

TRIGGER

KRIS BROOKER

1

The Universe discharged itself with a violent birth. Infinity expelled by a tiny, anxious womb. It was cause and effect expressed within a cataclysmic mass of energy left confused and angry, unhindered in its passage, this way and that. A rebel without a cause. A flash of rage unchecked by friendly counsel, and lacking maternal guidance. No love to show it the way.

Just the nature of the beast set free and left to roam and stumble within a virgin light. Unaware it was spreading awe and wonder.

Some time later I was pronounced alive. And I too experienced that same thunderous and fearful birth. My own precious spark ignited.

An inherited life, assimilated, expanded, and then expended. It was to wild a state, *life*, the fanciful notion of becoming aware. Of being wired into others. Only to find myself a tiny and insignificant part of the Whole. It was chaos. The wild savage pull of the Beast. Little Me, made from the stuff of Stars; I was left to wilt in the sunlight. To descend through the silt of eight billion souls; cast miserably out into the mist. I was left alone to drift, with only myself for friendship and comfort. Left to wonder . . . “Why?”

And yet it was worth it.

Though I changed nothing, and I left nothing behind. Despite never really arriving, and barely being noticed before I'd left.

It was worth it.

2

TRIGGER

You always come home early on Tuesday, it's what you do. You're always so punctual. *So where are you?*

A check of my phone confirms the time; four thirty. You should be here. *Why aren't you here?* I couldn't have missed you. There's only one way in, over there, that tall gate forged from iron. I would have seen you enter . . . unless? *Are you ill?* No, there's no lights, silly. No sign that you're at home. I really am beginning to worry. It's getting cold, and dark too. See how the street lamps glow. Their ethereal defiance against the relentless crawl of night. But it gathers regardless around the old Victorian pump house as I watch and wait.

Five pm; the stairwell lights have awoken and bright security lamps garnish the walls. The Iron Master's gates clank open in welcome as each of the residents return. 'Victoria Place' has come to life.

Five thirty, and still no sign.

'Where are you?'

I just want to see you. My neck cranes toward every stupid sound. And I'm freaking cold. Not from the night, no, it's a chill that bites deeper than the dark. Look, I'm starting to shake. I had no idea this would happen. If only I could show you how much I care. How much I worry. But I can't. Even if you walked by me I could never step out from these shadows.

Stay calm, Trigger. She's fine, just running late; there's nothing to worry about. Maybe a prayer would help. A few simple words whispered aloud to bring you safely home.

'In faith and hope, oh Lord, we turn to you for comfort. Grant that we may trust in your mercy and send an angel to sustain us as we await their safe return. Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name.'

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven.' Still no sign. 'Please Lord let her be safe, let her be . . .'

The gates are opening. How did I miss a car pulling up? Is it her? I can't see, is it? . . . No, just the Fat Man from the ground floor flat. He always looks suspicious that one; nervous and watchful. And what's in the box he clutches so keenly beneath his arm? And where does he go at weekends?

More headlamps approach. Who's this? I don't recognise the . . . It's a Police car. What are the Beasts doing here? *Has someone seen me?* No, not possible.

I feel the wall against my back. A sudden insecurity in my shadow. I can't run, they'll see me. They've stopped outside the gates. Two burly officers of the law have exited the car. Oh no, no, they're coming my way. This is bad, really bad. I'm going to be in trouble again.

'Hey you. Wait there, don't you move.'

I won't, I haven't.

'Hey, I said wait there. Stop.'

Running across the road and heading straight for me. *I've done nothing wrong.* It's a free country, I can stand where I like. I wouldn't hurt her, never . . . Why would I? I just wanted to see she was safely home. *Closer, they're getting closer.* Please, no, I don't want to go back. It's not fair. Say the words, Trigger. Defend yourself. 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.'

Shit, run Trigger.

I take a deep breath and try to shun the realisation, that there is nowhere to run. It's too late. I'm done for.

Hot lead thaws into lukewarm water that drains from my chest as the Dark Avengers veer away, running toward the phone box? Full steam ahead toward two kids, teenage hoodies, who run jeering insults in their wake. I feel cold, panicked, I might be sick. A third uniform is still sat in the car, he sounds a siren and blue lights revolve in anger. The scream of hot tyres and the sound of a fiery engine thrill my veins as the car accelerates and passes me by.

I can breathe again. The wall doesn't press me so hard. Across the road I see the Fat Man has got back in his car and watches on in earnest. He looks more terrified than me. *Why?* One day I'll find out what you're hiding in that box. And why you never open your curtains. And where you go at the weekend. Look at him, I didn't think he could move so fast, from his car to the front entrance. Why are *you* so afraid of the Beasts?

Ahh, the top floor curtain is twitching. Was it number nine who called them? The old lady who lost her husband less than a year ago? Well, good for her. Very neighbourly minded. You never know who might be hanging about outside your home these days.

Six pm and she *still* hasn't come home.

The glass in Victoria Place sparkles with expense. Rich living behind thick walls; pleasant lives secured behind tall locked gates. All but one of the flats is alight now, only *hers* remains dark. Maybe I should go in, check that she's not ill or injured. No, bad idea, not what the butterflies that prance in my stomach would advise.

It's a kind of fear, not knowing. A heavy curtain drawn across my chest. Discomfort that will lift if only she would come home. *Where is she?* I've not forgotten anything. *Have I?* My memory is not that good these days. Today is Tuesday, yes? She always comes home early on Tuesday. She's a creature of habit, strict in her ways. *Something's wrong.* I should go inside.

If they think their security can keep me out they're mistaken. Seven feet two inches, the height of the wall. I could jump that. Why bother. 7-8-9-0, the four digit code for the keypad on the gate. It's the same numbers on the entrance.

I'll take the rear stairwell, up three floors, I've done it before. It's number twelve, the number is ebony. Fixed to a rosewood door. The silver letter box has stiff brushes to stop anyone peeking through; wise precaution. A Yale lock that a child could open. If only I had the courage to knock. Pluck up the nerve to say, "Hi".

Dare I?

Walk past the window, switch on a light. Let me know that you're up there. *I should go in.* No, wait, just a little longer. To be sure. I have to be sure. I won't sleep tonight if I leave now.

Seven pm; still no sign. No choice now, I have to go. Get back for Jamie. *Jamie.* She'll need her medication soon. That settles it, another ten minutes, and not a moment more.

It's not like I'm being unfaithful. Jamie looks at men all the time. And she likes them to look at her. I don't. And she lies to me too, I know.

"Conceive, breathe, believe and then leave. It's the cycle, the rules, and no-one breaks them. There are no exceptions and no exclusions to the plan. There is nothing here to hold onto and everything to leave behind, and there is nothing waiting for us when we're gone. So why go to the trouble in the first place?"

That's what Jamie believes, but she's wrong. She has to be wrong? But Jamie is always right.

Jesus tells us that we're all going to Heaven, that's what I believe. Jamie says that I talk shit. I don't think that's fair. She says that life's not fair. It's tough, so deal with it. But that's just Jamie, I know her better than that. I just wish I could get her . . . *to what?* Find love in her heart for God, that's what. And maybe a space to find love for me.

I have to go, she'll be wondering where I am. I should have left here an hour ago. Maybe a few more minutes. Wait . . . I hear footsteps. *Someone's coming.* And I hear a bus in the next street. Yes, someone's walking toward me. Getting closer in the dark. *It's her.* Thank you, God. There's nothing wrong. She looks healthy, happy even. Walking briskly past on the other side of the road. Hey, is that a new bag? Since when did you carry a rucksack? And I've never seen you dress like this. Three quarter leggings and white trainers; that's a new jacket. The letters N I K E on the back. Have you been to a gym? Why? Look at you, you're perfection.

How long has it been now, six months. Half a year of watching, waiting, craving to say "hi". Not much that a man can't learn about a woman in that time. You're older, twice my age. A child of the Earth. A Norse Goddess possessed of the innocence of light. A beacon in a dark

and foreboding world. You're a woman of conscience who fights the good fight. I've seen you on marches, protests, acts of defiance against the abuse of animals. There are no products in your home from the pig filth whose brand names murder the innocent. You're a street pastor too, a member of the Lollypop Brigade. A woman who brings comfort and love to the streets.

Do you remember our first time? I do. How your willow green eyes lingered on me as I slept on that park bench. It was a ruse to gain food and supplies for the harsh climate. The lollipop you gave me was red, I remember. And your smile told me that you understood me. Your voice . . . I don't actually remember what you said. The words don't seem important now. All I needed to know was you'd been sent to help me from Heaven.

The gates have opened. *Do it, Trigger.* If you're ever going to say anything, do it now. *Do it.*

I can't . . . I have to go.

Jamie?

Another time then. I'll come back. Another look at my phone. I have four missed calls, all from Jamie. And several texts, she's asking where I am.

I'm coming.

She'll be waiting for me. She'll be angry. I shouldn't have stayed so long. This isn't fair on Jamie.

You know how she gets when you're late.

Jamie gets angry when I'm late. I need to get back, quickly. Go Trigger. Get a move on. Hurry back for Jamie.

The house in Llewelyn Road was once a proud family home, but not now, not for some years. Just another house left to die in the heart of London. Three stories of bricks bear the scars of desolation and the marks of abuse; eight bedrooms but no heart.

I guess the owners fell on hard times, or maybe someone died. Either way, it's mine and Jamie's, the upper rooms, they're all ours. Three months and no-one has come to bother us. It's become our home.

In through the tradesman entrance. I should do something about the garden, steal a mower from a neighbour's shed? And a scythe too, for the rampant Lavender. The Serengeti grass hides the path. Nothing that a spot of Guerrilla gardening wouldn't improve. If we're here for the summer months I'll sort it out. I'll do it for Jamie, she loves to sit outside in the sunshine. I'll get her a deckchair, and a small table for her Pimms. Yeah, when the sun comes out again, I'll sort it.

It's always a tight slide through the back door, it refuses to open properly. Inside it's dark. I hate coming home in the dark. You'd think I'd be used to it by now, but I'm not.

'Who's down there?' A male voice, coming from the first floor landing. 'Don't come up unless you want your face smashed in.'

'Hey Pauly, it's me, Trigger. I'm coming up.'

'Oh, hey Trigger . . . It's okay boys, just Trigger.'

'Hi Trigg.'

'Hey man.'

Two more familiar voices.

'Hi guys.' That's more like it. Low energy lights come on upstairs to guide me. Low energy, low effort, but enough to turn the landing into our own fairy Grotto.

'Hey Trigg, where you been? You on your own?'

‘You’ll crick your neck, Pauly. No-one else down there, just me. Is everything all right, upstairs I mean?’

‘Yeah, sure. I haven’t heard a peep. That girlfriend of yours must sleep all day.’

‘She’s not my girlfriend, Pauly. And she’s not very well, that’s why she sleeps a lot.’

‘Yeah, sure. But at least she’s a girl. I have to put up with that pair in there. No chance you wanna swap, just for one night?’

‘Maybe you should try some online dating, Pauly? There must be a squat full of women out there . . . all waiting for you. Though you might want to take a bath and get your hair cut. Oh, and get those teeth sorted. Maybe get a new face? *Stop it Trigger*. There’s someone for everyone, it’s the reason there are so many people in the world. To give Pauly a chance to get laid.

‘What are you smiling at? I can get a bird if I want.’

‘Hey Pauly, has Trigger brought anything nice back that he wants to share?’

It’s odd to see the same face lean out from the doorway, Pauly’s twin. The world needs even more people than I thought, to get them both laid.

‘Sorry, nothing tonight, times are hard. Has no-one mentioned the recession?’

‘It’s always a fucking recession in here. Later.’

‘Prayer and clean living might help, Pauly. Walk honestly as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in strife, and never with envy.’

‘Oookay, sure? Hey, we got the car battery charged up, the Xbox is on if the missus lets you out later.’

‘She’s not my . . . I’ll let you know, thanks.’ Maybe I will, later. But Jamie. ‘Sorry, I have to go.’

‘Sure, no worries. Later.’

Fifteen sixteen seventeen, why do I bother to count them? Same number of stairs as last time. It’s the same door, open it quietly. She may be asleep.

‘Jamie? Jamie, are you awake?’ No answer, she’s still asleep. Careful of the boards, they’re so old they whine at every touch. And careful where you put your hands. If only I could remember where I put the lights? And why is it the softer I try to tread the more noise I make? *Shhh*, don’t wake Jamie. I’m Stevie bloody Wonder, can’t see a thing. I put the damn lights somewhere.

Got you.

One big fat switch to click, and . . . Let there be light.

Camp lighting at its finest, batteries charged for free at the library. Adding to the Council's carbon footprint not mine. A second click and more light as the low energy bulbs offer up more of the room in a mystical glow. Much better when I can see what I'm doing. Put one here, the other on the mantle by the fire.

She's done it again. Jamie, you mustn't leave the blankets down; broken windows, you'll freeze to death. We both will. And we don't need to advertise our presence. I shouldn't have to do this every time I get back. There, much better, no wonder it's so cold in here. Check Jamie, make sure she has a blanket and . . .

'Oh, Jamie, you're awake?'

5
JAMIE

‘Where were you?’

‘Out.’

I shouldn’t have been so long. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* She’s had a rough day, I can see that. God forgive me, look at her. I’ve been so selfish.

‘I woke up and you were gone. Where were you Trigger? Where were you?’

‘I went out. Sorry.’

She’s so pale. She’s always pale, she can’t help it. The way she sits there, staring, like a child wet through and sulking.

‘How are you feeling?’ She doesn’t look good. ‘I’ll make some tea, would you like some tea?’ Then I’ll brush her hair, get the straggly bits combed through. She’s been sweating, profusely. ‘Poor lamb, sat here alone. I’ve left you sitting in the dark.’ *Bad Trigger, bad bad Trigger.*

‘I went out, sorry, forgot the time.’

‘The time? Trigger, you weren’t here when I woke up. I’ve been waiting for you. Do you know what it’s like sitting here waiting in the dark, on my own. Where were you?’

‘I said I was sorry. I . . . I was . . .’ White lies don’t count, do they? Not when you’re trying to protect someone you care for. ‘I was trying to get some money. I went to the job centre too. Thought maybe there was some work around here, McDonalds or something.’

McDonalds? What the fuck did you say that for?

‘You left me alone to get a job in a meat factory?’

‘No . . . well, sort of. Just for a few weeks to get some money together. We need the cash. I wasn’t thinking. Let me clean you up. Where did you put the hair brush’ I smile. ‘Why? Because you’re worth it.’

‘Is that supposed to be funny? Do I look like I want to have a laugh? I knew you were fucked up, but really? You leave me here on my own so you can profit from death?’

‘No, of course not.’ Please don’t get angry. ‘I wasn’t thinking.’ She’s animated, annoyed, of all the places to mention. I’m a fucking idiot. ‘Jamie, I wouldn’t have . . .’

‘Yes, you would. If you want to sacrifice your soul go ahead, but don’t come back here if you do.’

‘Look, Jamie, please.’

‘Don’t touch me, I don’t know you any more. You’re shit, Trigger. Like all the others, you’re shit. The entire human race is shit.’

What’s got into you?

‘That’s not true. I said I was sorry. Can’t you forget I said it.’

‘I thought you were different. I thought you had respect for life . . . for me.’

Tell Jamie the truth. Tell her where you’ve really been. Yeah, like that will make things better. You’re stupid, Trigger. You were born stupid. Everything thereafter has been stupid. You’re weak and you don’t deserve her. You don’t deserve to follow behind her. *Trigger, I hate you.*

‘Open your eyes, Trigger. Go on, take a look at the filth walking the streets out there. How much blood is sacrificed every day so they can gorge themselves. It’s death, Trigger. It’s filth. The way they slaughter the innocent, then pack the bodies into tins and bottles. They’re living creatures, not sweets to stack on a shelf. Rows and rows of bodies, Trigger. *Bodies.* All racked stacked and hung out like bunting.’

‘Stop it, that’s not fair. You now I care.’

‘Sure, why waste my breath, you don’t listen anyway. Fuck you, Trigger . . . I was frightened. Listening to all that noise out there. I kept thinking they’d come in here. I was on my own. Trigger, I’m hurting, bad.’

‘I know, and I’m sorry. Really I am, but I’m here now. Come on, sit up. Let me brush your hair, get some shine back in those midnight locks.’

‘Don’t, I’m not in the mood.’

‘Come on Jamie, I said I was sorry.’

‘I said don’t touch me, I’ll do it.’

I don’t like it when you stare like that. I know you can see through me. You know when I lie.

‘So did they offer you a job?’

‘There was nothing going, well, not for the likes of me.’

'You're lying, Trigger. Where have you really been? And what's that in your pocket? You obviously can't let go of it. Show me.'

'It's nothing.'

'I said show me.'

'Jamie, really, it's nothing. Jamie, you're hurting me. Let go. I don't . . .'
It's out there now. Out in the light with nowhere to hide.

'A lollipop . . . really?'

'They gave it to me.' More lies, but I have to. Jamie won't understand. She mustn't know. She mustn't get upset. 'Stupid really, I wasn't paying attention. I'd have run the other way if I'd seen them coming.'

'Fucking do gooders. So you didn't stop for a chat then?'

'No, not really.'

'Did any of them invite you back to their house, Trigger? Offer to let you stay a while? Watch some TV and sleep in the spare bed. Share some nice warm cocoa?'

'No.'

'Of course they didn't. Have a fucking lolly, and then fuck off. Get back in your cardboard box and go sleep in your filth. What a kick, what a laugh. Why do you bother?'

I feel pain, intense churning of the gut as the lolly bounces off the wall. I just want to rush over and pick it up, hide it again, but I can't. *Don't be angry with me, Jamie. Please.* Bad things happen when she gets angry. I know, I know, it's not her fault, it's mine. I accept that. *I need a hug.*

'They lie to you, Trigger. Every night those Vampires roam the streets. They rise up from the shadows and crawl out from dark spaces with a blanket and a thermos full of lies. They take, they don't give. They never give. It's about gratitude and gratification. They're monsters that suck life; take a little bit more of what you don't have to give. And you're stupid enough to be grateful? They're night crawlers, Trigger. As lost and needy as any junkie on the streets. You can see that can't you?'

'Yes.' You see the truth so much clearer than I do.

'Grasp what you can, Trigger. Take their baubles and beads but don't be beholden. Take them because you can. Come here you silly boy. That's better, I'm sorry. It's been hard, I've been waiting for you.'

This is what I need. This is what I hanker for. Jamie's arms hugged gently around me. Thank you God, for bringing her to me. For allowing me to find her.

The sharp edge in her words has dulled. I hear honey in her tone and not the bitter almonds. There now, look, the blossom returns to her eyes,

and my world flips from black to blue as the air warms to her soft voice.
What? What's wrong? Why is the change not permanent?

'It's red.'

'Red, what is?'

'The lollipop, it's red.'

I look, but I don't understand.

'Is that important?'

'And you kept it?'

No, I, yes. Don't do this, you were back. Trigger was forgiven. I said I was sorry and you forgave me.

'Come on Jamie, what's that supposed to mean?'

'You know exactly what it means. You've been to see *her* haven't you? That's where you've been. To see *her*. What were you doing this time, watching? Or did you summon the courage to speak? Invite you up did she? A quick latte and some sugar on a stick? Oh no . . . you didn't. Did you fuck her? Did you fuck her, Trigger?'

'No, stop it. Don't talk like that. I wouldn't.'

'Yes, you would. If it was offered on a plate you would. What man wouldn't? While I lay here tormented and racked with pain, scared shitless in the dark. I was waiting Trigger. I was afraid, alone, waiting in the dark. Praying you'd come back for me.'

Praying? If only you would.

'Jamie, stop it. There's only you. I wouldn't . . .'

'Don't fucking lie to me Trigger, it's written all over your face. You're a lying, cheating bastard. I'm glad I did it. I'm glad. Fucking bitch . . .'

'Did what? What did you do?'

'Why bother to come back? Why bother, Trigger? I'm not important . . . or do you feel sorry for me? Is that it? It is isn't it. *Oh my God.*

She's gone, drawn her knees to her chest, her hands to her mouth. She's withdrawing, beginning to crack and tremble. I can't watch this.

'Why come back? Why bother? I don't need you, or your filthy sympathy. Get out, Trigger. Go on, fuck off. Go be with your whore. Leave me here on my own, why should I care. Go on . . . go.'

She's right, I'm a pig. *I'm so sorry.* Look at what I've done. You're a mess, Trigger. It's all your fault. I should have been here, not there, she's right. I should have come straight back to be with Jamie. My Jamie. I'll always be here for you. I promise. I do.

‘Jamie, please, I’m sorry. Give me another hug, come on. Let me brush your hair, you like that. I’ll see if the boys downstairs have any clean water. I’ll get you some clean clothes out.’

‘I don’t need clothes, I need you. I’m glad I did it. That bitch needs to know. Now get out, get out, get out.’

Sure, alone. Weren’t you just bitching about being alone? And did what, you’ve not left here, have you? I should go, at least for a bit. But not too long. The boys downstairs have the Xbox working. Yeah, it’ll give Jamie a chance to cool off.

‘I’ll go see the twins for a bit. Bang on the ceiling when you, feel better.’

‘Where are you going? Don’t go. Please, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean any of that. Come, sit over here, next to me on the bed. Please don’t go. I don’t want to be alone.’

‘It’s okay, I won’t go. I’m here.’

‘Hold me Baby Boy. I’m just feeling a bit grumpy, a bit horrid. I’m sorry, I know you have stuff to do, I get it, no problem. Just don’t go. Don’t leave me. There, that’s my Baby, sit here next to me. Hold me . . . please?’

Jamie, wrapped in my arms, the outside world shut away to leave no space between us. I was wrong to go to that place. I’m weak. I need to be stronger. ‘Let me get you cleaned up, is that okay?’

‘Yes Baby. Jamie wants whatever Trigger wants, you know that.’

Look at you, poor sweet girl. What have I done to you?

‘Baby.’

‘Yes?’

‘I need my medicine, is that okay? Is it? Please.’

We have an agreement. Twice a day and no more. The medicine is strong, and Jamie is needy. Too much can make things worse for her.

‘Please Baby, I’m overdue. I thought you’d come home earlier, and I can’t manage on my own.’

‘Sure.’ How can I refuse her. She’s sweating and her temperature’s rising; she has eyes filled with shadows. I hate to see her like this. ‘I’ll get it for you.’

‘Finish my hair for me first. I don’t like you seeing me like this. Make me look pretty. I like to look pretty for you. Say something, Trigger, anything. I want to hear the truth, the truth as Trigger sees it. I should take my life far more seriously.’

The truth. What is the truth? What’s a lie? I’m not sure myself anymore. The truth as I see it is, what?

‘The truth is you and me, Jamie. There is no other truth. We’re waiting, you and I. Waiting for a second coming, for a new word to be spoken by a man who’ll bring eternal love in his heart.’ *That much is true.* ‘The Lord promised descendants as numerous as the stars; as locusts on the crops in the fields. And they will devour the garden, just as Eve devoured the fruit from the tree of knowledge. They will eat and eat until there is nothing left but dust, and then they will die. That is the truth.’

‘You think He will let us all die?’

‘He’ll give everyone a choice. He’s given *us* a choice. That’s why we stay in here. People out there believe the world exists in black and white. But that’s not true, Jamie. There’s a line of grey involved. And it slices through society on a whim, or with a vote. Mostly at the point of a gun. There is nothing out there for us. All I need is in here. With you in my arms and God in my heart the world in here is perfect.’

‘I like that.’

‘Then why so sad a face?’

‘It’s nothing.’

‘No, tell me, please. You can tell me anything you know that.’

‘It’s just, I wonder sometimes.’

‘Wonder what?’

‘What you’ll do when I’m gone?’

‘No, you’re not going anywhere. And I don’t want want to talk about it.’

‘I’m dying Trigger, you do understand that?’

‘. . . Yes.’

‘Look at me Baby Boy. You can’t stop me going no matter how hard you try. And I’m scared for you when I’m gone. No, no tears. No crying, remember? Just hold me so I know you’re real. I don’t want to be alone.’

Yes, I’ll hold you. Like a teddy bear wrapped in warm sunshine. I’ll never let you go.

‘There’s something else that frightens me.’

‘What, what scares you?’

‘Tomorrow, Trigger. I don’t want to look beyond today in case . . . in case it doesn’t come. If it does, I think it’s going to hurt, and I don’t want to feel the pain. I saw what it did to my mother, how she cried herself to sleep because of the pain. No, look at me Baby, look at me. Don’t let me cry. Please don’t let me cry . . . you promise me, yes? *Promise me?*’

‘Shh, I promise.’ You’re starting to tremble, perspiration is heavy on your neck and face. ‘Jamie, you need your medicine.’ I don’t want to let

her go. It's silly really, but as I rock her in my arms I swear her skin begins to glow. Maybe it's a sign that she's getting better? That's possible isn't it?

'I have to let you go, just for a minute, just while I get things prepared.' I feel one last desperate squeeze of her arms.

'Trigger, I'm really sorry for being so shitty with you.'

I give her my best smile for assurance. But the truth is, what *will* become of me when she's gone? Who will I become? How will I cope without her?

Don't think about it, it's not going to happen.

I won't let it happen. God will keep her safe. He will. *He must.* But what if He doesn't, what then?

She's lying back on the bed as I smile again. As I sink to my knees. I turn away from the crappy cracks in the walls, the blackened paintwork and the heavy blankets that block the night from entering through broken glass. I can't help but wonder how many have puked and pissed on this carpet before me, not that it really matters. I'll see the room as it was, tonight. I'll conjure a picture of yesterday when there was friendship and love in this house.

I can hear it already, it's faint, the sound of children playing down the hall. The blacksmith's glow arising from embers that burn in the fireplace. This was a happy house once. Its mortar and bricks warmed and loved those who cared for it. And I have another reason for being on my knees. *Words.* Good words for someone I hope, no, that I know will listen.

'None of us know how it will end, oh Lord. Or if it will lead to forgiveness. But if it comes in fire I will fall in glory. If it ends in sorrow I will shed no tears. If the world is to end I will leave with a song, for the Kingdom of my God shall be waiting for me. Forgive her Lord, have mercy on dear sweet Jamie. Find the good in her heart, and if thy vengeance must be cast, let it fall upon me, your humble servant; I beg you to spare sweet Jamie. Let her rise up when He comes, let her sit by Your side. Let dear sweet Jamie enter the Kingdom of Heaven.'

Amen.

I guess we're not much on cutlery, mostly take-away food. I only steal from stores that can afford it. I've had this spoon for a while now, its edges well charred, and I am more than familiar with the contents of the ageing tobacco tin I place by my knee on the floor.

Inside I find the last of the medication. It means that I will have to get more, somehow, tomorrow. It's always a shock when the last of the powder is tapped out into the spoon. A splash of lemon juice and some water for the mix; the filter is a fag butt that I found on the way home. Bless her, not a word as she waits. On the third flick of the wheel the lighter erupts, its flame steady, held below the underbelly of the spoon. A few more seconds, nearly there, won't be long now my love. I allow the potion to boil. Let it bubble in the cauldron until a sweet earthy smell begins to rise.

For some reason the odour arouses the glands below my tongue and they start to excrete. It's always like this, a salivating sensation that rapidly brings on a feeling of nausea. I guess it's just a part of the ritual as I leave things to cool. Nearly done as the piston in the hypo retracts and the dark brown medicine extracts through the filter. It travels unseen through the needle's bending metal and erupts to fill the transparent tube.

Jamie first, always her before me. She knows, always the same smile as she extends her arm. Baring herself for my attention and beaconing the needle for a lover's embrace. If I can get my belt off I'll happily oblige but the Ben Sherman leather sticks, then extracts itself from the denim loops. A moment later it covets her arm in a serpent's embrace.'

'I want to dream,' she says, 'of somewhere else.'

'Somewhere by the sea?'

'Yes, by the sea.'

I know exactly where, it's always the same destination. A town where her parents first met, where they married, and took her several times as a small child. I envy her, she's lucky to have the memories.

From the book she reads, the Zero Marginal Society, it's too highbrow for me, I carefully turn its corner. Then remove the photo that was marking the page. I've seen this picture a hundred times; little Jamie, she's six years old. Stood laughing in the rain, her bright pink coat wet through, her fine hair ruffled by the wind and rain. Above her, 'The Grand Hotel', in big letters.

It's an image I carry around in my head. Jamie, in her pink coat, laughing in the rain. I wonder how many pages this polaroid has marked? There's so much I don't know about Jamie. So much she doesn't know about me.

'One day I'll take you back. You'll be the little girl in the pink coat again. I promise. Here, keep it in your hand and dream.'

The needle refuses at first, and then a popping sound as it breaks her skin.

'Sorry, we need fresh syringes. I'll go to the chemist in the morning.' It's kind of ominous, and mystical too, how the blood spirals out to darken the potion. 'Ready?'

'Trigger.'

'Yes?'

'I feel old. And I'm tired. I don't want to be ill any more.'

What does that mean?

'You could make it all go away.'

'How?' What, what are you looking at . . . the syringe? *No.* I won't do that. *No,* not even for you.

'This will help, I promise, I'll get more tomorrow. Whatever you need.'

'Trigger.'

'Yes?'

'Be honest. When you look at me, am I ugly?'

'No, that's a stupid thing to say. Why would you ask that?'

'Because I look at myself, that's why. The mirror doesn't lie, Trigger. It never lies. And it doesn't like what it sees. It wants to be young again, for you.'

'No, you're beautiful as you are . . .'

'Shhh, I'm fading. You see it, I know you do. I'm fading, Baby Boy. I wish I wasn't but I am. Oh, I wish I had more time to give you.'

Her hand touches my cheek as a tear slips down her own.

Jamie's lips become frozen, her pupils dilate; I've loosened Sherman and eased the plunger down. This is not a conversation I want to have. The plunger stops. The medication flies straight as an arrow.

'We should be, lovers . . . you and I. Why, aren't, we . . .?'

Lovers? Did she just say that? Her hand slips away and she smiles as her eyes close.

"Lovers?"

I lift the blanket she wears to her shoulders, then wrap Sherman around my bicep. I pull it tight and hold on with my teeth. That same hollow noise again; it stings as it punctures. But before I set it free I have words to say. Important words.

'For what I am about to receive, I thank you Lord. For Jamie too, for her, I am truly grateful.'

I am too as the medication flows with a whisper, travels swiftly, and arrives with a roar. It slams home like Thor's hammer on a tsunami of love that flushes away the baggage of a lifetime, and sets me adrift upon a warm sea of affection. I feel hugged as a mother would cradle her child and I am kissed on the lips goodnight as she turns the bright lights down. She whispers soft and gentle in my mind to still the sudden rush of the current into a calm summer evening asleep by a mill pond. *Did she say lovers?* I should have laid down, it's too late now, I barely feel the impact of the floor.

* * *

It's the need for a smoke that prevails. If only my lazy hands would work the tin, fight the evil of gravity, get the bloody lid off. Advance planning is the key as hidden within is a cone, fully packed, a roach already loaded. This is the bit where nothing works as it should. My depth perception is off, thumb strength is at a minimum, sparking the lighter becomes difficult. Next time get one without a wheel.

Oh, but the roar of the flame, the sweetness of the burning weed; each draw applauds the effort I made as I lay on the floor. The carpet no longer hard and rough, the air free of the chill. I'm safe, happy, and content. But Nature always finds a way to bringing you down to Earth.

More G-Force, imminent head spin, I shouldn't have got up. I'm walking through water as one foot weaves delicately in front of the other in search of the toilet. This may be a bridge too far.

I've often wondered why they don't make toilet rims wider. It's an obvious flaw; the male sprinkles when he tinkles, it can't be helped. He has

enough trouble with his aim when he's straight, though he's never true. I'll clean up the tinkly bits later. And I'd pull the chain if the water worked. Oh Jamie, you've neglected to fill the bucket again. Fuck it, I really need to lay down, and quickly. As if the walk to the bog wasn't long enough, the walk back is made by a doddering fool. It's on the way back that I see something that I hoped I'd never see again. She's been drawing again.

The wall is thick with charcoaled art. Strange sweeping lines and symbols that I don't understand, but leave me with a feeling of sadness, and more than a tinge of foreboding. I've asked her before what it all means but she says she doesn't know, "they are just a feeling, an impulse . . . a compulsion." She barely remembers the effort. Her scrawling reminds me of the Nasdaq Lines, smattered with Inca glyphs. Maybe she's one of those people who knows stuff in their sleep. Stuff that they've never learnt nor spoken before. Maybe? There are things about Jamie that I just don't know. That I don't need to know. All I know for sure is her work captivates me. It's thought provoking, and a little unsettling. There is darkness to the work, especially as I have never seen the artist paint a single stroke.

A long toke on the spliff helps the images rise out from the wall. The HD image further confuses their meaning but highlights a more important need, to find something to moisten my eyes. It's getting more frequent, getting worse, and I'm hungry too . . . freeking ravenous. And for crying out loud, now I'm hearing things. It's coming from outside.

A car engine idles and is then cut, several doors are quietly clunked closed. The sounds are coming from the road. At least I have the presence of mind to tug my zipper before I peek through a space in the blankets to see it's still dark out there.

Below the street lights have timed out and numerous vehicles have parked overnight. Only one is in use. Only one catches my attention, the white van. No, there are two vans. I really need to get my eyes tested. Neither van has any markings, but four, no, five large men circle these wagons deep in discussion. One man, bald, a black jacket and denim jeans gives instruction; he is pointing. Shit, is that a uniform stood beside him? Shit, one of them is the Beast. Oh my God, Baldy is pointing straight at our house. Shit, shit, shit.

'Jamie, get up . . . The Barbarians are at the gates.'

‘Really, a sledgehammer? You don’t want to try knocking on the door first?’

‘The owner wants the building cleared, *today*,’ Baldy was insistent, ‘and that’s what we’re gonna do.’

‘Well, I’m here to keep the peace, *today*. And that’s what *I’m* going to do.’ Sergeant Raymond Adams felt it appropriate to lay down the law, so to speak.

Twenty-five years of service in the Met, and here I am babysitting a bunch of thugs. Bailiffs my arse, moonlighting bouncers more like. Still, it sat easy with him as this was his last year of service before retirement. Another mundane assignment to keep him out of trouble. ‘PC Cooper, fist . . . door, now. Let the dossers inside know we’re here.’

‘Yes Sarge.’

His effort seemed somewhat timid on such a large door.

‘Again . . . A bit louder this time.’

Half a dozen spirited blows announced their presence, and was duly answered.

‘Fuck off. What do you want?’

Baldy rolled his eyes and produced a fold of paper that he injected through the letterbox.

‘That’s a high court judgement in favour of the building’s owner. It requires us to repossess this building. Open the door and let us do our job.’

‘Piss off or I’ll call the police.’ The papers were ejected to fall at Baldy’s feet.

‘Who d’you think we have out here with us, you dumb . . .’ A smile towards Adams. ‘You have thirty seconds to remove yourself from behind the door, then we effect an entry.’

Silence.

‘Hey Pig, are you gonna stand there and let them do this?’

Adams lowered himself parallel to the eyes peering out through the letterbox.

‘We’re here to make sure that everyone keeps the peace. I’ll give you five minutes to grab your stuff. PC Cooper here has a list of charities and hostels that can help you find somewhere else to stay.’ Cooper was modelling the information at chest height for the entire street to view. ‘I’d appreciate some movement on this as we do have other things to do.’

‘Hey, hi. Sorry about the gammon thing. No insult intended.’

‘Sure kid, none taken.’

Pause.

‘Give us fifty quid and we’ll leave.’

‘No,’ Adams answered.

‘Thirty then?’

‘No.’

‘Nazi bastard.’

‘Probably.’

This could be worse, I suppose. My first day back from sick leave. Hell, I could be six feet under without the operation.

The Inspector had given him the choice. A morning out with the rookie, Cooper, or straight back in the saddle on a dawn raid in Hampstead? Chasing Illegal Eastern Europeans around the streets had even less appeal.

I wonder if Cooper would like to buy me a muffin when we stop at Starbucks? Prince Street should be open in . . . ooh, thirty minutes. ‘Can we get a move on please?’

‘I want twenty quid.’

‘Fine, I’ll give you twenty quid, but only if you open the door right now.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Anything for a quiet life, but you’ll have to sign for it.’ He was assuming that he did actually have twenty in his wallet. A quick search proved fruitful. ‘Can you see it? Keep it to yourselves or half of London will be dialling 999.’

‘Give it to me then.’

‘Open the door.’

‘Pass it through the letter box.’

‘Come outside and get it.’

‘Are you lying to me?’

‘I’m a Police Officer, it’s my sworn duty to be honest, diligent, and trustworthy. Come on, open the door kid. It’s cold out here.’

‘You should try sleeping in here mate. Give me a minute.’

‘You’re not really going to give them twenty quid, Sarge?’

‘What do you think Cooper? If a member of the public can’t trust a Policeman, why are we doing this?’ Baldy didn’t look convinced. The rest of the A team looked suspiciously confused. The lock on the door finally made the right noise as a large bolt sounded uneasy at being hauled back. The door opened on a chain with a hand thrust beyond. ‘When I said “open the door” the intention was that you leave through it. You want this, you have to come out and get it.’

The door closed briefly only to re-open. Two males, fancy that . . . they were twins, both wearing army surplus and coming out cautiously, their entire lives in three plastic bags. Adams raised his other hand for Baldy and the boys to remain exactly where they were.

‘Anyone else living in there?’

‘Just a guy and his girlfriend up on the top floor. We heard them leave down the fire escape out back a couple of minutes ago.’

‘No-one else?’

‘No.’

‘Sure?’

‘Positive.’

‘You’re not really going to give them twenty quid?’ asked Baldy.

Expectant silence from the three parties, it was Adams that broke the tension.

‘Take this and get yourself a cup of tea, something to eat. Come back and you’ll be arrested. You understand?’

‘Nice one mate. Come on bro, the pubs open in an hour.’

Why was Baldy shaking his head, the two goons he had in tow were entering the house, shouting their presence as they raced up the stairs and moved from room to room to be sure the building was clear.

‘Cooper, tag along with them. Make sure there’s no-one else in there, I don’t want any incidents arising after we leave. All the way to the top mind, make sure that little shit wasn’t lying to me.’

‘Yes Sarge.’

‘Trigger, where are we going?’

‘I found a place for us a few days ago, a *just in case* place.’

‘Trigger, I don’t think I can.’

‘It’s okay, you’ve got five feet from the end of the ladder to the floor. That’s it, I’m right below you. Let go, I’ll catch you.’

‘I don’t know if I can, I . . . Trigger . . . catch me.’

‘It’s okay, you’re okay, my face caught you. Oh, and that’s funny is it?’

‘It is a bit.’

‘Oww, your bum’s bent my nose.’

‘Sorry. There, down on terra firma. I don’t suppose we can afford breakfast?’

‘You’re thinking of breakfast? Okay, sure, just look normal in case someone sees us.’

‘Trigger, we’re legging it from a squat. I don’t think they’ll have satellites looking for us. Where are we going?’

‘Soho.’

‘Soho, that’s miles. Can we get a taxi?’

I can afford breakfast, but not a taxi.

‘The walk will do us good.’ I say.

‘Trigger, it’s too far, and I’m hungry. Can’t we try a hostel, maybe a church?’

She looks rough. This is the last thing she needs. Her arms are crossed, head hung low. I don’t want to think it, but MacBeth comes to mind. No, not even in jest, Trigger. And yet still she raises a smile. Maybe we should get a taxi. But how, not with four pounds twenty.

Six thirteen am, how far could Jamie walk before the adrenaline of our escape burns low? Soho from here, it would take till late morning to get there.

‘We’ll go by water when we get to the river. It’s worth the trip, I promise.’ A bus roared past, followed by another as we reached the main road. The city suddenly filled with headlamps. That’s the trouble with big cities, all the roads have insomnia. The noise of the bus, it caused me to remember

When was it, two years now? At least that long since I first arrived in the capital. Platform seven at Euston Station, the Big Smoke, and the end of my great escape. The final connection to dear old daddy was severed and I was out on my own. Sixteen and a half years of age and I had thrust myself into a crowd of millions; the noise . . . it was electric, the smell overpowering. It was terrifying, invigorating, and the only time in my life that I had ever truly felt alive. I was free. Free to sleep uneasy on the streets. Free to walk barefoot in the city’s shadows. I would have baulked, shamed myself, and fled if I hadn’t met Jamie. Sweet Jamie.

‘Come on, keep up,’ she says. ‘Do you want me to carry something?’ Head still down but marching on.

‘No, I can manage.’

‘Of course you can, you’re so macho. Look at those guns, I bet you could lift a car above your head if you wanted to. Come on let’s see them.’

‘Oy, get off, I’ll drop something you silly cow.’

‘Maybe I’ll find something more manly under here? Going in . . . cold hands imminent.’

Awwwww, you weren’t joking. Freeeezing.

‘Jamie, the bags?’ A horn blasted, followed by a shout from a car. ‘Jamie, stop, we’re attracting attention.’

‘I meant what I said last night.’

‘What, what did you say?’ *Oh, she kissed me.* ‘What was that for?’

‘We should be lovers, you and me. It’s the natural progression. Trigger, I want us to be together, you know, before . . .’

Don’t say it. I wish you hadn’t said that much. Wow, I’d forgotten what it was like to see you smile like this.

‘Did you say I had cold hands?’

‘Cold, cold, very cold. Jamie, stop it. Ha, you can’t do that if I use my super running backward powers. Whoa, steady there. Who put a brick on the path?’

‘Brick? It’s called a foot, and it’s one of yours. Super powers my arse? Come here Trigger. Closer. No, closer than that.’

You’ve put your arms around me before, but not like this. You’ve not looked up at me, not in that way. I don’t know what to do. Say something. *Say, I love you Trigger.* No, don’t move away, don’t leave it unsaid. Jamie . . . ?

‘Look, can you see it, Trigger. The sun’s coming up. It’s an omen, don’t you think? New light on a new day, our day. Come here you, let’s walk toward the light. It’s frigging spectacular the way it creeps across the buildings like that. It’s like the light is setting fire to the world but nothing wants to burn. Can you feel it yet? Sunlight, warmth, it’s all being reborn. The great city of London. Our city. It’s the greatest city on Earth.

Trigger, take me to Soho. Take me to our new home. I’ll dust and clean, I’ll even cook. Yes, I said cook. And candles? I need candles . . . and napkins. D’you think I could buy a new dress? Can I, can I have a new dress? Please, please, can I?’

‘I’ll steal one for you, I promise.’ She’s back. My Jamie is back. There’s a spring in her step, an energy and vitality that’s been missing these last few days. She’s right, it must be the sunlight; the start of a new day. Maybe a new life. Are we running?

‘Hey, wait up.’ Wow, someone’s in a hurry to get to Soho.

‘Follow them upstairs, Cooper. Have a look round and make sure there’s no surprises.’

I’ll wait down here and remember the good old days, when I could have kicked that little shit in the backside and saved myself twenty quid. When Poland and the Ukraine were war stories told by my granddad and not the lands of all things illegal.

The neighbouring wall was a good place to sit, have a smoke.

Oh wait, that’s not allowed anymore. “No smoking, and no drinking. You’ve had a heart attack Raymond.” If I hear my lovely wife, Carol, say that once more? Six weeks and not so much as an E-ciggy or an Alcopop. My body hates me. Maybe chasing scumbags would have been preferable? No, I can hear the duty Inspector, “We don’t want to bring on another medical incident, now do we Raymond?” Why doesn’t he just call it a heart attack like everyone else?

Wow, even now it’s still hazy. One minute you’re on the desk, and the next, doing fish out of water impressions on the floor. S’pose that’s why we all get first aid training? *Eurgh* . . . that thought again. That horrid sickly image of Sergeant Graham, his face staring down at me, tongue hanging out. I’ll never complain about DIP workers again. It was Sunshine Suzy who gave me CPR. Nice timing as she left the cell, shut the door on another ungrateful shit giving her grief for wanting to help him with his drug habit. I should have been on the desk with Sergeant *forty a day* Graham, who was, *fuck knows where?* Mouth to mouth from a fifty-five year old ashtray with a lisp. Suzy, Suzy, thank goodness for Suzy.

‘Sarge.’

The shout came from an upstairs window.

‘What?’ I knew it. The tone in Cooper’s voice says it all. Sloping off for coffee is not going to happen.

‘You might want to come up and take a look, Sarge.’

‘Might I?’ That’s great, wonderful, four floors. That’s how many steps toward another coronary? ‘Cooper, take a photo and email it to me. Isn’t that what these bloody things are for.’

The iPhone was in hand, Adams stared at it with his usual dismay. Nothing was happening.

Have I got to press the screen or something? Is it even switched on? How can a phone not have buttons? Thanks Carol. You only bought one so you can check up on me, and know where I am. “You’re fifty-one years old, and the only person on the planet aged six and above not to have a Smart Phone. Look Raymond, we can see each other on Facetime. Helloooo . . .” If Carol does that one more time . . . I want my old Nokia back.

‘Sarge.’

‘What?’

‘I didn’t bring my phone.’

And they want to fast track this kid?

‘Fine, I’ll be up in a minute. Don’t s’pose there’s a lift?’

Four floors? Must be fifty steps, feels like five hundred; just three more to go. Look at this place, even the rats have bailed. Two more. They’ve nicked the pipes but left the radiators, how considerate. One more to go.

‘You do know I’ve got a dickie ticker, Cooper?’ Try not to breathe too heavy until he looks the other way. ‘Well, go on then, show me what I’ve just climbed Everest for?’

‘Sorry Sarge. It’s in here. On the walls. It’s a bit odd.’

‘Odd? You dragged me up her for . . . fuck’s sake, what’s this all about?’

‘What’s going on here then?’

‘Sarge?’

‘Never mind, I’m in shock from the stairs. But I see what you mean, this is pretty odd. It seems we’ve had an artist in residence.’

Two of the four walls were covered in graffiti, not so unusual when you consider that squatters get bored. A doodle here, another there, and occasionally it isn’t brushed with paint. Thankfully this artist wasn’t so expressive. No, this was different. Not like anything he’d seen before. This is borderline disturbing.

‘What do you think, Sarge?’

‘I think you should turn this on and make it take some photos. Is this charcoal? Who the hell draws in charcoal? What d’you think, no crayons left to steal?’ *It must be nice to be able to draw like this.* ‘Cooper, does this flow from right to left, or left to right? Does it follow any direction at all?’ *What would Inspector Morse make of all this?*

‘Just press the symbol that looks like a camera, Sarge.’

‘You do it, and make sure you get all of it.’

‘Video, or panoramic?’

‘What?’

‘The settings.’

‘Does it go click? Good, then just make it go click.’

Click. ‘You ever seen anything like this before, Sarge?’ *click.* ‘Should we tell someone?’ *click, click.* ‘Would you rather have the shutter sound on or off?’

Whatever head this came out of was confused, scrambled, extremely intense. *Click, click.*

‘It’s all a bit, well, creepy,’ said Cooper.

‘Tortured, I’d say. Lovingly erratic even. And what’s with all the numbers?’ *So many numbers.* ‘I think the artist has a thing for South America. Those faces, what d’you reckon, Cooper. Inca?’

‘Maybe, Sarge, but that’s not.’

‘No . . . our artist likes roses. What is that, made of stone? Stem being pulled down by, are those chains? Pretty fearsome looking, and struggling to do the job. Any ideas?’

‘Might be praying, or pleading . . . maybe religious connotations?’

‘What’s that written below, Greek?’

‘It says, “Deus me ignoscat,” Sarge. It’s Latin. “May God forgive me.”’

‘You speak Latin?’

‘Took a few classes at University, Sarge.’

‘Why?’

‘Err, to improve myself?’

‘Yeah, that’s well handy at the sharp end. Cooper, you can tell all the other lads how to say, *please don’t wave that knife in my face*, in Latin? I s’pose you’ve got a six pack under that jacket too, oh, and that poster, the one that was doing the rounds, “the need for political correctness in the work place”, blue tacked above your bed is it?’

‘Sorry Sarge.’

‘Don’t apologise for being clever, Cooper, and I won’t for being ignorant.’

This new breed of uniform, most of them come straight from University. They’re educated, don’t smoke or drink; they just drive round in cars all day. Not a bloody clue how to walk the streets. Foot patrol on a mountain bike. Who’s fucking idea was that? Keep the public safe and stay fit at the same time. I bet he still lives at home with his mum. The public are fucked if there’s a riot.

Maybe Graham’s right, take retirement. Why not, it would make Carol happy? Some pension, a mild case of depression and the probability of more heart attacks. When did you get old Raymond?

‘What the fuck is going on?’ said Baldy.

‘Urrgh, I’d forgotten about you.’

‘Fucking toe-rags. I’ll have to get a paintbrush in here before the owner turns up. What the fuck is it, some sort of Satanic worship?’

‘Maybe, the writings all in Latin, and the pictorials are probably South American. Some sort of hybrid impressionism maybe? See the centre piece, that rose; obviously a religious analogy of some kind.’ Yeah, all right Cooper, eyes down. You need to learn to speak up if you want to get noticed.

‘Whatever *this* is, it’s getting a couple of coats of Trade over the top. Are you two done now? I want to lock the place up and get a bacon butty.’

‘Sure,’ *hmmm, bacon*, ‘I think we’ve got all we need.’

Give a whack job a wall . . . What’s with the all the numbers . . . Why a rose? The way it works itself through the centre of everything. It looks in pain? So would I all chained up like that. And what the hell does that mean.

“May God forgive me.”

‘What dark deeds did our artist do to feel the need to express himself like this?’

‘Sorry Sarge?’

‘Nothing Cooper, just thinking out loud.’

She's tired. I should have made provision, saved some money just in case. It was inevitable that they would come to take their building back. That's why we travel light; Jamie's idea. "Don't own anything you're not willing to leave behind." It's her mantra, and mine now. Just my guitar, our rucksack, and a carrier bag from Tesco.

'Are you okay?'

'For the hundredth time, Trigger, I'm fine. Stop fussing. You know it annoys me.'

'Sorry.' *I can't help myself.* Jamie looks tired, yet she walks with a spring in her step since the sun has come up. She loves the sunshine. And she loves London, hates it too. "In between the black and the white," she says, "these streets have a permanent Grey. That's how we live, Trigger. Surrounded by Grey." I still don't really know what that means. What I do know is I love being with her, whatever the colour; no matter what the shade.

'Do I look all right, Trigger?'

'Huh?'

The pavement is wet, the sun has lifted above the concrete and steel. Traffic grows an ever lengthening tail. But all I see is you. My Jamie. Ha, she's posing for me. With one foot on the dark green bin she holds back her hair and looks up. I should have insisted on brushing her hair.

'What . . . what is it?'

'Trigger, you will get me a dress won't you. You promised. I'm tired of looking like this. And I need a new jacket; greens not me anymore. You promised.'

She walks on. What that girl does for military surplus could fund an army. Paratrooper boots and black tights will never go out of fashion.

‘Huh, listen, did you hear that? Trigger, are we near the water. Mmmm, I can smell the Thames, all salt and shit. Please tell me we have enough money for the water taxi? Please, please . . . my feet are killing me in these boots; and I am sooo hungry. Hungry hungry hungry.’

Lol, you’re like a big kid, high on life. I wish you could be like this all the time. But she’ll run out of steam, begin to fade. Please let this last until we get to Soho.

‘We’ll get bread and milk, and some jam too when we get there. Just another hour, no more, I promise. You won’t be disappointed.’

‘Eurgh, more walking. I hate walking. Are we there yet?’

She’s so funny when she’s like this. I feel like jumping about too. ‘Hey, mind the road.’

A horn blared out in anger as a grey Ford Fiesta swerved away.

‘Jamie, be careful.’

‘Oh stop fussing, I don’t care. Fuck them, they don’t own the road.’ An erect middle finger accentuated her feelings. ‘I can be happy and show it. Fuck you, fuck you all.’

‘Jamie, come on. Let’s get to the water.’

‘Can we take a swim? That’d fuck up some traffic. Come on Trigger, lighten up, we’re having fun. Let’s go for a swim.’

Seven fifty am. Traffic is getting mad, the pace of everything has slowed. Jamie is fading, she’s getting more erratic. Every now and then she leans heavily against me. I offer to stop, take a breath, but she insists we go on. “no rest for the wicked”, she says, “and we’ve been very very wicked.” The look in her eyes when she says it; no, she shouldn’t say that. I don’t want to be reminded.

I think it’s the thought of a new dress that keeps her going. Strange that I have never seen her wear anything other than surplus and tee shirts. Skirts and jeans. I’ll move Heaven and Earth to find her what she wants. I just need to keep her going until we get to our new home. At the end of the street she sees it at last.

‘I told you, look, water. And there’s a taxi docked. It’s waiting for us, come on Trigger, run. We need to get on that boat.’

Run she says.

It’s clear that I’m the one carrying the bags as my boots clank loudly down the metal gangway, and it’s all aboard as a young crewman in a bright yellow life jacket slips the bow mooring rope that drips dirty water contaminated by the Thames.

His shipmate follows the early morning commuters inside as they gaggle through and finally settle within the cabin, as the rumble of the boat's diesels send us on our way. Outside the tea coloured murk of the Thames is angered by the passing of the vessel's hull.

Jamie's excitement is all too evident. It's too long since we were outside together. Her self imposed isolation at the squat is over, and I thank God that she's back . . . at least for now.

'Hey, wait up.' My loudest hush. 'This is a two man operation and we don't leave anyone behind.' Just the bags as I follow her toward the stern.

Check out Jamie with the cheeky grin, all mischief and energy as she leans against the rear doors. All right, I'm getting there, just leaving the bags where I can grab them quick. She's full of beans and enjoying this; I follow her gaze toward the young attendant inside. *Stop it.* Her lean figure stretches in a somewhat provocative pose. Hardly a good way to blend in. *Jamie?* She has to be careful. Men look at her, it's a side effect that she can't help. It's the long ebony hair that attracts the first glance, and their gaze lingers despite its *morning after* style.

When Jamie's eyes lock with a man's they become powerless to look away. I know she likes it, the attention. Her lips say 'hey' without the need for words, then her slim shapely contours overpower what's left of their resolve. Jamie has a powerful allure when she's like this. Toward women as well as men. She is a Siren, and sometimes the fire inside me wants to reach out and burn her fingers for what she does.

'Jamie, stop it. We're Ninjas, remember? No-one sees us coming or going.' She sends me a silent but sulky rebuff as I move out onto the bow and take her arm. 'I'm sorry, but we mustn't get caught. I don't want people to stare.' She's enjoying this a bit too much.

It's simple really, the ticket clipper comes through the cabin and works from stern to bow, as we slip around the clipper and come in behind him to take our seats. When we reach the next stop Jamie asks him for the time. As he can see, we are already aboard just before the new crowd walks on. He doesn't remember her, but he can't be sure. He's young, fresh faced, and Jamie has the power to command a young man's hormones.

'Jamie, please, come on.'

It's a buzz outside and I wish we could sit and hold hands for a while, enjoy the cold spray from the river on our skin. It's been a while since we've done this. It would be nice to watch as the modern metropolis, our ancient city goes by. I'm not sure what she finds so funny but Jamie's laughter is quietly infectious as the boat bounces us again, as the spray

reaches out from the water to wash over us both. I whisper a quick prayer that the Captain won't look down and catch sight of us both. Laughing like this, out here, he'd think we were both high on crack.

'Jamie, keep it down someone will see us.' Stop staring at the bank, we have to move on. 'Jamie, please, we need to get round before anyone sees us.'

'Trigger, I don't care. Just stay here with me. Live this moment, with me.'

Fuck it, who cares, let's get caught then. It'll be worth it. Just look at her. Jamie's feeling good about the world again.'

'I love it, Trigger . . . love it, love it, love it. Don't you? Hold my hand, let's jump in . . . let's do it now.'

'What? No.' *You're not serious?* 'Jamie, please.' *She'll do it too.* My heart just skipped a beat. 'Move toward the front of the boat, come on, before someone sees us.'

'Don't be such a bore. Come on, let's take the dive. You and me, we can search for Atlantis.'

The front of the boat, herd her toward the front of the boat.

'Let's do it. Let's take the leap. Come with me, Trigger.'

'No. Yes . . . I don't know?'

She has hold of my hand, one boot on the railing. *I'm scared.* Stop looking at me like that, you're not serious?

'Do you love me, Trigger? Do you? Cos if you did you'd jump, right now, the two of us holding hands. They'll never find us down there. We'd never have to run again.'

I don't know. It's stupid, but I want to. I do. The boat bumping about like this, it might make the decision for us. No, it doesn't have to, Jamie's right. She's always right. Her hand in mine, the two of us together, forever. She's right.

'Ahhh, fucking hell that's cold.' Relief as she steps away.

The sudden spray hit hard, a dampening sent by the Gods to scold us. 'It's an up and over, Trigger, a tsunami in the face. Screw jumping in there that water's fucking freezing. Polar adventure's bad, girl get wet, soaked . . . fucking drenched. Ha ha ha . . . oh my goodness. You didn't think I was serious. Trigger, get me inside.'

It was a joke? Of course it was a joke. Stupid Trigger.

'Go, quickly, the boat's closing toward the bank.' I think my heart has stopped beating. I was ready to jump. 'Jamie, wait until we're facing the bank. Wait. Now, go quickly, get inside.'

Next stop we are sitting in the front seats, the time is eight twenty-three, so says the cabin boy with the rosy cheeks. The cabin has just filled and he doesn't care to look closely at the pass on my lap that is three weeks out of date.

The journey from Putney to Embankment is short, the boat's hull yaws and pitches with each swell of the waves. Just like the waves I think that Jamie has peaked, and now she wanes, curled into her chair her head on my shoulder. I am her pillar, her rock, her arms laced tight through mine. I'm worried as she is quiet again. I need to get her to our new home whilst she still has strength.

We arrive minutes later at Embankment, safe and almost dry. We've reached the other side of the river. Nearly there.

‘Mind your head on the fence.’ We’ve reached our new home. This is a safe place. The street is quiet, the building empty but not derelict. We have it all to ourselves. If we live without a sound we will not be bothered, no-one will know we are here.

‘Hey, watch where you throw the bags.’

‘Shhh, sorry. Take the plastic, I’ll bring the rest. The back door’s unlocked, get them inside whilst I bend the fence back.’ The panel feels harder to bend than last time but fits precise. I follow quick sharp to see her face when she gets inside.

‘Upstairs, Jamie, I’m right behind you.’ The rucksack and my guitar in hand. The instrument is the only thing that remains from my former life. A past that still haunts my dreams; that I refused the chance to shape my future. Those days are past, gone, buried forever. Everything I do now is for Jamie. I shut the back door and hurry inside. It’s as I hoped, she likes it.

‘This is brilliant. How did you find it?’

‘I don’t know. I felt drawn somehow. It’s like I’d been here before.’

‘Fine, so you don’t want to tell me, that’s cool. Oh my God, Trigger, the water’s still on. If I let this run will it come out warm?’

‘We have power too.’

‘You’re shitting me?’

Like a magician I show my hand, both sides, and then flick the switch on the wall. It’s no illusion, but it is magic.

‘Don’t put them on without the drapes closed.’

‘Fucking hell, Trigger, this place is hot. I love it.’

Look at her dance. Oh, up on the furniture . . . go on do a turn. Wait until you see upstairs.

Jamie, we have to stay quiet, like mice, teeny tiny rodents. The neighbours will call the police.'

She's doing the thing with her teeth, hands hung like paws as she bounces from sofa to chair. More rabbit than mouse really, the impersonation ending in three steps toward me and a massive hug . . . then a kiss on my lips. Why does she look at me like that as her hands gently touch my face. I feel strange, drawn, excited.

'What are you doing?' I didn't mean it to come out like that. Her hands? No, it was a reflex not a rejection. I've upset you? Shit, shit, shit, Trigger, you're an imbecile. 'I'm sorry, you took me by surprise.'

'It was supposed to be an invitation, to return my affection. Don't fucking bother. Oh my God, I just totally laid myself bare. You don't want me do you? You don't find me attractive, is that it? No, no . . . it's her isn't it? Always fucking her.'

'Jamie, please,' *I'm such a fucking idiot.* 'Stop, please. Where are you going?'

'We have hot water, where do you think I'm going?'

I cringe at the stomp of each footstep up the stairs. Two doors are opened before the clunk of a bolt on the bathroom door, the sound of maximum security. How did passion twist and get angry?

Go to her. No, leave her. You know how she can be. Too late as I get to the landing. Both hands on the door, my cheek pressed against the cream coloured paint. I want to break it down, try again. I don't get a word out before I hear water fall. Best to leave her; how can I compete with a hot bubble bath?

'There's a bed in the bedroom.' Of course there is. 'It has a quilt on it, and a pillow. They're fresh, clean.' Say something Jamie . . . anything. I should have taken you in my arms and made you mine. You said it. I heard you say it. That you want us to be more. Is it true, do you really want us to be lovers. Your word, the one you used . . . lovers. But you don't always mean what you say. I don't always know what it is that you want. I do know that you shouldn't want me. When you could have anyone you desire, why me?

'Jamie?'

'Fuck off, Trigger.'

I've upset you, I'm sorry. I don't know what to do? 'I'll leave the last of the methadone on the bed. It'll see you through till I get back. Is that okay? Jamie? I'll be back before it gets dark.'

The Winter Gods are cruel and always at liberty to strike. And though I see clearly that the sun has risen high above me, the fire from their ice burns a hole in my chest. The heart is too delicate a muscle to be clutched in such a grip.

“And yet nothing burns” Jamie said it. The sun rises and nothing burns, and Jamie is never wrong. Yet still I burn a little more every day; so I wonder, will the day come when I finally dowse myself in flames?

With my strings hitched I head south, back toward the river. Toward the happy people, the visitors and the tourists, the ones who get to leave this city and go home. Their happiness is calculated by the weight of their bags, packed full with trophies from the ‘Big Smoke’. It’s the shops, the coffee houses, the bars that make it all go tick-tock. The daily migration of people who look, touch, and buy. To them this is another world. A historical bizarre that is plentiful and ripe for plunder. But I know who really plunders who so I keep my eyes turned down, set them on the endless tarmac. I am careful to avoid the crafty Imps that market and trade in the shadows as they scavenge for scraps. I see nothing, hear nothing, and speak to no one as I look for a space to call my own. That seemingly impossible endeavour in a land that is ring fenced by roads. Where time is suspended and hangs upon autonomous lights; one mesmerising gaze that follows the last to pause the slithering Serpent of cars; the only respite for the endless links in an unfathomable journey.

Their invisible smog is slowly turning London grey. It’s all so dirty and grubby, a land of pavements and yellow lines, not a breath of fresh air until I reach the river, and then I suck the air dry. I can breathe again. Yes, this will do, I know a place. I need to make money before the darkness returns to London. Before another strain of consumer arrives; the

ones who wait for the rising of the moon, they come and take the city at night.

Rise up and applaud London's curtain call, when concrete and brick take on the render of shadows, and the city's bright lights are fully cranked. But not me, and not Jamie. She is terrified of being out in the dark. She has the gift of sight, it's true, I've witnessed this. Jamie sees what lurks outside in the night. "They are wolves," she says, "followers of the Dark Angels. The ones who watch from the midnight wells." Jamie says they bide their time, that they wait and watch for the stragglers. For the weak who have separated from the herd. The foolish who stray off and get lost in the Cities Underworld. She says they are always watching, waiting, and biding their time. Darkness allows them to slither out and leave a smell on the streets.

Beware London after dark.

Leicester Square is a welcome reprieve. An oasis the city has pedestrianised, I like it. A tiny patch of green where the car is despised. A chance to breathe and look up, to admire the trees and the grass. There is a statue of Shakespeare, the great bard immortalised in stone. A thoughtful presence, well chiselled in an eternal pose. I wonder what he's thinking? I wonder if he cares? I don't. The Square is too quiet, slim earnings to be made. I need a crowd; one that moves. There are other places more suited to my needs so I move back toward the Thames. Consider the tube. Pick a station, take a pew. But these days the people that funnel past are desensitised. Unwilling to pity the broken life that begs at their feet. So not the Tube then. I walk South. South, south, south until I smell the "Salt and shit," isn't that what Jamie said, and she's right of course, she always is. So no point in going further, no-one stops any more to take a river view, just a Selfie.

I'll follow the Strand, an arterial link through this part of London; from Trafalgar Square to Temple Bar, and then on into Fleet Street, to the boundary of Westminster and the City of London. It's the southern boundary of Covent Garden.

The Garden?

The licensed performers won't like it. They'll object. Try to have me moved on. Fuck them. It's my Garden as much as theirs.

I'll go to the Garden.

I've always liked the Garden, it's old fashioned and lively, but doesn't smother you in London. It has market appeal mixed in with quaint; real easy on the senses. Plenty of hustle without the bustle. A gathering of boots, bobble hats and long scarves where you can taste the air. It's a carnival of flavours. The scent of fine dining being eaten below the stars. I should come here more often. Now all I need is a space, and I see one. Close to the Opera House where I unhitch my last remaining weapon in the war to keep us fed. A Gibson Hummingbird; my guitar, an umbilical to the past. The only comfort I feel when I'm alone without Jamie.

Quite remarkable how at ease I feel despite the colourful chaos that surrounds me. I know they mean me no harm, this colony of strangers, it's a turbid crowd. *Just stare at the ground, shut out the noise.* It's instinctive the way my fingers begin to gently pluck at the strings, and then a strum. No particular tune, just a rhythm which calms the air around me. It's simple, beautiful, calming. I'm in the zone. Alleviating all the anger in my world.

I sing, and not too badly so I'm told. In tandem they can take me as close to God as prayer. Lift my sorrow into smiles. And right now I'm smiling. I'm inside out, neither here nor there. Everything is clear and calm as I feel the rhythm resonate from the strings; it's the only way to make time stand still.

It's the music. God's gift from Heaven and I have a passion to share. I hope this maddened crowd will find it in their hearts to share too. From my instrument's travel bag I've fashioned a nest to catch loose change.

I close my eyes and retreat behind my acoustic walls.

Don't utter a sound, not a breath . . . it's coming.

Silent shoes step towards my secret place, then stop. I dare not move my head, just my eyes to peer from below the bed. The door, it's opening; I can hear its every creak. From outside the light spreads slowly across the floor; creeping towards me. I shrink away for fear it will burn my skin. *What's that in the distance?* I hear a flute, its sickly smooth notes play a lullaby. Then the shoes move closer and then past. They stop, twist on the wooden floor, and turn fully toward my secret place. *It's here.* I can't shrink any smaller. *It's found me.* I've tensed myself into a ball. *Wish it away, wish it away.* It's coming straight toward me . . .

'Hey little boy, are you under there?'

'No.' That was silly. And giggling doesn't help when I'm supposed to be hiding. Is that laughter I can hear out there?

'Are you coming out? Or do I have to come under to get you?'

'No.' Damn, I'm not very good at this.

'All right then, here I come. But be warned, I torture prisoners when I take them.'

I can't move, the wall won't let me. No way back, no way out, the bed that hides me has become a cage. This is bad, very bad. Whatever it is out there, it snorts, and it's coming close. I see a head, and shoulders, and . . . no, no, no . . . hands reach out like great long tentacles and threaten terrible things. I scream like a girl.

If it wasn't for the cheesy grin across my face I would be much better at this game. My screech turns to laughter, and the laughter is volcanic. Positively pyroclastic.

'Stop tickling me or I'll wet myself. I will, I will, I'm not bluffing. Mum . . . I just wet myself.'

‘Really? Oh Baby, let’s get you out and see?’

I’m sliding out on my backside, being dragged out into the light. Ahhhh, the light. What kind of beast holds a six year old kid up by his ankles?

‘You great big fibber. Grrrrr, Mummy eats little boys for breakfast.’

‘Mum, stop it. I really will wet myself.’

‘That’s enough.’

I know that voice as well as she does, and I feel mummy’s soft hands tense, they nearly drop. A cold chill follows the sound. It’s the power that words have when spoken by Gods. It is Winter that opens the door. Everything pauses as father enters the room.

Look at his face. Such outrage in the eyes because he doesn’t understand. So much fury intent to cut us short. Mummy is lowering me onto the bed, my eyes refuse to leave the upside down image that fills the doorway. I crash-land gently but Mummy holds my hand. Stands between me and Winter. But I can lean and still see.

What’s daddy looking at . . . oh, it’s the chart on the wall. A grey blank wall that doesn’t know how to have fun. A thousand times I have threatened to draw across its painted surface, but I daren’t. The only thing that breaks its ashen coat is a window covered with crinkled brown paper. It’s as if the lights have gone out and we are left to play in darkness.

Someone say something.

‘Malcolm, I, didn’t expect you back.’

‘So I see. Please, explain to me what’s going on? Why the boy isn’t practising?’ A glance at his watch. ‘I thought I’d made myself clear the last time.’

No, don’t tremble. I curl both my hands around Mummy’s and hug myself closer. I want to hide, but I have to see. Not like Mummy, she won’t return his icy stare. She never looks Winter straight in the eyes. Eyes that miss nothing. They see a thousand years of breeding been slighted by her kind nature. Winter has septic lips that are unable to smile.

‘Mummy?’

‘Shh, be quiet Baby Boy.’

‘But . . .’

‘Shhh, it’s not polite to interrupt Father.’

The cold clunk of hand made Italian hooves on ancient oak as he comes inside, and still the flute muses in the background.

‘Well?’ Winter demands.

‘We were just, playing.’

‘Playing?’ The word offends him.

‘We were just having fun.’

‘I’ve seen flowers wilt in the heat of the sun, but Winter isn’t hot? My mummy’s mischief and youthful spring is overcome by Winter’s demand to freeze.

‘Rebecca.’

That flute stops at last. I hate the flute. A door opens and footsteps patter across the planks out in the hall. My sister, Rebecca, older than me by a year; she stands in the doorway. Her flute clutched to her silky nightdress. Her head careful not to raise itself too high.

I think Rebecca is pretty, mostly when daddy is away. She has long blonde hair pulled tightly back from her scalp and then braided into a tail halfway down her back. It *must* stay like that until bed time, only then can she let it down. I’ve often wondered why her eyes are blue like daddy’s and mine are green like Mummy’s. What does that mean?

‘Tell me, Rebecca. When is *fun-time*?’

‘When I have finished my music. When my lessons are done. When my chores are complete. If I have time before dinner.’

Little snot, what does she want a pat on the head?

‘You see, it’s simple. Even a child can understand.’

Mummy’s cold, her hand grips mine as if frightened of slipping free. Rebecca stands erect, always straight, even when sitting down. She’s just like father.

‘Why do you do it? Why are you constantly at odds with our agreement?’

‘I didn’t mean to . . .’

‘Keep your tongue, I’m still speaking.’

A simple hand gesture is enough for both the women in my life to cow down. I feel its power too, and the surgical strike of the whispered commands that follow. I can’t stop it, I can’t help myself. I really have sprung a leak.

‘Go with your sister.’ Winter orders.

‘Stay where you are.’ Mummy resists and holds me firm.

Winter is so close to us now I can feel his heat. I startle; something awful just happened. I felt the shock wave travel down through Mummy and into my hand. Rebecca is shaking. Whatever happened, I feel I am no longer to be protected from the fallout. And something wet just fell onto my face.

Mummy? No, please don’t cry.

‘In front of the children?’ She’s crying. ‘You can’t wait until we are alone?’ Since when have Mummy’s tears been the colour of blood?

‘This will not continue. You’ve abused my trust for the final time. The boy will go to school earlier than planned.’ Winter turns but doesn’t leave. ‘He will learn the importance of his family name, ‘Daville’, and what his father expects of him.’

‘Terrance, please . . . he’s too young.’

‘I’ll see to the arrangements myself.’

‘We could get a nanny? You could choose a good one for him, from an agency, I’ll agree to anyone?’

She’s smiling, and whispering a prayer. Winter looks confused.

‘I’ve made my decision.’

‘Please, don’t take him away . . . Terrance . . . I’ll agree to anything, don’t take my baby.’

‘It is clear that I cannot trust you. I’ve endured your disruptive influence in this house for long enough.’

‘What? For God’s sake, they’re children, not commodities. Terrance . . . I’ll divorce you.’

Why have you grabbed her like that. *I won’t let go of her hand, I won’t. Stop it, stop it, you’re hurting her.* Now I’ve done it, all over the bed and the floor. Winter looks down on me with disgust. He lets go, steps back. Rebecca is sobbing in the doorway. Father pulls on his jacket as if it will make him respectable again. I just want him to go.

‘We had an agreement,’ Winter’s voice is calm again.

‘What agreement? I was a child. My parent’s shouldn’t have agreed to any of this . . . they’re *my* children too. Terrance, please, I trusted you.’

‘Have I not been patient? Generous beyond expectation? I have elevated you to the elite and thus is how you repay me. I’ve given you chance after chance, Gabrielle?’

‘All I ever wanted was your love.’

‘It was agreed. It was *fucking* agreed.’

‘I was seventeen, Terrance. Nobody asked me.’

‘No, I don’t suppose they did. I expect that no-one cared what you thought back then, nor do I now. You were bought and paid for. You’ve supplied what I needed,’ he looks at me. ‘Your family had their debts settled.’

It all sounds so much worse when he whispers the words as if they are weapons. Those eyes, so full of contempt. Full of hatred and pain.

‘Gabrielle, your usefulness is at an end. Your presence in this house is no longer required. Gentlemen, if you please.’

Who are these men? Where did they come from?

‘Get off her, let her go. I won’t stop hitting you until you do. Get off her, leave Mummy alone . . .’

I’m free falling and my face smarts. I can’t see Mummy any more, just Rebecca at the door. She’s crying, her face all red, her hands shaking like Rag Time. *Mummy?* I see her, one arm outstretched and reaching for me. She’s screaming. Pleading. That’s when it all goes dark.

* * *

‘Are you all right? Excuse me, are you all right?’

A kind but withered face seems intent to attract my attention.

My fault, sometimes the music lulls me and I remember things. Home movies that play in vivid colour; it’s someone else, not me. It can’t be me.

‘Hello? Are you all right in there?’

‘Yes, I think so.’ *Please don’t tap my head like that.* ‘Can I help you?’

‘I was worried you were having a stroke, dear. People were starting to stare, not that it’s any of their business. I said, not that it’s any of their business. These days if you drop down dead, you’re just in the way.’

She seems concerned. How do I explain.

‘I’m fine, still.’ *Stop staring.*

‘My name’s Dorothy. One minute you were playing so beautifully, the next, well, you look very pale. Like one of those statues in the park. I think they all thought it was part of your act. Look, show’s over, they’ve already moved on.’

The clink of cheap utensils and the chorus of cocky banter had resumed. And she was right. We live in a time when people fall, and others walk by so as not to be involved.

‘Thank you. I was dreaming.’ *At least I think I was.*

‘Oh, well, I didn’t mean to disturb; I thought, well, my husband died of a stroke, that’s all. Oh yes, that’s a lovely smile. What’s your name, love?’

‘Huh? Oh, Trigger.’

‘Trigger? That’s a funny name. Well, I’m very pleased to meet you, Trigger. Sorry I woke you up. Probably best anyway, wake you up before someone made off with the loot.’

Loot? Wow, there must be forty quid or more on the travel bag.

‘It’s hardly a surprise, you’re very good. Have you been classically trained? I only ask because I was a cleaner at the Royal Academy for

twenty years, you know, RAM, on the Marylebone Road? I've seen some plucky plectrums in my time. Are you sure you're all right?'

'I'm fine, really, I must have drifted off?'

'Dear, you were away with the Fairies.'

I guess it happens now and then. I'm glad I'm back. Take a deep breath, adjust, sometimes the noise and movement make me tense. My nerves are like a peacock's feathers, but starting to retract now. Beginning to feel normal, whatever normal is.

The Garden's still busy and crowded with shoppers. The square is rich and vibrant with sounds, a generous gaggle of gossip and whispers. This is a grand place to be. An opportunity to step back in time and wander below the girders and glass of Victorian England. The only thing missing is a locomotive's steam. I'll settle for the sweet smell and vapours from those that are cooking outside.

'Are you sure you're all right? You've barely taken a breath in the last few minutes.'

Granny is generous with her empathy. She's short and overweight; the hat and overcoat give her lovely granny appeal. She carries a black purse on her arm. It's how all Grandma's used to be. These days they drive nice cars and go to wine bars.

'You should get a proper job, love. Somewhere inside where you can stay warm. Look at you, not an ounce of fat. You must be freezing.'

'Life's not that bad, we don't mind.'

'We? Is there someone else? I haven't seen anyone else.'

'Jamie, she's my friend. She's waiting back at our house.'

'With a grin like that I'd say she was more than a friend. Is it one of those relationships that come with extra benefits I hear about?'

Really, did she just say that? I like her.

'What does she do, this *friend* of yours?'

'Do?'

'Does she work? Is she a housewife. Ohh, do you have children?'

'No . . . no, and no.' I raise my guitar and shrug. 'This is what I do.'

'Why the sad face, love? Half the country's on benefits nowadays. Why work when the government pays us not to? I get my State pension and I'm proud to be a burden. Fifty years I paid taxes, should get something in return.'

'You're old,' I smile, 'you should get more.'

'Damn right I should. But hey-ho, it's not much to live on but keeps me going. Reminds me of rationing during the War.'

‘Here,’ I take a ten pound note that someone has generously dropped and offer it to her.

‘No, no, I can’t take that. You’ve strummed hard for those coins, and you’re good too. I should know. I’ve listened to a few whilst scrubbing the halls. You’ve had some expert tuition that’s for sure. Mind if I ask where?’

Tuition? Yes . . . no . . . I don’t want to remember.

‘Did you say your name was, Dorothy?’

‘My friends call me Dot. You can call me Dot.’

I’m not sure the restaurant put that chair out so you could bring it over here. She’s feisty. And I can’t remember the last time anyone stopped for a chat. I’d normally run a mile from their company anyway.

‘That’s much better. The mind’s as sharp as it was but the pegs don’t lift weights any more. Why don’t I pour you a nice cup of tea?’

Tea? Ahh, that bag had to have something in it. She pours from a flask into the plastic cap without a handle. Hot, sweet, and with a hint of lemon as the penguins shuffle around us; hardly aware that we’re here. We’ve found an island, Dot and I. She seems nice, I like her.

‘We were married for fifty years, Harry and me. He died twelfth of December two thousand and two. It was a stroke.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. We had a wonderful life together, back when things were much simpler. At least it seemed that way. I can still see him, up here. Every second of our time together, it’s all up here. It’s sad to think that all that love and affection, all that bloody effort will be lost when I’m gone. My Harry was one of a kind. I miss him.’

‘I can’t imagine spending so much time with one person.’

‘What about, what’s her name, Jamie? Awww, see, she puts a smile on your face just thinking about her. My Harry does that to me, all the time. That’s why I’m always smiling. You love her don’t you, *your friend*?’

No . . . Yes. What else could it be? All I know for sure is I can’t bear the thought of being without her.

‘She doesn’t know does she? Oh, I’m embarrassing you by being intrusive. I’m a silly old girl, and I apologise. I know, I know, I’m a bit too forward for most people’s liking. I don’t mean any harm. I’m old and haggard, and I don’t get out much. If I sit here too long my teeth will want to come out. There, that’s better. You’re a handsome boy when you smile. Clean too, if you don’t mind me saying. Honestly, personal hygiene these days. Well, does she know?’

You are irritatingly difficult *not* to talk to.

‘I’ve never said the words, no, not out loud.’

‘But you love her don’t you? I’m sure she loves you too.’

Yes . . . maybe. It’s difficult to tell with Jamie. I smile.

‘She said something.’ *Go on, say it out loud. Make it real.* ‘It was unexpected.’

‘Ooh, do tell. I love a bit of Mills and Boon.’

‘She said, we should be Lovers. Then she tried to kiss me.’

‘Well, I’d say that’s a sign that she likes you. You should take her some flowers. Buy the girl a meal. That’s what us girls like. Keep us fed and buy lots of things that smell nice. Oh dear, why the long face?’

‘I didn’t kiss her back?’

‘Goodness, why not?’

‘I don’t know. I wasn’t ready. It just happened.’

‘But why? Oh, is there someone else?’

‘No.’

Why are you asking all these questions? I don’t even know you. There is no-one else.

No-one . . . no.

‘You should make your mind up, and soon. Trigger, time looks very different from where I’m sitting. All too soon you end up being alone. Trust me, I’m sort of an expert. I’d snap you up if I were forty years younger.’

You’re nice. This is nice. Someone to talk to is nice. I guess it’s easier because you’re a stranger.

‘I’m sorry, love. I don’t mean to pry. It’s just, well, I thought you were dead. Now you have this puppy dog thing going on. I just want to give you a big hug. Or maybe that hug would be for me? I get low myself sometimes, you know, when I think of Harry. I’ve got no family left you see; all gone now. I’ve outlived them all. And let me tell you, that’s a very silly thing to do. Don’t live longer than the people you love.’

If you want my advice, pack up your strings and go home. Go talk to Jamie. Tell her how you feel . . . and then kiss her. Do it while there’s time. There’s never enough time, love. Suddenly, they’re taken away.’

Why would you say that? She doesn’t know, how could she. Or does she? What does that mean?

‘Is there something else, love?’

Don’t tell her.

‘She’s angry with me.’

‘Oh I’m sure she’ll come round. Girls get grumpy, that’s what the flowers are for. No, shaking your head won’t help the cause.’

‘You don’t understand. When Jamie is angry . . . bad things . . . no, I can’t talk about it.’

‘Oh dear, Trigger . . . are you frightened of her?’

‘No.’

Yes. You don’t understand . . . *she does bad things.*

‘Jamie knows what’s best for us. It’s because she cares that she gets like this. I can be difficult . . . stupid. It’s because she cares.’

‘Did something happen?’

‘No.’

I can’t talk about it. She won’t like it.

Please, I know you mean well. But I can’t talk about Jamie. About, what she’s done.

‘I can’t speak about it.’ *Who the fuck are you anyway, poking your nose in where it’s not wanted? Go away. Please.*

The strings are silent. Why? Play something to drown her out.

‘I can’t talk to you about Jamie.’

Leave me alone.

I need to pluck, not strum. Try this one, a Flamenco. A difficult piece. My fingers need to pluck the strings.

Pluck them hard.

I can’t tell anyone. She’ll know if I tell. I can’t lie to Jamie. So I’ll never tell anyone what happens. It’s not her fault. Jamie gets angry, angry . . . she gets so angry.

I turn away from Granny and focus on the strings, on my fingers. I don’t see for sure but I think she’s got the message and gone. *I didn’t mean to be rude.* The music, focus on the music. *But I can’t talk about Jamie. Not about that. I can’t.*

The fierce melody builds me a wall and drowns out the Garden.

* * *

It’s dark out here. Why are we outside at this hour? Mummy, why are we heading for the car house?

‘Mummy, stop pulling me, I’m coming.’

‘Shhh, we have to be quiet, Baby Boy. Don’t let go of Mummy’s hand, not for a moment. Promise me.’

I nod. Why would I? But where are we going, I’m so tired. A few minutes ago I was asleep. It’s cold out here. Why is Rebecca sobbing?

‘Rebecca, please, stop dawdling. Rebecca, we have to go. What’s wrong darling? You must take Mummy’s hand.’

What’s her problem? Just get in the car. We’re going on an adventure, that’s what Mummy said.

‘Rebecca, please, my hand. I’m sorry I woke you up, but I’ve been planning this for some time. It’s a surprise; just the three of us together. Please, don’t fight me. It has to be tonight. Oh Becca, please, we have to

go. We can't live like this anymore. Becca . . . Oh God, Becca, please . . . please.'

Stop shaking your head and come with us. Sisters are so stupid. Mummy, get up off your knees.

'My name's Rebecca. Daddy doesn't like Becca. I won't go. He'll find us. I won't do it. He's angry with you, not me.'

'You don't understand, Bec . . . Rebecca. What he does. Please, Rebecca, I'm begging you . . . come with us.'

'No, he'll be angry. I want to go back. You know how he is when he's angry. You know what he'll do.'

I don't. What does he do? Why are you looking at us like that? No, Becca . . . don't do it. Don't shout . . .

Wow, she's deafening. A banshee scream for father fills the night. It's a call to arms, a warning to *him* that we are trying to break out.

Huh, typical Becca. A daddy's girl through and through.

'Oh God, Becca. I'm so sorry.'

Hold on, I'm not made to run this fast. Mummy, what about Becca?

'Run darling, run for the car.'

The doors of the big Mercedes are unlocked. I'm being ushered into the passenger seat. Mummy clicks my seat belt in place and runs round to take her seat. I see lights from the house, people are coming. Father is coming. What about Becca? Are we leaving Becca behind?

The lights are getting closer to her, closer to us as the car growls its willingness to aid in our escape. The powerful engine sounds angry, aggressive. This is no fairground ride, the wheel's shouldn't spin like this. Oh God, the car lurches forward. I can still see Becca through the window, standing there, screaming, getting further away. Why are we leaving Becca behind?

What's wrong Mummy, why are you shouting at the dashboard? Mummy, stop slamming your hand on the leather. Oh, the gates are closed? But I thought they opened when the car got close. Why aren't we slowing down? Mummy, why aren't we slowing down? The gates Mummy, *the gates*?

It's a fight to the death. The metal barrier designed to stop terrorists, I've heard them say. It will stop them getting in. But we want to get out. Uh oh, Mummy's put her arm across my chest. She not going to . . . she can't. The gates are refusing to open.

My head jerks down to look down at the floor and then whips back up. I see an angry gate smash its way into the cab and stare me in the face, thank God it is thrown free. Angry metal clanks everywhere as

tyres screech unholy union, with God knows what. I want to get out now, this is too scary. I want to go back to the house and hide under my bed. I don't like flying, and I think I'm upside down. It's all happening so slow, yet so fast. I'm bouncing, up up, now over. I have no control of my body but am strapped to the chair. Over and over, upside down and then right way up, and then upside down again. All I can do is stare as the world spins around and around. I want Mummy to stop bouncing as well. Mummy, please, make it stop.

I think God must have listened as the car grinds to a halt. A horrible hissing sound prevails and the air stinks of petrol. It seems like an age before I am able to move again.

'Out, get the boy out.'

Father?

'The belt's stuck, I can't move him.'

It's Clem's voice, father's bodyguard. I've never heard him shout like this before. Uh-oh, this time I think I've wet myself again.

'Come on boy, I've got you. Out you come.' Sliding, being pulled out. I want to go home. 'I've got him, he's clear. The boy's clear.'

So little air to speak with. Don't look at me like that. Go back, save her. She's just there, why are you taking me away. Go back, save her too.

'Go back, Clem. Put me down and get Mummy out.'

'I'm sorry Kid, Boss' orders. I have to make sure you're safe.'

Look at the mess, there are bricks spread across the road, lying all over the car. Why isn't anyone else trying to get her out? Huh, look, I can see her. She's moving. Mummy's alive and trying to get out. She's shouting for me, I can hear her voice. I see Father, he'll get her out. He will, won't he? Why is he walking away? *Help her*. Stop taking me back to the house. *Go back and help her*.

'Mummy needs me . . .' *Get off me. Let me go*. 'Clem, call a nah nah, please. Help Mummy out of the car.'

He stays silent and walks me away. Behind I see fire, it burns like magic in Father's hand. It's the lighter he uses as fire for his cigars. *No, no, that's dangerous*. He's dropped it. Father is walking away. *Father, you've dropped your lighter?* Too late, the night flares into light. I can see over Clem's shoulder as he carries me away. The car, it burns like a tiny sun. I hear screaming, faint, being drowned out by the roar of the flames.

The fire roars and lights the sky and the ground shakes with violence. Clem cowers and clutches me hard as thunder cracks through the night. I bury my head in his chest and remember only darkness.

* * *

My strings have fallen silent again. It was all my fault, they wanted me not her. I could have stayed, I could have refused. I don't want to be here any more. Go . . . I don't want to relive that night. It's all wrong anyway, they told me so. It was an accident, just an unfortunate thing to happen. Then why did the Police not want to talk to me? The doctor said it was shock, that I shouldn't talk about it. Bad things would happen if I talked about it. Talk about what, I'm not even sure it happened anymore. "You're lucky to be alive," that's what they said.

Was I?

I guess so.

'Dorothy?' Trigger you're a moron sometimes. I'm sorry that I shouted at you. I wish I could say I was sorry but the chair is empty, unlike the Garden that is aggressive and noisy. Fuck this, I pack up and leave. They've turned the lights on early, but it doesn't help, I don't think it's pretty any more. I need to leave, to be somewhere else.

Anywhere but here.

A short walk to Mercer Street and I'm in St Martin's Courtyard. Full of tall buildings and faceless windows this is a great place to shop. I made a promise to Jamie, and I always keep my word.

A dress, something casual but elegant. This will be a treat for Jamie. That girl can rock anything liberated from a charity shop. But not today. This will be figure hugging, expensive and soft, to show off her curves. She'll like that a lot. A peace offering, and then maybe she'll forgive me. They say that shopping is good therapy, so let's find out.

Lets see . . . Barbour, COS, Desa Duo. Three storeys of clothing and a good crowd to blend into. Upstairs is especially busy. And wandering about the women's section of any shop can be a bit obvious so I have to be quick.

I find what I'm looking for in Next. Knee length and tight, it has a soft and silky texture. The fabric has a sheen, it's just the type of dress my Jamie will fit, perfectly. She likes men to look at her. It's important to her. That's fine, I understand. *No, I don't.* But this dress will accentuate her to all who want to see.

Maybe it's her age, I don't know. She thinks she's getting old. *She's not.* Thirty-six is just about ready to bloom in my eyes. I intend to be clean and clinical as I help myself, the dress is already on the floor. Slipped from the hanger and being pushed along by my foot.

Hey, how you doing little kid. I know, I know, you shouldn't talk to strangers but how do you feel about committing a crime? Yes? Good girl. Just keep talking to me and I'll pop this inside my coat. Camera only sees me saying 'hi' to a child in a pushchair.

I like the pink hat, it sports Winnie the Pooh and Tigger too. Personally I prefer Eeyore. And wow, that's a beautiful smile. I bet your

mummy loves you doesn't she? Loves you to bits. Good girl, thank you for your complicity, maybe we'll do it again some time.'

'Can I help you?'

A stern voice behind me, but not a store detective. I think it's Mum. 'Hi.' She's short, slim, very pretty. Too young to be a mother, but has a much larger, much fiercer looking parent of her own in tow.

'She dropped this.' Okay I took it out of her mouth. 'You should probably clean it first, it's been on the floor.'

'Oh, thank you.' She's not sure. I hand the dummy to her and get up. She seems grateful and gives me a 'I need a man in my life' smile. Grandma's not so impressed.

'I don't suppose you know how I get to Soho when I leave here?' Big smile, it's me and my family for the cameras.

'Soho? That's easy,' she says, 'follow the road straight up to Seven Dials. Take any left and you'll see the signs. It's just a short walk from there.'

'Cool. She's a lovely kid by the way. You must be very proud.'

'Awe, thank you. I am. Do you have kids?'

'No, not yet.' Probably never. This isn't the sort of world that Jamie or I would want for them. 'Hey, maybe I'll see you around?'

'Yeah, maybe. Little Gemma and me, we're always about.'

She's nice. Her mum has a 'fuck off and die' look on her face.

'See ya then.'

'Bye,' I give Gemma a wave with my fingers.

I make the sign after they turn away. The one with the fingers that means. 'I'll phone you.' Just for the camera, let it know that I have a reason for being in the woman's aisle.

One more stop to make as I head out onto Mercer Street, a narrow road, one of thousands in the Capital. The tall bland buildings on either side help to cut out the light. But a short walk up to Seven Dials and the road opens up to a small roundabout, with a tall obelisk raised at its centre. They're showing 'Matilda' at the Cambridge theatre on the other side of the circle.

First left into Earlham Street below the promenade of awnings that stretch along either side. This is the London that I like, it has a cabaret feel, more vibrant and welcome. The girl in the shop was right, as I exit Earlham I'm into Shaftesbury Avenue, and just a stone's throw from Soho.

Three sharp raps, Raymond. No more. Don't want Ken to think it's a raid. *Tum te tum*. I should have been a reporter instead of a copper. *Te tum te tum*. He's got a really nice place here. Nice area to live in. *Tum tum*. Yeah, Ken's done well for himself.

Ahh, finally, my brother-in-law opens the door.

'Raymond . . . and what brings the Met to my neck of the woods? No, don't tell me, let me guess. This is business not pleasure. What have I done this time?'

'Well, I was going to say I was just passing.'

'Inside, I don't want to be seen with the filth.'

'Oy, cheeky bastard. I had a bath last week.'

What pisses me off more is how well Ken looks. For a reporter who spends most nights out and about there is a distinct lack of dark shady bits hanging around his face. He's a year older than me and not a wrinkle in sight.

'You're lucky you caught me. Five minutes and I was off down the gym. And don't look at me like that, keeping fit isn't contagious. You still a non smoker?'

'Yeah, not as hard as I thought.' *Only took a heart attack and two days in a coma to spur me on*. 'Did you say you were making coffee?'

'Sorry mate, it's only de-caff. Or I have some nice orange and passion fruit; some squeezed melon. Apple juice? It's lovely with a slice of lemon. Aw mate, your face? I'm joking. You want instant, or the real thing?'

Fucking asshole.

'Strong, white . . . and, err,' *thinking of Carol's face*, 'no sugar, thanks.'

'Got you on the sugar wagon has she?'

'There's a whole fucking convoy of wagons I'm signed onto. I've been shepherding a rookie named Cooper toward Starbucks all week. Sarge

just wants a full fat, double shot, no foam latte. Is that too much to ask? Have I got there yet? Cooper thinks it's not very Met like. We should be tracking murderers, molesters and mayhem, twenty-four seven. Hey, nice kitchen. Carol mentioned you'd had it done. Very countryfied. Oooh, double bowl and extendable faucet, and you've got baskets. Ken, I love baskets.'

'When you've finished taking the piss. It's Kathy who wanted the kitchen like this. And for the record, I love it.'

'Thought you wanted a Kawasaki?'

'Apparently I'm having a mid life crisis and I'd get a lot more use from a new kitchen.'

Bless him. Now this is a man under the thumb. A very lovely thumb, but it knows just how much pressure to apply before it kills him.

'What Kath wants Kath gets, eh?'

'Did Carol get those nice new pyjamas for you? The silky blue ones with the matching slippers.'

How do you . . . ?

'She told you about those?'

'No, of course not. But she told Kath, and in the strictest confidence mind. Then Kath told me, and don't worry I was told to keep it a secret. Though I am struggling for a headline?'

'All right, wipe the grin off. Kath still dabbing the cream on your haemorrhoids.'

'For crying out loud, does she tell Carol everything?'

'Mind if we sit and talk, Ken. In the front room?'

'So it is business then. Here, take your coffee with you.'

I've always liked the lounge. Cosy, homely. A lovely fireplace to cuddle up to in the evenings. *Shit, what happened in here?*

'Mate, someone's vandalised your walls.'

'Very funny, Kath's been decorating?'

'They're Canary yellow?'

'Wipe that grin off your face, she made me do it. Now tell me why you're here. What do you want?'

'Information, and Ken, this is off the record. At least for now.'

'You, off the record? I'm intrigued.'

'When I was unconscious in the hospital you came to visit; spent a few hours at by my bed chatting to me. Thanks, by the way.'

'No problem, I didn't think you were listening.'

'Apparently I was. Now I'm on a case, so this is between me and you. Ken, I found some drawings on a wall a day or so back. The images have

been banging round my head, Nag nag nag, you know, won't go away. Thinking I've seen them before somewhere. And then I realised that I haven't actually seen them. I've had them described to me. By you.'

'Definitely intrigued now.'

'Ghoulish faces, tearful petals, ring any bells? Ken, you described the art on a wall I saw, whilst I was unconscious in hospital.'

'Okaaaay?'

'Think back. A murder you were reporting on. A young man, twenties, there was writing on the walls. Pictures and stuff, scrawled all over in black crayon.'

'I remember. But I wasn't actually talking to you. I was on the phone to my editor. Final copy. I was gonna read you a book, honest.'

'That's fine.' *Git*. 'Run it by me, everything you know.'

'Don't the Met have files on this sort of thing?'

'Indulge me.'

'Okay. A fortnight or so before your, *wobble*, I get a phone call from a source. "Dead body, possible murder, usual fee." The source is normally reliable so I took a trip down to Wimbledon. Sure enough the place is a crime scene, local Bobby hints to a suspicious death. Suspicion being the three stab wounds, one taken to the chest, the other two in the abdomen. The body was a thirty something loner with no fixed abode. Came to London six years ago and had lived rough ever since. According to my source he had numerous arrests for drugs, small time dealing, nothing major. Official line was a drug related killing.'

'And?'

'And nothing. No-one's been charged to my knowledge. Don't suppose anyone gives a shit, not really.'

'There's always someone that gives a shit, Ken. It's normally the parents.'

'Not this time, kid had no family. Just another hard luck story from the big city.'

'You're all heart. Don't suppose you got any biscuits?'

'Got some fig rolls?'

'You got a name for the corpse?'

'Yeah, somewhere. What's this all about, Ray? You can get all this from your own files. What's your interest?'

'The drawings on the wall.'

'What about them, they were nothing to do with the murder? I found them upstairs when no-one was looking. The body was in the garden.'

'You broke the cordon on a crime scene didn't you?'

‘No, absolutely not.’

‘Was it in the middle of the night?’

‘It was dark, yes.’

‘Were there lines of tape stretched across, everything?’

‘Forensics were finished so I took a look around the rest of the building. Big deal, the place was a squat.’

‘They put it there to keep twats like you out.’

‘Then they should use bigger tape.’

If you weren't married to Carol's sister.

Okay, remember what Cooper told you. Press this, and this, look like you know what you're doing, and . . .

‘Ken, think carefully. Did the drawings look like this?’

‘Just a sec. Glasses, glasses . . . right, show me. Yeah, they were just like that. Don't remember them covering the entire wall though. The centre piece, just here, I thought it was some sort of album cover. Where'd you get these?’

Ray, how come these are on your phone? That entire building got a paint job two weeks later when the owner recovered his house. So unless you snuck out of the hospital these are from a different scene? They are aren't they. Has something else happened? Ray, has there been another murder?’

He's so sharp he'll cut himself one day.

‘Hand them over, Ken.’

‘Hand what over?’

‘Your photos, and any notes you took, and a copy of what was printed. I want everything. No, don't shrug at me, we're not at school. I expect they'll be on a memory card, probably in the drawer over there where you keep all that shit.’

* * *

Pulling teeth would have been easier. Ken can be a right dickhead sometimes. Come on Cooper, answer your phone.

‘Cooper, are you back at the station? Good, I have a job for you. I need you to pull a case number off the computer, and then print everything we have on the murder of one, Stuart Brownlow. I'll text you the date and the name of the officer in charge.’

“Let light shine out of darkness.” They are God’s words. He let the light shine bright in all of our hearts. He gave us the light of His glory, displayed in the face of His son Jesus Christ.

But as each day passes, as each sun rises only to fall; I begin to wonder . . . what if that is *not* the truth of things. It isn’t what I see around me.

It is the Stars that greet us each and every day. The Stars that nurture us and keep us warm. The Stars are colourful, dynamic, and dangerous. They burn when they are angry. Such visions of power and wonder, and yet so callous in nature. So isn’t it obvious. Aren’t we made up of left over Stars. Is it any wonder we act more in their image than we do our Lord? Sometimes I wonder if reason isn’t more powerful than Faith.

I’d like to be able to walk in through the front door, sometimes. Not always. Illegal entry is a buzz. But this is not the same as we hide from our new neighbours. The need to be careful, to walk in silence; whisper conversation in the semi-light. I have too much time to reflect in the shadows. To contemplate the World and its ills. But for now we have comfort, and hot water. So silence is how we live. If we are heard we’d have to move on again. And I don’t think Jamie could handle that, not so soon.

So tonight we celebrate. New house, new start . . . new dress. And there’s something else, a little extra from Tesco. A treat from the sixty-two quid that was dropped in my hat. Pinot Grigio, Italia, Jamie’s favourite, and a long stick of bread. I’ll take a sneaky Communion, say a few words to God. Just Him and me, it’s been a while. Not that God’s much of a talker, but I know He listens, and it’s important that *someone* listens. I’ll wait until Jamie’s asleep, she doesn’t do well with “that reli-

gious shit.” Be patient with her, Lord. One day she’ll see you as I do, I know she will. I slip the wood back into the fence and do the Black Ops thing across the garden.

Voices?

Hunker down and listen. Wait. Nothing but dark and silence to register, and the curtained light from next door. Sometimes I jump at my own shadow. The back door clicks shut and I slide the bolt. It will be a manly entrance tonight. The great hunter returned from the Bush, triumphant with his trophies. A rucksack filled with food and wine. I head for the light in the front room toward the subtle sound of voices. Jamie’s listening to the radio. I open the door and jump in.

‘Ta da . . . I’m back. Oh, what’s going on? Who’s he?’

‘Trigger, you’re back.’ She’s happy to see me. ‘Come in, and look, we have a visitor. Meet my new friend, Craig. You see, I told you he’d be back after dark, Craig. Trigger always comes back, he never lets me down. Trigger, come and sit down. Isn’t it wonderful, we have a guest.’

A guest? I think I’ve frozen from the feet up. This isn’t possible. Who the fuck is he? This is our space . . . he’s not welcome. *Go away, fuck off.*

‘Trigger? Say hi to Craig.’

I won’t. No way. Who is this guy?

‘Hey man, how you doing?’ he says. ‘I hope you don’t mind, but when a beautiful woman asks me back to hers, what can I say?’

‘Aww, that’s a nice thing to say. Craig and I met at the shop, Trigger.’

‘The shop?’ *But you never go out without me. You hate it out there?* ‘What shop?’

‘Oh, I took a walk. I needed some air to clear some cobwebs. You understand don’t you.’

No, you never want to go out alone. Why did you do that?

‘We got talking in the queue, had things in common. And voila, here he is. Craig’s been telling me wonderful things. It’s such a treat to have intelligent conversation again. And where have you been all this time? He does this, leaves me on my own in the dark’

‘But I . . .’

‘Tell me later. Come, sit.’

Stop patting your hand, I’m not a lap dog. Why have you brought him back? You shouldn’t have brought him here.

‘Hey, so you’re Trigger. Nice to meet you.’

Don’t talk to me. Don’t even fucking look at me. I don’t want you here. He has that University look about him. Like he just sailed in on a punt, with a smug *I know something that you don’t* look on his face. And

he has ginger hair. Isn't evolution trying to eradicate that mistake. It obviously needs to try harder.

Trigger, come and sit down, you're embarrassing me. Craig's nice, I like him, so you'll like him too. Sit, here, next to me.

I sit on the arm of the sofa as the space on the couch next to Jamie is filled with Ginger, that wears glasses. Jamie likes boys that wear glasses. She says it makes them look intelligent, like her. Jamie knows a lot, about everything. But she shares it with me, not with the likes of *him*. I'll have my eyes tested again, there must be something wrong with them by now.

'Hey, am I intruding? I don't want to cause offence.'

Then fuck off.

'Don't be silly, Trigger's probably had a hard day, haven't you darling.'

Darling? She never calls me that.

'I've got some . . .'

'Shush darling. Listen to what Craig's been saying. Go on Craig, sorry for the interruption.'

'Yeah, sure . . . As I said, it's called the Arrow of Time. Like the rest of the Universe we are compelled to travel into the future. The Arrow dictates that as each moment passes, things change. Of course they do. And when these changes occur, they can never be undone. You know, it's not like we invented time, we're a direct result of it's passing. Everything is born, it lives, and it dies. And then is reborn again. Scientists call it Entropy. On such a vast scale the Universe calls it progress. Constant change, a search for perfection. Personally, I would love to be around to see what happens next.'

'I've never thought of it like that before, it's fascinating. I'm more a Social Economic Tigress, you know, how we live, how we interact with our world. Every day shit that happens, one day at a time, another twenty-four hours abusing our planet. Governments letting their people down, banks fucking us over again. I'm for the children and the animals, the only ones who don't get a choice or a voice. But I guess the rest of the Universe has its problems too?'

'I guess so. Only this time *we're* not to blame.'

Don't laugh at his lame jokes. Oh yeah, really funny, hysterical. I think I've found a place to shove my breadstick.

'At the moment the Universe is spinning on it's head, and we're along for the ride. We go with the flow . . . and it's going this way.'

Jamie, why are you laughing at this shit? Ask him to leave.

‘Isn’t he wonderful, Trigger? Hey, I didn’t ask, what’s in the bag? Huh, is that the top of a wine bottle? Trigger darling, you’ve brought wine. Craig, we’re having a party.’

Break bread with the enemy, I don’t think so. And we’re not swapping spit with you either. Jamie, I’ll get you a cup, you don’t know where he’s been?

‘I’ll get him a plate and a cup.’

‘Go on Craig, I want to hear some more.’

Yes please, Craig. Bore me shitless with more tales of the Booringiverse.

‘Who was it that said, “We are all just players on a stage”? Well, it’s a pretty big stage. Did you know that there are over two billion galaxies in the Observable Universe. Two billion? And that the visible Universe has a radius of nearly fourteen billion light years, and is still expanding, rapidly. Astronomers measure the expansion of the universe in kilometres per second per megaparsec. It’s called the Hubble Constant, and has a value somewhere around 70 kilometres per second, per megaparsecs. If an object is one megaparsec away, or 20 billion billion miles, then it’s moving away at 70 kilometres per second, which is about 150,000 mile per hour. Things that are twice as far away move twice as fast, that’s if you ignore the effects of gravity and dark energy.’

Blah blah blah. Borrrrrr,ing.

‘The building blocks of life are forever moving too, and pretty rapidly. And it’s the same, here on Earth, as it is in Heaven.’

Don’t say that. Don’t you dare use those words, and with that tone. *Bastard.*

‘It’s change that drives Evolution everywhere. And it’s the constant evolving that will one day create perfection. Hey, it’s the search for perfection that has led to the creation of Man. It doesn’t get more ironic than that.’

‘God created Man.’ *You blasphemous twat.* ‘Just as he created the Universe and everything in it.’

‘Trigger, don’t.’

‘When people like you look through a telescope you see the work of God, and it *is* perfection.’

‘Trigger, don’t be rude. Not everyone believes in God. Science is a wonderful study, and besides, God hardly made us perfect, now did He?’

You’re siding with him?

‘Yeah, come on. God’s a cop out, man. An easy explanation for . . . well, everything. All the things that a limited intelligence and lack of imagination can’t understand. No offence.’

‘None taken.’ *Plenty taken, you prick.* A hundred years ago and I’d have denounced you. Let the church burn you at the stake. Use physics to light your fire. ‘So what about light? What about colour and sound?’ I ask. ‘What about the scent of a blossoming flower, and the feel of a warm breeze on your face?’

‘What about them? Everything we see is the refraction of light. Sound is just vibrations. As for your warm breeze? Just the sun reacting with the jet streams, all influenced by oceanic currents.’

‘And when you look at the sky at night, tell me what you see then?’
You Ginger fuck.

‘Plain old Matter, all discharged by the Big Bang. A few million years of gravity and it’s physics that started the fires, that produces the light you see. Everything can be explained by the application of science.’

I feel sorry for you. There is no magic left in your life. Answer me this.

‘Who was it who said, “I think, therefore I am”? How do you explain the feelings inside my head? The emotion in my heart, and my ability to be aroused by their presence? That’s God’s blessing for His children.’

‘No, it’s just chemicals.’

‘And my ability to reason from these chemicals? To understand their effects? To channel their presence into creativity. To use my hands as tools and create what I dream? To be able to say, I am?’ Going to smack you, you, ginger haired *freak*.

‘It’s just smoke and mirrors, mate. A trick of Evolution. A warped sense of reality.’

‘No, it’s a gift from God. We’re not perfect, Jamie. But God made us sentient, and He challenges us to find our own way. And I believe we *will* succeed.’

‘Trigger, I want you to stop talking like this, right now. Craig is our guest. I won’t have you branding him as a heretic.’

He did that himself. And why are you so cross with me, he started it. Can’t I voice *my* beliefs against his?

‘I see what you mean, how do you put up with him? And for the record, it was René Descartes who said “I think therefore I am.” And it was a philosophical proposition, not a religious conjecture. He was looking for knowledge.’

‘There, you see. Trigger, you’ve made yourself look silly. And you’ve embarrassed me. So if you’re not going to drink this wine with us, Craig and I will finish the bottle, whilst he tells me more about the Universe. What were you saying about the Big Bang earlier?’

‘Oh yeah, it’s a theory of mine. Fourteen billion years ago the Universe was a much smaller place. It already existed as a calm sea of protons chilled to absolute zero. That’s two hundred and seventy-three point five degrees Celsius, by the way.’

Don’t look at me like that when you say it.

‘The Big Bang brought it to life with a shock-wave so violent and super heated that it charged these protons into new forms of energy; Dark Matter, and its mortal enemy, Dark Energy, the Yin and Yang of the Universe. The Bang’s inertia caused the millpond to stir and it hasn’t stopped moving since. Its momentum is increasing the older the Universe gets. More haste means more heat, and more movement encourages the normal processes that we understand today. Bits clump together, they get bigger, and they begin to affect what’s around them. It’s called *gravity* . . .

Look at me like that again and they’ll never get this bread stick out.

‘It moves, crushes, and superheats things. That’s why the stars in the night sky are so, *pretty*. I tell you, mate. Science is the new religion. God went out with the old one.’

‘Go fuck yourself.’

‘Trigger . . . how dare you.’

‘What? He comes round here . . .’ No, not uninvited. You brought him here, why? ‘I don’t like him, Jamie.’

‘And right now I don’t like you, so stop this silliness and be nice. Stop embarrassing me. I’m so sorry, Craig. Now look, you’ve brought on one of my headaches.’

‘I’m sorry.’ I am. ‘There’s some paracetamol in the bag.’

‘No, I just want you and Craig to be friends. Is that too much to ask?’

Why Jamie? Why hang on every stupid word he says. Are you punishing me for something. I’m sorry. Whatever it is I’ve done, I’m sorry. Tell him to go.

‘I don’t mind, we can discuss God, or the *lack* of a God, to be more precise. I’m sorry mate, I am. But we’re not special, we’re no more interesting than . . . a water molecule. Jamie, did you know there are more molecules of water in a glass than stars in the Universe, and here’s an interesting fact for you . . .

I run a bath; the boilers on, and the temperature's constant. Hot water fills the tub. Lots going on but nothing to see, it's just a bath. So what happens if you introduce a single drop of ice cold water . . . plop. Too many bubbles, didn't even notice the splash. But for a nano moment something somewhere in that water became different, before it was absorbed. It was instant, and then forgotten. Might as well have never happened. And it's the same with us, Trigger. Nothing notices our splash, there are no residual marks. We're an anomaly, nothing more. A practical joke by the Cosmos. Just us, *here*, on our little rock. Lost in our teeny tiny solar system. Now you see us, and then we're gone. We are absorbed, passed through the Cosmic bowels as if we never happened. It may take a thousand or a hundred thousand, or even a million years. But joke over, no punch line . . . *we're nothing special*.

And I'll tell you something else, mate. When it's over, it's over. You, me, the Universe, we'll all come to an end. There's no Heaven or Hell in science. Nothing to come after we've gone. No journey to take. We knew nothing of the first fourteen billion years, and then by pure chance, a roll of the dice, it gives us a few dozen years to wonder why it even bothered. And that's life, mate.

'Jamie, I have to go out.'

'Trigger? I'm so sorry Craig, he's not usually like this. Where are you going, you've just got here?'

'I'm going to see Carl.'

'Carl? Trigger, is that a good idea?'

'We're north of the river, he's the only person I know that, can help us. Besides, Carl's okay. It's his dog. It doesn't like me for some reason.'

'Fine, go then. Did you get to the chemist earlier?'

Why would you ask that in front of him?

'I won't be long.' I'm angry with you, can't you see that? Right now anywhere is better than here, *with him*. I sneak the syringes the pharmacist gave me into a drawer. I don't want him to see that Jamie is ill. It's none of his business. His kind don't hang around to help. I hope he rots in Purgatory, hung up by his scientific bollocks. There's no way that I can give Jamie the dress before I leave. She's busy, no time for me. I'll give it to her later. Right now I have somewhere else I'd rather be.

Five thirty-six. It's only two stops on the Tube. I have to wonder, is that why I brought Jamie north of the river? Was it you? Did I want to be closer to you? I don't think so . . . but maybe?

You and me, we are at the centre of everything subversive. Our little secret; something that Jamie doesn't know. Not really. So where are you? I need to see you. I don't know how long I can wait.

I'll wait.

Victoria Place is lit up, its outline opulent and well to do. The Fat man is already home, curtains closed as always. What does he do in there, and why do I care? But I want to know. Why he never opens his curtains, and why he hid from the Beasts. Or is it just a distraction. To take that ginger fucks' face out of my head. Oh Jamie, you shouldn't have done it. It was wrong to bring that man to our new home. No-one enters our inner sanctum, it's ours. We agreed. Not even the twins were allowed.

Upstairs is twitching her blinds again. That woman makes me paranoid. I feel that I am visible, that the darkness in my Hide is . . . well, less than black. Go away. Go take a shower. Bake some tarts. Just stop that incessant twitching.

Ignore her.

Windows, there are twenty-six. Eight lamps on the wall, twelve steps to each turn of the staircase. Cars, cars, there are eight cars out front. Only two tenants are unaccounted for. *She*, is one of them. This time I'm going to say something. When she gets home, before the gate closes. I'm going to approach and tell her who I am. Why not? Life's too short, isn't that right, Ging. You can't just stand in the dark and stare. Frankly, it's a bit odd.

Say hello, introduce yourself. *Hi, my name is Trigger.* Take her hand and shake it, but don't hold on too firm. Smile, let her know you're

friendly. Ask her what her name is? No, maybe that's too forward? Just be nice, and maybe, maybe she'll invite you up for coffee. I'm going to do it, tonight, I'm going to say 'hi.'

Five forty-three and still no sign. Sometimes the bus gets delayed. London's transport can be as shite as anywhere else. Or maybe she missed it. Sometimes chatting to someone makes you late. Perhaps it's the music on her iPod, love songs can cause a girl to walk more slowly. That's true, isn't it? I read it somewhere. All I know for sure is it's getting cold again.

Five forty-four. Something's happened to her. Why is she late? Why? I don't know why. Leave work at five, the bus runs outside at six minutes past. The walk from the bus stop takes four minutes, five at a pinch. I've walked it. So why isn't she here? *Stop sighing, Trigger.*

Darkness has more than one shade and each time a car drives past I feel the boundary of my shadows. Whilst I stay within their limits I am invisible, I am safe. This place is sacred. So why does it feel so hot, so constrictive? What harm if I move forward and break free? Just one step, let the twitcher see me, what do I care. From the corner of the wall I can see more of the road. Outside the shadow I see everything. Take the step. No, wait, she'll be here. Any time soon. Any minute now.

Breeeathe.

I was going to give her a letter, I wrote it on the Tube. It explains everything that I want to say. All the words that rattle around my head. How we share a bond, you and me, ever since that day in the park. You remember, don't you? When you found me out there sleeping. When you smiled at me for the first time. The touch of your hand on mine to awaken me. You gave me a lollipop to suck and we talked. I knew right then that you were a vision sent from Him.

Someone's coming. I hear the footsteps. Is it you?

I feel a cavalry charge, the thunder of hooves in my chest. Perspiration smothers my skin with cold. Not winter, not this time. It's anticipation, expectation . . . revelation, that makes my eyes strain and both feet edge toward the line of shadow.

It is you.

This is a sign, surely. Why else would I feel like a child on Christmas morning, hearing trumpets that announce her presence. I'm on fire with desire. I must mount the stallion, ride him, race out to meet her. I've never felt the urge so bad. So why not use it, make it work for me. It must be a sign. It's His hand that pushes me forward. His voice that whispers "what have you got to lose." Well, it's all right for Him, I'm the

one that's walking out of the shadow and into the light. Yes, at a steady canter, preparing to trot now. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.*

That really doesn't help.

Quickly, move now before she gets to the gate. A subtle change, a quicker pace, I burn with courage. I will greet her as if we are friends, haven't I known her for months. Up the pace, make a noise. Cough, wheeze, whistle? Say, 'Hi, I'm Trigger, so pleased to meet you at last.' It's easy. Just a few more steps.

Wait, what are you doing, why have you quickened your stride? Match it. Overtake her. Be quick before the numbers are entered and she goes through the gate. Reach out and touch her on the shoulder. It's all right, she'll understand, do it now.

'Excuse me . . .'

'Stay back . . . you're scaring me. What do you want? I've got no money, nothing to give you. Go away.'

No, that's not it. I don't want . . .'

'Step back.'

Yes, of course. I'm sorry.

'Fucking tramps, is nowhere sacred? Get away before I call the police. Go on.'

Say something. Do it now Trigger. Tell her you just want to talk. Say some . . . It's too late there are bars between us now. The clunk of the heavy metal gate is final. What's that in her hand, is it Mace?

'What's going on down there? Is that you Karin? Is everything all right? Shall I call the police?'

Karin, is that your name?

'It's all right Mrs Grange, no need to call anyone. There isn't is there?'

Is that all I can do, shake my head? *Walk away, Trigger. Walk away. Go back to the shadows where you belong.*

'Hey, please, stop.'

She calls me, but I don't think I can. The dark is dragging me back. There's a hole where my heart used to be. Jamie's right, I'm stupid. Socially inept. Why did I think I could do that? I think I'm going to cry.

'You scared me . . . I'm sorry. Hey, there's a shelter on Lavern, do you know it? Tell them Karin sent you . . . Karin.'

She's putting the bottle back in her bag. What's that, a purse? Is that money. She's leaning through the bars and sliding a note behind the pad. Is that how she sees me?

‘Don’t come back. The next time I see you round here, I will call the police. Have you arrested. Nod if you understand.’

I comply. Karin has gone. The twitcher has shut up shop. It’s just me staring at the gate as another car goes speeding by. I’m so stupid. What did I expect? How was that ever a good idea? I’m a fool, a fucking idiot. A good dose of harsh reality is what it was. It wasn’t a sign, it was never a sign. Why God, why do you do this to me?

‘Hey, Trigger, is that you? Where you going in such a hurry?’

‘What? Do I know you?’ He’s short, dirty . . . averse to a razor. Life on the streets loosely bound in a charcoal trench coat and he wears fingerless gloves. ‘Who are you?’

‘It’s me, Billy, from the shelter. You remember. Couple of months back.’

No, I don’t. Is this me in a few years time? Is that what I become without Jamie? Is this another *fucking sign*?

‘Seen you round here a few times. What, you got a score? Hey, you gonna share? You’re on my street, man. It’s right that you share.’

‘Don’t touch me.’ *I mean it.*

‘Hey, it’s cool. Fuck you too, asshole. Billy’s just saying how it is. Don’t come back round here. Not on Billy’s street. And I saw what you did. Making a move on that nice lady. Top floor stake out, eh? Yeah, Billy knows what’s going on. Billy’s seen you hanging around. Billy knows. Billy sees. This is Billy’s patch.’

Run Trigger, get away, there’s nothing for you here. It’s all gone so very, very wrong.

It's not so long a walk from Victoria place to Hyde Park, not really. I know a few short cuts. Above the sun descends to do its usual vanishing act, back down below the buildings, but sends an orange hue across a greying sky. It's going to be dark soon.

I've stayed out too late. Jamie will be missing me. *Jamie?* I wonder if he's still there, Craig? I'm not going home until he's gone. Why did she do that, bring him home? *Aargh, she's so frustrating.*

I hate you, city.' *Especially in the dark.*

I jay walk across Piccadilly and vent my anger at the car drivers who honk. *Fuck them, fuck them all.*

Fuck Billy too.'

Trigger, how could you be so stupid. Why didn't you see it coming. You should have seen it coming. She thought I was like him. Like Billy.

Winter ransacks my body; takes over my mind. No escape, no pardon. The deed is done. Once my eyes are opened they can never be closed. Is that how Jamie has come to see me? Was Craig another sign? "My son, lead not a beggar's life; for better it is to die than to beg." Maybe Jamie was right, back there on the river? We should have jumped . . .

No, I'm just being stupid. Mountains and mole hills. But maybe it *would* be better, for us both. She's so frightened of how her life will end. "I saw what it did to my mother, how she cried herself to sleep because of the pain."

I don't want to lose her.

'Please God, I don't want to . . .'

The long blare of a horn kick starts me to move quicker. That car was uncomfortably close. I'm over the railings and into the Park before I turn to give him the finger, but he's gone. So I give it to a woman in a BMW instead. Then head into the Park toward the Serpentine.

I must find Carl. Jamie needs her medication. She needs me to look after her. The money from earlier, it's enough for a decent bag, maybe two. Find Carl, make myself useful. Stop whining and take action.

Three hundred and fifty acres of Hyde Park come down to this small section of dirt. A small copse, some ugly flower beds, an old public latrine. Here in this corner of the park the dense canopy denies the light from the moon. It's where the dark edge of the forest lets the undesirables gather and hide. A place where perverts come looking for kids who trade sex for cash and crack.

'Where the fuck is Carl?'

I have to repent, try to be absolved. But right now Jamie is my focus. I need to find Carl. He's five feet six inches of pure unadulterated, Dirt Bag. A black adolescent with a violent scar gouged deep into forehead. It's a chip he can launch in any direction. Usually delivered hard and fast, and with blunt force trauma. He has a latent hatred of all things passed down by the horrors in his ancestor's genes. It's a heritage that Carl knows absolutely nothing about, but gives him ample excuse to be mean. A useful habit for someone who sells drugs in the Park. Anything you need, for the right price.

Carl has an entourage, three scum bags cut from the same cloth. Familiars more adept with a knife than they ever have been with a pen. And I heard that Carl had recently acquired some girls, the type that sell favours. Up against a tree, or in their luxury suite; a bedsit several minutes south of the lake. It's been a while since I've seen him.

'Hey, you seen Carl?' *Yeah you.* Tall guy with the expensive jeans and sneakers. *What?* What are you looking at; just answer the question. I'm not in the mood. I don't want to spend a minute longer than I have too in this place.

'Carl? Have you seen Carl?' I see the look on his face. I'm too old for what he craves. That's right, you walk the other fucking way . . . you Nonce.

Seven forty-five pm. Jamie will be going up the wall with worry. Or is she still angry with me? So fucking what, she's got her friend *Craig* to keep her company. No, I didn't mean that, I'm sorry.

I walk a quarter mile further down, close to the gate. Still no sign. You have to be shitting me. He's always here, every night. It's his fucking job.

'Hey girls, you seen a short black guy. Thick nose, bad attitude? Never goes anywhere without a Rottweiler on a lead.' God, I hate that dog.

'You mean Carl?'

'Yes, yes . . . Carl.'

‘Well, I’m much prettier, wouldn’t you rather spend time with me?’

No, no I wouldn’t. *Who are you?* She comes closer.

Striking pencil lines halo welcoming eyes, her lipstick full and glossy. I don’t know her, but I see a kind face; she’s much younger than she looks, a pretty face hidden behind a tiring exterior. The tell tale signs of opiates. Heroin, probably. It acts like anti matter on the body. Ardentlly opposed to the wearers good skin and complexion. And it’s been a while since her last fix, I can tell.

‘Hey, I’m Jen. Are you sure I don’t know you?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’ I must have one of those faces tonight.

‘I know who you are.’ Another girl, I hadn’t seen her. She glows with a lurid mischief. A loose languid approach that screams *trouble* as she rounds on me. ‘Your name’s Trigger, they call you The Missionary.’

I’ve not heard that. Why would anyone call me that?

‘Carl? Do you know where Carl is?’ What does that mean, *The Missionary*? Her finger points, where to? Serpentine Lake is in that direction. Carl wouldn’t be that stupid to sell up there. Not his turf. That’s where the Poles hang out.

‘He’s got a clinic now, didn’t you know?’ says Jen. ‘Down on the Bayswater Road. He was around earlier, might be back later.’

Clinic? Is that what they call a crack den these days? I’ve been south of the river too long. It’s maybe ten minutes to leave the park from here, but which way then, Bayswater is a long road?

‘What number?’ No reply. ‘Please, I’m late. I really need to be somewhere.’

‘He needs to be somewhere, Jen?’

This one looks angry, older than the other, it’s the way she folds her arms. Not because of the cold, her posture more obtrusive, more aggressive. Both of them wear so little, barely past the shoulders, up above the knees. More fashion sense than common sense it appears. It’s getting really cold out here.

‘I’ll help you out, if you help us out.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means I need a little something to warm me up. And I’ll do whatever you want to get it.’

‘Do what?’

‘You, stupid. Maybe we could tag for you. Jen and me? Two for the price of one, just don’t take too long it’s fucking freezing out here.’

‘No, fornication is a sin.’

'You hear that Jen, he doesn't want to fornicate, it's a sin? Don't worry, love, people sin round here all the time. I won't tell no-one. You gonna tell on him Jen?'

'No,' she says.

Jen couldn't have left school more than two, maybe three years since. She should be hassling a tutor at College, not a punter. Binge drinking on a Friday night should be as hard core as it gets for a girl her age.

'That's sorted then, you can trust me. I know lots of secrets. Little boy secrets that grown men keep hidden from their wives. Do you have secrets, Missionary?'

'No . . . not really.' *Please don't touch me like that.*

'You don't remember me do you, love? No, well, that's fucking insulting. Think back, about a year ago. It was in the Butchers Belt? In Soho? No? I can't believe you're still wearing that same bloody coat. Think back, Bible Boy, you got into one with Speed Freak Pete. Annoying bloke who won't stop wiping tables. He said, "God was dead," and you tried to resurrect Him in the pub, remember? Mind, you were pretty pissed.

It was a couple of weeks before we met, Jen. Freeking funniest thing I'd ever seen. You really don't remember do you? Guess I'm not as memorable as I thought. I sat on your lap, gave you a free wriggle. You started yelling that, "men were sinners". Ain't that the fucking truth. "All they ever want to do is sin," you said.

Takes them about five minutes usually. Quicker they sin the better, I say. You want to indulge in some sin, *Missionary?*

'Don't Sal, he's not interested. Let's go back to the Feathers. At least it's warm in there.'

'No, he wants to, they all want to. Look at me, Missionary. I've got what you want.'

No, don't lower your top like that, you'll freeze.

'Tell you what, I'll suck it for free.'

'No, stop, please.' She's tempting me with her body, round, firm, exciting.

No.

'Upon her forehead was a name written: Secret, Babylon the Great, the Mother of the Whores, an abomination of Earth. Father, forgive me.'

'Forgive you? For what? You ain't done nothing yet.'

Stop staring at her breasts.

'Carl, please, I need to find Carl.'

‘Come on *Missionary Man*, get it out. Let’s take a look at what the Lord giveth, or has He taketh it away on this brrrr chilly night.’

‘That’s not funny.’ Stop laughing at me. And don’t ever laugh at Him. *It’s ugly . . . you’re ugly.* ‘Please, where’s Carl?’

‘Shall I get on my knees, Jen? Is that how the Vicar likes it?’

‘Sal, leave him alone. Come on, I want to go.’

I don’t like this, you shouldn’t do this. Get up off your knees. Why would you lick my fingers like that. *Stop it. Stop it . . .*

‘Stop this, please.’

‘Won’t be a minute, Jen. Like I said, all men are sinners.’

Why haven’t I walked away? Turn your cheek and ignore her. Ignore the temptress. Lord, I’m weak. But why shouldn’t I? That would teach them, both of them. *Teach Jamie.* Covet this girl, Trigger. Fall upon her. Let the beast run wild. Why the fuck not?

Because it’s a sin.

‘Please let go of my hand. You should walk in love, not *wallow* in it. Sexual immorality, impurity and covetousness must end. Let there be no filth or foolish talk, no crude joking; instead let there be thanksgiving. I warn you now. Anyone who is sexually immoral, who is impure or covetous, will have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.’

‘Ha ha ha, they weren’t joking about you were they. Did you hear that, Jen, fucking hysterical. You need to let off some sexual tension mate. Give yourself a hand job now and then.’

‘If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better to enter life crippled than have two hands in Hell. I beg you now, repent, repent . . . repent.’

‘Put a fucking bubble on it you weirdo. Jen, I don’t want to play with him anymore. He’s too freaky, and my boobs are freeking frozen. All right, it was just a joke. Turn the anger button down, fucking pervert.’

She’s walking away. Leaving me alone.

‘Go get yourself a girlfriend, saddo. Ha ha ha, hey Jen, come on?’

‘Yeah, sure, give me a minute. Are you all right? Sorry about Sal, she takes it too far sometimes. I’m Jen . . . Jennifer. *Missionary’s* not your real name, is it?’

‘No, it’s Trigger.’

‘Hi Trigger. Sorry, I should have stopped her, I thought she was joking. When you walked toward us she said it would be funny . . . sorry. Are you sure you’re okay?’

‘A joyful heart is my own good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries my bones.’ *Shut up, Trigger.* ‘I’m fine. But I really have to go now.’

‘No wait, please. What was that you were saying. Some quote from the Bible, or something? I used to read the Book when I was young. Mum’s a Catholic, so I suppose I am too. Maybe I should have listened to her and prayed more.’

‘Your friend, you should go with her.’

‘Oh, she’s not my friend. She’s a bitch really. It’s just . . . you know, safer in pairs. Guess she’s starting to rub off on me. Look, I really am sorry, Sal’s mouth goes off without her brain being present. Stupid huh?’

No not stupid, she’s lost. But everyone can be found; we can all be saved. She’s staring. The silence is horrible. What to say? I should go.

‘Are your parents religious too? Is that why you know all that stuff?’
I shake my head, I should go now.

‘My mum’s dead,’ I don’t know why I tell her. ‘She died when I was a kid.’

‘Oh, sorry. What about your dad?’

‘I don’t really know him. He sent me away after mum died.’

‘He put you in a Home?’

‘No, not a Home . . . a school. My father sent me to a boarding school in Oxfordshire.’

‘Wow, I’d have been stoked if my dad had sent me away to school.’

‘It wasn’t a very nice place. I was only allowed home on the holidays, and dad was never there.’ Why am I telling you this? I have to go, find Carl. *Jamie* . . .

‘My mum died too,’ she says, and follows me. ‘She took an overdose. I s’pose that’s ironic, somehow?’

She talks too much, and why is she following me? Just go away, leave me alone. I want to say it, but she looks vulnerable, lost even. I stop suddenly and she does too, instinctively folding her arms. What is it that she wants.

‘Why are you here? Why aren’t you at home with your dad?’

That look. The way the eyes deliver the tale without the use of words. I’ve worn the same expression myself, many times. Though probably for different reasons. She doesn’t need to say anything. I think we both understand. Pretty obvious as neither one can look the other in the eye at the mention of dads. I decide that she’s nice. I like her.

‘Jen, I have to find Carl. What number is it on the Bayswater?’

‘Why don’t I take you there?’

Why would you do that?

‘I don’t mind, honestly, I have to see him anyway. I owe him. He’ll only come looking for me. Might as well be now as later. Is that all right, going with you? I don’t like to be around Carl, not on my own.’

I know that look too. I’ve seen Carl pissed off. People get hurt, and if they fight back . . . his dog, it’s as mean as the man himself. I really hate that dog.

It's a longer walk through Hyde Park than I remember, and eerie too, it needs more artificial light. Is it any surprise that the undesirables flock here at night? Jen and I, we don't really have conversation, it's more question and answer, mostly from Jen. But I suppose that's how relationships start.

There's something nice about Jen. A nervous energy that I find attractive. It's nothing sexual, though she is pretty. She asks a lot of questions, and smiles a lot. I think she's frightened of seeing Carl. I'm worried about seeing Carl too.

I haven't seen this place for a while, the Italian Garden. Last stop before the Lancaster Gate. This is where the river ends and the Serpentine begins. Prince Albert built the pump house up ahead, back in the eighteenth hundreds, a gift for his beloved Queen Victoria. It serves four water filled basins and encourages the fountains to erupt into tall plumes of water. The tourists like it. Me too.

I tell Jen that I used to live round here. A big house with a view of the park. This is where Mummy took us to play, when Father would allow. I shouldn't go down that road. Memories, they don't tend to lead me anywhere I want to go.

Jen asks me what I'm grinning at, but I don't answer. I'm remembering my Mother, how beautiful she was; a goddess with golden hair. A wonderful mother who loved, breathed, and died for her children. Strange that at that moment the moonlight breaks through the dark and I see Jen, the young woman, not the whore.

'It's just on the other side of the gate,' she says. 'Trigger? The Bayswater.'

Carl, and that bloody dog. Either image is enough to sink the good ship Reminisce. A good job too as I'm not a child any more. This is my

life now. And at this moment in time I share it with Jen, and she's cold. Either that or she likes hugging herself.

'Here, just till we get to Carl's place.' A glimmer of surprise and appreciation, though quickly hidden. Payment enough as I drape my coat over the girl's shoulders. For a few minutes *she* would be the German paratrooper. The thick, well pocketed garment has kept me warm and dry since the day I stole it from an Army Surplus in Enfield. My first ever dishonest act, and a mere twenty-four hours after my arrival in London. Since then I think my moral compass has spun itself away from the dial.

London arrives a heart beat after we leave the Park. Traffic, noise, and buildings. And Jen's hand holding onto my arm. I think my grand gesture has earned me a friend, and despite my instinct to remove it, there's enough warmth left from my visions to let her keep it there for a while. If only she'd stop her incessant chatter. Or perhaps I should take more time to listen?

'You wouldn't think it would you? Carl, here? Look at them. I'd love to live in one of these houses. I'd have one of those big American fridges, filled with cheese, and champagne?'

Cheese?

'I had champagne once, at a party in Knightsbridge. They lent me a dress for the night. It was so beautiful. They took it back after . . . I bet the people that live in these houses are so happy. I'd like to want for nothing, it must be grand. Look, I'd have that one, the room behind the window up there. That would be mine. I'd walk from one big room to the next wearing nothing but a silky nightdress. How sick would that be?'

Not very. Big houses just have more rooms for a family to get lost in. More dark corners for Father to hide his secrets.

'It's not all it's cracked up to be, being wealthy.'

'Shh, don't spoil it. I'm looking out that window, the one with the drapes, up there above the columns. I can see right out across the park. Oh, and there's a warm bath waiting for me, it free stands in the middle of the bathroom and has gold taps. it's got bubbles a foot deep. And I've got a car downstairs . . . Huh, I won't have to walk anywhere ever again. No more jumping fares on the tubes, ever.'

She really does talk a lot. And now both hands are threaded around my arm. I'm being squeezed and leaned upon. But that's okay, for once I'm not bothered. She needs me. And I'm not going to be the one to tell her that a big house doesn't make people happy.

'You know what, fuck them. The twat's that live in these houses never gave me nothing.' She's stopped. 'You let me wear your coat. That was a

really nice thing to do. People don't do nice things anymore. Not for me at least. Thank you, Trigger.'

She's kissed me on the lips?

'Come on, it's not far now.'

Not far? If we keep walking we'll end up in Notting Hill.

Jen's pulling me toward Waitrose and pointing to the flats above. It's castles and tenements in London. The rich neighbour the poor with the middle-classes sprinkled liberally along the borders. I'm being pulled inside towards a lift, I think we're going up. I wonder, am I the middle-class buffer being offered up to Carl. Will he even remember me, it has been a while. The lift shunts into position and the doors open. I'm about to find out.

'This one?'

She nods.

'Here, you best have your coat back. Thanks, really.'

There's that smile again.

I give the lion's head knocker three sharp raps and smile awkwardly toward the camera above the door. *Hi*. Should I wave or something?

Rough hands grab at my body and turn me toward the wall. I don't think he likes me, the brute who answered the door. Jake is his name.

'Where you been, white boy? You find someone else to buy your shit from?'

The rooms pass by quickly as I'm frogmarched inside. Jake's bigger than I remember. But his disposition towards anger doesn't seem to have changed.

'Hey Boss, look what's turned up on our doorstep.'

'I'm busy Jake, just a fucking minute. Oh shit, incoming. Everyone down. Uh oh, grenade, so you wanna play with explosive shit. Shoot that mother fucker, shoot him. Hah, you like that. Up yours asshole. No-one does the sneaky sneaky on Dirty. Oh yeah, you want some too. One, two, three in the doorway, more coming in through the roof. Dirty's not going down without a fight. Not, going, down. Bam bam bam. Die mother fuckers, die.'

'Harry's busy. Take a seat.'

Another guy, wearing a shell suit. I don't know him but Jake called him, Josh. Hey, I'm cool, don't stop for us, we can wait. I'm really hoping that's Jen's hand holding onto my coat. I can't see the dog anywhere.

Carl reminds me of the twins, when they play Xbox. Except that he's black, and built like a fridge. It's the way that he twists and turns the controller, stabs at the paddles with his fat thumbs. Makes noises, a lot of noises. It's the all out total commitment to kill everything that moves on the flat screen. With Carl each kill on the Playstation seems a bit too personal.

Take your time, no hurry.

This is a nice place, Harry's done well. Most dealers live in hovels that attract flies. In here the ceilings are high with a bright white sheen, the

walls rolled over in a pleasant pastel peach. Leather furniture too; a wise consideration for owners of dogs. I still can't see the dog? I can't even smell him. But there is an odour, what is it? Yeah, the flat smells of, Chanel.

Shit, that was a growl. I recognise that growl. Follow the subversive sound. Uh oh I've found the dog. Sleeping, hiding . . . lying in wait. Just his face visible below the heavy sideboard parked against the wall. That fucking dog, and he's looking straight at me. *Whoa, good doggy. Why's he's getting up?*

Rising like the dead at the thought of a meal. One massively bad vibe on four legs. *Good doggy. Nice Milo.* One hundred and twenty pounds of attitude salivating with the thought of eating me.

'No, no, no . . . if I'm going down, you cunts are all coming with me. Die, mother . . . ahh, no, no . . . die . . .'

'You tell em Boss. Black Hawk down, you can do it, you can . . . Ohhh, bad dudes smoke the Boss again.'

The speakers on the wall crackle and grind with explosive satisfaction that is followed by silence. And two big words pitch up on the screen.

YOU'RE DEAD.

Carl won't like that. Milo growls like the Hound from Hell. I wish I was somewhere else.

'Shut up Milo. Down boy.'

Carl demands. And I agree. You heard him, down, back in your Dralon lair. He's all teeth and snarl with a glare fashioned by Cerberus. Move toward Jake, a bit closer, good boy . . .

Head up, stay alert, and don't let any of them know you're afraid. They're animals, young punks, Frankenstein's creations. Carl and his band are children really, barely out of school. I'd heard that Carl was bad, even back then. He worked for a dealer out of Camden, pushing coke and crack on his classmates; inner-city education at its finest. Look at them so proud in their uniforms, a shell suit and a hoody, a Rottweiler without a lead.

Urban terrorists, that's what they are. Intent to spoil the youth of London with a ten bag and a bad attitude. In another country it would be a Kalashnikov in his hand. And what did I ever do to piss that dog off?

'Hey, is that you, Trigger? Long time mate. I thought you was dead bro. And you brings Jenny too? Sweet, is there something I should know? Josh, please, see to the lady.'

Why does he speak like that? Nobody speaks like that. Shell suit looks meaner than Jake. Jen's hand pulls on my coat as she offers out her clutch bag.

'What you got for us darlin? Jake, are you still here. The fridge is empty man. Go find sweet stuff to fill da fridge.'

'Gone Boss. Back in a tick.'

'Over here,' says Josh, 'on the table. Come on, I ain't got all night.'

'Where you been, Trigger? No call, no card? And I don't see any flowers? Did I offend you or summink?'

Listen to him, he's got worse.

'Err, sorry. We moved south, other side of the river.' *Hey, don't grab her like that, she's not a piece of meat.* 'Err, I meant to call.' That's a lie.

'You hear that Josh, Triggs here meant to call. What, do I look like a telephone exchange? S'all right Pumpkin, important thing is you're here now, das all that counts.'

'She's short again, Boss.'

What does that mean? Jen looks petrified, close to tears. All her worldly belongings strewn across a glass topped table. Some make up, a mobile, and a fistful of twenty pound notes.

'You see that Trigger. I gives these girls employment and how does they repay me? They doesn't pay their taxes. Everyone gotta pay taxes. Even I gotta my taxes. It's the law, man.'

'It's not my fault, Harry. It's really quiet out there. Must be the recession. Sal and me, we're really trying.'

'Well, that's good, eh? At least they's trying. I apologise in advance for the drama, Trigger. First times back an all. You and me, just a moment; this is a question of employee productivity.'

Jen, do you think the government don't lets you pay taxes? Of course not. If you don't pay them, they puts you in prison. It's the same if you don't pay me, there has to be consequences. Ain't that right Trigg, there is always consequences. Josh, if you please.'

Oh God, I felt his hand over here. You fucking Neanderthal. *Jenny?* I want to go to her, help her, pick her up. I think Carl is hoping I will. That fucking dog, it's daring me to move.

'Consequences, Jen. There is always consequences. Aww, come on, it's okay, you take my hand. Josh gets excited, he don't have no manners like I does. Come on, up you gets. Now, let's try this again. Why are you short, Jen? It's the second time this month? It shows a lack of respect. Josh, if you please?'

Her scream goes right through me. It's a slap to her head that would fell a tree. She's crying. I'm close to doing the same.

'Josh, please, not too near the lady's face. Punter's won't pay for damaged goods. If this girl can't work she ain't getting no sick pay. And then she'll owe me even more back rent. Don't want that now do we Jen?'

'No. Please *sob* I'll get you more . . . please. I'm sorry *sob* I'm sorry. I'll try harder. Please Carl?'

'It's Harry, remember? My fucking name's Harry. And I'm trying to help you up, cos that's what a gentleman does.'

'Harry . . . Sorry Harry, I'll do better. I promise.'

'And where's that gobby slag, Sal? Can't see her, where is she? Can't see aunt Sally in here, can you Josh?'

'No boss. Can't see her anywhere.'

'Tut tut, you girls. I expect she's up to some mischief. Let's hope it's on her back. Now up you comes, I expects I'll see Sally later. No, no, Josh'll behave himself, the point has been made. This is what I'm here for, Jen. To protects you. I won't let Josh hurts you if you behaves.'

'Maybe I should check her out Boss. Make sure she's doing it right?'

'What you think, Triggs? I mean, she is a pretty little thing, isn't she. Granted all the runny make up ain't helping in the art of attraction. But I think Josh's right, maybe her moves is defective in some way. Josh, give the lady an M O T, and the benefit of your pornographic wisdom. It's my fault, I should never have given him his own laptop.'

I just want to leave, and fast. Nothing's changed, Carl's still an animal. I just want to go. *Go, go, go*. But I can't. Look at her, Jen, she's scared shitless. It takes about a second for her flimsy dress to fall to the floor. Why's Josh looking at me?

You bastards. Fucking Romans. Cover her up, she's not a slave. They want me to see this, some sort of message. *Jen?* They have her naked, totally exposed, trembling hands unsteady as she attempts to cover herself. I really don't want to look, but her image, burned on me. She's so petite. Poor cow should eat more. Such a narrow waist and delicate hips, *small perfect breasts*. No, don't look. *This has to stop*.

'Is there a problem, Triggs?'

Jen's eyes, they're staring, pleading with me. Both men are watching me as her head shakes, *don't do anything*. God bless her as Jen's hands fall to her side. This isn't right. I'm so sorry.

'Josh, take Jenny into the bedroom, make sure she works good. Me and Trigg, we got unfinished business.'

A second, that's all it takes, and we're alone. Jen's dress lying crumpled on the floor.

'Trigger . . . what products can Harry interest you in today? What you needs? Some blow, weed, powder? Something scientific, some medication for horses? I got pills, potions and prophylactics, fiver a pack. They gives a girl a tickle. You want to take a turn after Josh? No, okay, maybe later then.'

Both drawers in the sideboard are full. I see packs, wraps and zip locks. It's a fucking sweet shop . . . *is that a gun?*

'What, you likes this?'

He's got a gun in his hand. No, fuck, shit. Don't wave that thing around?

'You likes this? This is the real deal. A Smith and Wesson model twenty nine. That's right, the one with the six and a half inch barrel. Shit, this puppy makes a man feel inadequate. Why'd you blow me out, Trigger? I mean, didn't I always treat you right? Good deals Harry, that's what they calls me. Have I got competition, is that it? Does Harry need to make a home visit?'

'No. Honest. I told you, me and Jamie, we moved south of the river for a while.'

'Jamie? You got pussy Trigger? Well, why didn't you says so? Pussy is different, I understands. I was in love once . . . scuse me a moment. Milo, will you stop growling at the customer.'

I hear a scream from the bedroom, watch the gun waft in front of my face as Carl, Harry, shouts harsh words at the Kraken below the sideboard.

'I know what Trigger wants. Trigger wants summink sweet, am I right? Am I right? Harry is always right. Harry got summink that gonna help you cross the Event Horizon.'

I watch as he conducts his finger through the drawer like a Bank Clerk.

'Nows you need to be careful, this shit is thirty percent. You can suck it, smoke it, stick it up your nose, but be careful if you shoots it. I don't like customers that's dead. They don't pay. Trigger, is you listening to me?'

Whatever, just get me out of here. Here, take the money.

'Whoa, easy now big boy, carrying all that swag about. You'll pull a fucking muscle. Triggs, I's stepped up since, don't do less than quarters. You wants a fucking gramme or two find a street corner. No, wait, where's my manners? It's not your fault, you's been all loved up and don't knows how important I am. Tell you what, take the quarter, pays me back at the end of the week. I's like fucking 'Quick Quid' but sweeter, yeah?'

It's already in my hand, his stubby black fingers closing mine for me.

'There, deal done. A gentleman's agreement. Ain't it just great round here; like fucking Christmas. Happy Christmas, Trigger. Just don't forget Santa wants his fucking money by the weekend. There, deal done, you knows where I am. Milo, shut the fuck up. I swears, I'll fucking shoot that canine. Pleasure doing business with you Triggs; shuts the door on your way out. And remember, Harry always gets his man.'

He just winked at me whilst pointing a gun at my head. Get out Trigger, take the medication and go. So why am I staring at Jenny's dress, and now the bedroom door? Carl has fallen onto his sofa, game control back in hand.

‘Mother fuckers need to know who they’re messing with. Yeah, come on bitches. Is that all you got? Bam bam bam, Harry’s back in town.’

Jen will need her dress back. It’s not right, what he’s doing to her in there. It’s not right.

‘You shouldn’t treat people like this, Carl.’

‘What’s that, puppy . . . you says something? Why is you still inside my house?’

‘And he causes all, the small and the great, the rich and the poor, the free men and the slaves, to be given a mark on their right hand or their forehead. No-one will be able to buy or to sell, except the one who has the mark. Either the name of the beast or the number of his name. You have been marked, Carl.’

‘Say what mother fucker?’

‘I’m not leaving without Jen.’

‘Are you making me pause my game, fucker? Ow, shit, digital disaster. You made me get killed.’

He’s angry. Getting up is not as easy as sitting down. Yeah, he’s angry.

‘This is what I fucking hate about you, Trigger. You’s a boy scout with a holier dan thou stick shoved up your ass. You needs to just shut up . . . why is you still here? And what the fuck is you staring at? What, you want turns after Josh? You want a threesome with my man and the bitch. Well, that’s cool, Josh is a very liberated soul in the ways of love.’

‘Why do you do this? Why do you treat them like this? Why do you force girls to behave in such a lustful manner? We are the same flesh and blood and yet you sell them in this way.’

‘Oh shit, are you wired Trigger?’

‘No.’

‘Mother fucker . . . open up your coat.’

‘No.’

‘Oh, I fucking insists.’

‘I don’t want to.’

‘It ain’t multiple fucking choice, Trigger. Say what, are you stealing the whore’s dress? That is truly despicable. Man, there is hope for you yet. And who the fuck gave you a dumb shit name like Trigger, anyways?’

‘It’s no worse than Dirty Harry.’

‘Say what? I thought I heard you say something stoopid. Did I hear you say something stoopid. Or was it the door closing behind you? Last chance, Trigger.’

‘And Jesus asked him, saying, “What is thy name?” And he said, Harry: because many devils were entered into him.’

He has a cold stare and it lands on me. He’s a darker shade of black than I’ve ever seen. I should go. I want to go. But the dress, it’s so cold still from the outside. What’s that animal doing to her in there. Shit, Milo’s growling has risen a full octave. It doesn’t matter, I have right on my side. And a deep breath fills me with conviction like the ancient Martyrs.

‘For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.’

‘Don’t you bring that shit into my house, mother fucker. You take your product and go. And maybe, just maybe, I’ll forgets you opened your dumb shit mouth. *Milo, shut the fuck up.*’

‘I’ll wait for Jen.’

‘You’ll be joining her. Josh don’t give a shit what hole he plugs.’

‘Please let her come with me. JEN?’

‘Don’t you shouts in my house.’

‘It is a house of ill repute. JEN?’

‘It’s a house of what?’

‘If I say to you “that the wicked will die,” but you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked man from his wicked intent, then that wicked person shall die for his iniquity. But be sure, that his blood will stain your hands. I have to tell you Carl, you are a very wicked man.’

‘It’s Harry, and you, you . . . hey, Milo . . . Get back in your hole. Milo?’

Oh shit, four legged stampede. ‘No, get off. Leave Jen’s dress alone. Let go you’ll ruin it.’

‘Milo, down boy. Fucking dog. Get off. Get, down . . . Milo. I should let him chew on your face you dumb shit. Owwww, dumb animal it bit me. Milo? Whoa, Milo, easy boy. Milooo, get off me you mother fucking animal . . .’

‘What the fuck is going on out here?’

Josh, naked in the doorway. Where’s Jen?

‘Are you playing with the dog, Boss?’

‘No, you retard, get it off me. Ow . . . ow, get it off me.’

There she is. Thank God, I can see you now. Oh Jen, what has he done to you? Look at you, your eyes blackened by mascara; make up half rinsed from your face. She’s still weeping, half hiding behind the door.

‘Jen, come with me, we have to go.’

‘Trigger, what’s going on?’

‘Josh, for fuck’s sake get this dog off me. Aargh, shit shit, you’re biting the wrong mother fucker . . . Josh . . . *Josh?*’

‘Jen, I have your dress, look.’ You’re so pretty. ‘Quickly, we have to leave.’ The dog’s going mad, it has Carl pinned below the upturned sofa. Josh is trying to pull it away, ha ha, now it’s going for Josh. ‘Jen?’ Why are you shaking your head. ‘Jen, come with me.’

Oh my God, Carl. The fridge is on a stampede and heading, straight for me. Is he going to kill me, am I going to die?’

‘Get out of my way mother fucker.’

Too late. “Vengeance is mine,” says the Lord. Carl is on top of me, the dog is on top of him. No, no, no . . . big teeth, rabid Milo. We are both screaming . . . ‘JOSH.’ Two hundred pounds of naked man tries his best but the dog is overweight and in a frenzy. A growling scrabbling mean as shit ball of fur that will have its way. Carl’s eyes are about to pop and make a splash across my face, but Josh has Milo, both hands around the collar, he’s pulling. *Thank God.*

‘Come on boy, come on. It’s all over. Good Milo, good boy.’

‘I’m gonna put that fucking thing down.’

‘Fair play Boss, he’s only doing his job.’

‘He tried to eat me?’

The dog is stilled, panting, responding to Josh’s calming words. The terror has subsided and it’s love that comes from his mouth now, delivered with frantic lapping licks. Carl is trying hard to get up, I can move again. Over onto my chest, onto something hard, a bump in the carpet, uncomfortable and unexpected. It’s instinct over conscious approval, no-one is looking. I slide the object below my coat.

‘Chain that fucking thing up.’

‘I’ll put him in the bedroom, Boss.’

‘Put him in the car park. And get me some alcohol.’

‘Coming right up, Boss.’

‘And some fucking valium too. You, motherfucker, get out of my house, and take that bitch with you. So help me Harry’s gonna get Dirty on you, he’s gonna get . . . Ahhhh man, look at my fucking Playstation?’

It’s a feeble offering but I hold out her dress as she tries to hide herself from me. I’m not looking, not really. There’s so much innocence in her eyes as she accepts my gift. *Don’t cry.* Carl is still ranting, without the homicidal accent. Josh has taken Milo into another room. Jen is pulling me, I think she agrees, its time to leave.

Footsteps clunk and echo, steps are leaped. It's so much easier to descend the stairs than the other way round.

Thank you Lord, thank you for keeping us safe up there, it could have turned nasty, really nasty. And thank you for sparing Jen, oh, and for keeping Milo's teeth at bay.

I feel redeemed, emancipated . . . exasperated as the downstairs door gives against my weight and we are finally out into the cold where Jen takes my hand, and links *her* arm through mine. She is happy to follow as I lead. We are slaves on our toes and filled with Invictus. Unchained and in control. Freedom is the price we pay as we run, run, run until our feet are sore. Until we can no longer stand upright. I need to breathe.

'Are you all right, Jen?'

'No, yes . . . Thank you.'

She has a bruise below her eye, I see it now, and several more on her arms. I don't want to picture what happened in that room, but I just can't help it. Jamie's right, "People are shit".

Jen? Is she having a seizure?

'The dog, I thought, it was trying to kill you.'

Not a seizure, she's laughing.

'But I think, he was trying, to hump you both.'

She's bent over, can't draw breath fast enough. It's contagious as I join in.

'Dirty Harry . . . Dirty Panties more like,' she says.

'Ha, ha, ha.' I'm scared shitless, but I can't stop laughing, or shivering. Jen too, she's frozen. 'Put this on before you freeze to death.' I offer my coat again.

'Thank you Trigger, thank you so much.'

'For what?'

‘If I die, tomorrow, I’ll die happy.’ Look at her, she means it. ‘To see that bastard on his face like that . . . the dog trying to rape him. I can’t, stop laughing.’

She’s not stooping anymore, not so desperate for breath. Why such a serious smile? Oh, this is nice, her arms wrapped around me. Hugging me. Jen’s face is nestled against my neck. My innards explode into a spectacular Starburst and I don’t feel the cold anymore, just Jen’s embrace. I haven’t felt like this since I was a child.

‘Trigger.’

‘Yes?’

Oh, so not a platonic hug. Her lips are warm despite the chill, and they are tender against mine. I should close my eyes, but I can’t take them from her. I don’t know what to.

Kiss her, Trigger, don’t let another moment pass you by.

For fuck’s sake I want her, I crave her. Relent, submit, give in to her pleasure. I feel the gorgeous bump of her tongue, it’s slick, wet . . . intimate. Together we dance and writhe in an orgy of oneness. What? Did I do it wrong? No, it’s okay, she’s holding me again. My heart just skipped a beat.

‘Trigger?’

‘Yes?’

‘We could go somewhere, you and me. I don’t want money, it’s not like that. I’d just like to feel someone, well, because I want to. We could get cosy, hide out, rock the sheets like lovers. That would be nice.’

“*We should be lovers.*” That’s what Jamie said. That’s what Jamie wants.

‘Oy, oy, get a fucking room.’

An orchestra of drunken giggling from revellers on the path opposite is quickly supported by the horn section of a passing van. *So what?* I’m not embarrassed. I’m smiling from the toes up. But it won’t last, these feelings. They burn bright inside me, but they’ll fade, they always do. Why wouldn’t it; that’s how it is with Jamie. *Jamie.* I feel the serpent of guilt begin to wriggle. A snake pit of venom that fills my stomach and pumps me full of anxiety.

Jamie?

‘I can’t, Jen.’ *I want to, I swear I do.* ‘Please, it’s not because I don’t like you, I do . . . a lot.’

‘Right, okay, I get it. Hey, some things are just not meant to be, right? Do you have a girlfriend? I understand. She’s lucky. Most blokes wouldn’t care. Here, you’d better take this, you’ll get cold.’

‘Thanks. It’s like an old friend this coat.’ It smells of her now. It’s Jen’s scent, I can smell it; like she’s left something inside. There’s something else too. I’d forgotten. It’s something that I shouldn’t have. An item that will bring the Four Horseman down upon my head. But what does that matter. In my hand I have a wallet. Carl’s wallet; and it’s filled and fat.

It takes a few seconds to be brave but it’s open now, and oh my, there are dozens of notes inside. Are these for real? They look real. The red-dish tinge, the denominations, these are five hundred Euro banknotes. This is the mother load. There must be ten thousand Euros or more cosseted inside. I think the Four Horsemen may be bringing some friends.

The money of sin must not be brought into the house of the Lord. I know. But what if it’s spent on a sinner, one who wants to repent? In front of me is someone who’s sinned, but paid the price.

‘Go home, Jen.’ I take half of the money and force it into her small hands. ‘There must be a family member . . . a friend? Someone who will take you in, help you start again. Fuck it, Jen, working at Tesco is better than a life like this.’

‘Trigger, where did you get all of this? No, I can’t take it, it’s yours.’

‘The Tubes over there. You should go, and don’t come back. Have a nice life. Find someone nice to share it with. Promise me.’

She’s shaking her head, tears are streaming again.

‘Just like that?’ she says.

‘Just like that.’

‘Why would you do this, for me?’

She’s crying, I can see what it means to her. Wiping her face just smudges things worse. It’s a chance to start over, to do things differently this time.

‘Promise me,’ I repeat.

‘But . . .’

‘Promise me.’

She’s nodding, good girl. This makes sense.

‘Yes . . . I promise.’

Jen’s arms are around me her lips planted on mine. I feel her hands slide to my cheeks.

‘You could come with me?’

Shit, I didn’t expect that. I could. Why not? No, I can’t. *Jamie?* She’d be lost without me. I don’t have to say anything, she knows. She’s nodding, wiping her face. It’s goodbye then. She takes a slow walk; plenty of time for me to change my mind. But I can’t. I won’t. As Jen enters the

Tube she takes the final look back, the one from the films, and then she goes in.

And then she's gone.

It's sad, but I hope that I'll never see Jen again.

“Come with me,” that’s what she said. Was I a fool not to step through? I knew Jen for a couple of hours, but that kiss, it left me standing below a cloud. I hate feelings, they can be so random and impulsive, bipolar in their nature. They’re pretty shit really. Even the good ones can bring you down. Leave you wanting more. Lead to a state of mayhem and confusion. Jen has gone, time to move on. It’s just me and Jamie now.

Jamie . . .

Shit, I’ve been away too long. All the excitement, I have to get back. No . . . not this time. She brought it upon herself. Her and that, Ginger freak. I’ll take my time, teach her a lesson. She can’t keep messing with my feelings.

“Come with me,” that’s what Jen said. I think she meant it too.

“We should be lovers,” that’s what Jamie said. *Lovers*. And what Jamie wants, Jamie gets. But what Jamie says isn’t always what Jamie does. *Lovers?* Is that what she really wants? I’m not sure I’d even know how.

Jamie . . . Sweet Jamie.

I need to stop being jealous. It’s not her fault. She’s kinda messed up. Who wouldn’t be living with . . . with that. It would mess with anyone’s head. No, Jamie needs me. Jamie’s all I’ve ever wanted. But what happens to me when Jamie is gone?

I can’t go back, not yet. I need to get my head straight. That kiss, it’s proved one thing. Jamie’s right. There are too many distractions.

* * *

Victoria Place holds an eery presence in the mist that has descended upon everything. The glow of the wall lights inadequate to resist its

presence. The old pump house looks more like a sanitarium in the murky hue.

I've come here to say goodbye. I've been silly, stupid, and it must come to an end. One last time then, to say goodbye. To let go of, *Karin*. I'm glad I got to know her name. I'll look back on this as just another crazy dumb ass moment in my life.

I can't believe that I actually tried to talk to her. What was I thinking? That wasn't me, I don't do things like that. It's called *stalking*. I don't know whether I feel embarrassment or guilt. No, it's both. What possessed me to invade her life like this? And yet I'm here again. Stood outside in the shadows looking up, one last time.

Lord, when did I fall so far? When did my childhood end and this new life begin? I can't even remember half of what I was before I came here, to the Big City. Just flashes of the same memories, always the same. I'm not even sure how old I am. Time seems to pass so quickly now. But I'm not complaining, Lord. I wouldn't change my time with Jamie, not for a hundred Jens, or a thousand Karins.

I suppose I didn't think that anyone would want me, not like this, not the way I am. I have a self destructive nature, Lord. I guess that's why I needed her, Karin, and why I couldn't stay away. I suppose it's easier to want what I can't have. Is that what Angels are, Lord? Signs. Wonders for us to look up to, beacons to show us the way. To be seen but left untouched; only to be held in awe. I think that's why I come here. I think I see it now. Yes, I understand.

I'm frightened of what I have, and I'm terrified of what comes next. Well, I promise, right here and now, that I'll see it through. I have to accept *what is*, and not shy away from what will be. I need to face up to Jamie's illness and see her through to the end. What happens to me after that, well, only You know. And that's what Faith is all about.

There, I've said it. No more hiding in the shadows.

Oh, hey, did I mention, it's finally happened. Jamie and me, we're to be lovers. It's a bit scary really. I, I've never . . . you know. She's all I've ever desired, Lord.

And I think this is a sign too. It must be. Look at them all. Five Hundred Euro notes. I can exchange them for real money. They'll take us wherever we want to go. And I know *exactly* where that will be . . . Brighton, Lord. Jamie and me, we're going to Brighton. We'll walk on the beach. Have a ride on a donkey. The two of us alone, sat watching the lights on the promenade. Maybe, if you could make the arrangements,

we'll have a dance in the rain. Whatever time we have left, I'll make it special for Jamie.

Karin?

I see her at the window. I can't stop smiling even though this is goodbye. One more moment with her and then I'll leave. One more *brief encounter* before I . . . *That's not Karin. Who the hell is that looking out through her window?* She's not seeing anyone. This isn't right. I came to say goodbye, why's there a man in your flat? No, stop it. Why should I care I've made my decision. I'm moving on.

Well, go on then, move on.

I can't.

Who is that, staring down at me from Karin's castle?'

* * *

Adams let the curtain fall. No-one outside Victoria Place, not that he could see. But it was pretty dark and misty down there.

'I know it's late, Mrs O'Neil, but these things can take a while to go through the system, and as I said at the door, my Inspector asked me to call by, it's not too late is it?'

'No, absolutely not. Thank you.'

'Well, I know this sort of thing is upsetting. I thought it better to call now than leave things till tomorrow.'

'Sergeant Adams, I'm just relieved that someone has come so quickly. I didn't think. Well, I wasn't sure. You know, if the Police would take me seriously. And please, call me Karin.'

'Sure, Karin.' She's blonde, attractive, mid forties. Good curves, what the younger generation would call, Milf. Obviously lives well, got a nice post code; dresses high end. She's got that expensive hippy thing going on. Nice place too, it suits her. All spot lights and stainless steel. But who doesn't pull their curtains when it's dark outside? This flats lit up like a miner's lamp in a coal shed. Silly cow.

'Mind if I look around?'

'No, please.'

Bedroom's probably upstairs behind the nice gallery. More lights on wasting electricity. More 'look at me' windows. Why not put a sign up outside? What are you, an attention seeker, or an exhibitionist? My Carol would love a place like this. Probably have to make Deputy Commissioner first though.

‘So you think you may have a stalker?’ *Don’t tell me, your ex boyfriend wants his CD’s back.* ‘And for the record, we take all allegations of this nature very seriously?’ *Especially when they’re friends of the Inspector’s wife.* ‘Can you tell me what’s been happening?’

‘I hope I’m not wasting your time. Goodness, I feel a bit silly now.’

If I had a pound for every stalker in the shadows. I know I’m doing light duties from here on in, but shouldn’t a WPC be here doing this? Take a look through the other window, Ray. Just to reassure her . . . and maybe suggest that she *draws* the bloody curtains when it gets dark.

‘Can I make you a cup of tea Sergeant? Would you like a biscuit?’

‘Oh, don’t mind if do.’

Please let them be choccy biccies. Please, please, please. Carol can’t moan, not if they’re eaten in the line of duty. Oh great, Rich Tea, the world’s most boring biscuit.

‘Please, take a seat. I’m not really sure where to start?’

‘I know it’s a cliché, but try the beginning. When did you first notice something, someone?’

‘Some months ago. I suppose this sort of thing is always a risk with what I do. I’m a Pavement Pastor. I work the streets around Westminster with a team of colleagues. We’re organised by our church, the Council helped to fund the initiative.’

Ahh, the Lollipop Brigade. Nice one. If only more people would help out like that.

‘So how long have you been working the streets?’ You could have put that another way.

‘Huh? oh, about three years.’

‘No problems before then, they’ve only started recently?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you mind if I ask the obvious? Why you think you’re being stalked?’

‘The first time was the footsteps. Following me home down Tangier Road, they stopped every time I did. I didn’t see anyone but since then I’ve become aware that someone follows me. And I’m pretty sure that someone watches the flat from down there, on the other side of the street. And it’s not just me. Sandra from next door called the police the other night. It turned out to be kids in the end; some of your colleagues came and chased them off.’

Okaaaay.

‘Any boyfriend, girlfriend problems recently? Is there anyone at your work you’ve fallen out with. Anyone who may have an axe to grind. Someone who might think that this kind of thing would be amusing?’

‘No, and there’s been no-one since my husband died four years ago. He had a heart attack. He was only thirty-nine. He left me well provided for so the only work I do now is voluntary. I help out with a couple of charities on the high street. Most of the people I work with are a bit older than me, and I get on well with everyone. My social life is built mainly around the church, ever since my husband’s heart attack . . . they’ve been wonderful.’

Yeah, I got it the first the time . . . heart attack . . . dead. Wrap this up and go home Raymond.

‘Oh, I have joined a gym recently. But I don’t actually know anyone there yet.’

‘What about the neighbours? Any feuds or arguments? Anyone who smiles at you a bit too much? Who takes an interest in the more mundane things that you do? Always seems to be there to help out?’

‘No, all of my neighbours are very nice. They’re mostly professional or retired people; all very pleasant.’

So any one of them could be a serial killer? Okay, keep writing things down, take another look out the window, can’t do any harm.

Hello, anyone down there? No? It gets dark so bloody early now. Okay Raymond, let’s recap. In all probability it’s either her imagination, or some scumbag she gave a lollipop to having a wank in the dark.

‘Anyone with social or learning disabilities that you may have met on your travels; seen the same face more than twice, that sort of thing?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

Better get uniform to canvas the block tomorrow, just in case. If nothing else it’ll keep the inspector’s wife happy. And get some fish and chips on the way home. Oh wait, Carol’s text. She’s making vegetable wraps for tea.

‘I think I may have met him.’

‘Who? I mean, when? Your stalker?’

‘Yes, last night. Just as I was getting home. A man followed me to the gate. Scared me witless. Though I think I may have over reacted.’

‘I doubt it, what happened? Can you describe him? Would you know him if you saw him again?’

‘No, I don’t think so, maybe. He was young, very early twenties. It was dark, I’m sorry, he looked away as soon as I confronted him.’

And you didn’t tell me this, why?

‘Okay, so did he say anything to you?’

‘He said, “Excuse me”.’

‘Is that it?’

‘I think I might have freaked out a bit. I shouted at him. Told him I didn’t have any money. Though on reflection, maybe I should have given him a few pounds.’

Yeah, good move. Encourage the little fucker to come back. What’s wrong with people?

‘It’s probably good that you didn’t. How did he respond, when you shouted at him?’

‘I think he wanted to apologise.’

‘Apologise?’

Never been on a murder team, but I’m pretty sure killers don’t apologise before slashing you to death.

‘So he could have been asking the time, or for directions?’

‘Oh, I suppose so.’

‘What happened after you confronted him?’

‘He sort of, backed off. Looked really scared, maybe a bit shocked. It was a fleeting glimpse. Well, then I kind of . . . well I felt sorry for him. I told him to go to the shelter on Lavern, just as he was walking away, oh, and that I’d call the police if he came back. I did do the right thing didn’t I?’

‘Absolutely, you can’t be too careful these days.’ You scared the shit out of a kid who wanted to ask you the time. ‘Why the shelter? Did he look like a vagrant, a tramp, a junkie?’

‘No, there was . . . well, I’m not sure. He looked like a normal lad, slightly unshaven, and his hair was shoulder length. Oh, and he wore an army coat, like the ones you see on television. It was all over so quick. But I remember the jacket had a flag on the arm, German I think. Yes, it was black, gold and red. Does that help? Mrs Grange saw him too, my neighbour. Number twenty-two, upstairs on this side. But she is sixty-three, and her eye-sights not brilliant.’

‘Karin, I’ll send a couple of PC’s around first thing to chat with Mrs Grange and the rest of your neighbours, see if anyone else has seen this lad?’ Go on Raymond, take a couple of Rich Tea and scarper, she won’t mind.

‘Oh, there is one other thing.’

Of course there is.

‘Anything you can tell me, it could be important.’

‘I got this in the post today. It’s really why I rang Jessie.’

Jessie? Ah, Mrs Inspector. Karin, have you had a bang on the head or something? You got a fucking letter from him?

'May I see it? Just open it up and put it on the table for me. Thanks.' Gonna look stupid if I didn't bring some . . . ah, latex, a policeman's best friend. 'Have you got a plastic bag I could put this in?'

Hand written, local post mark on the envelope, self adhesive tab. Letter's on ordinary lined A4 paper. Shit, this is a bit ripe.

I know what you're doing, you fucking whore. I've read his letters to you, all of them, don't fucking deny it. Stay away from him or I'll cut your fucking throat. He's mine. I'll fucking slash you from ear to ear, bitch. He's mine. Fucking slash you bitch. He's mine

He belongs to me to me He's fucking mine.

'Are you all right, Sergeant? It's a bit intense isn't it.'
Intense? This a joke, right?

'And you say you got it this morning?'

This cannot be a coincidence.

'Karin, is there somewhere you can go and stay for a few days?'

I think I'm going to have another heart attack.

* * *

Who are you? Why do you keep looking out the window? Can you see me? No, of course you can't. But you look as if you expect to see someone.

I should go, this place isn't for me any more. It's just. I wanted to see Karin, one last time. Explain . . . apologise, say I'm sorry about yesterday. Stupid really, I expect you've forgotten me already. Look, you've already met someone else.

'Goodbye Karin.' I have somewhere special to go and now I have the means to get us there. Look, it's not a dream, they're real. I only gave half to Jen, I'm not stupid. The rest will get us where we have to go. I'm taking Jamie away, you see. Just her and me. Somewhere special.

He's stopped looking. Go now whilst the stranger isn't looking. Leave down Miller Street, head for the Tube. Ten minutes and you'll be on the train. Two stops and you'll be back in Soho.

'Goodbye Karin.'

* * *

'No, she's packing a few things in the bedroom. I still don't see the cars. Wait, I've got them, I can see their lights. Thanks Graham, got to go, I have another call. Cooper, where the hell have you been, I've been calling you? Yeah, well I've got some news too. I've got a widow with hate mail. And guess what, the author's doodled the same drawings on the letter as we found on that wall. Deus **me** ignoscat, doodled in the corner. Yeah, seriously. What? Say that again. They've found a body, where?'

'In the basement, Sarge. That repo we babysat? The new owner was doing an inventory and he's found a body down in the basement. The body's male, got no ID yet. SOCO's already here, giving the place the once-over.'

'Cooper, I'll raise your basement body with one that was found down in Wimbledon a couple of months ago. The same crap was scrawled all over the walls'

No shit, Sarge. What does that mean?

'I hate to say this, Cooper. But it looks to me like we have a serial killer on our hands.'

There's no-one downstairs so I go up, slowly, not sure of what I'll find. All I know is he'd better not be up here. *Please Lord, don't let me find them . . . you know.*

The only door that's closed is the main bedroom. I tip toe across the carpet to stand outside. I daren't touch the door as I listen, but hear nothing. Not a sound; no talk, no chatter . . . none of the other sounds. She's my Jamie, and yet I'm frightened to go in. *Please don't let that ginger twat be in here.* I'm so afraid to push this thing open. What if the hinges creak? What if I see . . . ?

The door opens without a sound. My voice can only muster a whisper.
'Jamie.'

It's so dark, I can't see.

'Jamie?'

I'm afraid to cross the threshold and go inside.

'Jamie . . .'

She can't have gone out. She never goes out without me. Or didn't. *Blink harder and sight will come.* I can just make out the bed, a lamp on either side. A shape below the covers

'Jamie, are you in here?'

'Yes.'

My throat's gone dry.

'Are you, alone?'

'Who else would be in here? Come in and stop whispering.'

I comply.

'He's gone then.' *Not hiding under the bed?*

'Yes, Craig's gone. He wasn't exactly made to feel welcome was he?'

No, I s'pose not. 'I'm sorry.' *I'm not.* 'You shouldn't have brought him here, this is our house.'

‘Hardly ours, but I take your point. I’m sorry.’

Sorry? I thought you’d be angry.

I can breath again. Disengage my defences. Begin to untangle the double tight knot my stomach has tied. My Jamie’s sat up and patting the bed.

‘Trigger . . . I needed to talk to someone. There, I’ve said it.’

‘Why? What’s wrong with talking to me?’

‘Nothing really. You and I, we talk lots, and I love it. I do. But it’s simple talk, you know? And sometimes I want, need, to be challenged.’

So I’m simple, is that what you’re saying? And you’re in one of your moods, I can feel it. It emanates on a wavelength similar to the shadows.

‘Come here, hold me. Give me a hug. I want to know you’re sorry too, for being selfish. It wasn’t Craig’s fault, I invited him. He was my guest.’

‘I suppose.’

‘Then say it.’

I always have to say it. It’s always me who says it.

‘I’m sorry, okay. I just . . . I didn’t like him being here.’

There, I said it.

‘I understand. I do. But next time try to be more subtle. We don’t nail our guests to a Cross.’

‘Next time? He’s coming back?’

‘No, silly. I just wanted to see your face. Craig’s gone and I won’t be inviting him back.’

She’s grinning. Why? It’s not funny.

‘You think this is funny don’t you. Well, you’re wrong, cos this is funny.’

‘Ahhh, Trigger, stop. Oh my God, your hands are cold. Ha ha ha. They’re freezing, stop it. Ah, no fair . . . no, don’t tickle. Ha ha ha . . .

She shrieks, her face planted in a pillow so the neighbours won’t hear? Best if I stop.

‘No, leave them there, let them warm up. I want to feel them. But you’re still an idiot.’

Yes, but I’m your idiot.

She’s so warm, and so soft. My hands have never actually touched her skin before. This is exciting, terrifying, she’s pulling up my jumper and . . . oh shit, she’s put her hands on my body? Go with flow. Don’t you dare pull away again. Or look anywhere else but in her eyes. *Sweet Jamie.* I think she’s going to kiss me. *Oh, maybe not.*

‘Say something, Trigger. Just talk. I need to hear your voice.’

Say what? *Nothing silly.* Tell her how much she means to you. How it feels to hold her like this in my arms. But I don't think that's what she wants to hear. Say something intelligent, like Craig . . . *But what? What does she want to hear?*

'They put sensors in the ground, did you know that? Somewhere in Brazil, I was reading about it at the Shelter.'

'Really, sensors? What for?'

She's stroking my face, smiling.

'To monitor the environment, the soil, stuff. They can detect the spread of pollen.'

'I didn't know that.'

'It's true. They put them in vegetable and fruit cartons as well, to sniff the produce, I think. They check for spoilage. They can even save lives.'

'Really, tell me how?'

I like it as she turns her body toward me, her hands slide down my back. *Ooh, goosebumps . . . everywhere.*

'They can predict heavy rain, and mudslides. Give advance warning to evacuate communities at risk . . . *Jamie?*

'Sorry, I'm sorry. It's just . . . well, like there aren't enough people in the world already, why would they want to save a few more.'

'But it's a good thing, surely.' *No, leave your hands there. Please.* 'Have I said something wrong?'

'You always say something wrong, Trigger. I want to, feel you. And you talk about sensors. For fuck's sake, this world needs less people, not more. A good epidemic, that's what's needed. Can your sensors predict that? And are these the same sensors that tell the *Overseers* where the truck is? Whether the driver is on time, working hard, or taking a shit on Company time?'

What's wrong? Don't be like this. I don't like it when Jamie gets like this. Please sit back down on the bed. Here, closer. I want to cuddle. 'Jamie, please?'

'Sensors spy on people, Trigger. They're the tools of the oppressor, our Lords and Masters. Corporations and governments, the black suits with the collars and ties. The Watchers who soil our privacy. That's what your sensors do, Trigger. They listen to phone calls. They read texts and emails, spy on us with a million cameras. And the people who collect all this information, they're the same ones who put the fascist uniforms on our streets. Your sensors keep us in our place. Oh Trigger, sweetie, you're so innocent toward the world, and so fucking naive.'

'I shouldn't have said anything, I'm sorry. Please don't be angry.'

'I'm not angry, I'm being realistic. Calling the world out for what it really is, a fucking hamster wheel. With most of us trying not to fall between the tracks. Trigger, your sensors want to lock us into an endless cycle of productivity. They keep tabs on us. And for what? A few pennies in a bowl. Please sir, can I have some more? You want more, then work harder, take less sleep, don't have a fucking life. What for, Trigger? So *they* can buy a new yacht, another villa in the sun? We're oppressed, Trigger, kept in our place. Allowed out at weekends to binge, and even then we have to behave ourselves.'

You're right of course. You always are. I wish I could see the world as you do. Be more a part of it. Engage more outside of my shell. I know what will make you happy.

'I have something for you.'

'Oh really, is it going to free us from our servitude?'

'No, I don't think so. Maybe . . .'

Touchy feely time is obviously over. I go out and grab my bag from the landing. Unzip the pocket and hold out what I was *loaned* by Carl.

'Trigger, where did you get all this? No, don't answer that, I don't want to know. Have we got any foil? Shit, please say we have foil.'

Look at her, she's a big kid. Eyes drawn to the powder I dab into a small pile on a used piece of foil. I'm salivating too, and can even smell the offering before it's burned. I roll one of Carl's Euro banknotes into a tube and hand it to her. She doesn't notice. My Bic ignites into flame.

'Ready?'

She nods with excitable eyes. The tube waiting in her mouth as I engage the flame below the foil. The brown powder seems to caramelise as it melts. Once again the dragon roars and runs away; in its wake a flume of smog rises and pursued by Jamie's straw. The mood from the lights has synced with her now. An embryo of calm and magic. Look at her, my Jamie. So full of anticipation that a moment later turns to relaxation, and finally to a glazed smile.

'Don't give me too much,' she says. 'I don't want to go all wobbly eyed and crash.' The words don't marry with her lungs capacity to fill with more. She chases the smog again. 'Oh, and sweetie, I know I've, been a bit of a, bitch lately.' She fills what space is left with clean air. 'I don't, mean, *cough*, to be, *cough, cough*. Do it again . . .' she says.

Keep sucking, almost there. Now hold. Keep it in. Why are you grinning at me like that? Oh, her lips close in on mine.

'Open your mouth, Trigger.'

I comply and she puts her lips on mine. I feel the medication cross within a measured breath. I don't know what's more exciting, her lips, or the taste of what she's sharing with me.

'Hold it in my love. Now breeeeathe. Hmmm, did you like that?'

Like it? Please, let's do it again.

'Do it to me. My turn, Baby Boy. Put your lips right here, don't take them away. Look at me Trigger.

We're so close, almost touching.

'I'll share whatever I have with you; only you. But no fucker's gonna control me, never, not ever again. Do you understand?'

Our lips engage and she breathes new life into my lungs. A moment passes. My senses begin to swim and feel numb.

'We're free, you and I,' she says. 'Free. It's us against the world, Trigger. You and me against the Machine.'

I hang on every word. It makes perfect sense. But I've gone all choo-choo eyes. Carl was right, this is really good shit.

‘Trigger, I know I can be hard to live with, I do. But it’s important that you understand. That I know you understand. That we share the same feelings about, well, everything.’

She’s chasing more smoke around the foil. I can hardly sit up straight.

‘I want us to be as One, Trigger. Fully entwined. Freeking symbiotic.’

Me too. I do

‘Jamie, are we lovers?’ I ask.

‘Yes Baby Boy, we are. But some things are more important than us.’

‘That’s okay, we can multitask.’

That makes her grin, but doesn’t stop her sharing again. When her lungs are emptied she draws away and points at my t-shirt.

‘That’s an expensive brand,’ she says. ‘Sown in a sweat shop full of teeny tiny fingers paid pennies to bleed. How much did it cost you?’

‘I stole it, *cough, cough*, you know I did.’

‘I know, Baby. But what did the price tag say on the rack?’

I don’t care, don’t stop. I just want the taste of your breath, the touch of your lips. *Jamie . . .*

‘Trigger?’

‘I don’t know. I, I didn’t see.’ Gravity just got really heavy.

‘That’s because you didn’t want to know. You don’t want to see, my darling. And that’s why you’re the problem. Yes you, and the rest of the walking dead. Walking around with their eyes shut with a finger in each ear. *Kiss*. I do love you Trigger, you know that don’t you. *Kiss*. I love you so much. *Kiss kiss*. But I fucking hate you too.’

Really?

Okay, I think I understand. I so wish I could be more like you. That I could think like you. The weight of the world rests heavy on your shoulders; I want to share its burden.

Can I have some more medicine, please? The world is a better place when medicated.

'The world's changing, Baby Boy. Capitalism is going down, and hard. It's free falling to follow the Communists. Boom and bust, has had its day. The economy of technology is forging the way. And we are finally beginning to use the Earth's resources in a more efficient manner. It's nature fighting back, through us. Who'd have thought it.'

Not me, I never would. It's nice to be ignorant sometimes. To wallow in the facts so masterfully explained by someone who knows better.

'It's survival of the fittest, Trigger. One creation begets another, and then another, each one leaner, cheaper, and more accessible than the last. We've become collaboratively networked through communication and social media. A good start. But we need more Social Commons, an end to all the Pigs in their Ivory Towers. Civil Society rules. Or it should do. It needs to spread free and grow fast, rise up but have strong roots. Free wealth spread amongst us all and not being hoarded by the Capitalist Markets. Their ill gotten gains hiding out in seedy vaults being slobbered over by fat bloated bankers.

Why should the lucky few live like Kings, Trigger, when the mass perpetuates as paupers? It's *their* fault we live like this. *Them*, the great Collaborative, the silken suits. They feed off us with sweet promises and little else . . . Life, if you can afford it.

And then they fuck us over. Take more than they're worth. Give back as little as the sheep deserve. Maximise profit, that's the Chivalric code they live by. Let the people eat cake, but ease back on the eggs and sugar. Steady my love, hold the foil steady. I don't want to miss any.'

I could listen to you forever. Dear sweet Jamie, you enrich my life. You enlighten my mind. Kiss me again.

'Collaboratism, is coming, Trigger. The Era when Socialism and Capitalism will lose their dominance. The young will rise up and overthrow their masters. We'll hack away at the centralising nature of both. No more Market monopoly. An end to the Bureaucratic State. We'll become a social economy. The democratisation of communication, of energy, of logistics will be achieved. No more intermediates biting away at the cherry, the whole punnet will be evenly shared. A Global Collaborative Commons that shares everything. No rich and no poor, just Collaborators. It's not a dirty word any more, it means survival of our Race. Can you see it, Baby Boy, can you? The world is changing. Free healthcare without the wait. Green energy that's free for all. Can you see?'

I want to, I do. I want to understand the words as they bloom and blossom from your lips. But my brain is going to sleep. This really is good shit. Wait, is that why you say “you hate me.” It’s because I’m stupid isn’t it. I’m one of the sheep you talk about. I’m sorry, I can’t help that, I wish I could. Maybe it’s enough for you to know that you inspire me.

‘Baby, where did the medication come from. Carl? Stop nodding like a dog. That man should be strung up by his bollocks. Fucking nigger, that’s all his kind are good for. God should strike them all down.’

‘Jamie. Don’t say things like that.’ *Where does that come from? That’s not you talking, not really.*

‘Why shouldn’t I say what others only think, or whisper in doorways. Kill them all *and* their bastard offspring. Trigger, please, just a little more, for me. Stop staring at me like that. What, you don’t think I could do it? Go on, say it. You think I’m full of shit. And stop shaking your head, just come out and say what you’re thinking. Act like a fucking man for a change.’

I can’t cope when you change like this. She mustn’t get angry. Calm her down. Say something to calm her down?

‘God’s greatest gift to man is his love, for all things, for all people. God loves you, Jamie.’

‘Oh no, not this shit again.’

‘He made us all in his image.’

‘Then *He* was fucking colour blind, and obviously schizophrenic, because in case you hadn’t noticed there are quite a few religions that claim to speak in His name. And non of them can agree on what He’s actually said. Some of them preach His words with a gun in their hands, Trigger.

I’ve made things worse.

So tell me, which one is right, and which ones are wrong? Your own church is the worst of all. Convert or be condemned. Bugger all the little children, ha ha, literally. Isn’t that their mantra? Isn’t it? Trigger . . . ?

Oh Trigger, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean that. I’m tired. I hurt still, all over. Be a sweetie, cook me up something nice. It’s my head, it won’t stop. Sometimes it just won’t stop. I don’t mean it, you know I don’t. Tell me you know.’

‘Shh, it’s all right.’ She’s in my arms holding me. Squeezing me for forgiveness. ‘It’s all right, I’m here.’

Jamie’s ill, it’s not her fault, I do understand. She’s frightened of not knowing how long she has left. It fucks with her head. Another good hit

of her medication and she'll sleep. Be at peace. I'll be here to watch over her.

'I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. Forgive me.'

I do.

'It's like, you know, when something gets stuck in your head. Something angry, stupid, it keeps on going round. Like music, yeah, the last tune you hear? A tune that won't go away. That won't leave your headspace. It keeps coming back. You keep humming it over and over and over. And sometimes the notes get bad. You're so fed up that they keep coming back; you want them to stop. But they won't stop. I can't make them stop. And sometimes they bring something else with them?'

She looks up at me like a puppy wanting love.

'That's what it's like, Baby Boy. The more the notes circle the more like thunder they sound. They grumble and spit, pitch and yaw, and then the lightning strikes. Trigger, hold me. Tighter. I know I say bad stuff, but I don't mean it. You know that, right? And I know I do things . . . I know I've done things. I'm really sorry. Please forgive me. You do forgive me, don't you? Oh God, please say you won't leave me. You wouldn't do that to me, you wouldn't, ever, would you?'

'No, never. I wouldn't ever. It's you and me, remember. Backs to the wall, forever. Come on, give me a Jamie smile?'

She needs to sleep. I need to cook something nice for her, the only thing that will give her peace.

A minute later I've clamped Sherman to her arm and the needle breaks her skin. A curious spiralling of blood streams out into the mixture, and then I slide the plunger down. Goodnight, sweet Jamie.

Goodnight.

Adams should have know. There was a reason why Charles ‘Teapot’ Harriott was still an Inspector after all these years. Nice enough bloke, but won’t take the lead, not with anything. Always left it to someone else. Teapot was a beanpole who thought his right hand had evolved to carry a cup of tea.

Come on, this is serious.

Any longer on that phone and Raymond would hang it up for him. And he needed to stop looking over his glasses at him like that.

About time.

The handset finally closed, Teapot didn’t look happy.

‘So, what makes you think we have a serial killer, Adams?’

Really . . . again?

‘Dead bodies, sir.’

‘Don’t be flippant, Adams. So, let’s recap shall we.

Oh please do. In case I missed anything, sir.

‘You have two bodies of different ages and colour. And the geography’s different for both scenes?’

Yes, sir, this will mean cross-territory coordination.

‘There’s no physical or motivational link. No DNA. And did you say, no witnesses?’

Wife pick your tie again, sir? For fuck’s sake if you take your head out of your arse . . .

‘Graffiti, sir,’ said Adams politely, ‘that’s the link. And I’ll wager if I look deeper, I’ll find more bodies. There are always more bodies.’

‘Graffiti?’

It’s like talking to someone with dementia.

‘Yes, sir, take another look. These are prints of the photos taken before some idiot at the house painted the walls. These others, the ones on my

phone. Err, would you sir? Thank you. It's a Smartphone; doesn't seem too smart to me. No, that's my wife . . . the dog . . . stop, those are the ones. They're from the crime scene in Wimbledon. A dead male who shared a squat with several other unknowns. Look here, these images, it's the same unmistakable artwork at both scenes; that's not a coincidence.'

'People read Marvel, Adams. Squatters get bored. And there's no way of telling *when* these were drawn.'

'The property was confirmed to be locked up and empty three weeks before they found the body. It's documented. I have a time-line.'

'Tenuous at best. And who took these photos, SOCO?'

'Err no, not exactly. I got them from a friendly reporter.'

'There's no such thing.' That look again. 'Adams, were these taken by your brother in law?'

No answer.

'Well, you know what I think of him.'

'That doesn't alter the facts, sir. It's the same artwork found at both locations. Both properties are the scene of a murder.'

'But not in the actual rooms? And these drawings, what are they? Have they been examined by forensics?'

'Well, no. Wimbledon didn't think they were relevant at the time, I don't know why? The house has since been sold to private owners, and they've re-plastered. But read the reports, there are similarities. Both men were stabbed for a start. The first one six times. The latest was used as a pin cushion. Way more frantic; over thirty wounds. I'll bet there's at least one, maybe two bodies in-between these two. It's obviously an escalation, sir. Both males shared squats and were stabbed multiple times. Both scenes had walls covered in this shit. They're linked, sir.'

'That may well be, but I can't raise the flag and go shouting *serial killer* on anything this tenuous, now can I? The Deputy Commissioner would have a coronary. Oh . . . sorry.'

'That's okay, sir. But what about Mrs O'Neill, her letter?'

'Well, I hate to point out the obvious, but she's female, and she's still alive. Oh, and you've since scared her witless and encouraged her to leave the city.'

'Well, yes. She's gone to her sister's in Leeds. Went about an hour ago. I've contacted the local Nick in Leeds and filled them in.'

'Local Nick? Please try to move into the twenty-first century, Adams. Look, you have two, as yet unrelated homicides, and a lot of wishful thinking. Let SOCO turn the house upside down and see what forensics

can pull up. But I tell you now, I'm not starting a hunt for a serial murderer on the presence of someone's wall doodles. And neither are you. Is that clear?

For crying out loud, if the press got a sniff of your rantings they wouldn't care about the facts; it'll be a three inch headline. No, this is an interesting coincidence until we have more evidence. I'll pass everything on to the SCD, and doubtless they'll filter it down to the Murder Investigation Teams in both boroughs. It's the best I can do. Consider the matter passed on.'

Consider the matter, passed on. Is that it?

Put it on pause, Raymond. Look, I've seen this before. You've had a bad scare recently. A heart attack is a pretty serious event in anyone's life. It's the realisation of your own mortality, coupled no doubt with impending retirement. And a large slice of midlife crisis, I shouldn't wonder. You've got eleven months left until you leave us and start the quiet life. We can't all bow out by chasing Serial Killers, now can we?'

Obviously not, you patronising old . . . Teapot

'No, sir.'

'Oh and how's, err, Carol isn't it? Things okay in general? No other problems I should know about? Anything I can help with? Good good. I'm going to instruct the duty officers to keep you in the office for a while, how does that sound? Light duties for the wounded, eh? Now was there anything else?'

You chocolate fucking teapot. 'No sir, I think that's all.' *Patronising, smug . . . four eyed git.* 'You're probably right, sir. Thank you for your time, sir. I'll find a desk and raise a file, have copies made for you to pass on. And they're lovely by the way.'

'They are? Oh, the photo. They're my grandchildren. Lovely little buggers aren't they.'

'Yes, sir.' *Poor sods.*

* * *

'How'd it go in there, Sarge?'

'The Inspector agreed to raise a task force. You and I are going to liaise with the Specialist Crimes and Operations Directorate. Play your cards right and there's a big promotion waiting for you.'

'The SCD . . . promotion? Wow, seriously?'

No. And that's why you'll be a PC for the rest of your career. The Old Man told me to stop being a paranoid wanker and find myself a desk to sit behind.'

'Oh, right. Not receptive to our inclinations?'

'Our inclinations? Cooper, what language . . . Never mind. And no, he thinks we're chasing shadows. Said he'd pass it on.'

'So, that's that then.'

'You are joking. He didn't say I couldn't nose around or ask questions. Just that I'm not to talk about it. I'll get some uniforms to knock doors at Victoria Place, maybe someone else saw Jack.'

'Jack?'

'Gotta call him something. I want *you* to track down everyone else that's been at that squat. Those twins will do for a start, they shouldn't be hard to find. I'm gonna trawl around the hostels, food banks, soup kitchens . . . see if I can't get a lead on someone that likes to scrawl with crayons.'

'It was charcoal, Sarge. Sorry Sarge.'

'Well, go on then, and Cooper, you see anyone that's homeless, vagrant, or generally unwashed, you stop them and have a chat. Someone out there knows someone else who likes to play with charcoal.'

'Yes, Sarge.'

Adams had no idea there were so many shelters, hostels, and refuges. Churches, it might be worth ringing around the churches; they do charitable shit for the homeless. How many churches between Wimbledon and . . . ?

Maybe Teapot has a point?

The best part of four hours hanging on the end of the phone hoping he'd catch a break. But the only evidence he'd acquired, he now needed to get rid of. Find a bin and dispose of the McDonalds wrappers. Tell Carol he had a nice chicken salad for lunch.

'Shh, our little secret.' The bin flapped closed. 'Got to keep up my strength.'

Right . . . Street Link, done. Day Centres, ring around tonight. Hostels, Charities, Shelters, Work shops . . . *The homeless get a bigger budget than the Metropolitan Police. I had no idea there were so many.* Safari was going into melt down, too many do-gooders. It would be quicker finding numbers if his fingers weren't so fat. *Council . . . is that with an e or an i?* Someone out there knew who this guy was. The streets aren't so big when the Police know who they're looking for. *Come on, Raymond. Four hours and not so much as a sniff.* Half a notepad used up chasing shadows.

The phone rang.

'Yes, Cooper? Please say you're doing better than I am.'

'Remember the twins, Sarge? Well, I've found them.'

'That was quick. Send me the address, I'm on my way. Oh, and nice one Cooper.'

‘So, Dwaine . . . and that’s your real name is it? Let me get this straight. The guy lives upstairs and you don’t know anything about him.’

Adams wasn’t sure which of the twins he was talking to, but surely they couldn’t both look as stupid as this one. Dwaine looked like his hair had been cut round a pudding bowl.

‘I told you his name, what more do you want?’

‘Trigger, right? And your name really is Dwaine? Is it a competition?’

‘What does that mean?’

‘What about a description, Dwaine?’

‘It’s like I said, twice. He’s blonde, late teens, ish. Always wears a green army jacket, German, I think. Has a flag just here, and he likes playing on the Xbox. Oh, and he’s got purple laces in his boots.’

‘Purple eh? That’s lovely. Well, thank you, I think we’re done here. Cooper, put a BOLO out on some purple laces for me. I’m sorry, was that mauve or mulberry? Wake up you little dickhead, you’re in a lot of trouble. So do yourself a favour and get those grey cells working. Think. He must have mentioned where he comes from, or maybe where he was heading? Friends, acquaintances, favourite places to be?’

‘I told you, he’s not from London. He doesn’t speak like us. All I know is he’s been here for a couple of years. Moves around a lot. You do realise being homeless means we live in a fluid environment. This side of the river, that side of the river, it all depends.’

‘On what?’

‘On who you meet and what they tell you. The streets are like an extended family, we look out for each other. Ever heard of social media; a twitter here and there. We got our own code and everything. Everyone’s looking for a safe place, mate. Safety in numbers, you know?’

No, not really. And the sad thing is you believe all that crap. Not a mention of your own family worried sick at home. Though maybe they’re not so bothered. Hoping you don’t back probably.

‘You ever thought of getting a job?’

‘What?’

‘See that, Cooper. Mention the J word and I get more of a reaction than, *prison*. I never saw handouts and sympathy as a career choice myself?’

‘What, you my mum or summink?’

‘And you say we have two of these, Cooper?’

‘Other one’s next door, Sarge.’

I should arrest him for being a tosser. Then burn this place down. Look at it. Burn them all down and bring back National Service. *Shit, I*

sound like my dad. Maybe the Inspector was right. I should have taken a few more months before coming back.

Patience, Raymond . . . play nice.

‘Dwaine, you do realise that this is a murder investigation. Which means I need your help before someone else gets killed.’

‘What, you think Trigger done it? That’s a laugh.’

‘You don’t think he could do something like that?’

‘He couldn’t, no. No way.’

‘If not him, then who? Is he with someone else, is that it?’

Fine, the silent treatment. Just grab the little shit by the ear and . . . ‘He must have talked about himself, Dwaine. Something, anything. What about his childhood?’

‘Fuck knows.’

‘Family?’

‘Don’t think he’s got any.’

‘Friends?’

‘Hello mate, you’re talking to him.’

‘Is there anybody he knows, trusts, might go to in a pinch; ring on the phone. Shout out the bloody window to?’ *If he shrugs one more time I swear I’ll . . .*

‘He’s got a girlfriend.’

‘What . . .? Cooper, who have we been talking to for the last twenty minutes? Why didn’t you mention a girlfriend?’

‘You didn’t ask.’

I’m over there, thumbs in the eyes, truncheon up his . . .

‘You got a name?’

‘Shaun.’

‘Her name?’

‘Jamie, I think.’

‘You think? You and your toe-rag brother live downstairs from them for several weeks and you *think* that’s her name?’

‘It was three weeks, and I never actually met her. They were kind of, secretive. A bit odd really. I only heard her, upstairs. Trigger mentioned she was ill, not very well. I think she’s got that thing. You know. Where you’re scared of the outside.’

‘Agoraphobia?’

‘Don’t know if she like spiders, but she likes to draw on the walls.’

Does she now?

‘So you did go upstairs. No, no, it’s too late, you just told me. What, you get nosy, go for a sneaky peek when they were out?’

‘It’s health and safety mate. Need to know. You can get some right weirdos living in the room next door. Some can be dangerous.’

What happened to friends and family?

‘Tell me everything you saw upstairs?’

‘There was nothing much. She liked to draw when Trigger wasn’t around, and they live out of a plastic bag like the rest of us. Though technically it was a couple of rucksacks.’

‘Don’t suppose you felt the need to go *health and safety* inside their bags.’

‘Might of. Maybe?’

‘Cooper, put his hand on the table and go grab my hammer from the car.’

‘Ha ha, hammer. That’s a joke, right? Mate, they had nothing worth nicking. Just clothes, nice ones mind, not your typical market shit. A couple of pairs of trainers, size ten, and four, I think. He had a couple of books in his bag, some science shit, and she had a bit of make up. Oh, and they had a knife, about this big.’

That made the hairs on Adam’s neck stand fully erect.

‘You saw a knife? Yeah, right, course you did.’

‘Fucking straight. It’s well dodgy out there, especially on a weekend.’

‘Have you got a knife?’

‘No way, not me. Carrying knives, that’s illegal.’

‘Okay. So describe it to me, this knife.’

‘Kinda this big, made of metal.’

I’m gonna smack this little shit.

‘Really, made of metal . . . What was the handle made of? The blade, how long was it; how wide? Were any blood stains visible on its surface? Think boy, think . . .’

‘About this long, and maybe that wide. Blood? No-one uses them, it’s not like that, they’re just for show. Mate, I’m trying to be helpful.’

‘Okay, okay. Who’s bag was the knife in?’

‘Trigger’s, I think. How bout some reciprocation, eh? Maybe you could spot us a few quid, just to see us on? No, okay, worth asking. What if I knew something that would really help, would that be worth anything?’

‘Twenty minutes of talking shit, and now you want to help?’

‘Well, you know, scratchy scratchy and all that. It’s tough out there. I thought you paid for information these days?’

‘How about I arrest you and your brother for obstructing the course of an investigation? Oh, and as accessories to murder.’

‘Fuck you . . . do it. Not a bad option really. Warm blanket and free breakfasts till they kick it out of court. Yeah all right, I’m up for it.’

Don’t look at me like that Cooper, it was considered a deterrent once.

‘Fine, how much do you want?’

‘How much you got?’

‘How about thirty quid, and I won’t tell everyone that you’re a Grass. We’ve had a couple of drug busts round here in the last few days, I expect you’ve heard about them. Fucking good results for us, back slapping and beers all round. What d’you reckon Cooper? We could mention the twins as being good clean upright citizens, very helpful in our investigations. Tell you what, *Dwaine*, I may even be able to get you a police commendation. Now I reckon that would get your name in the papers. Shit, you’d be a celebrity. And everyone wants to be a celebrity these days, don’t they?’

‘He’s joking, right? Bollocks . . . I want the money first.’

‘Get your wallet out, Cooper.’

‘Me?’

‘Make it fifty. Me brother and me, we got expenses.’

‘Give him twenty. Well, come on, Cooper. Twenty’s all you’re getting cos the Force’s budget was cut again this year. The Met’s skint, pot-less, not a fucking penny. Don’t panic, Cooper. The station will reimburse you.’

‘Nice one, thanks.’

‘Well, information?’

‘Trigger let slip once. It was during Grand Theft. He’s a sick get-away driver. Loved the pavements, though a bit too much really. You know, spilling old people, kids on bikes, babies in prams? Oh yeah, right . . . well he mentioned once that he got done for something drink related, I don’t remember what, but he has someone he sees now and then. A woman. Through the courts, you know. What d’you call em?’

‘A Psychiatrist?’

‘Nah.’

‘A Counsellor?’

‘Nope.’

‘Join in Cooper, it’s like one of those TV game shows.’

‘Was it a DIP worker, *Dwaine*?’ Cooper asked.

‘Yeah, that’s it. A Dippy, he sees a Dippy. Got himself put on an Order some time back. I did one myself, way better than community service.’

‘A name, *Dwaine*. I need a name.’

‘Sharon . . .?’

‘Good, Sharon, now we have a name.’

‘Maybe not Sharon. Sarah?’

‘Sarah . . . Are you sure?’

‘Nah, not Sarah. It’s difficult to remember, maybe another Score would help.’

‘Sarge, you’re not going to give him another twenty quid?’

‘No Cooper, you’re giving him another twenty quid.’

‘Sarge?’

‘You’ll get it back. Come on, chop chop.’

‘Hey, nice one.’

‘The name, Dwaine?’

‘Oh yeah, I remember. It was Sue. He said she had lovely red hair, oh, and she works in Brixton. I remember cos I walked some of the way there with him once.’

‘Sue, Brixton? Are you absolutely sure this time?’

‘Positive.’

‘Thank you Shaun. Cooper, put the cuffs on him. Shaun, I’m arresting you and your brother for perverting the course of Justice. For attempting to bribe a Police Officer.’

‘Hey wait a minute, I didn’t ask . . . this is payment for information. You’re bribing me.’

‘Nope, that’s not how it’s going in my report. Dwaine, you’re nicked. Oh, unless you feel you want to make a donation to the Police Ball? Say, forty quid?’

‘You bastard.’

'I told you you'd get your money back, didn't I?'

'Yes Sarge, but . . .'

'But what? Oh for fuck's sake, why the long face?'

'I'm not sure what you did in there was strictly legal.'

'Of course it was, now get in the car.' Adams closed the car door. Messing with Dwaine's head had got them a name, and a description. He dragged the seat belt out and clicked it in place. 'What? Come on, out with it.'

'Are we absolutely sure? I mean, why hasn't someone else picked up on this? The link between the dead men, I mean. There are a lot of bloody good detectives on the Force.'

'Cooper, sometimes it happens like this, pure chance. Look, Teapot was right. We have two homicides that have no physical or motivational links. And they're in different boroughs. The only evidence we have is flimsy at best. An unreliable witness who says he saw a knife, and some painted over drawings. Sometimes it comes down to a gut feeling. So what's your gut telling you, Cooper? Because we need to be on the same page with this.' Adams slipped the gear lever into first and tipped the indicator. The car moved out into light traffic. 'Well?'

'We're right about this.'

'Damn right we are. You and me, Cooper, right now we're Butch and Sundance.'

'They were criminals, Sarge.'

'Well, fucking Batman and Robin then. Look, the second murder was far more *frantic* than the first, right? That suggests there may be more bodies in-between. Maybe others prior to Wimbledon, we don't know. Not yet. And what makes it harder for the Met is we're looking for someone who isn't actually trying to hide. He's made no attempt to con-

ceal the bodies, or hide the crimes. And who's the girlfriend. Does she know about his moonlighting as Jack the Ripper.'

'A girlfriend fits with the letter that Mrs O'Neil got,' said Cooper.

'Yeah, that letter, trying to scare Mrs . . . Or does the girlfriend aspire to be more like Trigger? No clear motive, not yet. Cooper, there's more going on here than we know. Bits of this puzzle are still missing.' A voice called out through the radio. A report of an RT incident close by. Adams grabbed the handset from his dashboard. 'Show 258 responding,' he said, and flicked the nearest switch. Outside the car's lights began to flash. Another click and the siren blared. Cooper indicated, looked, and manoeuvred the car out into the road. The car accelerated.

'Cooper, you should know that I've been warned off this. If the press get a sniff and it turns out to be goose chase, I'll be for the chop. It's not too late to bail.' *I'd treat me like the plague in your position.* 'I need to know that you're on board with this. We could end up in heavy doo-doo, whichever way it turns out.'

'Sam,' Cooper replied.

'Sam what?'

'It's my name, Sarge. When we're done I'll check for a DIP worker named Sue in the Brixton area.'

'No need, I already know who she is. Cooper, this truly is a small world.'

‘Do you know how many cases come across my desk each month?’

‘Sue, I don’t even know what it is you do . . . What the fuck is DIP anyway?’

‘Drug Intervention Programme, and you know exactly what we do.’

‘Indulge me, I’ve never seen you at work in the office before.’

‘At Saint Augustus we enable vulnerable people to fulfil their potential in life. We liaise between our clients and the courts, your lot, social housing, and every other Agency you’ve ever heard of. And I expect there are plenty that you haven’t.’

‘Sounds chaotic. Does that mean that every alcoholic, junkie and ex-con that comes through that door gets you as their personal assistant?’

‘Pretty much. And we don’t call them alcoholics or junkies. They’re vulnerable adults.’

‘So are their victims,’ he said. ‘Did you know the Government cut the Met’s budget again this year?’

‘Very sorry to hear that, but we’re a charity. Excuse me. Hey, Charles, Yoohoo? Order me some drug testing kits, down to my last six pack over here. Thank you, love. Look, Sergeant, everyone deserves a second chance.’

‘Even toe rags?’

‘You mean vulnerable clients. And yes, it’s my job to help them. For the record we have some very impressive statistics to prove that recovery and reintegration into society for our clients is a worthwhile and achievable goal. Excuse me. Hi, Saint Augusta Trust, Sue speaking. How may I help you?’

‘I can wait, no hurry.’

Sue was overworked, over qualified, and overweight. Her shoulder length hair was bright shiny and copper in colour. She had a habit of scrunching her face and adjusting her glasses as she spoke.

Tick tock, tick tock.

And I thought the Met was tight for space. Fifty square feet of office, six women, all desk sharing. Half a dozen monitors, twice as many tall piles of paperwork. The phones seemed to take it in turn to ring.

Ah, you're back.

'What is it you need, Sergeant?'

'Just thought you'd like to liaise with the Police on a different level.'

'I'm married love, but thanks for the offer. Now is it important; as you can see I'm pretty busy here?'

'It's an ongoing investigation. And it's very important. Please, five minutes.'

'Fine. You can have three.' The phone rang. 'Hi, Saint Augusta Trust, Sue speaking . . .'

More pulled faces as she scribbled notes onto a piece of paper. She put the phone down. Adams leant over and pulled the plug from the receiver.

'I'm looking for someone you may have crossed paths with,' he said.

'Name?'

Sue looked unimpressed.

'All I have is a pet name. Trigger? Oh, so you do know him then?'

'Yes, Trigger's a nice boy. Is he a witness or something?'

'Or something. I need to find him.'

'I don't have a current address for him. When he came to us he was nfa, no fixed abode. Nothing had changed the last time I saw him.'

'And the last time you saw him was?'

'About a week, maybe ten days ago.'

'Don't suppose you have a photo?'

'Yes I do. Damn, I keep forgetting. We don't line our clients up against the wall and take their mug shots anymore. Two minutes.' She seemed hungry to get back on the phone.

'Tell me about him? Height, weight, complexion, eye colour?'

'Five eightish? A hundred and sixty poundsish, white, with green eyes, I think? Got a small tattoo on his wrist, it's a rose. And he wears the same coat every time I meet him.'

'Don't tell me, it's a green army jacket. Got a flag about here.'

'That's the one.'

'Tell me about him. Tell me about Trigger? What's he like socially? Psychologically? Does he have a girlfriend?'

‘You’re sailing a bit close to client confidentiality, and yes, he talks about a girl. Her name’s Jamie.’

‘Ever met her?’

‘He always comes alone.’

‘Why? If his Order is up, why does he still come?’

‘Just to touch base. Every now and then he pops in to say hello.’

‘Just to say hello, eh . . . Can I take a look at his file?’

‘No. What’s this about, Sergeant? What’s Trigger done?’

‘Sorry, client confidentiality. I’m looking for information that can help us with a very sensitive case. Just a quick peek at the file, go on.’

‘I can’t believe you’re even asking. And I’m considering reporting you.’

‘Sue, you do remember that moment we shared? You, me, the fancy suite. Our lips touching for the first time. It must have meant something to you.’

‘It was the custody suite not the bloody Savoy. And if I hadn’t just had caffeine I’d have walked over your gagging body to go get some.’

‘Come on, saving my life was the most exciting thing you’d done in months?’

‘Probably, but it still doesn’t get you any special favours.’

‘Sue, you saved my life. In Chinese culture, that makes you responsible for me . . . *forever*.’

‘Responsible? In your dreams. I have a husband, two kids, and three cats. None of whom can wipe their arse without me being present to help them. And can you hear those. That’s the ever present sound of . . . oh yes, *the phones*. Eight till five, and beyond probably. I don’t know, I’m not here. But they ring in my sleep. I’m overworked, underpaid, and this bloody computer was resurrected from the Ark. The only sanity I get is a fag outside in the car park, and I’m only allowed three of those a day. I’m due for a nicotine fix now, and if I don’t get one I become borderline psychotic.’

‘Can I remind you that, *forever*, is a very long time.’

‘Sergeant, what is it that you want, exactly?’

‘Just tell me about Trigger. Everything you can without the use of a warrant.’

‘His real name’s Mathew Breelman, not that I’ve ever seen his birth certificate, and he’s twenty years old. He has a history of drug abuse, which is where I come in. He was arrested for possession of heroin about eighteen months ago, passed on to me when the court issued him a DRR. That order ended about six months ago but he stills comes in now and

then. Look, Trigger's a nice lad. Wouldn't say boo to a goose. What's he supposed to have done?'

'And you have no idea where he hangs out, or who with?'

'No, I'm not his social worker.'

'What about the girlfriend?'

'Jamie? Like I said, never met her. But I think she has issues of her own. A drug problem to be specific. Trigger feels responsible for her. There's no question that he's in love with the girl. But alas, I think it's unreciprocated. At least that's the impression I get. Trigger's a lovely kid. Comes over as a bit, lost, if you know what I mean.'

'No, not really.'

'Raymond, Trigger has a few problems, social ones mainly. He doesn't fit in, some of it is borderline psychological. But who hasn't got mental health issues these days?'

'Me.'

'Yeah, right. Now I obviously can't get any more personal about my client with you, not without his permission.'

'*Forever.* Sue.'

'I don't care, I cannot discuss my clients. I've probably said too much already.'

'But you said his Order has finished. So he's not a client anymore.'

'Doesn't matter, now sod off. I've got a truck load of paper work and five clients coming in this afternoon. And that bloody phone doesn't stop, *ever.*' She plugged the chord back in. The phone rang. 'You see. Hello Saint Augusta Trust, Sue speaking, how may I help you? Oh hi Jean. Yes, I got them yesterday. Yes, I'll have them done by Friday, yes those too . . .'

The voice of an Angel, but the eyes of Bin Laden.

'Okay, I get it . . . I'm going.'

But not empty handed. Sue just gave my boy a proper name.

'You took your time, it's bloody freezing out there.'

'Sorry Sarge, rush hour traffic's a nightmare.'

'Yeah yeah, which one turns the heater up? Brrr, you got anything to eat in here.'

'It's this one, and no, sorry.'

'Great, cold and hungry. Well, get on with it then. What have you dug up on Jack, Trigger . . . Mathew.'

'Right, I checked out Mathew Breelman. You're not going to like this. Caucasian teenager, nineteen years of age, history of drug offences. Personal possession that turns into one arrest for minor dealing. He turned up dead a year and a half ago.'

'He's what, dead? How?'

'Single stab wound to the chest. Open case. There's a copy of the file on the back seat.'

'You did say dead?'

'Yes, Sarge.'

'The little fucker; so he stole a dead man's ID. *Bollocks*. How did that get by the system? Doesn't anyone check any more?'

'It's not hard to change the face on a driver's licence these days.'

'A proper check would show the owner of said licence is deceased. You'd think that would raise a few eyebrows.' Adams grabbed the brown folder from the rear and began to read. 'Not a very illustrious life was it. Petty theft, driving offences, drug dealing. His mother must have been so proud. On the bright side it means we have a third body.'

'Sarge?'

'Another murder victim with a stab wound. This may be our first victim; each one getting it worse than the last. It's escalation for sure.'

And it proves whoever stole Mathew's ID has been present at all three murder scenes.'

'Can you go back to the Inspector?'

'Cooper, do you know how many people get murdered in London and it's boroughs every year? Too many. How many are victims of stabbings? Most of them. How many go unsolved? . . .'

'Too many?'

'Yeah, too many.'

But it's Jack, has to be. He's using a murdered man's ID. If not Inspector Harriott, then the Chief Inspector, the Superintendent?'

'It's not like the Court of Appeal, Cooper. Besides, it wouldn't matter whoever I spoke to. I could drop in on the Divisional Commander and he wouldn't buy it either. I've been told, officially, upstairs is not going for it. We have three drug related murders, tenuous links, officially that means it's not a serial killer. Can't blame them really. If the Press got hold of it they'd have to roll out half the Force on this. The resources alone . . .'

'But Sarge, we have three murders.'

' . . . and can't *prove* a link. It's all circumstantial when you put it under the light. Squatters move about, they interact. It's like a fucking club. The drawings on the walls, what do they prove? That someone was at two of the scenes, it doesn't prove who, or when. Sue has client confidentiality to worry about, and the twins are, well, would you want them as your star witnesses in a court of Law?'

Until we prove beyond doubt he's a serial killer, Jack is just a person of interest. We need evidence. That's what the Inspector will tell me, as passed down to him by the Chief, and all that reign mighty above them. I get it, he's got the AC on his back, and probably the Commissioner too. If the Press start running with the headline *serial killer stalks London*, it'll put them all under the spotlight. You and me especially. Which means heap loads of shit falling from high if we get it wrong.'

'So what then?'

'So what then? So we find him, that's what. We bring him in. He's not hiding, remember. That's why no-one's looking for him. But that works for us too, because he doesn't know that we're looking for him.'

Get Trigger's description out on the wire. Who knows, maybe we'll get lucky. Drop me at the Tube will you, I'm going home to take a shower. I need to think about where we go next with this.'

Five to the power of ten and follow the constant, mustn't let it out of my sight. See X through the crowd, there's a curtain of light. Find X . . . Find X. The charcoal covered hand scratched at the wall. It trembled one marking after the next.

You're here, there, I just can't see you, not yet. But I know, without any doubt, you're hiding in the Strings. Hiding . . . Or are you lost? Out there drifting amongst a googolplex of beauty; such beautiful Strings. A gift of vibration, of laceration, of devastation. And yet they hold us all together, forever . . . in perp-etude; ever since the Beginning.

Hmmmm, if only I couldn't hear them. I need to block them out. Out, out, out. It's so hard for me, over and over, the same old song. No, not a song, they're a chorus. Repetitive, repeating, over and over . . . I have to keep looking, searching, I know you're out there; hiding in the Strings. Each one as constant in the dark as it is in the light. None any different from the last; all copies of the ones that will come again. The epitome of emptiness before stuff tumbles in and gets in the way.

More scratching at the plaster. Symbols, faces . . . sums that don't add up.

You see, you see how they work. Can you hear the noise in the background. Just strings, and all that's attached.

A steady hand now, it draws an arc from one side of the wall to the other.

You can't stop it, the moon, as it drifts across the sky. Grates upon the heavens. Listen, listen, to the mountains as they grind a path slowly toward the sea. All pulled, or are they pushed, by Strings?

Latitude, longitude, is it up or down, round and round? In all places, at subsequent times, present past and future. Can't stop them, can't shut them

out. It's the vibrations, always humming; can't shut them out. Can't keep them quiet. Can't find the silence, X.

But it's in there, out there, it has to be somewhere. Follow the Constant, find the Constant. Carry the value above its mass. Move the knowledge around without the knowing, that it's waiting to be found.

'Trigger? Aww, you're muttering again. No, shhh . . . stay still sleepy head.'

She runs her hand through my hair. Each finger sends a message, more a feeling, a triumphant surge throughout my body. Assurance that things will be okay.

'Look at you, Baby Boy. So lovely and so kind, so gentle toward me. Sometimes when you sleep, I wonder. How bad will it be when I'm gone?'

'Don't say that.'

'Shhhh, I'm dying Trigger. I don't want to, and I'll fight to stay. I swear, I will. I don't want to go. I don't. But there are times when I think it would be kinder, so much kinder for us both. You and me. If we went together, don't you think? You and me, me and you. We'd step out into the void together.'

I nod. I understand, I think. The feeling of her fingers become sharper, colder, more scary. I'll tell her shall I? Tell her I know where we'd go. How sure I am that *He* would be there to greet us. Her and me. He'd let us both in.

But Jamie doesn't believe, and she'd probably get angry. I don't think she wants there to be any kind of life after life. Because then she would have to live again, and that's not what she wants.

'Shhh, go back to sleep. Things to do, remember? Problems to solve; have to find the answer. We have to find the answer.'

'Trigger, wake up Baby Boy. You're having bad dreams again.'

'Huh, Jamie?'

'Shhh, you were dreaming out loud. You sounded really frightened?'

'No, *I don't think so.* 'Did I?' *I don't remember.*

Whatever it was that disturbed me, her presence has startled it away. Now all I see is the soft light that reflects in Jamie's eyes.

'Did I disturb you?' I ask. 'I'm really sorry.'

'No, silly boy, I was already awake. I was watching you.'

'Why?'

'I like to watch you when you sleep, Trigger.'

She looks mischievous. What's she been up to?

'Move over.'

'What?'

'Move over, I want to come under; I want to lie with with you. Do you mind?'

Why? No, I mean yes, definitely yes. Why would I mind?

I can't pull the sleeping bag open fast enough. I'd offer her the World, but this small warm space is all I have. And my Jamie is about to fill it.

Her body slides in, close and intimate. Her face a mere breath away. I like this. I like it a lot. She does too, I can tell. Jamie looks content, happy.

'It's chilly out there,' she says. 'Warm me up, Trigger. I need you to hold me, is that all right? What's with the cheesy grin?'

Am I grinning?

'Trigger, are we good, you and I? I need us to be good. I couldn't bear it otherwise. No, shhh, don't speak, just nod. I want to say something. I don't say it enough, hardly ever.

Thank you. For putting up with me, I mean.'

'Is she trembling? Her hand, it's trembling.

'It's been a long time since I've been this close to anyone. It's really nice.'

I'm nodding. She's right, I'm good at it.

'You're warm.' I say. 'And you smell good.' She really does.

'I took a shower after you fell asleep. It's Chanel, from a drawer in the other bedroom. You like it?'

Oh yeah, I like.

Turn over, face the other way and close your eyes. I want to spoon you. Snuggle close and listen to your heart beat, until it stops.'

Sure, why not? I feel her head against my neck, her fingers slide down my back. She's moving, writhing almost. What's she doin . . . Hey, are you sliding out of your tee shirt? An arm and a leg dress over me, pull me snug. She wraps me like a silken onesie. Her breath sends a thousand ponies to stampede along my spine. Whoah, she's definitely wriggling out of something down below.

Oh God, she's taking off my t-shirt. I'll help. It's gone. She's moving herself gently up and down, pushing at me from behind. I've never felt Jamie in her naked form. She's so soft, so warm, so tender against me.

'Are you smiling?'

'Maybe. Yes.'

'Good, now turn around. I want you to be happy, Baby Boy. You and me, just the two of us; the way it should be.'

I agree with all my heart. You and me. We're through the looking glass. No-one can see us but ourselves. This is how I dreamt it would be. This is how . . . *Oh God, Jamie . . . what have you done?*

The wall, look at the wall. It's alive with her art strewn across its surface.

'You've been drawing whilst I was asleep. Why? What does it mean? What have you done?'

'It doesn't matter. Shhh, nothing matters. Trigger, what happens to you when I do this?'

What . . . ? Oh, wow.

My breath judders and my temperature steams above normal.

'What about this?' she asks.

Plenty is happening. Each touch sends my body deeper into thrill mode. I've lost the power of speech. All the blood has rushed from my head and is on the fast train south as four fingers drag their way up my thigh, and inward. If Jamie were a cat I would die happy as I felt her nails tear me apart.

'I want us to be lovers, Trigger. I've decided.'

Yes yes, it's what I want.

Oh my God, her hands, they're pulling away my discretion, and my legs are helping. I'm completely naked and exposed. My Universe has finally been aroused.

'Jamie, what's wrong? Where are you going?'

'Shhh, no, don't say anything. Just look at me.'

What, why? . . . Don't get out. Why are you getting dressed? I think I know why it is that ice melts now. But still, just to look at her like this. Like she's carved from marble by the greatest hands. *What did I do wrong?*

'Trigger, I want *us*, you know what I mean.'

Am I nodding like a dog again? I think I am. It's the only part of me that works now, all my rocket fuel has been expended. My engine has gone into limp mode. My disappointment will pass.

'I love you, Jamie.'

'I know, Baby Boy. I think I love you too. Why else would it hurt like this?'

Her breasts disappear as the dress falls to cover them. Those wonderful curves are denied me as she tugs at the hem. Jamie kneels, her hand a rhythmic motion through my hair. This time she hugs me from the outside, the quilted fabric denies contact once again. But I don't mind, not really. I'll take my Jamie any way I can. And besides, this is

nice, my eyes are still engaged with hers . . . not strictly true, they're looking beyond as she hugs me tight. I'm staring past her and wondering, what part of Jamie comes to life within those images on the wall.

Half an hour, no more, I think that's how long we've lain here. Not a word has been spoken. We lie in contentment, half wondering what to say. The other half suggesting we say nothing. I know she feels the same.

I should say something. *No, don't spoil the moment.* But it's too late as I open my mouth.

'Did you mean what you said.' I ask.

'Hmmm . . . what did I say?'

'You said yesterday, that you often dream of being somewhere else?'
Yes, closer, pull me closer. I said something good.

'Yes, I did. So long as it's with you.'

Really? That's all I need to know. Now I know what has to happen. God has sent me the means for our deliverance, why else would I have fallen on Carl's money? *Carl . . . that fucking dog.* I can still see Jen's face, the wonder and then the joy. Where did the money take her, I wonder?

What's left will take Jamie and me somewhere safe. What else could it be for? *Oh Jamie, it's a sign.* If we don't get out of London we're going to die. This is a chance to breath fresher air, somewhere else. The opportunity to leave everything that's happened behind. We have to get away before what she's done comes back to haunt us. Yes, we'll go, get away. Jamie deserves so much more than what we have here. And I'm the one who's going to give it to her.

'Trigger, where are you going?'

'I won't be long, I promise.' I step back and kiss her.

'But I don't want you to go. Stay here, snuggle.'

'Wait for me.' I say. 'I'll have a surprise for you when I get back. For both of us. Something big, I promise.'

'Really, I like surprises? And you won't be long.'

‘I promise.’ Don’t let the warmth out of that sleeping bag. *Kiss*. ‘I’ll be a couple of hours, *kiss*, no more. Things are going to change for us, starting now.’ *Kiss kiss*.

I’ve made a decision. I’m no longer a dreamer, I’m Jamie’s man of action.

Cooper's a nice lad, got a good career ahead of him. Am I being fair?
What to do, to do, to do? It's decision time, Raymond.

I know I'm right about this.

It's fucking obvious, surely?

There's a serial killer on the loose and he has to be stopped.

Adams left St James Street Station. Just ahead, up the steps, and he was there; New Scotland Yard.

Shit, is the Inspector right?

Am I guilty of making the crime fit the evidence? Behind those big, mildly intimidating doors, are a shed load of badges and brass. Paper pushers who worry daily about ending up, in the Daily.

I feel sick.

What am I doing?

No-one's gonna appreciate me doing this; going over the Inspector's head. Come on, think this through Raymond. Go through those doors and there's no going back. It's Cooper's career on the line as well as your own. He's like a puppy that boy, full of energy and ready to chase the ball. My ball. But someone has to listen, someone has to make this stop.

Adams, stop being a pussy and get in there.

* * *

Patience, Trigger. Be patient.

I promised Jamie I wouldn't be long. This train is the quickest way. Why does time slow down when I'm in a hurry? Can anyone see? I'm buzzing like a bee inside. And I've just realised I still have all that money, and the medicine. Oh shit, I should have left them with Jamie.

Look down at the floor, be patient.

I like the Underground trains. They have wonderful motion and an industrial sound. They are beasts of burden with their peaceful and rhythmic tones. Pit ponies, cursed to trudge back and forth through candle lit tunnels until their well oiled workings wear thin.

Though I'm not so sure the others in the carriage share my sentiments. Tired faces, mostly. They are silent drones paused in their daily lives. Most are standing, waiting, as the endless darkness of the Underground blurs on by. A means to an end, the journey inconvenient, until bright lights herald the promise of a station on this magical fantasy Line. I've never felt the train move so slowly. Keep your head down, no-one can see me.

The lights outside are a cue for my fellow travellers to stir. Men, women, and even a child. Check the watch, fold a paper, prepare for journey's end. Just because I've shut them out it doesn't mean I'm blind to their preparation, to their expectation, that the doors will hiss open and signal each of the drones to continue elsewhere. Carry on with their repetitive daily lives. It's out with the old and in with the new. One wave of bodies replaced by the next. Strange, how this is the only place where a crowd does not have an intimidating presence. It's a place of ignorance and anonymity. The carriage when it moves is like a tomb.

EMBANKMENT

This is my stop. My time to power up and filter back within the rest of the world. I feel awkward, terrified really as I take the short walk. One claustrophobic tunnel leads to another and then to steps which I climb. There's a mist that greets me when I walk outside. It hides the river as I cross the bridge. Back amongst "the smoking cancer that clogs the tarmac arteries of London", at least that's how Jamie see's them. "The latest dependancy to be gorged on by the Human Race." To me they're just cars. I wish I could see the world as Jamie does. Until then I'll stand and wait with the others. Left on pause until the car's true Master, the traffic light, changes to red.

I'm off the bridge and hurrying across the road to ascend the last few steps towards Journey's end, and I've made it. I'm here. My short pilgrimage is at an end as I enter Waterloo Station.

* * *

Well, that was a fucking waste of time.

Adams was furious. He'd taken a ride on the Tube to New Scotland Yard. Waited inside like a big tit. Just to be told the Deputy Commissioner was too busy to see him. *Ninety minutes, I waited ninety minutes.* All this way to leap-frog the chain of command and not even get an audience.

He knows. The bastard must know. If he doesn't see me, he has deniability if I'm right. They insist in seeing these deaths as completely unrelated. Why? Shit, shit shit shit, this will all come back on me.

'Take your heads out of your arses and open your eyes. . . . Oh, sorry love, didn't see you there.' *Too busy chastising my superiors.* He didn't see the woman with the quilted yellow pushchair. 'Hey, I said sorry.' *Yurgh, that's an ugly baby.*

So what now?

Coffee from the cake shop on his right seemed a good place to start. Maybe a donut, or two. Then a calming stroll through Westminster to clear his head. Decide what to do next.

'A grande latte, please. Make it wet. And stick an extra shot in, thanks.'

'That bad already?' the Barista asked.

'Worse,' Adams replied.

Drink coffee and give Cooper a call. Get him to pick me up and take me south of the river again. And stay there. I need to get this shit out of my head. Let it go. Issue a few parking fines, find some lost kittens.

'Thanks . . . where's the sugar? Of course it is, right in front of me. Thanks love.'

In eleven months time the last twenty-five years would be a memory. He was gonna drive Carol mad.

Damn it Raymond, is Teapot right? Is that what this is all about . . . a mid life fucking crisis? He was back onto the pavement. Sipping, chewing, sipping some more. He didn't want to think it, but . . . Is there something else, something more sinister lurking in my head? Uncle Charlie had dementia, and Granddad went a bit, funny. Uncle Charlie left the normal world and turned into a right fruitcake. Shit, did that heart attack do something, up here? Fucking funny how I'm seeing serial killers a month after sharing a bed with some hospital tubes.

'Oy, you lot. Bikes, pavement, get them off, now.'

Maybe I should spot-fine the buggy brigade over there for dropping litter. 'Nice example you're setting for the babies you're pushing. Oy, pick it up.'

Yeah, I'm watching you.

‘Yeah, and here’s one for you too love.’ His middle finger letting her know just how he felt. *And what’s with the bloody car horns? What is that old dear doing?*

‘Hey hey.’ Adams trotted toward the car. Spillage, hot, all over his hand. ‘Ow, ow.’ Hard tapping on window. ‘You can’t make a U-turn here, love. You’re holding all these cars up. You lot, stop honking your horns.’ The elderly woman driving didn’t look too impressed. He’d probably made it worse as the gear box ground out a harsh metallic shriek, the lever not quite gelling with its clutch pedal counterpart. ‘Oy, try putting the clutch down.’ Tap tapping on the window again. ‘Gear lever, clutch . . . don’t look at me like that, I’m not a bloody serial . . .’

She was old and fraught, poor dear, and he was definitely adding to her stress levels. The Force had probably been right, all those years ago, to deny his application to become a hostage negotiator.

Those bloody car horns.

‘Calm down, I’m dealing with this.’ He was threatening the motorists with his coffee, snapping a bite from his cake. ‘I’m dealing with . . . You know what, fuck this. You lot, I hope you get repetitive strain injury. And you . . . find yourself a fucking zimmer frame, you’ll get wherever much quicker.’ Adams walked away and scoffed what was left of the jam donut. ‘Fucking retards, the lot of you.’ *Sip, slurp.*

Parliament Square ahead. Take a right and make a B line for the tall building with an oversized clock. Go stare at the river beside the Commons. Take a long hard think about . . . well, everything.

No doubting that Adams was at a low tide; plenty of shit rising to the top. Not unlike the Thames below as he watched his empty coffee carton begin its journey out to sea.

I’m gonna take up golf. Yeah, walk for miles whilst freezing my nuts off; gauge some big deep holes in the local landscape. Fitness and anger management, all in one.

Much better to think of the future. To hell with the past. This city of London, the Met, both had taken too much of his life. And the heart at-tack, that was scary, it should be taken as a nudge in the right direction.

Hey, I’ll buy a motorbike. Haven’t had one of those for at least thirty years. And Sky Sports, that’s a must have. Yeah, I’m liking this; become a couch potato. Watch footie every weekend whilst sat on my arse, a beer in my hand.

I could bake cup cakes.

A wry smile crept across his lips.

Or, I could make Carol happy. Stop avoiding the subject. She's been hinting at it for years. Make the move out to Australia, be closer to the only family we've got left. Sell up and head for the sunshine and open space. Why not? Dad's house must be worth a fortune. Dad's house . . . it's my bloody house. I could work in security. Wear a hat with hanging corks. Learn to play the Didgeridoo. Sweet mother of . . . what was I thinking? Walking into New Scotland Yard like that? Teapot was right, I'm having a mid-life crisis.

Adams phone came out. He hit redial. Waited for the other end to answer.

'Sarge?'

'Cooper, where are you?'

'At the station. Sarge, the Inspector's just asked me to write a report on the last few days. You know, me and you, everything we've been up to. Sarge, he especially wants to know how you are. Have I noticed any odd behaviour. What do you want me to do?'

So it's come to that has it? All my years on the job . . . 'Cooper, just write it as you see it. Everything you've seen, heard, and done. He thinks I'm having a nervous breakdown.'

'That's not fair, Sarge.'

'Life rarely is. Look . . . Sam, finish up whatever you're doing, then come get me. I'm on Westminster Bridge. The clock end.'

'Westminster, what are you doing up there?'

'Just come and get me. I think I need to go home.' He hung up. Paused. Opened up a text box to Carol.

* * *

Waterloo is a cathedral. A vast cavern covered in steel and glass. A monument to travel and a testament to men with great vision.

Head for the sign 'Tickets' opposite platforms sixteen and seventeen. Join the queue, be patient. *I don't think I've ever had so much money in my pocket. I would give it all, and more, to make Jamie happy.*

Deep breath Trigger. You're taking her from the city to the coast. To Brighton. To a place where we can dance in the rain. Huh, I can't wait to see her face. Jamie and me, on the train to Brighton. We'll walk on the beach. Feed the gulls. I can learn to swim.

I don't think I've ever been so happy. Look at me, a spring in my step. It's like the Wonka factory, and I'm about to get my Golden Tickets.

We're leaving London behind to start afresh, me and Jamie. I can't wait to tell Jamie.

I'm going to hop skip and jump back to Soho.

'Hi, two tickets to Brighton, the fastest train you have.'

The lady in the window smiles, presses some buttons. She asks some questions. Tells me all I need to know. Then hands over tickets that will take us to the moon.

This is the best day. The greatest day. I'm floating as I leave the station. Head out for the bridge. I haven't felt like this since . . . I've never felt like this.

Hello London. Hello bridge. Hello Big Ben. The only thing missing now is to hear the bell chime. Don't you just love life, right here, right now. *I love you river.* I even love the passers by whose faces I infect with joy, though they probably think I'm crazy.

Yay, I love them all.

* * *

Adams turned away from the river. He stared straight down the bridge, toward Waterloo. He saw a young man at the other end, obviously thinking he was the star of the Sound of Music; the Westminster version.

Well, I'm glad someone's happy. Probably on drugs, most of London is. This one certainly is, quite a bounce in his step.

Where did it all go? I used to be that age once. Full of vigour and verve. Though my old man would have slapped me if I'd come home dressed like that. Probably think I'd joined the army. Dad hated the army. Hated what he saw fighting in the War.

There was something familiar about the young man. Even at that distance. Had they met?

Adams continued with the text he was trying to compose.

Hey Carol. I've been thinking, about where we are, maybe where we should b. Ur right, as usual. Mayb it's time for change. What say U grab some mags on ur way home and we'll take a look at Aussie, just for a hol, for now anyway. C what it's like. What dya think? Fancy some sunshine? xxxx :)

His thumb hovered over SEND.

That kid? Something about that kid?

Where was he, oh, right in front of him. Their eyes met. The young man gave a polite bow and Adams returned the smile, more a cheesy grin.

Do I know you? Christ he thinks he's Tigger from Winnie the . . . Something so familiar about him.

Tigger?

Blonde shoulder length hair, and that coat? It's a green army coat. Nah, must be hundreds of them in London. He stepped away from the rail for a better look. *Red gold and black. Deutschland? Fuck, no, he couldn't be . . . could he? Check him out, Ray. Step on it. Pull him over for a friendly a chat. Can't hurt.*

'Hey kid.' *Move yourself, but don't spook him.* 'Scuse me. Yeah, you. Okay, take it easy, I just want to ask you a couple of questions.' *Show him your warrant card.*

'Look, it's cool, I'm a Police officer. Just wondering if you could help me out.' *Calm down, son, you're not in any trouble.* 'I just want a chat' *Easy, Raymond. He's ready to bolt.* Adams had seen that look a hundred times. He stopped. Checked him out again. It was just an old army coat. Until he looked down.

Holy shit, his boots. He's got purple laces in his boots. 'Hey, just a quick question, no big deal . . .' *Fuck.* 'Somebody stop that kid.' *On your toes, Raymond. On your toes.*

Phone, hand, shit . . . text message? SEND.

Shit, shit the little bastard's quick. 'Get out of the way.' Too many people. 'Police officer, get out of the way. Someone stop that man.'

Run you lazy bastard, run.

'Cooper, get here now.' *Fuck, he's off the bridge.* 'Cooper, can you hear me?' *Christ, watch out for the cars. Kid's got a death wish.* 'Yeah fuck you too asshole. In pursuit of a murder suspect. Get out of the way. Get . . . get . . . out . . .' Too many people. *Move it Ray he's heading for the Tube.* A hundred yard dash across five lanes of moving vehicles using Adams as their target. *Move Raymond, move, do not lose sight of him.*

'Oh fuck, bollocks . . . go over the top, Ray.' *Bonnets are just as good as the pavement.* Screech, bump, slide. *Aargh, bumper, need to jump higher . . . that really, hurt.* He was up.

'Hey man, are you all right?'

Are you fucking stupid, of course I'm not.

'Phone, where's my phone?'

'Mister are you okay? Do you need an ambulance?'

'Police officer, I'm fine. No, get off. Someone stop that man.' *Come on Raymond. Owwww, owwww, it hurts. Run it off, no pain. Eye of the fucking tiger.* 'Excuse lady, may I? Thanks.'

'My phone, that man stole my phone.'

‘Police emergency.’ Run, dial, hop. ‘Cooper, I’m inside Portcullis House and heading down.’ *Down, it’s easier going down.* ‘I’m in pursuit, our man. Cooper, I’ve found him.’

‘Sarge, is that you. You’re not very clear?’

‘Westminster Tube, it’s Jack, Trigger, he’s heading for the train.’

Sarge, you’re not making much sense.

‘Police officer, coming through . . . move people, move. Cooper, how the hell do I stop a train?’

‘Slow down, Sarge. It’s a really bad signal. You’re where, doing what?’

Wow, this place is big, and shiny. Over the turnstiles, Ray. Get a move on.

‘It’s Tigg . . . Err, Trigger, I’ve found him.’ *For fuck’s sake too many people.* ‘Out of the way . . . He’s heading down to the Jubilee line. In pursuit. Need help.’ *Use the centre of the escalator, go on, slide, do it. Shit, shit.* ‘Sam, how do I stop a traaaaain?’

‘Transport Police, Sarge. Sarge . . . are you okay?’

Use the inertia to . . . oh, shit, ouch. Arrgh, must get up off the floor. Get up. ‘Just do it, Sam. Shut the track down. Send back-up, whatever’s in the area.’ *Ahhh, my leg.* ‘Send cars, every available copper, do it now. Sam, do it now.’

‘Okay, I’m making the call. Stay on the line, Sarge. I’ll need a description.’

The bastard smiled at me, Sam. He fucking smiled at me. Get his description out. Blue eyes, blonde hair.’ *He smiled at me.* ‘Looks like the kid in that band, Harry . . . whatisname? He’s wearing a green army coat, paratrooper I think. Blue denims and work boots. Sam, he’s got purple laces. He fucking smiled at me.’

‘Do you still have him in sight? I need to know which line he’s on.’

‘Don’t know, injured, trying to get a visual. Going down. Wait, I see him, there’s a sign . . . Jubilee, he’s on the Jubilee line. Bollocks, I’ve lost him. No wait, there he is. ’Scuse me. Come, out of the way.’ The escalator was filled with people impeding his progress. It was difficult to limp through them all. Going down again. ‘Oh shit, the train’s doors are closing. It’s leaving. Sam, I’ve lost visual. Sam, stop that bloody train.’ Adams walked to the platform’s edge as the last carriage was pulled by. ‘It’s the nine, err, nine fifty. It’s the nine fifty Sam, heading toward . . . where’s the train going? Sam, are you still there? *Sam?*’

‘I’m back, Sarge. I’ve sent an alert. It’ll take time, a few minutes. Sarge?’

‘Sam . . . Sam?’ Goddamn mobile shit. ‘Sam, can you hear me?’

I had him. Ten years ago I'd have had him. I need to sit, lie down. I need . . . Mr Redbull.

Adams sank to his knees. He took deep lungfuls of air as dozens of commuters stepped around him.

Raymond . . . you idiot; couldn't keep up. Little bastard. But he's real. At least now I know he's for real; they'll have to listen now. And did I just slide down that escalator? I have to tell Carol. Ha ha ha . . . no, don't tell Carol.

Adams lay back on the concrete staring at the ceiling. At all the faces that were unsure whether to offer him assistance. 'Hey, he's real. The little fucker's real.' *And it's official, I am definitely too old for this shit.*

'Young man, are you feeling okay?' A kind old face who actually paused to check he wasn't dying.

'Yeah, sure,' he replied. 'I'm fine lady. I just need a mug of coffee and a nap.'

* * *

First stop, Green Park, get out of the train and blend in. *Come on doors, open . . . open. Come on, open.* Here we go, follow the crowd. Take your jacket off, Trigger. Wrap it round your waist, head down, don't stand out. *Move. Get out, get out of here.*

Who was that man? Why did he chase me? I don't know him, how does he know me? Jump the turnstile, hurry them along. Slip between the gaps and get up to the street. Daylight, I see daylight. Make it to the doors and get outside. Cross the road and get away. I hear sirens? The Beasts are closing the entrance to the station.

Just keep walking.

What's going on? Blue flashing lights and Police cars, things are getting crazy behind me. Slamming doors, men shouting. Don't look back, never look back. What's happening, why are they stopping people as they leave the station? They can't be looking for me. Why? Keep walking, don't look back, no-one will see me in the park. Keep to the path by the trees.

What the Hell is going on? Who was that man?

The Police are acting like a sieve, they're trying to find someone. They're trying to find me? *But why?* Walk away, stay casual, get lost. Don't stop until you reach home.

When the Horsemen of the Apocalypse ride, the dead will rise up to inherit the Earth. And the world will be plunged into darkness.

Please God, don't let it be me you ask to turn out the lights.

That's the third siren in as many minutes. I can see it in their eyes, the ordinary people, they want to know what's going on. Well, me too.

That man who chased me, he recognised me, how? Why? Think, Trigger. Why would anyone be searching for me? What is it they think I've done?

Oh God, they know don't they. They know about the . . . They think it was me.

I can't stay here. Standing behind bins, hardly inconspicuous. But where to go when everyone is watching? The two men on the bench, the woman at the bus stop. That girl walking her dog. I see you, see you all, watching me. And now it's starting to rain, a steady chorus from the clouds. I daren't put my coat back on.

Keep me safe, Lord. Protect me from the clutch of the Beasts. I need help, Lord. Help me. Deliver me from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory . . . so much glory.

Yes, yes, I see the break in the clouds. I see *His* glory below. Up ahead, God's love . . . His direction, His welcoming arms. I see the sign that He sends, and it towers above all over others. The spire of the church rises above the roof tops, and it's obvious; I understand His will. The heavy rain that I walk through is His distraction to all.

The woman with her dog turns back. The cyclist keeps his head down. The men on the bench run back to wherever they came from. Passing cars only have eyes for the road.

I have to move, head toward the church. Run, Trigger. Run for Sanctuary.

It's truly a miracle as the rain stops falling and the sun burns away the grey as I enter through mighty wooden doors. I'm wet through but don't care, it's as if the sudden deluge has cleansed me of all sin. I have been Baptised again . . . I am protected by Him. I am blessed and inside the Narthex of the church.

But the Holy interior summons up the past in a sudden wave of unpleasant feeling, that make me realise that even here, especially here, I cannot hide from myself. Memories I'd considered well buried suddenly begin to resurface. This is the first time I've been inside a Church for many years. Perhaps the reasons I seek Sanctuary are not the ones from which God has decided to deliver me.

I step inside and see how pretty this place is. Some members of the congregation are clearly endowed with green fingers. Evidence of their passion surrounds me in tall urns and clay pots, from baskets hung from high vaulted rafters. An audience of flowers from nave to chancel that applaud my entry and welcome me in.

At the far end of the narrow church I see the brightest of the bright, the burden of all guilt, and the sword of God. A silver cross above the altar. I kiss my fingers, cross my chest, and whisper thanks. But this is not how I remember the House of God. Not the solemn hollow House my leaking memories now force me to resurrect. This House of God is warm, it's colourful; it welcomes me in.

On your knees, Trigger. Prostrate yourself below the sign of Christ. Give thanks for your deliverance, as He offers you salvation.

Outside another siren blasts past. One last scathing scream from the Beasts scratches down my spine. But here I'm safe. Or am I? Of course I am, this is Sanctuary. I've left the troubled world outside, unless . . . something I brought in with me? But what, I'm clean, unburdened. I would never . . . oh, except for this. The wallet I have inside my jacket, in my hands. What good are the wages of sin in the Palace of God? Get rid of it, Trigger.

But where?

There, the box for the poor beside the altar. *But I can't. What about Jamie, Brighton?* Could this be a test of faith? Leave behind everything that I've come in with? I can't. Not all of it. I have plans for us. We need to live when we get there. I'm fed up with living on fresh air, it's not enough.

A compromise then, half each? The House always takes a cut. A gift to help those far needier than us. Maybe they should cut a bigger hole . . .

‘Thank you, you’re so kind.’

Surely not?

No, the voice is from behind me. Not that crazy, not yet. It’s a voice of authority, dressed in black. Not the Beast, not the vengeance of the State. I’ve done the right thing then, as welcome relief pats my body down.

‘We’re collecting for Midbury Lodge, a shelter for the aged who develop mental health issues. Good people who have no-one to care for them. Every little helps, don’t you think.’

‘Yes.’

‘And what about the donator, can I offer him any assistance?’

Turn around, Trigger. Say hi to the Priest.

‘Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter. But the advantage of knowledge is this: Wisdom preserves those who have it.’

‘That’s a quote from the Old Testament isn’t it?’ he says. ‘Ecclesiastic? Haven’t heard that for a long time. Personally I find all that fire and brimstone a bit heavy reading. But I thank you for the donation. That was, *very generous*. Is there anything I should know about where it came from . . . no? Good, good. I’ll see it is well spent. And what about you, can the Church help you in return?’

It already has.

‘No,’ I say. ‘I’m not sure. It’s been a long time since I entered a house of worship.’

‘Well, you’re very welcome. Please, take a seat. God doesn’t expect his followers to spend all their time on their knees.’

I *think* that was a joke. Yes, I’m sure it was. Delivered with a kindly smile and a welcoming demeanour. But that’s not how I remember the priests. It wasn’t the black and collar brigade, they wore the Habit where my father sent me. It was not a place of warm dispositions, I don’t recall any welcoming smile.

I don’t want to remember. Please God, don’t make me remember.

But I don’t want to go back out there, not yet. Sit, take advantage of the Church’s hospitality.

‘Sometimes being somewhere else is a blessing,’ he says. ‘Truth is it’s nice to find someone new in here, especially midweek. The old girl is a bit empty these days. They don’t stampede the doors to get in any more. Most people that come just want some quiet time, the opportunity to think, and reflect. You should come and see us on Sundays, it’s our best day. The sound of the hymns as we try to lift the roof. It’s inspiring.’

You look tired. And that's the fourth time you've looked toward the door? I'm sorry, I'm intruding aren't I? If you want me to go, I understand. Please say, I won't take offence.'

'No . . . I'd like to talk, I think.'

'Well, that's one thing we Priests excel at, talking. We've been known to listen too. Would you like to take Confession?'

'No.' Unless . . . is that why I'm here, to confess? Am I a goose to honk out words in search of penance? No, I don't think so. I talk to God, not that He ever answers me. Not any more. But I understand, He's busy.

'Will He listen?' I ask.

'Yes, of course He will. How can we be saved if we remain in our sins?'

'I remember, he used to say that.'

'Who, who said that?'

This is a mistake, it has to be. Why would *He* want me to come in here. He already knows why I stopped coming. So what is it that He wants me to do here? He led me here for a reason. And what about the feelings, the images, they began the moment I entered the building. Memories of another life that are not welcome in my head. No, I don't want to remember. Don't make me remember.

‘May I ask your name?’ He asks.

‘Trigger.’ I answer.

‘You look troubled, Trigger. Here, let me help you up.’

He has my arm. Helping me rise. I thought it would burn, his hand. I don’t like it, he shouldn’t touch me.’

‘There, that’s better. Take a Pew. Tell me what brings you here, apart from your obvious generosity? Ah, if I had a pound for every shrug of the shoulders and shake of the head, we’d have a new roof by now.’

Another joke? This isn’t a joke.

‘I’m afraid, Father.’

‘Afraid? Of what?’

‘I’m a sinner, Father.’

‘Oh, is that all? We all sin, my boy, it’s what we do. Are you sure you don’t want Confession?’

‘Is that why I’m here?’ The shine of the Crucifix above the altar is mesmerising; somewhat blinding from the light through the window. Can’t he see it? The air is so fresh and sweet, scented with flowers. Is this what Heaven is like? ‘Confession, is that what God has sent me here to do?’

‘I don’t know, but God welcomes *all* those who repent. “Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained.” John, 20:22-23.’

‘Yes, I remember. Confession is the Sacrament of Penance. It’s been a long time since I last repented.’

‘Are you afraid, Trigger? Are you so sinful that you cannot ask for forgiveness? In God, there is always hope of salvation.’

‘What about damnation?’

‘Why would God damn you, Trigger, what have you done to warrant such feelings?’

Tell him. Open your mouth and speak the words. The soldiers of Babylon will never stop hunting me unless I tell the truth. ‘I keep a secret, Father. It’s a terrible secret, about the sins of someone dear.’

‘Can’t *they* come and Repent.’

‘She doesn’t believe. I have to accept the burden for her.’

‘Do you love her?’

‘Oh yes, Father, with all my heart.’

‘I can see that.’

‘And I pray for her all the time, but He doesn’t listen.’

‘God always listens.’

‘Then why won’t He help?’

‘It doesn’t work like that, Trigger. Some things God must leave to Man. *He* can only offer us the path. What direction we take, well . . . we must find strength through faith. Maybe it was God’s hand that brought you here today. Why do you keep looking at the door? Are you hiding from someone. I heard the sirens outside. Are the Police looking for you?’

‘Not for me, Father. I am but a vessel for them to find another fish. I am the Chalice of Guilt.’

‘Then unburden yourself. Let Christ absolve you of your sins and hers. You’ll sleep better at night if you do.’

He’s right. I want to, I do. But I can’t. I daren’t say what it is that she’s done. I’m just as guilty for sharing her secret. For keeping it to myself. *No, I can’t. I won’t be the one, I’m not like Judas.* I love her more than *he* loved Christ.

And what about you, Priest? Are you like those others? You don’t look like them, you’re younger, but you wear the same cloth, the same uniform.

‘Please, I think I just want to be left alone.’

‘Of course, sorry. But if you want to talk. My door, it’s just through there. It’s always open.’

It was always open back then too.

This is wrong, I was wrong to come here. This is a mistake. You hear me God, this is a mistake. Leave now Trigger, hide somewhere else.

The door feels so much heavier to open on the way out. And it’s raining again, harder this time. No people outside, just cars splashing by. I’ve never seen the sky that shade of grey before. Is God angry with me

for leaving? Is He angry with me for staying silent? God saw fit to bring me here and now He wants me to stay.

‘You’ll get wet if you go outside.’

Have you sent this Priest to absolve me, is that it? I won’t tell him what she’s done. I won’t. Please God, I can’t.

‘Would a cup of tea help? It helps me. Trigger, please stay. If not for Confession, then a chat? That was a very large donation. Let me tell you about Midbury Lodge, the charity where the money will go.’

Sweet and strong in a cup made of bone china, and a biscuit too. It seems odd to eat off a plate. Sometimes I think that Jamie and I live like animals. *Say something to the Priest . . . anything.*

‘Do you believe in Angels?’ I ask him.

‘Yes, yes I do.’

‘That they watch over us?’

‘Some do, yes.’

‘I don’t. Not any more.’

‘Is that because you’ve never seen one?’

‘Jamie’s dying.’ Shit, it just came out. It’s none of his business.

‘Jamie, is that her name?’

‘Yes. We’re lovers.’

‘That’s good, we all need someone. And I’m very sorry to hear she’s ill. It’s a hard thing to accept, when someone we love is going to leave us. Do you think that the Angels should intervene; is that why you don’t believe in them?’

‘They should help her.’

‘They will, when the time comes. I’m sure of it. Does Jamie have faith . . . no? It doesn’t really matter, God will still welcome her if she repents at the end.

Trigger, I believe that life was created on Earth by God. We were a baby, left in a basket without a note to tell us who, or what we are. *He* allowed us to make our own minds up. He gave us curiosity so we could strive for knowledge, and compassion to understand the morality of what our lives mean. I believe that one day, when we are ready, we will leave here and journey back to Eden, to find *Him*.

I like to think that Mankind is still a work in progress. It gives me hope for us. Trigger, if Jamie repents her sins, He *will* accept her.’

‘I hope so, Father.’

‘John 10:10, “I came so that everyone would have life, and have it in the fullest.” They were Jesus’ words. It’s such a simple thing to believe in

the Lord, and yet we struggle with it daily. He created us in His own image, so that we could know *Him* personally. We take a look in the mirror and see Him every day.

See yourself for who you are, Trigger. You are Him. That's what faith is all about.'

You talk a lot, Priest.

'Bring Jamie here, to us. If she's ill we can find help, help for both of you.'

'She won't come.' This tea is invigorating, warm and stirring. I shouldn't have told him about Jamie. She doesn't believe, she won't come. *Stop talking.*

'Trigger. Are you hiding from something, from someone?'

'No.'

'Then you're in the minority. People come to the Church for Sanctuary, as well as for guidance. But you can't hide from yourself, Trigger. You can't . . . Trigger?'

Stop talking, Priest. I shouldn't have come in here, listen to him. *Blah blah blah.* I love God, I don't need you to tell me who He is. *Blah blah.* I understand God. It's people like you, who try to sell *Him* that I don't understand. You, the Christians, and the Muslims, everyone. You're all the same. There's always a price to pay, to you, the middle men, something that *every* church wants in return. It's a new roof, or a bomb strapped to my vest. It's Angels or Virgins that wait for me in Heaven, is that it? Well, there are no Angels, it's a lie. I just want to talk to *Him*. I want *Him* to listen.

'Trigger, are you all right?'

'I don't know.' *He brought me here.* 'Don't touch my hand.'

'I'm sorry, it's just, you look so troubled.'

Is it that obvious?

There was someone, a long time ago, he used to touch me . . . *Please, I don't want to remember, I won't remember.* I'm not here to confess. *I just want Sanctuary.*

'Can God see me, Father? Does He want to?'

'Yes, of course He does.'

'And He hears me, yes?'

'Yes, He hears you. We are all important to Him.'

'Then why does He ignore me? If I am so important, why doesn't He answer my prayers?'

Why won't He help Jamie?

‘Prayer is only the first step, Trigger. There are many ways to know God.’

Well, it’s all I’ve got, and He doesn’t listen. Yes He does, yes He does. God is waiting, God is watching. I’m here to surrender myself, all of me. That’s what *they* said. So I did. Do I have to surrender myself now? Is that why I’m here? ‘God is the power, the Kingdom and the glory . . .’

‘Trigger, are you all right? Please, sit down.’

What are you doing? Don’t touch me, Priest.

‘Trigger, you’re safe here. Please, calm yourself; let me help you. Will it help if we pray?’

Yes, to touch God I must allow His agents on Earth to touch me. I remember, Father Deacon, he taught me that. Over and over. All those years of teaching me that.’

‘Trigger, are you all right?’

I remember, how *Deacon* gave me God’s love. The Priest’s affection, so why did it always make me cry. *This isn’t real*. I left there, I ran away, this house is different. It’s warm not cold. This house is small, friendly, and carries the scent of nature. It’s not full of empty halls where voices carry into the darkness. I can still hear the bell, as if it were here next to me. I remember it’s torturous tone, how the iron tongue lashed out and ruled my life, as harshly as its brother the rod of cane.

When that sweet dear woman, my mother was gone, *he* left me there. Hand in hand with Father Deacon I watched him walk away. I was a child of six, or was it seven. Everything seemed so big back then, so full of empty spaces, where the shadows crawl.

‘Learn the book, understand its words . . . put God in your heart.’

Deacon’s God was from the Old Testament.

‘Without God in the world there is horror.’

He was right. But what good is a God who refuses to listen?

‘Come in, shut the door. Shhh. Come, sit here on my knee. We’ll say prayers together. In God we trust. For He will provide, and He will endure. He will lead us into the light. Amen.’

It started with prayer. He would hold my hand. In time another Father, Deacon, would spin my world around.

‘There’s no need for Earthly garment, here, let me unburden you. You don’t need earthly cloth when you’re with me,’ he said. At first he would stare and admire me. Talk about my body. Help me to understand I was the image of God.

‘So soft, so tender . . . so young.’ He would say. ‘Let me gaze upon your body. Man is golden, did you know that? His form is blessed by God. It’s a masterpiece of Nature in which we should marvel, bow, and revere. Like the greatest sculptures of antiquity, we should admire the prowess of the Male form. Feel it’s shape and curves, and know that God has blessed us. Like the Greeks and the Romans before us we should worship at the temple of Man. Oh that my hands could immortalise you in marble.’

I believed him. I came to enjoy his gaze. Until the day he wanted more than to look, he wanted to study.

‘You’re such a good boy, let me touch what God has provided. Come, join me. Here, lay yourself next to me. Are you a good Christian boy? Of course you are. Do you love the scriptures? Of course you do. Jesus tells us “to love our fellow man.”’

I felt his finger run like water down my spine for the first time. It tickled my thigh, but not with laughter, no, more ominous than that; more secretive and seductive. I was wide eyed and compliant, trusting, and then frozen as he whispered carnal lusting in my ear. It was calloused hands that turned me over on my side. Hard lips that pecked like a Raven’s beak from my shoulder to my waist. A wet tongue that harvested what was innocent and pure.

I forget now how many times I stared at that crucifix on the wall. How many times I asked myself, *does God really love me?*

I never understood why it didn’t burst into flames.

‘Trigger . . . Trigger, can you hear me?’

Stop clicking your fingers, I’m fine.

‘Please, can I have another biscuit with my tea?’

‘Adams, you’re wanted in here, now.’

Inspector Marriott left the glass door ajar. Adams took a deep breath.

‘Teapot sounds really pissed off.’

‘Good luck, Sarge,’ said Cooper.

‘Thanks Sam, sure you don’t want to come with . . . no, fair enough. Hey, you might want to bring the mop and bucket when they’re done with me.’ That’s when he noticed seven other officers in uniform watching. *So this is what a goldfish feels like.* ‘All right boys get on with some work.’ *I’m going in.*

‘Close the door, Adams.’

‘Yes sir.’ *Teapot sir.*

‘You know Deputy Commissioner Kruiise.’

Of course I fucking don’t

‘No sir, I haven’t had the pleasure.’

Two white shirts, shiny buttons, a lot of braid. But no black caps; surely that was a good sign. But at odds with the tingly wave of intimidation that ran down his spine. The Deputy Commissioner was a heavy-weight; the Political Police, and staring at Adams from behind the table.

I’m so sorry Carol, I’ve fucked up. They want my job.

‘Take a seat, Adams.’

‘Yes sir.’ *Wow, Deputy Commissioner Kruiise, taking an interest in me. I’ve never even seen him up close. I must be in the shit. Only a photo shoot and a good hanging brings ‘Trump’ down from the Ivory Tower. Is that a hair piece on his head?*

‘I am at a loss, Adams. The Deputy Commissioner here is beside himself. What the Hell did you think you were doing?’

‘Sir, I . . .’

‘That was rhetorical, Adams, you’ll have a chance to speak. I think The Deputy Commissioner has something to say. Sir . . .’

Deputy Commissioner Kruse. The Met’s very own clone of Donald Trump. The man was lean, and mean looking. The Commissioner’s hatchet man. He had the look of a man who hadn’t enjoyed his last meal. The silence in the room now could only be taken as ominous.

Trump spoke, softly, and that only made the tension for Adams worse.

‘You do realise the trouble you’ve caused the Met, Sergeant? You stopped a Tube line for nearly forty minutes. Interrupted other Met officers in their duties. Had half the Force checking passengers at over a dozen stations. Not to mention impeding the public in their day to day activities.’ Another pause. And then his arms folded, chin lowered, his gaze hardened. ‘The press office has been inundated with calls from reporters wanting to know why? What should I tell them?’

Was that a question, or rhetorical? Ray wasn’t sure.

‘And to think the Inspector and I were worried about headlines concerning a serial killer. No, I’ve seen tomorrow’s headlines, Adams. The Press think there’s a terrorist cell at large. That an attack was imminent on the Underground, but no arrests were made.’ He sat forward. ‘Have you gone completely fucking mad?’

That was a question, yes, definitely a question?

‘Sirs, I saw our man get on that train. I was in pursuit.’

‘Our man? Excuse me Deputy Commissioner.’ Teapot’s glasses came off. ‘Adams, there is no, *our man*. I thought I made myself perfectly clear on that.’

‘I have three bodies now, sir. And evidence that the suspect was present at all the scenes. He’s been using the first victim’s identity for the last eighteen months. Look, sirs, I have independent witnesses. And we’ve established a *physical link* between the murders.’

‘*We?* There is no *we*. You’re not dragging the Met down with you on this.’

‘*We*, sir, have three murders on the book. And I’ll bet my pension that we’ll find more.’

‘I think you may have done that on the Tube yesterday, Adams.’ Teapot took a breath. ‘So, the man you say was on the train, that no-one else has seen. You’re telling us that you have undeniable proof that he’s a serial killer?’

That was a question? NO, that was *the* question. That tingly feeling returned.

‘Err, no, not definitive evidence, no sir.’ *Yep, that’s the look. The one that wants my head.*

‘Not definitive? Then how about beyond reasonable doubt? Do you have evidence beyond reasonable doubt that the suspect you say, who was on that train, is a serial killer?’

‘It’s a bit more complicated. I think that, Trigger, is protecting someone else that is.’

‘Oh for fuck’s sake, are you saying that we have two serial killers now?’

‘No sir, just one. It’s a girl, Trigger’s partner. All I have is her name, Jamie. That’s why I called up Transport. Both Trigger and Jamie are present at all the crime scenes, but I think it’s the girl who draws the pictures. And a witness places a big knife in her bag.’

‘So let me clarify this,’ said Trump. ‘You have a woman you’ve never seen, with an alleged knife in her purse, who likes to draw pictures? You’re telling me that Bonny and Clyde are on the loose in the streets of London with a big knife, is that it?’

‘Sir, I have . . .’

‘You’re out of order, Adams. Excuse me again, Deputy Commissioner. Did I or did I not send everything you have to the murder teams? Not one, mind, but two teams, and are they or are they not following up on those leads? Well?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘And for the record, Adams, what were you doing in Westminster this morning? Bit off our patch isn’t it?’

Shit, he knows. Teapot was going red in the face, he hadn’t seen that before. *Say something Raymond. Anything?*

‘He has purple shoe laces,’ he said. ‘The witnesses at both the latter scenes describe a young man, wearing a German military coat, with purple laces . . .’

‘So now we’re being invaded by the Germans. For goodness sake I’ve heard enough. Deputy Commissioner, I think we’re agreed on a course of action.’ The DC nodded. ‘Adams, you’re on sick-leave as of now, pending a full investigation into your recent conduct. You’ll also submit yourself to a Met counsellor for psychological review within four days. Am I clear? You can go now.’

‘Sick Leave? That’s a joke, right? Sir, Deputy Commissioner, what’s going on here? Why isn’t anyone moving forward with this? The evidence . . .?’

'Is all *circumstantial* and being looked at by experienced officers. You've caused a shit storm with the press, Adams. The Home Secretary is on the prowl and you've put us all in his headlamps. No Sergeant,' said Teapot, 'you're done here.'

'This is bollocks, sir. Is there something going on here that I don't know about?'

'Is that paranoia, Adams? Something else you want to throw in the ring. A good conspiracy theory, is that your defence? And I especially don't like the tone you're using toward me. Say another fucking word and I'll have you suspended. Leave the station immediately. Go home. Do not go near your desk as you leave. Do not talk to any of your colleagues as you pass. You will not involve yourself with this case, or any other, personally or by proxy, am I clear? And nor will you contact the press, or any of it's representatives, whether related to you or not. Not if you value your pension. Now, have I made myself *abundantly clear* this time?'

Fuck . . . fuck . . . bollocks.

'Yes sir, crystal clear.'

'Now get out, Adams. And send Cooper in before you leave.'

Thought I wasn't allowed to talk to anyone, sir?

'Sir, Cooper, he was just doing his job. I accept full responsibility for . . .

'Fuck off Raymond. This is none of your business now.'

'Yes sir.'

Carol, I'd like you to understand that none of this was my fault. I was just doing my job. A little over zealous, perhaps? Making decisions above my pay grade, granted. And yes, Teapot knows I was going to go over his head.

No, I haven't got the sack. No, I haven't damaged the Met's image, not yet. I've been sent to the naughty boys' corner on full pay. No, they can't take my pension.

They can't can they?

But hey, I have brochures on Down Under, I know how much it means to you, and to me too . . . *more important than ever now.*

And look, I've brought you flowers.

Shit, where can I get flowers?

Aww, shit, she's gonna explode. Do the thing with her eyes, and spend all night sighing. How do I explain that I'm right about this.

Adams' phone started to buzz.

Don't tell me some bastard's told her already?

"Hi Carol. Just phoning to see how Raymond's doing. What, you haven't heard yet. Well, get a load of this . . ."

'Oh, hi Sam. You really shouldn't be phoning me. What's up?'

'Just thought you'd want to know, I've backtracked from the bridge and had a word with the boys in Transport. Guess who's got Trigger on camera at Waterloo, purple laces and all.'

Adams hit the brakes and yanked the car across the road. He pulled into a disabled parking bay.

'You're shitting me?'

'No Sarge. Transport have him buying tickets on CCTV. We're running through the computer now trying to match purchases with the time stamp.'

'Sam, I love you, you do know that. That is truly good work. But shouldn't you be telling Teapot this?'

'What, so he can put me on sick-leave as well. No thanks. I'm looking at Trigger now. We've got him, Sarge, plain as day on camera.'

'Nice one, Sam.' *Fucking yes.* 'Keep me posted will you. I need to go see someone. See if I can fill in some more of this bloody hole I've just dug for myself.'

The sign wasn't much to look at. The architecture it was attached to symbolised everything about the Seventies that modern day London wanted to knock down.

God, I hope Harvey's on duty today. No answer from his phone as Adams walked up to reception. *Be grateful Inspector Teapot didn't ask for your warrant card back.*

One quick flash of the card and Adams was through. He took the lift to the second floor. Then stepped out to see a familiar face.

'Well, well, it's Sergeant Adams.' A tall burly officer approached. Square jawed, brown eyed, wearing Blues. A night stick and pepper spray hung ready. Freeman's hand was extended, and shook.

'Sergeant Freeman, look at you with the full Batman kit. Off to do some moonlighting as a stripper, are we?'

'The money would be better.'

'You're not going to arrest me are you?'

'Ha ha ha, I should do. What a fucking knob-head.'

'Seriously . . . you've heard already?'

'Ray Adams, you are the official pin up boy of the Force. Half the coppers in London are talking about you. The other half will catch up when the tabloids get delivered in the morning. They're calling you Sergeant Rock . . . no wait, it rhymed with Rock.'

'Very funny. They're not, are they?'

'Oh yeah, you're the Force's new sweetheart. The man of the moment. I hear there's a pool been started. 100-1 you're the new Commissioner when Burnside retires.'

'Oh really? So what would I win for a quid?'

'Probably something that rhymes with, the rack.'

‘That’s encouraging. Look, Harvey, I need a *really* big favour.’

‘Hmm, that young nosed PC of yours has already phoned me. Advance *Knob-head alert*. Does Carol know yet?’

‘Leave it out, I only got put on notice a couple of hours ago. I can’t believe you know already.’

‘Ray, you put half of London on pause. We’re the Transport Police, remember.’

It was good to see a friendly face. Harvey and Raymond had a lot of history. Five years working together until Harvey swapped sides. Promotion was part of the offer to lure him over. But they’d kept in touch. The wives were besties after all.

‘So where is everyone?’ asked Adams.

The floor-plan resembled telesales. Everyone had a space, and a slither of partition to hide their head behind. ‘Is there an office party? Weren’t you invited?’

‘I wouldn’t be here if there was a party somewhere else. No, the Chief Superintendent’s visiting for a, *pep talk*. You’d think the Queen was coming the way we all have to shine our shoes. But lucky for you he is because you’re probably on a wanted poster by now.

Come on, Ray. I’ve got what you want over here, and don’t lift your head up if anyone comes in.’

Freeman mimicked a zip across his lips as led Adams to a small office. Three foot of desk, somewhat claustrophobic. A monitor and keyboard. Harvey began to type.

‘This is Waterloo station at eight twelve this morning. The view is from the south end.’ He turned the monitor around. ‘Young man, army surplus . . . purple laces. Is this the man you were chasing?’

‘Cooper, you beauty. Yeah, that’s him. What’s he doing there?’

‘In about three minutes he’ll buy tickets.’ *Tap tap*. ‘This is the view from the coffee shop opposite platform sixteen. Eight fifteen, he waits in the queue like a good boy. Then buys two tickets.’

‘Do you know where to?’

‘Brighton.’

‘Brighton?’

‘Purple laces bought two tickets to Brighton, leaving Monday at eight fifty am.’

‘From Waterloo?’

‘No, he’d have to change trains from Waterloo. He’s going direct from Victoria.’

‘So we know he’ll be at Victoria Station on Monday morning. Harvey, you may have saved my career.’

‘What career, you’re retiring in a few months.’

‘I’ve been a bloody good copper, Harvey. I don’t want it to end like this. I’m right about this.’ *I have to be.* ‘I’m gonna wait for him in Victoria. For him, and his girlfriend.’

‘Your funeral, Ray. But there is another alternative. Let this blow over and come and work for us. The BTP needs experienced idiots like you.’

‘If it’s idiots you need, I’d make Superintendent in a month. Thanks Harvey, but no. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking today. The heart attack, the faith and support shown by my glorious superiors. Carol’s right. We should give Aussie a try.’

‘Gonna share shrimp with the sister-in-law and her kids eh?’

‘Yeah, I think so. But I need to sort this first. I don’t think I could live with myself if I didn’t.’

‘Then I have something else that might help the cause. Take a look, at this. *Tap tap.* We’re outside the north exit at Waterloo. See the cab approaching? It stops, pauses, and out comes your man.’

‘You’re joking? Do you have the cab’s plate?’

‘Would that be the one I’ve written down on this piece of paper here? The phone number I’ve written underneath is the cab company. I expect you’ll want to give them a ring, find out where they picked up your serial killer.’

‘Harvey . . .

‘Yeah, I know. Say hi to Carol for me.’

Why was that man chasing me, I don't know him? Is it because of Jamie? Does somebody know? No, how can that be, it's not possible; and yet he called out to me by name? And now the police are everywhere.

Trigger dropped to his knees.

Lord, I don't care what happens to me, I'm not important. Please, I beg you, give me time with Jamie. She's got no-one else to watch over her. She's ill, confused. She hasn't got long. If I'm not back she'll panic; I don't want anyone to get hurt.

Lord? . . . Lord? Say something, please; show me a sign . . . anything?

Always silence.

My mother prayed and you didn't help her. Why? Is she with you, Lord? I hope so, I miss so much. Perhaps her faith wasn't strong enough. But I have faith, Lord. I do, in you, and in Jamie. I know that when the time comes you'll hold out your hand and show her the way. Take her to your heart, Lord. Show us both your Kingdom. I know you will. I don't doubt it, not really. Please, I just want to know for sure.

The Priest is wondering why I've been here all day. I think he suspects the Police are looking for *me*. He brings me tea, and offers Confession. Is that why I'm here, Lord, to Confess? Well, I won't do it. I won't. I don't need a Priest to listen. I need to know that You're listening.

He's kind, I know. But I don't want a Priest's help. You know why. There's a bond between You and me, and *his kind* are not a part of that, not anymore. *Stop it, stop it.* Round and round, up here in my head. I'm struggling, Lord. But you know that. I can't hide it from You, like I do from the Priest.

'I don't matter, Lord. I just want to know, for sure, that Jamie will be good, with you?' *I need to know.* 'Just give me a sign, a word, anything . . . please.'

No?

For all the praying, the believing, I'm not *feeling* too much in return, Lord. I know, I know, it's not supposed to be easy, but look at me. Look at me, Lord. I'm fucked up. I'm a mess. I'm going round in circles with no way out. When I take my medicine I'm strong, I can cope, I can. I look forward to tomorrow and I swear it will be different next time. But it never is, tomorrow always comes and it's no different to today.' *No different.* 'I crawl out of my pit and I beg borrow, and steal. Just to feel strong again. So I can look tomorrow in the face one more time. Lord, if it wasn't for Jamie.'

I'm starting to shake. Watery eyes, clammy skin. I've been here too long. Tell me, tell me she'll be all right. *Please . . .*

'Just tell me.'

He's back. I can see you, Priest. Always in the background, a vulture hovering, waiting for me to crack. It's what your kind does, wait, until you know that I have nowhere else to go, nowhere else to turn. And when there is nothing left, that's when you strike; when you offer your fables and stories. Make promises in His name that you can never keep. And when we start to listen, that's when you come in for the kill; make an offer that no-one can refuse. *Absolution.* But only on the Church's terms. Well, not me, not this time. I'd rather die than come back. Father Deacon said that, "Confession would redeem me". *That's what he said . . .*

"Confession, my son, it's your only path to absolution. Through me, He will listen."

But it didn't change a thing, not a damn thing. So stop staring at me. Please, stop staring.

Trigger whispered. Barely uttered the words so no-one could hear.

'I'm tired, Lord. Tell me what to do. Have I sunk so low that even you turn your back? The Priest says that You listen to everyone. Is that true, because I don't know anymore. I feel abandoned. It's getting harder to find my feet, to walk upright and go on. It's more difficult to breathe. I swear, if I didn't have Jamie, sweet wonderful Jamie, I don't know what I'd do. And the time's coming when she won't be here . . .

But you know all this, don't you. So is this why I'm here, to acknowledge the truth? Is that it? Because I won't do it. It's not her fault. She doesn't mean to do those things . . .' *She's ill.*

'So what would you do if I reached up and took the crucifix. The Priest thinks I want to steal it. Probably sell it to buy drugs. If I did, would that get your attention? Would it unleash some fire and brimstone; a savage burst of flames? Would it? At least then I'd know. I'd

have an answer. I'd take that as a sign.' *The priest's back.* He's light of foot that one. Clever like a fox. He's judged me vulnerable. He'll come baring the Book and Godly words. *He's ready to strike.*

'Trigger, it's dark outside. Do you have a place to stay?'

'Yes, yes I have somewhere. Thank you.'

But what's out there waiting for me? Do the Beast's camp outside. Of course they do. They wait to bring tomorrow. But still, the sound of horns has passed. The chariots of blue light have gone. *So what to do?* Probably best to wait a bit longer, just in case. The truth is I'm frightened. What if that man is outside? What if he waits for me to leave Sanctuary.

Is God really that cruel?

'I'll have to lock the doors, Trigger. We shut up shop early in the winter. Switch off the heating and turn down the lights. It's the Bishop's orders, so we can save what we can. But you're welcome to stay a while longer.

Can I ask, Trigger. What's she like this Jamie of yours. You speak so fondly of her. Tell me about her. Like how you met. Trigger, have I said something wrong?'

'Not really. Why d'you want to know?'

'Jamie's important to you, I just thought . . . sorry.'

He's different, this priest. Annoying but sincere. It's jab and repost, foray and retreat with his words. And now he's found my weakness, my Achilles heel. I'm like a tom-bola inside my skin all tingly and excited. I'm a bud bathed in sunshine awaiting an excuse to burst, to tell the world about Jamie. But the truth is, I can't. I can never tell what she's done.

'She's older than me.' I say.

'Love crosses many boundaries, age is hardly cause to whisper these days. How old is she? No . . . that's okay. I'm fifty-eight, myself. Forty years in the Church. Where does all that time go? It's important that we share it with someone we love, don't you think?'

'Jamie's nearly twice my age.' *Where's the harm in talking.* 'I'm twenty, in March.'

'Goodness, I thought you were older. So young to be living so . . . well, I'm happy for you both. We all need someone in our lives. For me it's always been the Church, and God. Is Jamie pretty? I bet she is. Yes, I can tell just by looking at your face. You're starting to glow.'

I am? That's how it is when I think of her.

‘She has long hair, the colour of night. She wants to dye it blonde, but I’m not so sure. I think that people will want to look at her more than they do already.’

‘So she’s very pretty.’

‘And slim. I try to get her to eat more, but you know how girls are.’

‘Yes, I do, though I think fast food is trying to change that. Did you meet in London?’

‘Yes.’

‘A lot of people do. It’s the bright lights that draw most people here. It was inner city poverty that attracted me. I wanted to help. And you, where do you hale from. You don’t sound like a Londoner.’

I shake my head.

‘So where do you and Jamie find each other, in London?’

Yes, London. Where did we meet? I can’t remember. It seems a lifetime ago. I remember white walls, and too much noise. There were other people.

‘It was a gallery?’ I say. ‘I think we met at a gallery. She’s an artist, did I mention that? She was the centre of the room, the focus of all attention. I knew she was someone special the moment our eyes met.’

‘How lovely. So you, you’re an artist too?’

‘My father thinks so. He sent me away to learn. He doesn’t like to have me around. I don’t like him. Always telling me what to do. Always insisting that I do it better than everyone else. He sent my mother away.’

‘So your parents are divorced?’

‘I think so, yes.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. Marriage used to be a union for life. But times change. Tell me about her, Jamie.’

‘She caused quite a stir, had everyone’s attention. But she chose me.’

‘Good, I’m glad, for both of you.’

‘We’re different, Father, but both the same. Neither of us fit in. That’s why I’m taking Jamie away. Somewhere that we can be together and leave the past behind. We’re going to picnic in the shade of a pier, and make castles out of sand. We’ll watch the sun rise and set on a blue horizon, and breathe salt air. We have each other, Father. Maybe we’ll have a happy ending.’

‘But you said she was ill. Trigger, I don’t mean to pry . . .’

‘Then don’t. It’s not something I want to talk about. There’s nothing anyone can do.’

‘Then I’m truly sorry, for you both. Let’s pray for her.’

'I spend hours on my knees every day, Father. Nothing has changed.'
Why doesn't He answer my prayers? 'Father, are we alone here?'

'Yes, it's been a quiet day, there's no-one else here now.'

'No, I mean, *here*. Do you think God has other children, *out there*?'

'Ahh, I don't know. I suppose it's possible.'

'Is that *why*? Is He too busy out there to be *here* with us?'

'Trigger, is this a crisis of faith? Is that why you're here?'

'I want to know that He'll forgive her, Father. I need to know that He will welcome Jamie, at the end.'

'But you said you believed in God.'

'I do.'

'But she doesn't, is that it? Trigger, this is His Universe; His purpose for us all. God will welcome every one of us when the time comes. He will end the darkness and light our way, and when we stand at the Gates of St Peter, all that He will ask of us is that we repent our sins. There *will* be a place for you, and for Jamie, I'm certain of it.'

'But how do you know, for sure?'

'How? Because I have faith. Because I trust in God.'

'In spite of everything, out there. The way of the world . . . the way that people behave?'

'In spite of everything, Trigger.'

I believe him.

'Pray with me, Father'

It's dark and cold out here but I daren't put my coat on. But at least the rain has stopped. If only London's cars would follow by example. These metal wagons, their brightly lit eyes; still roaming London's tarmac with endless procession. Which one will be the Beasts and try to stop me?

It's been a long wet walk and at last I can see the house. No lights are visible, that's good. Jamie's using the lamps. We need to avoid unwanted attention, now more than ever. Just two more days and we fly this city for good.

'Jamie?' I speak with a hush as even loud whispers carry far in the night. 'Jamie?' No answer. But I hear faint sounds from the bedroom so I ascend the stairs. It's music, a soft melody from my past.

The last step is as soft as the first on the piled carpet. The panelled door ahead is half closed. I recognise the tune now, 'Love On The Rocks'. The seductive voice of Neil Diamond. And I was wrong about the lamps because there is no light, only darkness that escapes as I open the door.

'Jamie, sweetie?' I don't like this game, she should answer me. *Please answer me.* 'Jamie?' It's too dark, I can't see a thing. I'm shy of crossing the threshold, afraid there may be something waiting in there for me? Should I turn around and leave?

'Jamie?'

Oh God, Jamie, are you okay?

My heart beats thunder now and can be heard on the street. I've driven away the fearful fool and the Cavalier marches head on into the room. 'Jamie.' I can't see and fumble for the lamp on the mantle. It's in my hand and held aloft.

Then relief came to Saul; he felt better, and the evil spirits left him. Jamie sleeps on the bed. Her body woven between the sheets as if the night is too warm. On the floor I see why she didn't answered me.

Foil stained with the crust of burnt powder. *Thank you Lord.* I feel like the Watchman as I cross the room, lantern well extended. Its faint circle of light carries around the bed and enters her sleep. She turns away. Sweet Jamie, I'll leave the lamp alight by her bedside, just to be sure that she can find her way home from her dreams.

I don't need to get out of the bed to know its cold. My breath forewarns me. But its Nature that calls so the need is imminent. Gently does it with the covers. Slowly, don't wake Jamie.

Jamie?

She's not here.

'Jamie . . . Jamie?' *One day I'll be able to call her name in more than a whisper.* 'Jamie?'

I didn't hear her get up. And my early morning eyes can't make sense of the room. Which is silly because we have bedside lamps, somewhere, that actually work. *Click.*

I like everything about this room. This is how a bedroom should be. Plush carpet, white furniture, and soft fluffy pillows on a firm clean bed. And an ensuite that I tiptoe toward. It's got to be the biggest bathroom in the country..

'Jamie, are you in there?'

I ease the door back and switch on the lights. Mood lighting and the dimmer's turned down. I don't turn them because I'm stunned by what I see. It takes my breath away.

'Oh Jamie . . . Jamie, Jamie, what have you done?'

The wall, it's a rich tapestry of shapes and numbers. Of scrawling swirls and perfect lines. She said she'd stop this. She promised me she'd stop. *Oh Jamie.* I don't think she can. So much detail crammed into a single wall. It's the faces I don't care for; ominous and disturbing. Inca, Aztec, I don't know. They stare and scowl at me. Signify sacrifice and pain. And why all the numbers; so many numbers. Hundreds of equations scrawled in every gap. Maths been scratched out in a hurry.

I'm so absorbed by the mural that it takes a few moments to see her sat in the corner tub.

'Jamie?' I'm on my knees. 'Jamie.' *Oh God, what's wrong.* She must be freezing. I grab towels and wrap them about her upper body. 'Come here. Cuddle up.' Her face, it's so cold.

This isn't right, her head down like this, arms wrapped around her knees. *Oh my God.* Her hands, all dark and stained. Please no, you haven't.

'Jamie, Jamie . . .' I shake her. 'What have you done?' She's cold. Too cold. 'No . . . Jamie, talk to me.' Her head, it's limp. 'Jamie . . .?'

No, no, please no. Check for a pulse. *Oh you silly girl. Silly selfish girl.* I can't find her pulse. *Don't you dare leave me, don't you dare . . .* I grab her so tightly, fingers pushing, probing for a heart beat. *Please Lord, no . . .* I have it. It's there, I feel a pulse.

The quilt from the bed covers Jamie. Her wrists feel dry not sticky. I need light and turn the dimmer up full, still frightened of what I'll find. But it's not blood that makes them dark.

'Charcoal? It's charcoal all over your hands. I thought . . .'

She fills my arms, I won't let go. My face against hers as it slowly warms. *Jamie, Jamie, please wake up. Open your eyes for me.*

I don't how long. It doesn't matter. She's waking.

'Trigger, is that you?'

'Yes, silly girl you had me worried. But it's all right now, I'm here. Jamie? What, no, don't push me away.' The same blackened hands I thought were dead are now raised against me. Stained fingers smudged with make up and dried tears insistent I keep my distance. She's a mess. Why? What happened in here?

'Jamie It's okay, I'll sit here. That's it, pull the quilt up tight. Tell me what's wrong. I thought . . . Jamie, where are you going? Stay here, you're not well. Jamie, please, come back.'

'Leave me alone.'

'Why, what have I done?'

'That. That's what.'

I don't understand, but follow her hand to see the dress I brought back. Why is it lying on the floor? Oh, such a beautiful thing all ripped and torn, as if mauled by a frightened animal.

'Where have you been, Trigger? Where did you go? I'm sick of you leaving me on my own. Where the fuck have you been?'

'I'm sorry, there was a problem.' *It wasn't my fault. It was his, that man on the bridge.* 'I . . . I'm so sorry.'

'You're always sorry. I'm sick of you being *sorry*. You don't know what it's like being left on your own, how could you. It's me who sits

and worries. Who stares at the walls. Who lives with shadows because someone might see the light. It freaks me out, Trigger. Do you understand? And I never know if you're going to come back. I stare at the door and I'm scared you won't come back.'

'Why would you think that? I'll never leave you.'

'So you say. And what's *that*? I found *that* in the drawer.'

The dress.

'It was a gift, for you. Don't you remember? You said you wanted a new dress. I, I got it for you.'

'So what, you think you can buy me? Am I a whore to you? Is that it? You think you can bring me presents and I'll forgive you? You think I'd wear something like that anyway. It's disgusting. Oh, yes, I see it now. You want to dress me like a whore whilst you treat me like one, is that it? You fuck off out and live the life whilst Jamie waits and stares at the wall.'

'No, never. Jamie, why would you think that? I love you.'

'So you say. And then you fuck off and leave me again. I'm here on my own. It does my head in. I don't like it. Where were you, Trigger? You've been gone since yesterday. I've been alone all night. All night . . . Oh, I'm so stupid. The dress, I wasn't supposed to find it was I? No, no, no, it's not for me. You liar. You got it for someone else. That's it, or why else would you hide it from me. I'm so stupid, so stupid. Every time you go out you go to see someone else, don't you. Oh God, I can't breathe. Oh fuck. Nooo, it's not true. You fucking bastard . . . you've found someone else.'

'Jamie stop this. Stop it.'

'Don't you touch me. Don't you fucking dare to touch me.'

'Shhh, the neighbours. Jamie, please. You know it's not true. I would never . . .'

'Is she younger than me? She is isn't she. Oh fuck, oh fuck, I knew this would happen. I knew it. No, no, no, don't you touch me, you . . . leave me alone.'

She's going to be sick. I have to calm her down. Tell her, Trigger, tell her it's not true. No, she won't listen to me, not now. Just go, go quickly. *I can't leave her like this.* My Jamie, tears dripping from her cheeks. Pacing, she's pacing as if there's a problem to be solved.

Is that her hair on the floor? Oh Jamie, what have you done to yourself?

'Jamie, please, listen to me.' *Please don't look at me like that.* 'I've done nothing wrong. I swear to you. The dress, it was a gift for you.'

‘Lies, all lies. It was inevitable I suppose. Fucking bitches, they’re out there waiting; sniffing the air for weakness, for a sign. How long, huh? When did it first happen? How many times, Trigger? How many girls are you fucking? Oh shit, you’re going to do it aren’t you. No, please don’t. You’re fucking leaving me.’

‘Jamie, I swear. There’s no-one else. There could never be anyone else. The dress, it was for . . .’

‘Liar. I don’t want to hear your lies. No, no, she’s pretty isn’t she? Prettier than me . . . Of course she is. It’s my fault I suppose, for getting old. It’s nature’s way of telling me my time’s up. The young strike down the old, stab them in the heart. Stab, stab, stab, and then leave them in the cold to die . . . alone. Alone Trigger. I’m always alone.’

‘Please Trigger, I don’t want to die alone. I don’t. Please don’t let me . . .’

‘Shhh, it’s okay, I’ve got you. Shhhh.’

She’s holding me, tearful, head buried in my chest. We’re so tight we’ve almost become one. I’m so inadequate to help her when she’s like this; so frightened and confused. And it’s getting worse.

‘Jamie, I love you.’ I kiss her head. ‘Only you. No-one but you.’ *No, I won’t let you pull away.*

‘I’m not enough for you any more, am I? Trigger, baby, I want to be, I do. I’ll try harder, I will. I promise. I’ll be more than enough for you, you’ll see. You and me, yeah? You said so. I heard you. It’s me and you, you and me, backs to the wall, you said so. And you remember what I said. I told you I want us to be lovers, that I want it to happen. I did.’

‘Wasn’t that enough? It’s all I’ve got. I tried to kiss you, remember. Baby Boy, let’s try again. Let me kiss you again. Hmmm, you like this don’t you. Tell me you like this.’

‘No, Jamie, no. I mean yes, of course I like it. *Kiss* But not like this. Jamie, please.’ *Kiss, kiss.* ‘I don’t want to do this because you’re angry, or scared. Jamie, you have to stop.’

‘Stop . . . You don’t want me to kiss you?’

‘No, yes. Not like this.’

No, don’t, I won’t let go of you . . .

We’re no longer as one.

‘I’m so stupid. No, don’t, let go of me. Don’t touch me.’

It feels like the room freezes over. I’ve seen Jamie look at men like this before. The gaze that Medusa gave Perseus before he cut off her head. I take a step back from the girl I love and then watch her circle me. Mid-

night drips from Jamie's hair as she melts away from the lamp's light. My eyes fix firmly on the carpeted floor.

'You pig, you pulled away from me again. I bare myself and you fucking reject me. Why? It's her isn't it. Isn't it . . .? Is she young, Trigger. Fresh and good to squeeze. Are you fucking her? Of course you are. That's where you get to isn't it . . .'

'You're wrong. It's not true.'

'I'm such a fucking idiot. My lips aren't young enough for you are they? Not soft enough. Does the thought of kissing me, make you want to puke? Does it? Poor poor Trigger, poor you.'

'Jamie, don't. Please.'

'So why hang around, Trigger? Why? Is it a motherly thing? What to come home and curl up with Mummy after a hard days fucking. Well, it's fuck Jamie from where I sit. Leave her on her fucking own, someone to come home to because your whore doesn't want you to move in . . . is that it? Is that the reason you come back. I'm so stupid, so stupid. Why else? Why? . . . No, don't you look at me. No, no, don't you dare feel sorry for me. Don't you dare. I don't fucking need you. You cunt . . . I kissed you.'

I've never seen her weep before. Angry, sure, she does that a lot. I'm breaking her heart, but I've done nothing wrong.

'Jamie, stop this.' I have to stop her. 'Please, Jamie, calm down.'

'No, get off me. I don't want you to touch me. Don't you dare touch me; it's too fucking late now. I can see it all. You can't lie to me any more, Trigger. Let go of me. I'm not the trash to be left out in the cold and then brought in at a whim. You bastard. I hate you, you pig. I fucking hate you . . .'

'Please don't be angry with me, I've done nothing wrong. Jamie, shhh, Jamie. I've got you. Shhhh, calm down. I swear to God, there's no-one. Nobody for me. Just you. My Jamie. My Sweet Jamie . . . shhhhh.'

I feel her talons deep in my neck. Slicing my skin. The pain. I have to let her go. I have to.

Leave, Trigger. Get out.

'Where are you going? No . . . no, no, Trigger, you're not leaving me. No. Baby Boy, please don't. I didn't mean to do that. It's you and me, remember. Backs to the wall. When we go, we go together, remember? Walk out that door and you don't come back.'

She's never said anything like that before. There's blood on my neck. She's never hurt me before. I can't go. Look at her, on her knees weeping. How can I leave her. I'm going to cry.

'It's okay. I'm not going.'

'You bastard.' *Slap.* 'You think I'm some dumb bitch that you can use.'

'Please, stop, Jamie, you're hurting me.'

'I'll, fucking, hurt you. You, lying, bastard.'

Back away, Trigger. She doesn't know what she's doing. But it hurts, every wild slap and punch. It hurts. *I can't leave, can't go.* Curl up, withdraw, let it happen, don't fight back. I can't fight back. I deserve this, it's all my fault. Every blow, every hateful hammer of the fist. I deserve them all.'

'I, don't know, why I, waste my time, with you.'

It's my fault. *I'm sorry.* It's all my fault. *Forgive me.* It's not her fault, Lord, it's mine. I make her angry. I don't think of anyone but myself.

Each lunge, every impact, another reminder that I only think of myself. *Please stop it.* I don't want to cry, it's not manly, but it hurts. I can't stop the tears.

Don't move. Stay quiet. Don't remind her that you're here. It's true, everything she said. All I do is think of myself. How many times now have I been unfaithful, up here in my head.

Karin? I don't even know her. I don't want to know her, not any more.

Jen? What was I thinking? She's a stray left out in the night. I saw her naked and I wanted her. Lusted for her. I'm immoral, disgusting. I'm so unworthy of Jamie . . . I deserved this. I deserve everything I get, and more. She's right, I don't blame her, she's not responsible. It's me. I'm the problem. Me me me. I don't treat Jamie right. I don't give her what she deserve. Just the same shit every day; it begins and ends with me.

Jamie?

She's sat on the bed cradling her rucksack. Rocking to and fro as if a baby has died in her arms.

Speak to me, please. I don't like what she says.

'It's too late.'

What is?

'I see it all now, the big picture. I know what we have to do.'

She's stilled herself. She's calm. What thoughts stream through her mind? Good ones I hope, I can't tell. She's an emoticon of reluctance, sombre but sincere as she fumbles between wiping at her eyes and opening her rucksack.

Can I help? Let me help . . . No, I don't want to, I don't want to help.

'Jamie, please, put that away.' I see what she's lifted from the bag. 'Jamie, no, you're not thinking straight.'

'You're leaving me.'

'No, I wouldn't, ever.' I've asked her, pleaded with her; get rid of that knife. Knives hurt people. My Jamie, she hurts people. I told her . . . Get rid of the knife.

‘I won’t let you go, Trigger. I’ll never let you go. How could I? We’re like . . . Like bread and butter. Rice pudding and jam. One without the other, what would be the point? I know what we have to do now, Trigger. You and me.’

‘Oh Jamie, please. Baby, I love you. You don’t have to do this. You don’t have to . . .’

‘Shhhh, no, it’s okay, don’t be scared. I shouldn’t have hit you, and I’m so sorry for it. I wasn’t thinking straight. You know how I get.’

Jamie’s smiling at me. Her sweet face smiles with acceptance. She beckons me.

‘It’s better this way. Shhhh, Baby Boy, it’s okay. Come to me. Come here and sit, here, next to me. I want to hug you.’

Really? I can’t say no, not when her arms are open to me like this. And she’s right, why hang around. Why stay in this shitty world any longer? I place my head onto Jamie’s lap and curl my arms around her waist. It’s so nice. So why do I want to cry?

‘Don’t tremble.’ She whispers. ‘Shhhh, close your eyes. Close them tightly. No, Baby, don’t look up. Please, don’t look at me. Just close them, like this.’

Jamie knows best, but I’m not sure. No, I don’t want her to do this. I don’t want *us* to end like this.

‘Trigger, we should have jumped. You know, back on the boat. We should have jumped then. Hand in hand, together.’

‘I would have, you know I would. But I’m not sure now. I’m frightened.’

‘Shhh, take my hand. I want you to squeeze my fingers. Squeeze really tightly. I want to feel how real you are. I want to know we’re both here and now. Jamie and Trigger, together forever.’

I’m not sure. I’m really not sure.

‘We’ll be like Romeo and Juliet when they find us.’

‘You’re not thinking straight. Jamie, I don’t want to.’

‘I can’t let you leave me. I *won’t* let you leave me. Give me your arm. *Give it to me.* There, I promise, you won’t feel anything. Did I hurt you, before? I didn’t mean to, you do know that, right? Close your eyes, Baby Boy. I promise you won’t feel a thing. I’ll cut you first, and then I’ll cut myself. We’ll fall asleep together. I promise I’ll hold on tight, I won’t ever let you go.’

‘But we won’t get to dance together in the rain.’

‘Shhh, you silly boy. I don’t know what that means. Trigger, lay your head down, just here, and close your eyes.’

Maybe this is best then. It's God's way of telling me that I've failed. But Jen, the money . . . The tickets?

'Jamie . . . I have tickets. They're in my pocket. Here, look, I got them earlier. That's why I was out so long. Look. You and me, just like I promised.

'Tickets? I don't understand. Trigger, are we going somewhere?'

'Yes.' *Please God I hope so.* 'To the seaside, and we're not coming back. Oh Jamie, we're going away from London and we're not coming back. That dress,' *what's left of it,* 'I stole it for you. It was for you to wear at the hotel. So you could make a grand entrance at dinner. So everyone would turn and look at you. Everyone would look at Jamie and be in awe.'

'Trigger, these are tickets to Brighton.'

'Yes. You and me, we're going and not coming back.'

'We are? Seriously?'

'Yes. And I have this.' The wad of cash that I throw on the bed.

'Trigger, where did you get this?'

'That doesn't matter. Jamie, you remember the hotel, the one in the photo. You wore a pink coat in the photo. I was taking you back. It was supposed to be a surprise. I was taking you away, away from London. You and me, never coming back. Look, I have tickets.'

'You've done this for me?'

'Yes.'

Yes, that's it, put the knife down. Come here. Closer. Face to face so I can kiss you, because I'm not frightened any more. Aww no, sweetie, don't cry.

'The dress, it was for you, for the hotel. That's why I wasn't here today. I've planned this for us, for the two of us. Don't cry.'

'So you're not leaving me?'

'No, never, what would I be without you? *Kiss.* We're a team you and me. *Kiss.* We're going to walk barefoot on the sand. *Kiss kiss.* We'll drink tea at the pavilion and dance in the rain.' *Kiss kiss kiss.*

'Dance?'

'Yes.'

'But I don't know how.'

'Ha ha ha, neither do I.'

That's right my love, smile, be happy. Here, let me wipe those tears with my sleeve. Oh, and take this from your hand. We're good now. It's all over. I'm so sorry I made you do this. I'm thoughtless, stupid. I'm so sorry . . .

‘Did I hurt you? I didn’t mean to hurt you.’

‘No, silly girl. No no, don’t cry. Look, smiling, Trigger’s happy’. So *happy*. ‘I want you to be happy too. It’s all I’ve ever wanted. I’m going to buy you a pink coat when we get there. Complete with daft furry lining. And I’ll take another photo of you under the sign. One of us together, below the sign. How sick will that be.’

Oh, and we’re going to have the room with the posh four poster bed, and a big TV, and room service. We’ll drink the entire mini bar before bed.’

‘Oh, I want that too. I do, Trigger. Oh Baby Boy, I didn’t mean to . . . you know. It won’t happen again, I promise. Never again.’

‘I love you, Jamie. You’re the only part of me that makes any sense. I’m not complete without you, in this world or the next. I love you so much.’

‘And I love you too, I do.’ *Kiss*. ‘I really do.’ *kiss kiss*. ‘I’m going to cry again.’

It’s a golden fanfare, a choir of angels, the sound of vibrant heartbeats as the knife finally slips from her fingers to the floor.

‘Forgive me?’ She asks.

‘Always,’ and I kiss her as if our lives are about to end. But the truth is, they are just about to begin.

We're like desperate vines curled in embrace, not a space between us as Jamie pulls the quilt up tight to my chin. It's more than mere spooning, or a hug or a cuddle. Jamie and I are together and closer than ever before. I like this. Her hands on me, as our lips touch gently, over and over.

She kisses my face, my neck, my ear. I'm embarrassed because it tickles.

What's she doing?

Oh, taking my shirt off; kissing my chest. Pinching gently at the skin with her teeth. Have I been away, is this my welcome home? There's mischief all about her as Jamie reemerges and takes my hand. A single finger delivered into her mouth to find gentle lips clamp, to then be teased away. There's something wild about Jamie. More colour in her face than I've ever seen before. And her breathing, filled with desire as her breasts swell on each breath of air.

Yes, yes, I want to be kissed again.

My face gets tangled in her long hair, but I don't care if it gets in the way. I barely notice her hands on mine, encouraged to go down . . . *Down where?* I don't care. They're all hers, she owns them. This is so different, so very exciting, wild even. And then she breaks away, hovers above me, eyes bright and in a need. That need is for me, yes? *Yeah, I'm up for this.* As we begin peeling each others clothing away. Our lips part only to remove my top, but then they're back. Kissing, nipping, loving. Every suck and tease, nip and stroke, is delicious. My Jamie is warm, and tasty too; tender to the bite.

I'm losing my bottom half, one furious tug after another. Then she rolls away. Tugging herself free from her jeans; I see them hung, dangled, and then dropped out of sight, and what a sight. My Jamie in the

lacy white underwear I stole from Debenhams. That's what it looks like out of the packet.

My girl, kneeling, grinning, hands hidden behind her back. Oh, I see. I get it, as the bra obeys gravity. Not too quick. Just motion enough to encourage my heart to Tango in my chest.

Jamie's naked and bare. She's more beautiful, more perfect than I could ever have imagined as one knee drops either side of my thighs. I'm straddled. Her long black hair falls to tickle my face. I've got a piston banging away below my ribs and a rod of iron has risen up between my legs. I don't think this is a good time to mention that I haven't done this before.

It's really not important, just look at her. She is a Goddess and I am her fool. If this is a sin then I am content to go to Hell. To let her writhe and press, lift and linger upon me. Each stroke of her pleasure is warm and wet and in tune with her magical hands. She has nails that draw on me like playful talons.

Go for it, do it. I am her plaything as she pants and pulses. Whilst I, greedy boy that I am, try not to be too eager. *Please God, don't let me arrive too soon at the journey's end.* It's not easy, but I can take more. I can wait. I'm not sure how long. But her eyes, they are ready, her breath, it's very rapid. Now? Is it now? Do I do it now?

Strange noises, powerful thrusts, and thank God because I can't hold out on any longer. Yes, yes, she's there, and squeezing hard for all she's worth as I erupt in unison, with a force to compare with Vesuvius.

We are breathless. I am spent, tingly, and left in awe of what has just happened. I have to learn to breathe again. Short and sharp, as Jamie nestles close her legs entwined in mine. And a kiss too, gently on my cheek, as her hand pushes down my chest. She's a contented cat, but it's me that purrs. Neither one of us has ever been so carefree and at ease.

Thank you Lord. We are finally as one. Each of us carries a part of the other

So that was the act of Creation, and no small thing. The Lord's gift to us all. His crowning glory and the summit of all perfection. Immortality through procreation and the chance to live again. *I want to weep.*

It's no wonder that the act is so popular, oversubscribed, wholesale and debased now. To be bought and sold on street corners. *Poor Jen. I hope she got on that train.* Please God, let her be very far away and heading for peace.

No, it shouldn't matter to me, not now. I have My Jamie. An impish grin on her face as well. Come here I want to hold you. Wrap myself around you. *Hmmm, that's it, just like that but even tighter.* My fingers laced in hers. Her body pressed against mine, our skin still warm with perspiration.

'What is it?' I ask her. 'You've got mischievousness written all over your face.'

'No, this is my *I love Trigger* face. My Trigger, no-one else's. You're all mine. And I love you.'

Three simple wonderful words. Why are you giggling? Ooh, okay, you're sliding on top of me again. Are we going to do it again? Are we? Oh yes, I think we are.

How wonderful.

The woman behind the counter was in her fifties, and obese. Unattractive in so many ways, and what did she have against washing her hair? Or cleaning the office? Adams felt grateful there was a counter between them.

‘Sergeant Adams from the Met,’ he said. Warrant card deployed for inspection. *Don’t strain a muscle staring at it love.*

‘One of your cabs picked up a passenger. This man in the photo. Ever seen him before? How do I get in touch with the driver?’

‘One question at a time, love. And without my glasses I can’t see a thing. Just a sec. Now where did I leave them?’

If you lost some weight you’d move quicker. How the hell did you get that size anyway? The pile of sweet wrappers in the bin suggested habitual abuse of sugar. *Tum te tum te . . .*

‘No hurry, I can wait,’ he added, ‘and for the record, smoking in the workplace is illegal.’ *Whoa, what the . . .?* ‘Is this your dog? Shagging a Police Officer’s leg is also illegal. *Or it should be.*’

‘FooFoo? FooFoo, what are you doing round that side of the desk? What have I told you, you little rascal. Naughty boy, you come here, up you come. There’s a good boy. We don’t know where he’s been.’

Where I’ve been? Seriously?

‘This is FooFoo, he’s the love of my life. Aren’t you my little pouchy poo. Yes you are, yes you are . . . you’re Mama’s little cutie.’

‘Why’s he growling at me?’

‘You let the nice policeman alone now. There’s a good boy, yes you are. He’s such a good boy.’

‘I’m sure he is.’ *Just keep the oversized rat away from my leg.*

FooFoo disappeared behind a glazed door. Adams watched his outline jumping up against the glass with scrabbling paws.

‘Now what was it you were you waving in my face? I can’t remember the last time I had a handsome Bobby in the office. Pop it on the desk, let’s have a good look at it’

Eurgh, you’re not flirting with me. Again, really?

‘Hmmm, yes, that’s Rajish’s cab. He’s one of our part timers. Not on the job today. Don’t know the young man though. Not a regular of ours; probably a one off. Can I make you a cup of tea? You can take a seat round here whilst I get Raj on the phone? You can play with my FooFoo if you want.’

Please don’t pat the sofa like that? No fucking way I’m leaving this side of the desk.

‘If you could write his number down so I can ring him later. It’s very important.’

‘Nonsense, you come round and take a seat.’

‘No, thank you. I’ll just take the number.’

‘Come and take a seat.’

‘No.’

Seriously, you’re sulking?

‘It’s the Met’s policy not mine. No drinking on the job.’

‘Fine, than I’m unable to give out a driver’s phone number, it’s against company policy. Unless you have a warrant? Do you have a warrant? If you have one, I’ll let you take everything down. I’ll bare everything I have.’

Sick . . . I’m going to be sick.

‘Cup of tea did you say? Actually, that would be lovely. Two sugars, lots of milk.’ *Wipe that grin of your face. And lose the come to bed eyes. I’m protected by the sanctity of marriage, it’s powerful Voodoo.*

I’m going to catch something, I know it.

‘Cooper, I have the cabbie’s phone number. I got out in one piece and her virginity is still intact.’

‘Sarge?’

‘Never mind, it doesn’t matter. The cabbie picked our man up in Walker Street, Soho. Driver says he’s never seen Trigger before he picked him up. I’m texting you the details.’

Right, I want you outside Tottenham Court Tube in twenty minutes to pick me up. We’re closing in on him, Sam. I’ve got a feeling we could have him before the day is done.’

Dear sweet Jamie. She's smiling, I can tell, as I trace *I, love, you*, on her back. Then a big heart that tickles her. When I'm with Jamie my mind is still. None of the crazy things that go on up there seem to matter. They are forgotten.

I kiss her neck, sweet pecks of pleasure as she wriggles closer and purrs for more. I feel every rise of her delicious curves with roving fingers. And I pray. Sing a silent Hallelujah to mark the moment, and wish this would last forever.

Jamie's turning, a serious look about her.

'Am I doing this wrong?' I ask.

'No Baby, it's nice. I, I want to talk.'

Well, I don't. She has her serious face on. *No talking, turn back over.* 'Okay, let's talk. I like talking. What about?'

'Me,' she says.

'What about you?' I don't know why I'm whispering.

'It's me . . . isn't it.'

'What is?' *I don't understand.* 'What's you?'

'I'm not right, Trigger. Am I?'

'Yes. I mean, no . . . yes? I don't know what you mean.' I've been caught off guard. *Turn around, I want to stroke your back again.* 'Jamie, you're everything that's right in my life.'

I gently touch her face, go nose to nose, try to beam my feelings in through her eyes. I don't like where this is going. My heart's quickened too, and I'm starting to tingle. But not like before.

'When I'm on my own . . . no, it's okay, you explained, Trigger, it's fine. Shhh, please, I have to say this. Baby . . . I don't feel, *normal*. You know, like you.'

Not really. No, don't sit up, I like it like this.

‘Look at the wall, Trigger. That’s what I am, up there. That’s me, a messy scrawl for everyone to see. That’s me laid bare, and I don’t remember doing it. Trigger, I see flashes. Wild, scary. I think they’re memories, but I don’t remember them. I see really bad things that I want to forget. Trigger, they’re not dreams are they?’

She looks down at me begging for answers. What do I say? How do I tell her the truth? It would do no good for either of us. Besides, what’s the truth anyway. Whatever I want it to be, that’s what.

‘The truth is, I’m nothing without you. That’s why I’m here. You and me, me and you, backs to the wall. Let’s not talk, not now. You need some sleep, and some medication too.’

‘Yeah, please. That would help. Will you cook some for me?’

‘Of course I will. Now stop being daft or you’ll make yourself ill with worry. Everyone dreams, Jamie. Your dreams will be different when you’ve had your medication.’

‘So they are just dreams?’

I wish they were.

‘What else could they be? It’s the stress. And as for that stuff on the wall. You’re an artist, what else are walls for? And for the record, I like it.’ I don’t think she believes me. I don’t know what else to say.

‘You’re lying to me, Trigger. I can always tell. I want you to be honest with me . . . It’s getting worse isn’t it? Baby Boy, I can see it in your face. And there’s something else, isn’t there? Please tell . . . Oh God, I frighten you don’t I? You’re shaking your head but it’s true. It’s true isn’t it. I’ve done things. Such terrible things.’

No. She must never know.

‘Oh Trigger, my heart’s beating so fast. Is there blood on my hands. Is there?’

I miss my opportunity and leave an awful silence hanging between us.

‘Why? Why do you stick around? Do you think you’re protecting me, is that it? Because you can’t, you know that. Sooner or later the Bloodhounds will come. There *will* be a reckoning. Tell me the truth, Trigger. Tell me . . . Am I a monster?’

‘No.’ I have to be strong, for both of us. ‘They’re just dreams. It’s the illness, it’s messing with your mind. That’s what the medicine’s for, it’s to calm the symptoms. To ease the pain. We’re prepared for this, remember. You *will* get better. I know you will.’

I throw back the quilt my intention to get Carl’s bag. But she stops me.’

‘You promise me that’s the truth?’

‘Yes, yes, I promise. It’s true.’ I encourage her to lie back down. She won’t let go so I hold her naked body tight. *She mustn’t know. It isn’t true. I decide what’s true.*

‘I’m so scared, Trigger.’

‘Don’t be. I’m here, I won’t leave you like that again, I promise. Hope to die.’

‘Please don’t, Baby. I was so sick whilst you were gone. My head pounded, and I was shaking with cold. Everything gets so bad. All messed up. You know, up here.’

‘I know. No, don’t cry.’ I should have been here. I’m so inadequate for her needs when she gets like this. It’s all my fault.

‘I love you, *kiss*, I do. Oh Trigger, Baby Boy, I’m so selfish. I should be thinking about you, not me? We need to prepare. Yes, it’s important we prepare, for you. What will happen to you when I’m gone?’

Gone? No, I don’t want to talk about that. *Not that.* I want to feel good, not like this. *I have tickets.*

‘I can’t stop thinking about tomorrow,’ she says, ‘about not having any more tomorrows. I hate it. I hate not knowing what that will bring. It scares me. Oh Trigger, *kiss*, you deserve more, *kiss*, than I can give you. You deserve so much more than just, tomorrow.’

‘I don’t care about tomorrow, just today.’

‘But you should. There is a tomorrow, at least for you. No, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. Baby Boy, *kiss*, don’t you want children? *Kiss.* A wife, *kiss*, and children, *kiss.* You need a house filled with memories to come home to, not me. You should have them, *kiss.* But you can’t have them, not with me . . . There, I saw it. You can’t lie to me. I see your disappointment.’

No you don’t. What disappointment? There wasn’t any to see.

‘I’m so sorry, so sorry . . . Trigger, please forgive me. *Kiss.* Please don’t leave me.’

Stop it. Stop saying that.

‘You’re being silly,’ I say. ‘What child would want me as a father? But you’d be a wonderful mum. Defo, brilliant . . . Dear God, are you pregnant? Have I just . . .’

‘No, Trigger, I’m not pregnant. Oh you’re so simple sometimes; that’s one of the reasons I love you so much.’

One day you’ll be a mum, and I’ll be a dad, and we’ll start a new life together. You and me, we’ll make a great family together. It will happen, I know it will.

What we just did, I felt the life force rush out from me and into you. Why else would it have happened? It's God's will, I know it is.

'We're going to the seaside?' I say tentatively. 'You and me, backs to the water. The sea air will be good for you. For us both.'

That's the Jamie I want to see. Smiling and full of hope. Why are we bothering if there isn't any hope?

'We catch the train on Monday. We're going nonstop to the coast.' I reach for my jeans. 'Look, we have tickets, money, and medication. What else do we need?'

We have to get away from London. From that man on the bridge. And Carl. I think Jamie's right, there are Bloodhounds out there.

And they've caught a whiff of our scent.

I want it to get dark outside. I want the black to roll in and mask everything. I want London to get busy with the new weekend so it can leave us alone. I want the next two nights to pass so we can catch the train and get away. I've never wanted to leave this city so badly as I do now. There's trouble brewing in the Capital, and I think it looked me in the eyes on that bridge.

You, yes you . . . Policeman. I can still your face. Your image has replayed over and over. What did you see when we connected? When I smiled at you, when you robbed me of something so precious that life rarely allows it twice. *I was happy.* Now I'm scared. What did you see in that moment to make you give chase? I'm a nobody. A nothing. And yet you called me by name, why . . . how? In what way have we become bound and linked? What did you see Bloodhound? Why is it you have my scent?

Come on, darkness rules OK. The cars have grown cat's eyes and the street lamps have flickered awake. Only the outlines of the buildings opposite remain. No-one can come for us now, not until morning. Not until the light returns. Those are the rules. *So why has that car stopped down below?*

Two men have left the car, they talk and gesticulate. What do they want? What business have they round here? I can't make them out, not quite. Get closer to the street light and let me see who you are . . . that's right, closer still. One leaves and crosses the road, the other seems undecided, more interested in the houses. I step away from the window, I think he's looking up here.

Just a little closer to the light. I want to see your face. Closer, closer . . . Oh my God, no, it can't be. It's not possible.

Turn the fucking lamp out. It's Bloodhound, he's found us.

I'm frozen, paralysed . . . don't panic. I don't understand how this is possible. Shit, the Bloodhound, and he's brought a friend. They're canvassing the neighbours, only three doors away.

'Jamie . . . Shhh, Jamie, wake up.'

'No, not asleep, I'm reading.'

'Most people snore when they're reading. Now come, we have to go.'

'Go? Trigger stop it, what are you doing?'

'We have to go, now.'

'What the fuck? Trigger, put my stuff down.'

'The Police are outside, Jamie. They've found us.'

'What Police? What are you talking about? Get off, I was reading that.'

Trigger what's going on? Stop this . . . stop it.'

I have to tell her. Tell her about the bridge, about the Bloodhound.

'I'm not going anywhere unless you tell me why.'

I pause. No, I'm caught. No choice but to tell.

'They found me today, on the bridge. A policeman, he chased me. Jamie, he knew my name. I think he's looking for you.'

'Why? Why would they want me. What have I done? Trigger, talk to me. What's going on? What, why are staring at the wall? What does all that mean?' The penny drops. 'It's my dreams, isn't it?'

'Please Jamie, trust me. We have to go, now. Put all your stuff in the rucksack.'

'Trigger, talk to me. They're not dreams, are they?'

Stupid, stupid, why did you say that. Just keep your mouth shut. Shut shut shut.

'Trigger, you stop this right now. You tell me.'

'Jamie, my arm, let go. You're hurting me.'

'It's this isn't it?'

The knife . . . I don't want to see that thing. Not now, not ever.

'It's me the Bloodhound wants. He was chasing me.' *She mustn't know. She must never know.* 'It's just shit. Outstanding shit. He recognised me from CCTV or something. Scared me shitless, so I ran.'

'But you said he was after me?'

'Blah blah, I'm an idiot. See, my mouth says shit when I panic, you know that. Why would anyone want you?' Get back to the window. Check . . . Where's he gone? Oh fuck, he's next door? 'Jamie, we have to go before he finds me, please.'

'And this?'

Don't point that thing.

'We'll get rid of it later. Pack your bag and follow me. There's only two of them, both out front and knocking on doors.'

One good thing about owning nothing is it's easy to pack. Now Jamie's on board, shoving what little she has into her bag. We have to get out of here and go . . . but where? Two more days, just two more days and we'd have been gone. *It's not fair, it's not fucking fair.*

* * *

'So you're sure you haven't seen this man. No? Okay, thanks for your time.' Run for it Raymond, before you get any more of her life story. 'Sorry to have bothered you. I'll try next door.'

'No dear, they're not in. They spend the winters in the Bahamas. We'd go too but my husband's been poorly these last few years. A stroke you see. He doesn't work properly any more. But you should have seen him in his prime. Oh my. He was a roofer, did I say. Very manly he was. Had a lovely body back then. It's old age you see, it makes everything sag these days. Well, if you know what I mean.

'Well, that's lovely, but I really do need . . .'

'I don't know what I'd do without the Home Help, what with his other problems. The arthritis is a bugger, and I think he's going a bit senile. I mean, we do at our age don't we.'

'I suppose, yes. It's a bugger.' You're giving me so much to look forward to. 'Did you say not at home next door?'

'Oh no, been gone for two weeks now.'

'Excuse me, one second . . . Sam? Sam, where are you? Get over here, I may have something.'

'Have I said something helpful dear?'

‘If there’s no-one home next door who turned the light out a minute ago? Excuse me. Next door Sam, move yourself.’

* * *

‘Trigger, the doorbell? Who’s ringing the doorbell?’

‘Get downstairs, go quietly. We’ll go out the back.’

‘Who’s banging on the door . . . Trigger what’s going on?’

‘I’ll explain everything later, now come on we have to go.’

‘All right, okay. I’m moving. But what if they’re waiting out back too?’

I hadn’t thought of that.

‘No, I only saw two of them. Both out front. Take this, come on, we have to go.’

A voice from shouts out from downstairs. It’s him, Bloodhound.

‘Hello, Trigger, are you in there? Come on, we know you’re in there. We have the building surrounded. Open the door, I just want to talk.’

Lying bastard. Carpet on the stairs helps us descend quietly. I shepherd Jamie down towards the kitchen as Bloodhound’s fist bangs the door with more aggression. Like I’d answer. Besides, he’s just guessing. No way he knows we’re here, not for sure, or there would be more of them. *Fuck you, Bloodhound.* We’re through the kitchen and out in the garden. I close the door without a sound.

* * *

‘Would a key help, dear?’

‘You have a key?’

‘Yes dear. What if there’s an emergency whilst the Brownlows are away?’

‘Lady, this is an emergency.’ Stay calm Ray. ‘Well, go get it, now, please.’

‘Oh, well, really. Give me a minute. I have to remember where I put it?’

For crying out loud, someone find her a walker.

Do not kick the door in, Raymond. Do not kick it in. Here she comes, that’s my girl. The Living Dead returns, and she has a key.

‘Thank you. Take this, Sam. Get that door open. You take the upstairs. I’ll take the ground floor and out back. Go Sam, go.’

* * *

They're inside, I can hear them shouting. All the houselights are coming on.

'Take my bag, Jamie.' I'm through the fence just as the back door opens. 'Get down, Jamie. Shhh, don't make sound.'

It's him, Bloodhound, eager to get outside into the garden. To scour it with his angry gaze. Who are you? Why are you here? Leave us alone. Shit, he's coming down the garden path.

'Shhhhhh he's coming.' Jamie's face down in the grass. We can't move, he'll see us if we try. *Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name.* Don't let him find us, please. Please Lord, make him go back inside. *Make him go away.* Make him leave us alone.

No, Jamie. *Fuck, this could end badly.* Look at me, look at me. I can only shake my head, pray, implore her with my eyes to stay down and low in the grass. *Don't do it.* I never want to see that thing again. That bloody knife, it's in her hand. *Look at me, look at me.* This is not the way. I put my hand on hers but she pulls it away.

* * *

Shit, they've had it away on their toes. Nothing but an old wooden fence; just darkness beyond. Looked like a small copse and some scrubland. *Shit, shit . . .*

'Hey Sarge.'

Adams didn't hear. He stared out into void. Half the Met was needed to cordon the area. He'd blown it.

'Sarge, hey . . .'

'Cooper, why are you hanging out of the window?'

'Probably best if you come up and take a look at this.'

Where have I heard that before.

'Don't tell me, our artist's been at it again.'

'Oh yeah, the bathroom wall is covered. They were definitely here.'

'I'll be up in a sec,' he said.

So you were here, and now you're gone. I'll have you.

'I'll have you, Trigger,' he shouted.

Nothing but darkness on the other side of the fence but really dark trees. Don't go out there alone, Raymond. You'd need dogs, and more man power. They're gone. In the wind.

'Can you see anything from up there, Cooper?'

‘Sorry, Sarge.’

But they were here. Damn it, Raymond, you dumb shit. You should have handled it differently. Nothing but dark trees out there. Shit shit, I’ve fucked this up again.

‘Sarge . . .’

‘Yes . . . I said I was coming. I’m coming.’

* * *

‘It’s all right, he’s going back in.’

‘Who is he? What does he want with you?’

‘Shhhh, wait till he’s inside.’

He’s clever this one. How else would he know where we were? *How did he know?*

‘Jamie, are you okay?’ She’s scared, breathing heavy. Me too. ‘We should go before more of them turn up.’

‘More? Trigger, who are they? Why are they looking for us? Do you owe money?’

‘Come on, I’ll take your bag. We need to keep moving. I’ll tell you what I know when we find somewhere safe to stay.’

‘And where would that be? An empty garage . . . Someone’s car? It’s bloody freezing out here. Oh shit. Trigger . . . I left my book behind.’

‘I’ll get you another one, I promise, and I know exactly where we’re going.’

‘Where? Is it close. Trigger, it’s cold.’

‘There’s a place where a fat man lives. He’s never home at the week-ends; we’ll be safe there. We can stay till Monday. After that, the train will take us away. We’re leaving London and never coming back.’

I wish I still had my coat. That old jacket kept me warm for two years. I must have left it at the church.

We were lucky to flag down a passing bus, get a brief ride; Take the opportunity to get warm. It's a short walk now, not long. All I can think about is, how. How Bloodhound managed to find us?

Does he know about Jamie? Has someone finally joined the dots? But if that were true, why were there only two of them? Surely they would have come mob handed. So many fucking questions going round and round in my head.

'Jamie, look over there. Can you see the lights from the big building?'

'No.'

'You have to look up.' Her head is buried in my shoulder as she trembles from the cold. 'Look, we can see it now. It's called Victoria Place. They're really nice flats. We'll be in the warm before you know it.'

'Trigger, there's a gate? I don't think I can climb over a gate.'

'There's no need, I have the numbers to get in.' Two, four, six, eight. Not very imaginative. I've watched her enter them many times. I see no lights on in her flat.

'What if someone comes out? I can't run, I'm too cold.'

It's the same number to get into the building. Four short beeps and the door unlocks.

'There, see, we're in. Come on, it's the one at the end. The Fat Man keeps a spare key, up here.' I saw him go to the bins once and forget his keys. He was angry, like he'd done it before. Fat Man retrieved a spare hidden in a notch cut out behind the frame. Very clever.

It's pure relief as I close the door. Jubilation at the warmth inside. The hall lights slowly with with energy saving light.

‘Trigger, it’s lovely. It’s so warm.’ She’s exploring. ‘Have you been in here before?’

‘No. I saw the owner once. I considered breaking in.’ I don’t want to lie. But I don’t want awkward questions. ‘Come on, let’s get you warmed up.’

‘Just find me a hot drink, please. I’ll huddle up with the radiator.’

‘Sure.’ *Which way is the kitchen?* ‘One hot coffee coming up.’ I’ll bet the Fatman has a lot of nice things in his cupboard. He’ll have cookies and chocolate. But not in here, it’s a bedroom. Big, stylish, very modern. Another bedroom opposite, smaller than the first.

Wow, check out the lounge. It’s filled with stainless steel and marble. And look how plush the carpet is. Is that real wool? I fight the urge to fall into either one of two massive sofas.

And look at the TV. *It’s fucking huge.* At least sixty inches staring down from the wall. I don’t think I’ve watched television for over a month. I don’t want to leave this room but Jamie needs a drink. I’ll run her a bath, turn up the heating; make this place feel like home. Yeah, two days here, not a hardship.

The kettle rumbles with excitement as it boils the water. Fat Man has a nice kitchen. The doors are white, designed in the ‘Shaker’ style. Lots of shelves above and baskets below. This is nice, modern. One day we’ll have a place like this, Jamie and I.

I can’t resist a peek outside. Just a crack in the fabric, far enough to see what all the residents see. What *she* sees, Karin, when she looks outside from upstairs.

It’s like being in a castle with a courtyard outside. Expensive four wheeled chariots are lined up between the white lines. The perimeter is a wall of iron railings to keep people out; the likes of me. Beyond the reach of the outside lights is the dark where I have waited so often in the past. *What was I thinking?* I’m not a stalker, or a weirdo. So why was I drawn to this place . . . unless . . . could it be a sign?

Of course, what else could it be? First the church to hide me in, and now this place to keep us safe. Everything has a reason. God works in mysterious ways, isn’t that what they say.

Shut the curtain. Don’t look outside again. Two nights and we’re gone. Monday morning and the train will set us free.

The train?

What if the Bloodhound knows about that too? *No, that’s not possible.* How could he? But how did he know where to find us? We had the whole of London to hide ourselves, and yet Bloodhound turned up at our

door. It's not possible, but it happened. What if he does know about the tickets?

'Trigger, what are you doing?'

'Err, checking. Making sure we weren't followed.' *Nice one, make Jamie even more paranoid.* 'I'm just being silly, we're safe here. Even I didn't know we were coming until we'd run off.' That's it, big smile, make her feel safe.

'Coffee, right?' The kettle clicked right on cue. 'Choose a cupboard,' I say. 'Try them all. They're an Aladdin's cave of sweet things.'

'Trigger, this place, it's lovely.'

She puts her arm through mine. Then rests her head on my shoulder.

'It's ours for the next two days?'

'And no-one will come?'

'No. Not until late Monday, and we'll be long gone. Jamie, have you seen the TV. It's massive. I bet there's at least a hundred channels to choose from.'

She's in the cupboards first, a bag of crisps retrieved. A packet of biscuits follows. And I was right, they're cookies. Really big ones. I follow her towards the lounge, with coffee in hand.

That's right, Jamie. You wear this place like a coat. We're safe here, at least for now.

‘Grandma’s downstairs again. Asking if you want more tea, Sarge?’

‘Cooper, what do you make of this?’

‘I’d say it used to be a dress, Sarge. Maybe the owner wasn’t too keen on the colour.’

‘It’s new. Still got the labels on it. Stolen I expect, from Next. Can’t be that many Next stores around here. Have someone make a few phone calls. Email a description. Might get lucky

So they left a knackered dress, that she obviously didn’t care for, and a book. Bit of an odd read for someone who’s Homeless, don’t you think?’

Cooper took the book.

‘The Zero Marginal Cost Society?’ he said. ‘Jeremy Rifkin, he’s an economist. I read some of his stuff at Uni. Got some interesting visions for the future.’

‘What, like Michael Crichton?’

‘Err, no, not really . . . Sarge, we were close weren’t we.’

‘A minute or two earlier with that key, yeah, we’d have had the bastards.’

‘They could be anywhere in London by now.’

‘Fuck it, I should have called it in, Sam. Got some cars out looking for them.’

‘Sarge, you’re suspended, and I’m off duty. Technically, we broke into this house. Any evidence would be tainted and inadmissible.’

‘The old lady gave us the key.’

‘Only because you said you saw a light, that no-one else can substantiate. Would you have wanted to argue the finer points with the Inspector? Be we do have another wall, that book, and a dress.’

‘But they were here. More men would have helped.’

‘Sarge, we’re five minutes from half a dozen night clubs. By the time the cars got here . . . well, needle in a haystack springs to mind. Besides, you’ve already held up the Tube. Do you want to cancel a Friday night clubbing in London as well?’

‘Is this you trying to cheer me up? Go get that tea, and a biccie. Something with chocolate on. And make sure they’re not out of date.’

Adams stared at the book. *Jeremy bloody who?* He flicked though the pages; something fell. It looked like an old Polaroid. A moment later it was sealed inside an evidence bag and hung from his fingers.

It was a photo. Of a small child stood outside in the rain.

‘Caught Grandma halfway up the stairs, Sarge. Wants to know how much longer we’re going to be. What’s that? Have you found something?’

‘A photo of our prime suspect, maybe?’

Adams turned the photo around so Cooper could see.

‘Sarge, I don’t think we can circulate that. She’s probably changed a bit since it was taken. Here, and mind the mug it’s hot.’

‘Sam, take a closer look at this picture. Tell me what you see.’

‘It’s a photo, old . . . Used as a book mark? Err, judging by the clothing, I’d say, taken in the mid to late eighties. Picture is of a wet child, maybe nine, ten years old. Can we assume that this is personal to *her?*’

‘Who else?’

‘Trigger maybe . . . Could be his sister?’

‘No, from what the twin told us, Trigger isn’t the sharpest tool. This book’s a bit hit highbrow for him.’

‘It’s still not much though is it, Sarge. And that’s an annoyingly popular name for a hotel. Oh, wait, she’ll have left her prints all over it.’

‘We might make a good copper of you yet, Cooper. And it also gives us an idea of her age. We now know she’s older than Trigger. Purple laces is her Toy-Boy.’

I have a swell of emotions, and for some reason my mouth always waters in anticipation. But now the preparation is done and the powder is piled on the foil, a little higher than usual, and my lighter is held steady. I am ready. A five hundred Euro note is drafted in to act as a straw, now held between my lips. I ignite the flame.

The heat produces a chain reaction and the powder reduces to leave a black bubbling tar that runs away down the foil. I am in hot pursuit with my straw. A deep aspiration through the note intent to capture all the smog left behind in its trail. It only takes a few moments for my lungs to find their limits. I turn off the flame. Make a funny noise as I try to suck in beyond my limits. I think my lungs will going to explode but I don't want to miss a wisp of smog. It's like candy in a cloud . . . *And breeeeeathe.*

I release slowly, very slowly, and the pleasure zones in my brain are grateful. All that is left is a sweet earthy smell and the caramelised left overs that will burn again. But I don't think that's necessary. *Wow, I've well gone goo goo eyed.* This medicine hasn't been cut. *Shit, I feel sick.* The urge to lie down is undeniable so I'll settle here, on the floor, a moment only. It's a good job Jamie went first, lol.

Jamie?

'Jamie?'

She must have gone to one of the bedrooms. I'll join her. I'll try. Maybe not? Gravity just got really heavy. As have my eyes, they want to close. Don't fight it. I couldn't if I tried. Free falling now, crossing the Event Horizon. Being pulled into a warm, cosy, fluffy Black Hole.

Someone's shouting at me, calling out from the other side. *Shh, leave me alone.* I want to sleep.

More shouting. Mindless profanity best left in the gutter, getting louder. Roll over, make it go away.

Hey, what the . . . ? This isn't right. I don't want to get up. Hey, I'm comfy. *No, don't pull me like that . . .*

'Jamie? Jamie, stop it. Don't pull me, I'm too tired.'

The ground's moving, sliding away. Stop shouting. I really don't like this dream. It's really difficult to open my eyes. But I have to tell her to stop.

'Jamie . . .' *Who the fuck are you?*

'What the fuck are you doing in my flat?'

What . . . who?

No, stop it, put me down.' *Who are you?* 'Get off me.'

'You little shit. Get up . . . Get up.'

One arm immobile, being pulled. Being dragged. The other raised in helpless defence.

'Who are you?' My eyes won't focus. My brain is still in a trance. Another dull thud against my head. Something just hit me. Yes, that's pain.

'You think you can break into my home, you, you fucking junkie. Get up.'

Oh God, it's the Fat Man? How can this be? He doesn't come back at weekends. *Ow*, stopped moving, *owww . . .* Won't stop hitting me. *Stop it stop it . . .*

'I'm sorry.' I shout the words out, can't think of anything else to say. 'I'm sorry, please, let go of me. I just wanted a place to sleep. Stop hitting me.'

He's let go of me. I've been allowed to cower. The soft pillow of my former life has been jacked by his violence. I'm still too out of it to register. Another crushing blow brings me back to life. Instant vision through the daze. I see him now; all ten feet of him. *Going up*. Such powerful hands to lift me like this. *Oh dear God, it really is the Fat Man*.

'You, you shouldn't be here.'

'What, in my own home? You little shit.'

I'm turning. There's an arm around my neck, squeezing my throat. 'You're hurting me. Let go of me. Jamie?'

'Jamie? Who the fuck's Jamie? Are there more of you? Son of a bitch, you got the family in here? You'd better get your friend out here right now before I snap your scrawny neck.'

'No, no, it's just me. I was dreaming.'

She must have heard us. *Run Jamie, hide*. The room swirls as my feet drag across the carpet. 'I was dreaming.'

'You dream on this you little cunt.'

Pain, senseless and violent, hard against my back. A punch that immobilises my legs and drops my knees to the carpet. He comes around and grabs hold of my hair. Kneels and prepares for the coup de gras.

Help me . . . I need help.

'Who else is in here?' he whispers and I can smell booze on his breath.

'Just me.'

I think my lip is bleeding. Can't see through the tears. I'm gonna puke.

'You dirty little scum, fuck, all over my trousers. You filthy fucking twat.'

I need more medicine, I felt that.

'I'm gonna, beat the crap, out of you.'

My head, my face. I'm face down. I feel his boot stomp on my back. I can't stop him, he's going to kill me.

'Stop . . . please stop, I beg you.' Doesn't he hear me, doesn't he care? 'Please, no.' Crawl Trigger, pull yourself way.

I'm crawling, kind of. The melee of impacts has stopped. A pause in his anger. Thank God I can't feel the pain. Uh oh, being dragged up again. I can see him now, above me. Angry, so angry. So much bigger up close. The balding on the man's rotund head, it emanates rage. The redness descending to his stubble laden face.

'Hey, I know you.'

No, no you don't.

‘I’ve seen you outside. Yes, hanging around. You’ve you been watching me, haven’t you? Casing up my flat.’

‘No. I swear. Not you . . .’

‘Not me? Who then? You fucking liar. Why else would you be in here now? You thought I’d be gone, didn’t you? Thought you’d help yourself to my shit? You thieving bastard. Not enough to rob the place you thought you’d hang out for a while. Watch my fucking TV. Help yourself to my shit.’

‘No, I swear . . .’

Moving again, head down and fast. Can’t stop him. I feel burning sensations all over my body. I’m like a child’s doll in this man’s hands.

‘How did you get in here? Who gave you the codes? Where did you get a key? Talk. *Slap*. Who told you to come here, what were you looking for? *Slap*. I won’t ask you again. *Slap slap slap*. Did you think you could camp out, help yourself whilst you looked for it?’

‘I was cold, and hungry I’ve never seen you be . . .’

‘Liar.’ *SLAP*.

A hand glued to my throat my arm twisted behind my back. I’m going for a walk. I don’t want to, but my feet ignore my commands to stop; he’s too strong to resist.

‘Anyone else in here?’

‘No.’

‘Let’s take a look shall we. Hey, anyone in here?’

Okay, brain beginning to work. Synapses are firing. It’s a firework display in my head. I have to concentrate. As soon as he lets go of my arm to open the door . . . *run*.

‘Anyone home? Come out now and you can leave. Take this piece of shit with you. No? If you’re lying to me you scumbag?’

‘No, there’s no-one.’ I don’t know what he’ll do if he finds her. *Please Lord, let Jamie find somewhere safe*.

‘What, your mummy never tell you to turn lights off when you leave the bog? You disgust me. That hard to aim straight is it? I should rub your face in it.’

‘I’m sorry, I, I’ll leave. No harm done.’ I can’t breath I’m so scared. ‘It’s so cold out there. I’m sorry, I’m so . . .’

‘One more sorry ass word and I’ll cut your fucking tongue out. Nod if you understand. That’s a good boy. If there’s anyone in the bedroom you’d better come out now.’

He kicks the door wide open. Empty. Nothing but furniture. Effeminate covers and colours for such a large and brutal man.

‘Come out you fuckers.’

Thank you Lord. *Fuck you Fatman.* Jamie’s found somewhere to hide. Maybe she got out when he started beating on me.

‘You find something funny Hobo?’

‘Ahh, no.’ *Please, stop.* ‘You’re hurting me.’

‘Sure there’s nothing funny?’

‘Yes, no, I don’t know.’ *Open the front door and throw me out.* No, it’s not this way. There’s no-one hiding in the other bedroom. I try to struggle, wriggle, but I’m clamped by his hands. ‘It’s just me. You don’t, have to, do this.’ Another door is kicked wide open. I’m being forced inside the room.

‘Down, face down on the bed. Don’t you fucking move. So what’s in the rucksack over there? Got my shit in it? You stealing my shit?’

I can’t breathe. The pillow, please, can’t breathe. Suffocating.

Yay, through I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

Can’t, breathe.

Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Not enough air. What’s he saying . . . *I can’t fucking hear you? I’m suffocating.* No, being lifted away . . . Taking a breath . . . I can breathe.

Hey, that’s Jamie’s bag. All its contents being tipped on the bed. *Why?* There’s nothing of his in there?

‘You fucking thief.’

What? . . . no.

‘Where did you get this from?’

‘That’s my money? *My Euros?* Being thrown on the bed.

‘It’s my money, I swear.’

‘Yeah, course it is. Tell me where you took this from?’

If I could stop panting I’d explain. I took the money from someone else. Someone just as crazy as you. I’m still trying to catch my breath. He’s let go of me. Fat Man is pulling at the carpet.

Now’s the time. Jamie’s bag, the stupid pocket I can never get open. It’s in there, a chance to defend myself. Stop fumbling, get it before he’s finished. *Open the bag, open the bloody thing . . .* It’s not there?

‘It’s still here?’ Fat Man says, his relief obvious. ‘Just as I left it. Tell me where you got that money? Tell me where it came from?’

You wouldn’t believe me. No, stay away. Don’t you touch me. Hands, fighting them off, choking me. No, forcing me down, face down on the bed again. Please, I can’t do this. I can barely breathe from the last time. Darkness.

The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord, my Lord, he will protect me . . .
Oh God, please?

Can't breathe. No air. I'm dying.

"It's Jesus' will that we love all men." I hear his voice. For the first time in years. *Why his voice?* "It's His will, that you love me," Father Deacon, reassuring me. Whispering words from behind me.

I hide my face in the cushion and pray. I try to imagine myself in another place as I receive *his* love.

"This is the nature of love," Father Deacon says.

Sometimes love hurts.

But I endure. I have never once cried out. As I lie prostrated, arms out to form the sign of the Cross. Sometimes he makes me kneel, hands together in prayer, but with my face touching the ground.

And always, He, is there. The Lord Jesus hung on the cross, nailed to the plaster. I see Him. He watches us from the wall. But He never intervenes. So this must be love then. His love. His image hangs as a symbol of all that is divine and good.

At times I can barely breathe. Father Deacon, he loves me so intensely.

I can't breathe. I can't fucking breathe. Adrenaline is finally overpowering my medication. *Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.* I throw myself into a fit and cast off all fear. I am an Angel. I am might. I will be heard.

I can't move . . .

'Don't you fucking touch him.'

Jamie? Is that Jamie's voice? She sounds angry.

Fat Man groans and lifts himself away. I can breathe again.

'I said get off him, get off him. Get, off, him . . . Fucking die you fat fuck.'

Another grunt, more muted than the last. I think I can move now. Eurgh, something splatters, I can't see. It's all gone red. What the fuck is going on?

The Fat Man, he's falling all over me. Reeling, squirming, squashing. I catch a glint of something shiny, but there's something in my eyes. Flash follows flash, each twinkle followed by a crisp sloppy penetrating sound. In, and then out. Again and again, the sounds more deliberate, more exacting. Each delivery sucks itself free. And I hear Jamie, not speaking, she's panting. Her breaths are angry and in perfect time with the blows. It's happening again.

'Die, die, you fucking fat bastard, die . . .'

No-one deserves this, not this, not to die like this. I can't do anything, I can't save him. But I think Jamie just saved my life.

'Die, die, die.'

The frenzy begins again. Blow after blow into the blubber that pins me down.

'Die, die . . . die.'

Stop it, stop it . . . stop it.

It's in my eyes, all wet and warm. One spurt follows another, I can't move out of the way. His blood? My Blood? She won't stop stabbing with the knife.

'Jamie, stop. For God's sake, stop. That's enough, he's dead.' He stopped moaning a dozen strikes ago. 'He's gone. Please, stop.'

'Is he, dead?' She asks between breaths.

Carved up like a Sunday roast.

'He's too heavy, get him off me,' I plead, but she's no help. *Get him off me, get him off.* I'm sliding, moving, being pulled by the leg. And then I'm free. I'm out. Thank God. *Oh Jamie . . .*

Look at her, she's shaking like a leaf. Me too. What a fucking mess. Now what are we going to do?

'I couldn't, let him, hurt you,' Jamie says. The girl with the knife, in the blood soaked clothes. I just want to hold her, tell her it's okay. Take the knife from her hand, carefully.

'Jamie, please, give it to me.' She's nodding.

'Okay.'

Okay? Like I want the salt?

I've never seen so much blood. It's all up the walls, and me, I'm covered in the stuff. I've got to get it off me, now, get his blood off me. I need to get Fat Man off of Jamie.

'Take your clothes off.'

'Okay.'

Okay? It's like she doesn't understand what just happened? I'm not sure that I do. I just want to shut down, go into shock. But I can't.

'Jamie, come with me.' I have her hand, teasing her toward the door. 'We need to get you into the shower. No, leave all our clothes in here.' I help her undress. She doesn't resist. 'Come on, we'll get in the shower. We have to get the blood off you.' *And then me . . .*

'Trigger, he was hurting you. He deserved to die.'

'No. Don't you say that.' *Not that.* 'Get out of those clothes. Come on, away from the blood, it's soaked into the carpet.' I have to clean her up. Clean myself up.

I undress and lead her out of the room. But I can't help looking back. The Fat Man lies on the bed with a frenzy of wounds. Blood splatters are everywhere. The carpet is wet. Part of the carpet is up, why? What has the Fat Man hidden in the floor? I don't care. I close the door.

“He deserved to die,” Jamie said with no remorse. As if it were something that had to be done. Like putting out the trash. Maybe she’s right.

How many gallons of water have run over my head and scrolled down my shoulders? It’s hot, scalding almost. The soap’s scent floral and fresh. I keep at it but I can’t wash The Fat Man off me. I’ve bathed in him. I just want him gone. And what about the body? It’s still in there, lying on the bed.

The spare bedroom has clothes in the wardrobe. They don’t belong to the Fat Man; someone else. A friend maybe, or a son? I’ve never seen anyone else come back here. Not too bad a fit these jeans, not now I’ve found a belt, a nice big woolly jumper too. Black and red, how ironic, but it will keep me warm. DC trainers on my feet, barely worn, only one size to big.

Jamie’s fine, she has clothes in her bag. But she refuses to change. She just sits there staring at the wall. Staring and rocking as if she were a patient in one of those places. All I can do now is cover her with a bath towel, still warm from the radiator. The storm has passed. Now we must deal with the aftermath.

Why? Why did Fat Man come back? All he had to do was stay away until Monday and we'd have been gone. On our way to dance in the rain. He's ruined everything. *Everything*. And yet I can't stop thinking about him lying in there; his bloated body. *Jamie*. Her eyes after the act. So full of passion, pride almost; a lioness returning to the pride with a kill.

There is a reckoning coming. Make no mistake. And when it comes, it will visit us with violence.

'Jamie?' I daren't raise more than a whisper. 'Do you want to get dressed yet?' Still she won't answer. I'll leave the door open. Listen out. I must be patient, let her come back to me on her own. Right now I need medication. Not much. Just enough to calm me down. *Oh God . . .* I can't stop thinking about him. *Forgive her, please*. He's lying in there, in that a mess. *I'm weak, Lord. I'm sorry*. I can't cope without the medication.

This is so uncomfortable. A labour to sit up. How long have I been curled up like this? Eurgh, and the coffee's cold.

Jamie? Have I been asleep?

My face is in my hands, my head filled with butterflies. I moved the chairs like this so I could keep good vigil on the door, not fall asleep. *Jamie.* Shit, how long have I been asleep?

The flat is quiet, eerily so. I can't see to the end of the hall. Anyone could have walked in, again. *I'm so stupid.* Half a dozen steps gets me to the front door. The mortice is still locked, the chain looped in place. My heart's dancing.

'Jamie, are you in there?' The doors closed, didn't I leave it ajar? I can't remember. Can't think straight.

'Jamie?' Anything could come out of the dark but I daren't put the light on. I must wait. A few moments more and my eyes adjust. Start to draw in the shapes inside the bedroom. Shit, I'm so jumpy. Just a bed and a night table. She's still there, unmoved. *Thank you, Lord.* I wonder what she sees when she stares like that. If only I could enter her world. But I can't, there's nothing special about me.

Look at her . . . my Jamie.

An artist's muse sat there, knees up, her arms wrapped around her shins. She's so beautiful. I'll look for a brush so I can comb her hair. I hope she's warm enough, I put the heating on before I crashed. And just as well, bless her, the towel has slipped from her shoulders. *My Jamie.* She's truly *my Jamie* now after what we did together.

I'll put the kettle on and make some coffee; extra strong and sweet. That's what Jamie will need. And find her a bed sheet, something to wrap her up in. I pull the door too as I leave.

What a mess. What a fucking mess I've made of this.

Two days camping out in style before our great adventure to the coast. All in jeopardy now, because of me.

Because of him.

Now we have to hide in this place. Skulk in the darkness before we can take flight. And when we get there we'll have to go hide in the backstreets. No, it shouldn't be like this. We should be flying to freedom. I wanted Jamie to flaunt herself. I bought her a new dress.

The dress, where is it?

Everything from the rucksack is out on the floor. It's not here. The pretty garment I stole is not here. Was it left behind with the book? I backtrack in my mind. Try to remember. Yes, I see it, lying on the floor in tatters. How did I forget? Dear God, I wish I could forget all of this. Start again. But the facts are all around me. Just look at the lounge, so plush and modern, so clean . . . so very clean. Now look again, at the broken glass and upturned chairs. And in the hallway two doors with broken hinges. Caved in by the Fat Man's big boots. Oh God, his body, I can still see it in the bedroom even though the door is closed.

I have to distract myself, listen to the roar of the kettle as it boils. Concentrate on its sound. Like a roaring wind as the water boils. *Click.* Strong coffee, make it strong.

Maybe if I poured the hot steamy liquid over my head it would help? I suspect not.

I have to think. *I don't want to think.* But there's no way we can stay here now. *Not like this.* What if someone comes? Oh God, what if there's a knock on the door? *We have to leave.* But where to? The tickets, they're not valid until Monday. *Oh Trigger, why direct. Why did you have to travel direct?* We should have gone that day, straight away. But no, I had to make the grand gesture. Flaunt what I had to Jamie. I wanted us to go shopping. Prepare properly. *I'm so stupid. Stupid stupid stupid.*

No, we're not spending another day and night in this place, not with him. Not with Fat Man in there like that. *Fuck . . .* what if that copper knows about the train? *No, he can't.* That's not possible. But what if he's lying in wait at the station?

We can't risk it, not now.

Find another way . . . there must be another way. There must be . . . The Fat Man's car? If he's come back, then so has his car.

Keys, where are the keys? Oh crap, what if they're in his pocket. No, I'm not going in there, I can't. *I won't.* I have to.

Check the floor in the hallway, the lounge. They could have fallen out in the struggle. But they're not lying anywhere. So no choice then, I have to go in there. Back to the scene of the slaughter.

It's the only way.

I feel a powerful vibe through my hand as my fingers touch the door. As they wrap around the handle. I know why I have to enter. The chance of freedom. But the more I push, the more the door does not want to open. I don't want it to open.

He's still there, and it's worse than I remember. Oh God, look at him. Do fat people have more blood in them? How many times did Jamie stab him? I feel The Force, but not in a good way.

The bed is awash with red, my Euros are on the quilt. Some are tainted by blood. *There's so much blood.* Streams of crimson painted halfway up the wall; they reach the ceiling. Fat Man didn't stand a chance. I can still hear his first groan of surprise; I think she'd stabbed him a second time before Fat Man had felt the pain. I can't imagine how that must have felt. I don't want to try. *I feel sick.* He tried so desperately to get up. But Jamie was too quick, too eager. He squirmed on top of me each time she plunged the blade.

I really don't want to be in here. *Just do it.* I can't. *I won't.* There has to be another way. But I know there isn't. This is it. This is what it will take to be free of this place. To be free of this city.

I take a deep breath; suck up all my anxieties, as my fingers work gingerly to empty his back pockets. Only a wallet that I drop to the floor. In his front pockets then.

The Fat Man's weight blocks my entry. I steel my hand to persevere. Dry blood crinkles to my touch. I don't want to do this. *Oh God, he's heavy.* Too heavy as I try to move him.

I shove my hand down deeper, to where the blood is still wet, well, gooey really. A disgusting broth I must feel my way through. Fingers fondling, pressing, delving into the ever tightening space to find . . . Nothing?

No keys?

Blood stains my hands again.

Where are they?

I take a step back, trip and stumble. Look down at what it was that caught my foot.

I remember now. Fat Man was keen to check the floor when he'd found my money. He'd pulled at the carpet. *Why?* What had distracted him. What did he think I'd stolen?

Some sort of hole has been cut into the floor and then hidden below the edge of the carpet. *Very clever.* Below is an old black box made of tin. What's so valuable in there that it distracted him from me?

Not here, not with him lying there like that. I can't stop thinking he'll get up and come back to life. Besides, the blood is beginning to smell, it's disgusting. How long before he proper stinks? I grab the cleanest pillow. Relieve it of the outer casing and pluck all my Euros from the bed to put inside. *Get out, Trigger.* Take the swag and get out.

Deep breaths . . . Take deep breaths.

Panting, feeling the urge to puke. Using the hallway wall as a crutch. I won't go back in there again, not ever, not for anything. My head is spinning again.

Take a deep breath.

My life has become a tale of horror. And it's following me; take a look at the wall. Covered with blood from my hands. Like a child's hand-painting. If it wasn't for Jamie I'd open that front door, and I'd run. I'd run . . . *No way, it can't be.*

Hanging on the hook beside the door is a set of keys. The logo on the fob is Jaguar. Fat Man must have put them there when he came in last night. Before he knew I was here. *Sweet hallelujah.* Half a dozen silver treats hang as if dangled from a Christmas tree. Now clutched in my hand.

I have the keys to our salvation. And enough money to buy a castle in the sand.

I whisper her name from the door but Jamie won't respond. She still sits there draped in that sheet, staring.

How long? How long until she comes back to me. She always comes back. Come back to me, Jamie.

I need us to talk. Last night keeps going around in my head. Around and around like a catchy song that won't leave my lips.

Fuck, fuck . . . why did this have to happen? Damn you. Damn you Fat Man for coming back. For putting yourself in harm's way?

Breathe . . .

I have the keys to the car, but all I can do is wait. Watch. Jamie from the doorway and hope. Tell myself that all will be well.

It will be. I know it will.

On the floor of the lounge is the Fat Man's box. It's old, the paint faded. It's like the old petty cash tins from the sixties. The ones with the handles that fold down into the lid. A lid that's stiff but opens. What treasure lies inside?

Oh no, not that. Anything but that.

Photos, dozens of them. I can't look. *Get them out, throw them away.* They disgust me. Fat Man's box is full of images, of children. How could anyone want to look at filth like these?

Maybe he did deserved to die. Jamie said he did. Maybe that's why he came home, for Divine retribution. Jamie's act was the vengeful hand of God. *Yes, I see it now.* And there's money in here too, a lot of money. Big Euro's like mine. Even more than I gave to Jen, a lot more. And there's something else, something far more powerful than money.

Out you come.

I've never held a gun before. Or seen one, before that prick, Carl, shoved his in my face. In my hand is an automatic handgun.

It's lighter than it looks. The handle moulds perfectly into my palm. Both palms, as I move it around the room to take aim at the lamp, and then the TV. For the first time since the Fat Man returned, I realise my hands don't tremble.

I stand up and sweep my aim around the room. *Bang*. The light fitting is dead. *Bang*. The sofa and chair just got it. This thing makes me feel like a Hawk; I'm no longer a Pigeon. *Bang, Bang*. Death to the telephone and the vase. Now I wonder what it's like to shoot this thing for real.

In the tin there are two magazines, each one packed with bullets.

'You can't take that.'

'What?' *Shit*. 'Jamie, I didn't hear you come in.'

'Give that to me.'

'What . . . why?'

'Because you'll shoot yourself in the foot.'

'Ha ha,' *Funny*, 'no, I want to keep it.'

'You don't need a gun, Trigger. Give it to me.'

'No, I won't. I found it, it's mine. Besides, I need this.'

'Why?'

'I . . .'

'Why do you need a gun, Trigger?'

'To protect us.'

'From whom? Tell me, Trigger. Who was it back at the house. Why were they looking for you? Tell me.'

'It was Bloodhound. They want me.'

'Why?'

'I think they're looking for you,' *there, I said it. Looking for you, not me*. 'I should have told you, I'm sorry.'

'Who's looking for me, Trigger?'

'The Police.' *Shit, I said it out loud*. 'It was the police back at the squat. I should have told you, I know I should. I didn't want to worry you.'

'What do the Police want with me?'

'It's the man on the bridge, Bloodhound. He knows, Jamie. I think he knows.'

She comes in and sits on the arm of the chair. *Where did she get a hairbrush?* Slow sweeping strokes run through her hair.

'What does he know, Baby Boy?'

'About you, and me . . . about the bodies, I think.'

'Bodies?' The brush stops. 'What bodies?' She delivers another thoughtful stroke down her midnight hair. 'Oh, I remember,' she says. 'I didn't have any choice, you do know that. You do believe me, don't you.'

'Yes, of course. But I don't think that Policeman will.'

'Fine, so he knows. Is that why we're going away?'

'Yes, look.' I offer up the Fat Man's cash. 'It's all happened so fast, Jamie. The Police . . . him in there. Carl. I pray it isn't too late.'

'Trigger, I've never seen so much money. Is it ours?'

'Yes, no, I mean . . . You do understand, we're in big trouble. People are looking for us.'

'What people?'

'The man, Bloodhound, oh, and Carl.'

'Carl? What's Carl got to do with us? Is that where you got all that medication? Well, so what. None of them matter. We have money now. And we have each other, right.'

I don't think she understands. 'You shrug as if it's of no concern? Jamie, another man is dead.'

'Another one? You said the others were dreams. Trigger, can you brush for me. It feels better when you do it. Can't we hide him? Clean up the flat? What, did I say something funny?'

'Jamie, I can't clean that up. Not this time.'

She takes my hand in hers. She looks frightened.

'Trigger, you won't leave me will you?'

'No, don't be silly. It's okay, we'll deal with this.' *Somehow.* 'Shhhh, don't cry. It'll be all right, I promise. You and me, backs to the wall, remember. Besides, I'm not frightened if they come. Not now.' *Not with this tucked into my jeans.* 'Let's get you dressed.' I let the keys dangle. 'We're leaving now, and we're not coming back.'

I'm not frightened any more.

61
MONDAY

Adams never cared much for Victoria Station. The criss-crossing of the steel roof, the thousands of glass panels in-between. It was all too busy, too put up in a hurry. Outside the station looked like a Department Store; inside someone had gone crazy with the Meccano.

Adams took a breath. Even at this early hour hundreds of people were milling around. Checking signs, shuffling through gates, dashing for platforms.

A hollow voice barked and startled him. Unintelligible words from the hidden tannoy. Sounds that echoed around the Station. Then a voice interrupted the busy scene, talking to Adams from his radio.

'They're not coming, Ray. The train left the platform forty minutes ago. I'm sorry mate, but we'll have to call it a day.'

A look at the big screen confirmed the statement.

'Another ten minutes, Harvey, can you keep them here another ten minutes?'

'I'm sorry mate, I really am. But I can't have the boys hanging around all day.'

'Yeah, sure.' The radio clicked as if changing channel. It signalled his failure, again. Acceptance was a bitter pill to swallow.

'Stand down, stand down. Let's wrap it up boys. Go get a coffee, and thanks for coming in.' The radio clicked again. *'We'll keep an eye on the cctv, Ray, but I had to call it.'*

'Understood, Harv. And Harv, thanks for trying mate.'

'Hey, if the boys want to hang around a train station before their shift, who am I to argue. And for the record, you did the right thing. Wanna get tea and cake?'

‘Not really.’

‘Platform five, Coffee Ritazza. I’ll be two minutes. Let’s chat and see where you go from here.’

Coffee Ritazza. Big letters on the sign above the door. Inside was tiny, just a glass counter and a selection of cakes. A middle aged woman speaking to a customer. Outside were three tables, all occupied by early morning commuters.

‘Excuse me, ladies. I’m sorry to bother you both. I’m a Police officer.’ *Yes, the warrant card is real.* ‘Could you get up and move casually to another area. This table is needed for surveillance, for an ongoing investigation. Please don’t look around, just carry on with your day. Thank you so much. Your cooperation is much appreciated.’

Adams helped them on their way with a sympathetic smile.

‘Raymond, using your warrant card to get us a table was misuse of Police power.’

‘You want to stand and drink your coffee? Didn’t think so. And I’m paying, no arguments.’ Ray took a seat, then released a well overdue sigh. ‘Fuck . . . Fuck. Why didn’t they show, Harvey?’

‘Maybe you spooked them when you raided that house. Maybe they got on at a different station? We can’t watch them all, not without the Met and the Counties involved. And you’d need cooperation from some heavy duty Brass for that to happen. So what now? Where do you go from here, Ray?’

‘I have no idea. They obviously didn’t catch the train. Shit, shit. They’re long gone, aren’t they. I would be. As far from London as I could get.’

‘Ahh, here she comes.’ Harvey was grinning. Why was Harvey grinning? ‘Ray, this is Jodie, and she makes the best latte in London.’

‘Aww, thank you,’ replied the waitress. She was seventeen, eighteen at a pinch. Blonde and bright eyed, and wore a face that couldn’t help but smile all the time. ‘Can I get you your usual?’ she asked.

‘Yes please, and a latte with an extra shot for my unhappy friend here.’

‘Oh, it’s nothing serious I hope?’ she asked.

‘No, not really. Just multiple murder, a serious professional fuck up, and the probable loss of my job and pension. Sorry love, even your smile can’t burn that lot away.’

‘Oh, right, I’ll bring you some coffee.’

‘She was being nice, Ray.’

‘She needn’t bother. And since when do they do table service here?’

‘I might have helped out with a parking permit. It was nothing really.’

‘Harvey, you’re not . . .?’

‘Ha ha ha, no. I’m just an old fella who enjoys his coffee.’

‘Yeah, well drag your pervert mind back to Police work. I need help.’

‘Mate, I have no idea where you go with this. Sorry.’

‘Trigger’s in the wind. Fuck, for all I know he’s out there, any one of that lot milling around. Sat on a platform waiting for another train. Maybe hanging out watching me.’

‘That’s a bit paranoid, mate.’

‘I’ll tell you something Harvey, she’ll kill again. Maybe on someone else’s turf, but there *will* be more bodies. It’s just a matter of time.’

‘Maybe, but you did everything you could. Don’t beat yourself up. What about your sidekick, Cooper? Told him yet?’

‘Yeah, I texted him whilst I was waiting for you. Poor sod’s put his job on the line for this.’

‘You could give the Inspector one more crack?’

‘Yeah right. He’ll probably arrest me for trespass if I turn up at the Station. No, he’s gone, not my problem any more.’

I’m going home, Harv. And you know what, I’m stopping at Thomas Cook on the way. This is dead and buried now. There’s nothing more I can do. Fuck, fuck . . . Ahh, thank you, Jodie.’

‘Are you sure I can’t get you some toast, or a bagel? Goes lovely with coffee,’ she said.

‘No thanks Love, just coffee.’ She walked away. ‘But why didn’t he show? He bought the fucking tickets, why didn’t he use them?’

‘Sorry Ray, I don’t know. But you’ll let me know if there’s anything else I can do.’

‘Sure. Hmm, looks good.’

‘She does doesn’t she?’

‘The coffee, Harvey. If you want to bang the barista buy her flowers first. Or take her out for dinner. Maybe your wife will make up a three-some after the meal?’

‘Well, you know how to bring a man down.’

‘Hey, misery loves company.’ Raymond’s phone rang. ‘Excuse me, it’s probably Sam. Oh great, did I mention misery? It’s Teapot. What the fuck does he want?’

‘Answer it and you’ll find out.’

‘Harv, he doesn’t know about us being here, does he?’

‘Not unless he’s psychic. Well, go on, answer it.’

Ray stood. Coffee in one hand, phone in the other. He had to use one of them.

‘Hello? Oh, hi sir. Yes sir. Uh-huh, sir. Straight away? I’ll get out of bed and come straight down, sir. Yes sir, immediately. I’m on my way.’

‘Men only look like that when their wife’s out to get them?’

‘Harvey, you sure you didn’t tell anyone else about this?’

‘Derr, no. Shit, am I gonna get a call too?’

‘Gotta go, Harv. And Harvey, thanks . . . for everything.’

Adams felt like he'd been called to the Headmaster's office. Hey, what's the worst Teapot could do. Suspend him. Take his pension. Put his marriage on the line. Thinking about it wasn't helping.

The spindly figure of Sergeant Daws sat behind the desk as he entered the station. Where was everyone?

'What have you done, Adams?' Daws asked. 'The Inspectors got the AC upstairs with him; that's twice in as many days. You up for the Queens Award or something?'

'Something like that,' he answered. 'Where is everyone?'

'Half the building has been called down to Ops,' Daws replied. 'Well, what's going on?'

'I have no idea, Dave. Message I got was to get my arse down here, *pronto*.'

'Well, he didn't look too happy when I saw him. Says you're to go straight up when you get here. Everything all right?'

'No, not really. Do I leave my warrant card here on the desk, or take it in and hand it over?' He offered it ceremoniously to Daws. 'They may as well have this too.' He dropped the photo on the desk. 'Pretty pointless now. The only *real* lead I had. No match on the prints. And who the hell would recognise this face thirty years later?'

'Raymond, I don't what you're talking about.'

'Straight upstairs you said?'

'Immediately, was the word the Inspector used. Hey, I didn't know you had kids, Ray?'

'What? Oh, no, not mine.'

'She's cute.'

'No, she isn't. She's a bitch.'

'You feeling all right? Wouldn't let you play with her tea set?'

Adams wasn't listening. He retracted the offer of his warrant card. It really was the Headmaster's office, only he wouldn't be getting a slipper across his arse. This was way more serious.

'Some sweet memories behind her though,' said Daws. 'We made enough noise in that hotel to wake the dead, if you know what I mean.'

Right, let's get this over with.

'Hey, say that again. You recognise the hotel in the photo?'

'I should do, I spent my honeymoon in it four years ago. It's The Grand Hotel in Brighton. Really nice place; that's the main entrance behind the girl. Colours different but the hotel's the same. And it was sunny whilst we were there. Why, is that important?'

'I could kiss you.'

'Resist the temptation,' said Daws. The photo snatched from his hand.

Trigger's left me a message, what else can it be? Shit, they're gonna sack me aren't they.

No-one in the office. Not a soul. Adams knocked on the door.

'Yes, come in. Ahh good, Adams. You know the DC. Don't bother taking a seat.' Marriott removed his glasses. Adams stood to attention

'It appears you are on to something, Raymond. There's more to your tale than any of us considered. You're familiar with the flats at Victoria Place?'

Victoria Place? 'Yes, sir, I spoke to one of the owners the other day.

'Right, well one of her neighbours found a body about two hours ago. Severe stabbing to the back and torso. Attack looks frenzied.'

'It's not Mrs O'Neil?'

'No, the body's male. Lives in the flat downstairs. Victim's name is, George Hammack.' Teapot looked up over his glasses. 'Apparently the neighbour found his door ajar. Went in and got more than she bargained for.'

'The murderer left the door open? They aren't usually so helpful.'

'SOCO's going over the place as we speak,' Teapot added, 'apparently the bedroom wall is covered with your artist's impressions.'

'And you think it's *our* man, sir?'

'Oh, it's *our* man all right, Raymond.'

Just wanted to check it's not just 'my man' anymore.

'Preliminary sent us these,' said the Deputy Commissioner. And handed Ray a tablet.

'Wow, that's a lot of blood. How many stab wounds does that take?'

'A lot,' said the DC. 'The officer on scene suggests a blitz attack by an unknown assailant.'

By an angry fucking octopus.

‘Raymond, do you have any ideas about the meaning of these symbols?’

‘No, sir, Cooper says the figures are prime numbers, but the rest . . . who knows? Maybe Inca, or Mayan? Some sort of end of the world nonsense?’

‘Right, well, we’ll get some brighter minds than ours to work on the symbols shall we. And you’re reinstated by the way. I want you to run down to the crime scene and have a chat with the murder squad. Fill them in on everything, and then get yourself back to work.’

‘I could be of more help sir.’ The DC sat back, Marriott leaned forward.

‘That won’t be necessary, Adams,’ said Teapot. ‘Fill them in on what you know, and then take the rest of the day off. You’ve earned it.’

You’re sidelining me, why?

‘He left me a message, sir.’

‘I’m sorry, a message?’ Teapot did the thing with the glasses again. ‘The suspect left *you* a message?’

‘His name’s Trigger sir, and yes, I believe he’s left me a message.’

‘And what did this message say?’ asked the DC.

Whoa, Raymond, don’t do this. You’re about to take a giant leap with nothing but shit to land in.

‘He told me where to find him, sir.’ *Ah, I think I just farted at the dinner table.* ‘I chased up a lead or two after our last chat, sir. Didn’t want to let it go. Look, sirs, I’m no shrink, but I think Trigger wants to stop her and he can’t do it himself. I can’t be sure, but maybe in *his* head, we’ve bonded somehow.’

‘You chased him down the road, Adams. I hardly think that constitutes a commingle relationship.’

‘Just a moment, Inspector,’ the DC interrupted, ‘you think that this man, Trigger; he wants to stop a woman that you only *suspect* he’s with?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘But you’ve no actual proof he has a partner?’

‘We have several witnesses who say she’s his girlfriend, sir.’

‘Go on,’ said the DC.

‘I think he’s covered up for her until now, but that maybe it’s all getting too much for him. Look, I don’t know for sure, but we have him on cctv getting out of a taxi at Waterloo, on the day that I chased him. Cooper backtracked to where the cabbie picked him up and we went

knocking on some doors. We found them, where they were staying. They were in the building but gone by the time we gained access.'

'And you didn't call this in?' Teapot removed his glasses and pointed straight them at Ray. 'Why the fuck not?'

'Err, I was three parts suspended, sir. And technically I had committed breaking and entering. So no, I didn't call it in. I informed the murder squad . . . anonymously.'

'That was you? You realise you'll probably lose your job for this.'

Here we go again.

'Inspector . . . *Jack.*' The DC interrupted. 'Sergeant Adams is a good man; a bloody good cop from what I can see. If it wasn't for the *initiative* of our boys, most of the crime in London would go unsolved. Wouldn't you agree?'

'Yes sir, apparently I would.'

'Good, now tell us what you know, Sergeant. No gaps.'

'Yes sir, thank you sir. I think I know where they've gone.'

'You know where this couple are hiding out?'

'Yes sir.'

'This isn't a game, Sergeant.'

'No sir, but I want in on this, sir. All the way.'

'Are you about to blackmail the Deputy Commissioner, Adams?'

'Jack . . . please. Sergeant Adam's has obviously struck some kind of accord with, Trigger was it? So I think he's quite right, we should utilise every resource that we have. May I call you Raymond? After all, Raymond here has joined the dots quicker than two murder teams.'

He may look like a ponce but there's a Rottweiler hiding behind the celebrity grin. I can almost see the cogs turning. The politics mixing with the job. A big spoonful of public relations and a once in a lifetime photo op. You are so out of your depth here, Raymond. I'll be crucified if I'm wrong.

'All right Sergeant, you're on the team.'

Fucking yeah.

'Thank you sir. He's here, the building in this photo,' he handed it to the DC, 'that's the Grand Hotel in Brighton. We know from the ticket records that Trigger bought two tickets for Brighton. We staked out Victoria Station this morning but they were a no show.'

'You staked out Victoria Station?' said Teapot.

'Yes, sir, but I may have tipped our hand back at Walker Street.'

'Oh this just gets better and better.'

Jack . . .'

‘Sorry sir.’

‘We found a book when we entered Walker Street, and more scribbles on the wall. This photo was inside a book. It’s her, a bit younger, but it’s her. Trigger’s telling me that’s where they’re headed,’ *I think I’m gonna crap myself*, ‘to the Grand Hotel in Brighton.’

‘And you’re sure about this?’

‘Why else would he leave it, sir. They were in the house at Walker Street; he knew we were outside. He left this for me to find. She doesn’t know, I’m sure of that. And why would he leave the door open at the murder scene unless he wanted the body to be found?’

‘All right, Raymond. You can run with this. I’ll contact the Chief Constable in Sussex and suggest that he get an armed response unit ready. Sergeant Adams, you’re going to Brighton to liaise with the locals. If this is going down *off* our patch we need to make sure that someone from the Met is on hand. Right, is there anything else . . . Sergeant . . .? Inspector? Sergeant Adams, it looks like you’ve got yourself a lead role in all of this. Get a car from the pool, I want you on the ground reporting directly to Inspector Bennett here, he can apprise me of the situation as it unfolds. The moment anything happens, I want to know, is that clear? The Commissioner will want to make a statement to the Press the moment you make an arrest. And Adams, if you’re wrong, there’ll be a shit storm.’

‘Yes, sir,’ *and by that smile I’m guessing all the shit will stick to me.*

‘Sir, I’ll need PC Cooper. It’ll be good experience for him.’

‘Fine. Jack, see to it. Sergeant Adams, make the Met proud.’

‘Yes, sir, and thank you sir.’

‘Right, Jack and I are late for a briefing downstairs. Good luck.’

‘Just one moment, Adams,’ said Teapot. ‘I’ll be along shortly, sir.’

Here it comes. Here it comes.

The door closed behind the DC.

‘What the hell was that all about, Raymond?’

‘I’m not wrong about this, sir’

‘If you want to throw twenty-five years of good police work down the drain that’s your decision. But you’ve dragged Cooper into all of this which makes you out of fucking order. That boy has a decent shot of rising through the ranks.

And you do realise that the DC is already distancing himself from both of you, through me. I’m in the firing line now, so you’d better be right. Christ, that heart attack has seriously fucked you up.’

‘I’m not wrong, sir.’

‘For all our sakes, I hope not.’ The shine was fading from his face. ‘Okay, we’ll continue to run down leads at this end. You take an unmarked car from the pool, and I’ll make the calls. And make sure you do everything by the book, is that understood?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And Raymond, the DC wants to know everything that goes on down there, before it happens. Don’t fuck this up.’

What am I without Jamie? What will I become when they take her away? I won't know myself when she's gone. I won't recognise my own face when I look in the mirror. I might not even remember Jamie's name when they finish with me. It's a horrible thought, Lord.

So I want to say thank you. Thank you for everything, but especially for Jamie in my life, Lord. Thank you for the woman by the window who's smiling at me. The girl whose naked skin glistens in your light. Proof absolute that perfection exists in the World. Her shape, moulded by You . . . Sorry, I shouldn't pray to you without my pants on, but I had to tell You. I wanted you to know. I'm happy, Lord. So happy that Jamie is a part of my life.

I just wish you could find it in your heart to make us last forever, at least for a while longer. Give us a more time, Lord. Please, before they come to try and take her away. And they will come. Because she's done bad things, Lord. But she's not a bad person. It's just, well, perfection can't always be perfect. You above all should know that. Show Jamie love, Lord. I'll take what's coming. I'll bear its weight. But I beg You, Lord, don't let Jamie end. Not in fire and brimstone. Let her sit by Your side and find peace. Show her mercy and love . . . Amen.

Oh, and say hello to Mummy for me. Tell her I'll see her soon. Tell her we both will. All good things must come to an end, right? I make the sign of the Cross. 'My Father, hallowed be thy name . . . Amen.'

'Trigger, are you going to pray every time we make love? Okay, fine, so long as you do it quietly. Now come over here, come on. Stand by the window with me. Can you smell it? The air, it's so clean and fresh. And I feel it too, don't you? I feel cleansed; all my bad thoughts leaving through the window as the sweat evaporates out to sea. Come outside with me. Come on.'

‘Bloody heck, Jamie, cover up. You can’t just wander outside naked like this. Here, put this round your shoulders, and stop laughing. No, no . . . stop it. Stop it. Someone will see us, ha, ha, no tickling. Ha, ha, ha, Jamie, please.’

‘Fine, give me the towel. I’ll wear it like a cape of invisibility. Look, no-one can see me, only you. Do you like what you see?’

I do.

‘Are you happy, Baby Boy?’

I’m nodding like a dog.

‘I’m happy. I think I am. Yes, yes, let’s be happy.’ The towel drops away. ‘No-one knows us here, Trigger. Isn’t this Heaven? Isn’t it? The two of us, invisible at the seaside.’

The view is wonderful. The wide open sea lies before us. A place where gulls caw and swoop. Where white horses surf the tips of waves. It’s so beautiful. Can’t she feel the cold?

‘The sea is lovely, pneumonia isn’t. Can we look from the other side of the doors.’

‘But it’s so invigorating.’

‘It’s bloody freezing out here. Look, see, goose pimples. Jamie, please, cover yourself.’

‘Hold me first. Squeeze me. Kiss me, yeah, just like that. I love you, Baby Boy. I really do.’

She said *the* words again. Those three beautiful words. The only words I need to hear, the rest don’t matter. *Jamie loves Trigger*. Bring it on, bring it all on. Nothing can hurt us now, we’re in love.

‘I love you too.’ I say, and usher her inside. ‘Let’s get back in bed and warm up a bit.’

Is this how the earliest explorers viewed our World? Such a vast and virginal horizon, where nothing but mystery and surprise lay waiting. I wish it could be so for us. But I fear this will be our last stand. This room, this palace of comfort and finery. One last chance to feel alive. The ocean, my gift to Jamie.

‘Hey, I thought you were coming to bed?’

‘Try and stop me.’ I say. One last look at our World before I close the doors . . . ‘No, no, that’s not possible. Not yet.’ *Cancer*. Spreading fast. Hurling along the road, coming from both sides. Carving a terrible divide between the hotel and the sandy beach. I see a sight that brings our Brave New World crashing down.

‘Trigger, what is it? Uh oh, have I done something wrong again?’

‘No, no, it’s not you. Someone else. I asked for a couple of days, Lord? Just a couple of days . . .’

‘Trigger, stop it, what’s wrong?’

‘Nothing, everything . . . you should get dressed. Yes, Jamie, get your clothes on.’

Cars pulling up all along the road outside. A procession of flashing lights but no sirens on the tarmac below.

‘Jamie, I said get dressed. Please, we need to go, right now.’

‘Have they come for us, is that it?’

I don’t know. I suppose so. But how? Is it Bloodhound? Has he found us?

‘For crying out loud put some clothes on woman, quickly.’

‘Trigger, stop it. You’re scaring me.’

Where is it? I can’t wear new clothes, they have to be old. Comfortable. Easy to run in. *Where did I put it?* ‘Jamie, get dressed, now.’

‘Trigger, stop it, you’re ruining everything. What are you doing? What are you looking for?’

All the clothes we bought yesterday, I fish out onto the floor and throw towards the bed. Fuck, that’s a lovely bed. Silk sheets and dreamy pillows. Just a few days, Lord, that’s all we needed together, a few days. *Where the fuck did I put . . .* ‘This.’ My new friend. My light weight, perfectly sized, ready to point and shoot, bestest friend. Feel how easy the magazine slides in and clicks closed. I feel powerful.

‘No, Trigger, put that down, right now. They’ll kill you.’

‘Maybe so, maybe it’s for the best.’

Is this why I’m here, Lord? Am I such a disappointment that you want me dead? The front of a bus would be easier. And this, what about all of

this? Was it our last supper? Oh it was wasn't it. I'm such an idiot. Better this than a cold bath tub in a dirty squat. Even the space around me sags with the realisation.

Okay, why not. Why not here? It's nice here, it's warm. And You did give us last night. *What a night.* Everyone should have a feast of love on their final night.

'Jamie, the dress you bought; the floral one from the shop on the prom. Where is it? . . . Here, put it on for me.' For once she does as she's told. Grey flowers with flecks of red, very retro. It fits her figure as if it were hand made.

'No, Trigger, I know exactly what you're thinking. I won't do it.'

'Stop hopping like a bunny and put your sneakers on.'

'I'm trying. Trigger, what's going on. Who's out there? Shit, is it the police?'

I pull the slide back on the gun. The weapon has moulded into my palm. I'm willing to take them on. Ready to protect what I love.

'No, don't you even think it. Look, I'm dressed. Let's run, Baby Boy. Let them try to catch us.'

'It's too late to run. We've got nowhere left to hide. Shit, I wish I'd bought a suit. I'd look good in a suit. Jamie, whatever happens, don't you forget. Don't you ever forget that I love you. Now and always, I love you. I love you, I love you.'

I take her hand and kiss her.

'Trigger, you're scaring me. Why don't you give me the gun. I'll hide it. You go outside and check the corridor. See how long we've got.'

'No.'

'Yes, do it.'

'No, I don't want to. I've had enough, Jamie. No more hiding in shitty shadows. Oh God, I'm so stupid. Jamie, we should have got married.'

'Got what?'

'Married. Yesterday, we should have tied the knot, you and me. Oh, why didn't I think of that? We could have had flowers and music, and cake. You like cake don't you.'

'I'm going to slap you really hard if you don't listen to me. Put the gun down, just there, on the shelf. Then go check the corridor. Please. Do it for me, Baby Boy.'

'They'll take you away if they catch us. We'll never see each other again.'

'I'd rather that than have them hurt you. It's me they want, Baby Boy. Me. Trigger please, I don't want you to die. Please, give me the gun.'

‘Remember the boat, Jamie. You wanted us to jump. To let the water wash us away.’ She remembers. ‘I wish we’d jumped.’

‘That was before we had all of this. Come here, give me a hug. Don’t you give up, not now, not after all we’ve been through to get here.’

She takes my hand.

‘Let me take this, that’s it. I’ll put it here, in the rucksack, out of the way. You go and see if the stairs are clear.’

‘There’s a lot of them,’ I say. ‘Beasts in blue. And they have guns.’

‘Then we can’t go down. But maybe we can go up. Find a way out, up there. What d’you say?’ Jamie’s eyes draw mine to hers. Her hand in my palm. ‘It’ll be fun,’ she says.

There's nothing in the hallway but closed doors and a vibrant blue carpet. Beige walls from one end to the other. At this time in the morning the hotel's residents should all be asleep and unaware of what's about to happen.

I check the exit further down the hall. A glance around the corner confirms no-one is lurking. I check the stairwell to be sure. It seems the Beasts are unaware that I've seen them. That's good. It gives us time. Then I hear the ting of the lift arriving on our floor. I leave the stairs to see the doors slide open.

It's not possible. How can this be?

'Hey, Triggs, wow, is this fate or what? Me and Josh, we was just passing by and thought, hey, I wonder if that white piece of shit is staying in this lovely hotel, spending my hard earned.'

What the fuck is Carl doing here?

‘Carl?’ He has Josh the Giant with him. *But how? . . .*

‘You looks surprised mate. Did you think you could skip town and I wouldn’t know. You owes me mother fucker, and I always comes for what’s mine.’

His hand, reaching behind his back. *No, not that. Back away, Trigger.* This can’t be happening.

‘Don’t even think about it you dumb shit. I’ll drop you before you reach the door.’

Gun, pointing. He wouldn’t?

‘Go away, Carl. There’s nothing for you here.’

‘That’s no way to talk to an old friend? And it’s Harry, my name’s fucking Harry. March him back to his room, Josh.’

Run Trigger, run.

‘Seriously? Did I not tell him I would shoot.’

I’m on my toes towards the room. I can hear Carl and Josh behind me. But they won’t get to the room before I do. *Fuck you, Harry.* I slam the door, turn the lock; there’s no way in.

There’s no way out?

‘Trigger, what’s going on?’

‘It’s Carl,’ I blurt, still seeing that cannon in his hand, ‘he’s found us.’

Oh no, that look. It mirrors my first reaction. Do something. Say something. But what? Three stories up, one door in and out. It’s a big room, maybe we can hide.

Yes, hide.

‘Jamie, hide. He doesn’t know you’re here. Find somewhere to hide.’

Three loud knocks on the door have us both staring at what seems a flimsy barrier between us and them.

‘Hey Triggy Triggy, you in there?’

‘Please Jamie, find somewhere to hide.’

‘How did he find us?’

‘What . . . how do I know? Jamie, you need to hide.’

‘Fuck him. I’ll carve the cunt up like a turkey.’

‘What? . . . No. Jamie, stop.’ She’s going for the rucksack, that pocket. ‘No! I can deal with this. Trust me, please.’ Don’t look at me like that. Not like that. ‘We have the Fat Man’s money. I’ll give Carl what I took, pay for the drugs we’ve used. Tell him it’s all a mistake. A few days away, where’s the harm? I’ll get rid of him.’ *It sounds so easy.* ‘After that we’ll evade the Beasts, I promise.’ I don’t know how, not yet. Half the County’s Constabulary are busy surrounding the building. ‘Trust me, Jamie. Please.’ I take her hand and move to the door. Take a peek through the eye hole.

‘Hey little pig, ain’t no point in hiding. You lets Harry in and we’ll talk some. Harry likes conversation. He just wants to chat.’

Whoa, the door moved.

‘Josh’ll break it down if he has to. You knows it.’

‘Jamie, please, get in the wardrobe. Hide.’

‘We should fight.’

‘No, he has a gun.’

‘So do you.’

Yes, my gun. *Shit, the door.* Half the hotel will wake up if this carries on.

‘Please, Jamie, they both have guns. They’ll kill us both. Let me talk to him. Carl’s a reasonable man.’

‘He’s a pig who’d sell his Mother for profit.’

‘Exactly. He’s a business man.’ *He’s a pig.* ‘Hide in there, in the wardrobe. I’ll get rid of him, or at least stall him until the Police get up here.’

‘Trigger . . .’

‘Just do as I fucking say, please.’ *Just for once?* ‘I don’t want you to get hurt. Harry won’t harm me, he just wants his money. He’s all about the money. I’ve got more than enough to pay him. It’ll be okay, promise. I’ll make him go away.’

‘Open up little piggy, Harry’s here. Oink oink.’

‘Hey, Harry, you won’t hurt me, will you?’

‘Don’t be silly, Triggs. And I’m offended by the question. You’s speaking to a man of peace, not violence. I just wants what’s mine, that’s all. Now please, open the door. Let your old mate Harry comes in for a chat.’

I turn back to see Jamie has gone. She's actually listened to me . . .
whoa, the door.

'Okay, okay. But only if you promise to go when we're done?'

'Triggs, cross my heart and hopes to die.'

Fucking hell, I'm so scared. Where's the Bloodhound, he should be here by now? Where are the Police when you want them? I unlock the door.

'Wow, look at this, Josh. This is a well nice room, must have cost loads. Triggs must have won the Lotto or summin? Is that right, Triggs?'

'No, not really.'

'Ha, ha, you hear that Josh. He said no.'

'How did you know I was here, Harry?'

'Triggs, I'm an important man now. You knows it. Important peoples knows where to find things when they gets lost. Don't shake your head, Triggs. I knows people. I got me a little Pig that squeals when I fill his trough. He goes oink oink when I puts in pennies. But you's worth it. Worth every penny, Triggs. Ain't that the way, Josh?'

'Yes Boss, worth every penny.'

Josh is bigger than I remember. He hasn't looked at the room once, just at me. I don't like the way he stares. At least he didn't bring the dog. I look beyond Josh just to be sure.

'I is here to collect, Triggs, and with interest. And may I ask whilst we is still besties, where the fuck is Jenny? I finds it difficult to run a business when my staff decides to go awol. Where's Jenny? No, Josh, if you please.'

Ahhh, my face. I did not see that coming. The force of his fist moves me backwards. *It really hurts.* My nose is bleeding.

'I'm sorry, Triggs, I didn't hear you answer da question. No? Josh, if you please . . . Oh, man, that was a sick one. Ha ha, I felt that. Did it hurt, Triggs?'

Of course it fucking hurt.

'Another one to make sure I have Triggs' attention. Ohhh, put the man on his back. Josh, you're a superstar.'

No, he's not.

'Stop, please, don't hit me anymore.'

'Tell me where Jen is. We'll get to ma hard earned after you tells me where me Jen is?'

So she got away then, good for her. When you smile on your children it is true bliss, Lord. Don't let him find her, ever. And keep Jamie safe, let her stay safe.

'Arrgh, my leg.' He hit me in the leg. 'Please, Harry, stop him, it hurts.'

'Josh, don't break the merchandise, not yet. Okay Triggs, we'll come back to Jenny, let's talk about ma money. You do still have ma money don't you? I means, you hasn't spent it on like, a room with a view?'

'No, no, I still have it.'

'All of it?'

'Yes, yes, it's all here.'

'He still has it, Josh. Triggs my man, you may yet come out ahead. Or is that, still attached to your head?'

That's not funny. Why are you laughing?

'Don't hit me again . . . Please. Why are you hitting me?'

'You hear a little piggy squeal, Josh? I do. Triggs, you ran off with ma money.'

'I have your money. All of it. I came here to take a break, you know, from the city.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes, yes.'

'Well, where' ma money?'

'I have it, I do.' My leg hurts. My face, it's still bleeding.

'And me merchandise, you still has ma merchandise?'

'Yes . . . yes.' *Most of it.* 'It's in there.'

'Well, tick tock, mother fucker. Tick tock.'

'I'll get it.' I'm still missing the feeling in my thigh from the boot Josh gave me. 'It's in here.'

'Tick tock. Tick tock.'

'It's in my rucksack. In the wardrobe.'

'Take a look in the wardrobe, Josh.'

No, don't, Jamie.

'Before you do that,' I say, 'have you looked out of the window recently?' *What . . . why are you looking at me?* Look out the window. 'Go on, Harry. Take a look. You need to see what's down there.'

That's right, look at him you dumb . . . now look out of the window. Just stay away from the wardrobe.

'If your friendly Pig told you where I was, then why didn't he tell you about them as well?'

'Josh, take a look.'

‘Boss, there’s Old Bill outside, a lot of them. Err, Boss. They’ve got guns.’

‘Looks like your little piggy tells porkies, Harry.’ *Now that’s fucking funny.* ‘He’s set you up.’

‘What the fuck is you talking about? Get out of ma way, Josh. Let me see.’

‘We should leave, Boss.’

‘Fuck, there’s like, an army of Pigs outside.’

‘Boss, we should go.’

‘No, not without my money, and ma merchandise.’

‘Here, it’s in here.’ *Please zip, not today.* The tag eases back. My hand goes inside. No need to feel about. It slips smoothly into my hand. ‘It’s all in here, Harry. Everything, look, I’ll show you.’

‘Fanfuckingtastic. Trigger, my man. You just blow me away.’

* * *

‘Sergeant Adams, if your man is armed when we find him, we will take him down.’

‘Okay, sure . . . you gotta do, I get it.’

His name was Perkin, Arnold Perkin. Since when did the Counties Police dress like SWAT?

‘Can I at least listen in?’ Adams asked.

Perkin handed Adams a headset.

These boys are seriously kitted out; the full tactical wardrobe. Maybe a dozen officers outside, mostly armed. More at reception, all fully weaponised. God knows how many inside bringing the ground floor civilians out, mostly still dressed for bed. Seriously, what are they complaining about? Can’t they see the guns?

‘Holy shit, was that gunshots?’

‘Gunshots fired,’ said Perkin into his handset. ‘Gunshots fired,’ he repeated every word into the mike. ‘I want armed response up on the third floor, clear that building. Armed response, third floor, clear the building.’

Is that my heartbeat I can hear thumping away below this bloody heavy vest?

‘Inspector, I need to go inside.’ *Convince him Ray, he has to let you in there.* ‘Inspector, I need to be in there.’

‘I’m not sending you in, Sergeant. Rooftop, do you have eyes on the target?’

“*Negative, curtains were closed prior to gunshot.*”

‘Charlie Two, have you secured the second floor yet?’

“Exits secure. We’ve locked down the floor.”

‘Charlie One, are you up on third floor yet?’

“Going through the fire door, deploying down hallway. Go go go. Clearing rooms as quick as we can at this end. I’ll hold for instruction at the corner of rooms twenty-one to thirty.”

‘Inspector, please, I need to be up there,’ insisted Adams. ‘I may be able to talk him down before anyone gets hurt. Inspector, he knows me.’
Kinda.

‘Sergeant, a gunshot normally means that someone is already hurt.’

‘Even more reason for me to talk to him. I can end this without more casualties. Sir, please. Let me up there. Give me a chance to talk to Trigger, or you could have a bloodbath on your hands.’ *Come on, stop thinking about it.* ‘Sir?’

‘All right.’ He signalled to the closest of his men. ‘Williams, take the Sergeant here to the third floor. You’re riding shotgun, make sure he stays in one piece. Adams, you keep your head down. And under no circumstances do you go approach the suspect alone, am I clear?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Follow me sergeant,’ said Williams. He looked battle hardened and strangely happy to be going in. All Adams could see was his eyes, the lower face covered by a scarf. ‘Do not get between me and the space ahead.’ Williams ordered. ‘Is that clear?’

‘Perfectly, not gonna happen.’ *Do I look stupid.*

The Foyer was an active scene. Coppers in uniform who ushered the hotel clientele towards the doors. Armed officers stood poised and ready at all corners. There were a lot of guns.

Williams opened the lift door. They were going up. The ride seemed to last forever.

‘Follow me out, Sergeant. Stay low, and do not let go of my belt unless I tell you to. And then you hit the floor, hard, understood.’

‘Gotcha.’ *Literally.* ‘I’m right behind you.’

The people he passed look scared, the gun fire had freaked everyone out. The Police had total control.

Stay close, Ray. Walk them by. Ride that nervous energy. OMG, I am actually excited.

‘Charlie Two, I have eyes on Charlie One. He’s confirmed the third floor is clear of civilians. Shotgun is in place and awaiting instructions.’

‘Hold fast, Shotgun. No-one goes down that hallway until I confirm all civilians are clear. Then take Adams to where he needs to be.’

'I did it. I shot them both. Did you see the look on his face when I pulled my gun? I killed them, Jamie. I killed them both . . .'

'Easy, Trigger. Calm down. Shhh, Baby Boy . . . shhhh.'

'He would have killed us, I had to do it. I didn't have a choice. I had to.'

'I know, Baby Boy, I know. Sometimes we don't have a choice.'

'I didn't have a choice, I didn't. He made me do it. Why can't I stop shaking?'

'Come here and hold me. It's just the shock. Shh, just the shock. It's not easy to kill someone, even harder when the adrenaline has passed. But you'll be all right, I promise. Shhh. Shhhh.'

I can remember now, the first one. Shhhhh. He was horrible, a bad man. He shouldn't have hurt you, Baby Boy. I won't let anyone hurt you, not ever. Shhhhhh, my Baby Boy.'

I like this. Jamie is holding me. It's just the two of us now.

'The Police are coming aren't they?' I say.

'Yes.'

'We'll never get to dance in the rain. I'm so sorry, I've made a mess of this. It's all over isn't it. '

'Oh silly boy, we'll never be over, not you and me. Look what you did for me. They were bad people. You should get a medal for what you've done.'

'All I want is you.'

'I know.'

'Are the Beasts outside? They must be by now. I won't let them take you, I won't. We can run, yes.' I pull away, take her hand. 'We have to go, now. You and me, we have to go.'

'Go where, Trigger?'

'I don't care, anywhere. I won't let them take you away. I'll kill them all before I let them take you away.'

'No, no way, not going to happen. It's me that they want, not you. Give me the gun. Give it to me. I'll tell them I shot Carl. I'll tell them I forced you to be with me. That you had no choice.'

'No, that's not true.'

'They'll believe me. And they'll go easy on you, I promise, they will.'

'But they'll take you away.'

'I know, but you'll have a life. Maybe even a wife and kids. You'd like that, wouldn't you?'

‘Yes, with you.’

‘No, Baby Boy. Not with me. It’s too late for me. I’ve been so selfish, Trigger. All this time and I couldn’t see what was right in front of me.’

‘What is?’

‘You, silly.’

‘Me?’

‘Yes, it’s always been about me, when it should have been about you. All of this, the last few nights. Those two, lying there. Absolute proof. Trigger, I see things so clearly now.’

‘You do?’

‘Yes, I really do love you. Ha, I didn’t think I could. Please, give me the gun. Let me do this for you. We’ll go down to them. I’ll talk to them. You can go with them.’

‘Just me, not you?’

‘I can’t go, not this time. Give me the gun, Baby Boy. Let me do this for you. It’s time for me to go.’

‘No, you can’t . . . I won’t let you. No!’

‘Baby Boy, give me the gun. Let me do this, for you.’

No, no . . . there must be another way.’ I back away from her, drop to one knee. ‘Help us Lord, Father, please. Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name.

So hallowed is thy name.

For yours is the Kingdom, the power and the . . .’

‘Trigger, stop it. I love you.’

‘Don’t leave me . . .’

‘Let me do this. I want you to have a life.’

‘Not without you.’

‘Yes.’

‘No,’ I don’t know why I’m crying. I’m not a Baby Boy, not anymore. ‘There’s another way,’ I say.

Thank you Lord. The mist has cleared.

‘We won’t be parted, Jamie. Not now, not ever.’ *It’s fear that has bound me, that has stopped me in the past. Yes, I can see things with clarity too. There is only one way out. One way for us to stay together, forever.*

I take Jamie’s hand. There’s a place where the Beasts won’t find us. Where we can never be forced apart. Not now, not ever. And look, I’ve stopped shaking.

‘Jamie, I’ve made up my mind.’ It’s my turn to be strong. ‘I know a wonderful place where the Light runs like a river through all of the

cracks in Time. A place where darkness can never take root. It's a place where no-one will ever need to ask our names.

'Trigger, where are we going?'

'Up,' I say, pulling her hand, 'we're going up.'

'Trigger, no . . . the gun. You've dropped the gun? Trigger, the gun?'

'We don't need to bring a gun where we're going, Jamie. It's okay, I want to do this now. It's like you said on the river. There'll be no more tomorrows . . . just forever. Come and take a leap of faith with me. Just you and me. Come on, I'll race you to the roof.'

'Alpha, I have eyes on the second floor; civilians are coming your way. Estimate forty seconds until breach.'

'Who's that?' Adams asked.

'We have a man on the roof of a nearby building,' Shotgun replied.

'Man, what man? D'you mean a sniper?' Another voice entered his helmet over the radio.

'Treetop, do you have a visual on the roof?'

'Partial view only, Alpha. Line of sight is obscured. Ten seconds until floor is clear. Nine . . . eight. Civilians entering stairwell. Seven . . . six.'

Ray found his fingers tighten on Shotgun's belt. It was like the Police paintball convention had gathered around him, only these men had real weapons in their hands. Not one of them moved, all were poised, ready to go on the order.

'Five . . . four . . . Last Civilian in the stairwell and heading down. Three . . . Two . . . Alpha four giving thumbs up.'

'Oh shit.' This suddenly got real. Butterflies flying crazy in Ray's stomach. One, why didn't he say, one?

'One . . . Alpha, you have a go. I repeat, you have a go go go.'

'Charlie Two, you are clear to breach. I say again, you are clear to breach.'

Adams watched as hand signals were made. The Combat Police were on the move. Single file and heading around the corner. Men with automatic weapons wearing gas masks lead the way. Shotgun moved into the hallway, Adams in tow.

Within seconds a charge had been laid against the handle of the room's door. The lead officers took a step away. A moment later a small explosion ripped a hole in the door and forced it open. A stun grenade

was hurled inside and made a bang. Armed Police with weapons raised, disappeared into the room.

All Adams could do was watch, and listen. Loud voices muffled by respirators as they shouted for any occupants to find the floor. And then silence.

‘Charlie Two to Alpha. Room is clear. I repeat, the room is clear.’

Shotgun wants me to follow him. How’s he so relaxed. *Fuck, I’m about to wet myself.* He could feel the belt dig into his palm he gripped so tight.

‘Alpha, room is secured. Shotgun and Charlie Two are heading up to the roof.’

Adams was pulled out of the way as the gas masks exited and moved, weapons raised, toward the stairs.

Yeah, I got that. Grab hold of the belt again. Where are you, Trigger? Where’s Jamie? Are you up on the roof? I’m getting a real bad feeling about all of this.

‘Not home,’ said Shotgun who was smiling. ‘Must have just missed them.’ He was pointing upward. Was he chewing gum as well? ‘We’ve cleared all the rooms up there, only one place they can be now. Soon as the boys exit the hallway we go up. You good to go?’

‘Yes, yes, get me up on that roof.’

* * *

The lift arrives at the top floor. Through the fancy windows I can see no-one outside. Our ascension stops and the doors separate and open. I pause. Jamie pushes. ‘We don’t know who could be out there waiting. *Stop digging at me.* ‘Yes, all right, I’ll look.’

No-one, the hallway is empty. Nothing to see but closed doors and a floral carpet, *and something else.*

‘Jamie, look. Someone’s left a trolley in the hallway.’ I’m outside heading for the trolley. ‘Jamie, there’s a uniform hanging from it.’ I reach for the clothing that hangs within a plastic drape. ‘I have an idea, here, take this and put it on.’

‘What, why? I’ll look like a chambermaid.’

‘Exactly. You can go back down and get out through the back. No-one will stop a member of staff. They’re clearing the hotel, you’ll blend right in.’

‘No, I’m not leaving you here. All those Police outside, they’ve come for me, Trigger. It’s too late to run now. No, we go together, one way or another, or not at all.’

She has to go. Get out. Do something Trigger.

‘What was that?’ I felt it through the floor, a vibration. The faint thump of something explosive. I can see that Jamie felt it too.

‘You’re right,’ I say, ‘together then. What have we got to lose? Here, help me push the trolley into the lift, and put this on. I mean it. I have a plan.’

‘Stop pushing, what are we doing?’

‘The only thing left to do.’ I look at the cart. Lift the drape that hides the maid’s tools.

‘You won’t fit under there, will you?’

‘It’ll be tight, but it’ll do.’ A swipe of my arm clears most of what’s below. ‘Come on, get changed.’

She’s reluctant, but excited. This is a good plan. I’ve seen it work on telly.

‘I’ll follow you inside. Come on, Jamie, pull. I’ll push.’

‘Trigger, I haven’t got, my jeans off; stop pushing. I’m not sure about this, it’s a stupid idea.’

‘It’ll work, trust me.’ I’ve backed her into the lift, the trolley between us. She’s noticed I’m looking at her.

‘What? Oh, right. If they shoot me wearing this . . .’

‘You’ll look wonderful like you always do.’

‘In your dreams, okay. So stop with the Cheshire Cat imitation, this is serious. Why do all men like women in an outfit?’

‘You look like a proper maid.’ I say. And as she pulls the outfit over her head I lean in and press the button marked B, for basement. The doors move inwards towards each other. At the last moment I step outside.

‘Trigger . . . No, don’t you dare. Hey, hey, Trigger, don’t you leave me in here.’

I hold the trolley firm. The doors mustn’t touch my arm. I pull it clear as they close. She’s pulled the trolley away and her palm slams against the glass. Her face . . . Jamie’s face. She’s horrified. *Oh God, what have I done?*

‘Open the door. Open the fucking door. Trigger, this isn’t funny. No, stop it going down. Please, stop the lift. Trigger . . . No, no . . .’

‘You can do this.’ I say. ‘Do it for me.’

Jamie's fury has turned into tears. Her sudden anger now melted into a despair. She's crying as the lift goes down. Her last words to me . . . why? I can't hear, I read her lips. My last image of Jamie is filled with tears.

This time I've been the strong one. I've stepped up, by sending sweet Jamie down. It's me they want. It's me they'll follow. It's me, Trigger, who will end this once and for all.

There's no time to feel the pain as I hear a door burst open somewhere below. Footsteps in the stairwell? And the clumping of boots on the carpet at the far end of the hallway out of sight. They're coming.

Run, Trigger, run.

Through the stairwell doors and up. The Beasts are climbing the steps below. They won't catch me, I'm too quick. Two at a time as I fly toward the top of the hotel. Down below men are shouting, giving orders that I won't obey. Their pace has quickened as another door slams open. I hesitate and look down.

My God, men in armour and helmets; bearing weapons that clunk and glint in the light. So many guns. I keep going past the signs that read "Staff Only" until I reach the door at the top.

Straight through, you can do it.

My inertia rams the bar and bursts the door open. The sound of an alarm rings aloud in the stairwell behind.

I'm outside, sprinting into the early morning sunshine. This is freedom. The infinite space of hope, where nothing looks down on me but the sky. And I can see the sea. So close it seems I could almost reach it in a single bound. This is a good place to end it all. This is a beautiful place to die.

Across the roof, Trigger. All the way. Don't stop until the edge.

It's the only way now. Keep them occupied long enough for Jamie to get out.

Jamie? Oh Jamie, I'm sorry. I can still see her face, her gaze; locked onto mine with utter disbelief. A lifetime of tears in those eyes. But I had to give you a chance. I had to. Was I wrong to send her away?

She would have jumped, I know she would. Hand in hand with me. But I don't want her to die. "Backs to the wall", that's what we've always said. I'd die for Jamie, and now I have the chance to prove it.

'Run, Jamie, run.' I've shouted my words to the wind and hope they reach her ears. 'Baby Girl, I love you.'

I start to laugh, and then I begin to cry. I'm worn out, panting for air. The last few steps I walk to the edge. It's a long way down. One more and I'll be a bird and I'll fly away to freedom.

'Armed Police. Get down on the ground.'

'Down on the ground.'

'Down, down, arms behind your head.'

I don't have to look behind to know there are many servants of the Beast who deploy about the roof. Why do they all have to shout? I can hear them. I'm not deaf. I'm not looking at them either. Why should I? As both my feet shuffle close to the edge. Only the wind holds me back now. One tiny step and I'm free. I just want to enjoy the view, only for a moment.

Look, I can see people swimming in the sea. It must be freezing. I see the early morning joggers, and several people walking their dogs. There's a man on the beach with a machine who searches for trinkets and gold. They all have such different lives. None of which, I expect, will ever touch the other.

There are so many of us now, don't you think? Bumbling along in our mundane little lives; all of us, looking the other way. "We, these Soldiers of Anarchy. Violators of our World. Subjugators of all that is wild and wonderful. We, these savage dogs that maul and tear at the Natural Order." At least that's what Jamie says.

'Trigger, don't do this. Think about what you're doing. Turn around, let's talk.'

I recognise that voice. It chased me across a bridge one day.

'Trigger, it's me, you know who I am. Come on, turn around, let's talk.'

'You shouldn't be up here. Go away.' I lean forward and he screams at me, "Don't do it." But why shouldn't I? 'Back off.' I shout back. 'Stay back or I'll jump.'

I suppose I should turn around, it's rude not to. So I do. Just as more wild and dangerous men come out through the doorway, guns raised and pointed at me. There are so many of them who spread across the roof and close in all around.

'Come away from the edge.'

'Put your face on the ground.'

'On the floor, get on the floor.'

They still seem to think I'm deaf. Bloodhound seems desperate for them to lower their weapons. I don't think they like that idea. Now they're shouting at him because he stands between us.

‘Trigger? Hey, Trigger, can you hear me? No-one’s going to shoot you, I promise. But you must come away from the edge.’

Must I? *I don’t think* so. So this is what he looks like close up. The Bloodhound that’s tracked me down. What’s he saying? I can’t hear with the others shouting.

‘Why don’t you all shut up.’

‘Easy Trigger, it’s all right. Stand down, all of you. He’s unarmed. Trigger, no-one wants to hurt you. They won’t hurt you. Lower your fucking weapons. Trigger, come down off the ledge. Everything’s cool. It’s cool guys, everyone stay cool.’

The weaponised warriors have stopped shouting. I’m glad, they were making me feel dizzy. But even in silence they are menacing. So many guns, all directed toward me. It’s like Splinter Cell, the game the twins like to play. But this isn’t like the game. I don’t like the guns being pointed at me.

‘Shoot.’ I shout. ‘Why don’t you just shoot and get it over with?’

‘No-one wants that, Trigger. No-one wants to shoot you. I promise, that’s the last thing anyone wants. We just want you to come down from there.’

‘No, I won’t. And you can’t make me.’

‘Okay, fine, so let’s talk here. That is what you want, right, to talk? That’s why you left me all the clues. So I could follow and find you.’

I don’t know what you’re talking about.

‘Is he dead?’ I shout.

‘Who? Is who dead, Trigger?’

‘Carl. I shot him.’ Why’s he looking at his friend? The only other one to come forward. *I’m not lying, I shot him.* I did what had to be done.

‘We didn’t find him, Trigger. We heard the gunshots and came running. You weren’t in the room. We didn’t find a body. But that’s good, right? No-one’s dead, and no-one is going to die.’

I don’t like this, I left Carl for dead? He must still be in the hotel. Jamie’s still in the hotel?

‘You have to find him.’ I say.

‘We will. No-one’s getting out of the hotel. And that includes Jamie. Where is she, Trigger? Where’s Jamie? Is she hiding in the hotel somewhere?’

Yes, Jamie’s hiding. She’s good at hiding. *Look at me, all of you.* I start flapping my arms. *If you’re all up here you’re not in there, looking. You won’t find her, not now, you’re too late.* It’s difficult to flap and keep looking down. I just want to see her walk out. Walk away from the

growing crowd down there; all the staff, the dog walkers. I need to see her leave the hotel.

‘Easy, Trigger, Come on, come away from the edge. For fuck’s sake, Shotgun, do we know where Jamie is?’

‘Charlie Two’s just confirmed that the roof is clear. She’s not up here. You got five to talk him down. Make it quick before we freeze our arses off.’

‘You’re all heart. Hey Trigger, where’s Jamie? Do you know where she is? Tell us where she is so we can help her.’

I stop flapping.

‘Keep your hands up or I will use lethal force.’

‘Easy Shotgun. Easy does it all of you. No-one shoots, okay. Trigger, keep your hands where we can see them, please. Make no sudden movements. No-one shoots, you guys hear me.’

‘Come down Trigger, let’s go down. It’s bloody cold, and windy. And the sky’s on the turn, look, it’s going to rain soon. None of us want to get wet, so come on, yeah. Come on, step down.’

‘Let it rain.’ I say. ‘Up there is the pathway to Heaven. The sky is just a halo below which all life has flourished. The birds know, listen to them.’

‘You do know he’s a whack job. He’s gonna jump anyway so let’s rush him. Take our best shot at grabbing him.’

‘What’s he saying? Talk louder so I can hear you, or I’ll jump. I will.’

‘It’s okay, Trigger. Turning the volume up, speaking loudly, no whispers. Hey, how about we get a hot drink and we find you a blanket. Has anyone got a blanket?’

‘Do we look like the Salvation Army?’ Shotgun replied.

I don't think Bloodhound's friend likes me. He stands by his side but never takes his eyes from me. The rooftop seems small now with all the Beast's Henchmen. These creatures in blue with hard hats and half covered faces. There's violence in their eyes. Only Bloodhound speaks out loud. Only Bloodhound seems to care.

'Jamie wouldn't want you to do this.' Adams stepped away from Shotgun who tried to pull him back. 'She wouldn't want it to end this way. Jamie wants you to be safe.'

'What do you know about Jamie?'

'I've spoken to Dwaine, he told me that Jamie's ill. Well, I can help with that. Find Jamie a doctor, a good one. And I spoke to Sue as well. You remember Sue, with the red hair? She says you love Jamie. Says it's the most obvious thing about you: your feelings for her. I want to help Jamie. Let's help her together.'

'That's all I'm trying to do.' He looks sincere. *No, you're trying to trick me with deceit.* 'You don't know anything; not about me, or Jamie.'

'I know that Jamie's done bad things to keep you safe. Isn't that right? So if you step off that ledge, it will all have been for nothing. Don't let it be for nothing. Come down, Trigger. Please.'

Maybe he's right. Jamie would have to see a doctor. Look how he holds out his hand. Filled with friendship. Should I take it?

'You'll shoot me,' I say.

'No, why would we do that? Look, I can help you. I can help Jamie. Tell us where she is and we can get her all the medical help she needs.'

'I can shoot him in the leg,' said Shotgun.

'Can you give us some space, please? Trigger, so far as we know you've done nothing but try to keep Jamie safe. That's not a crime.'

'But I killed them.'

‘Who, the guys downstairs? Have we found this, Carl, yet? Who was he, Trigger? What did he want?’

‘Harry wanted his money.’

‘What money? Did he threaten you? I saw the gun on the floor. Did he threaten Jamie, is that what happened? No problem, the Courts will understand. I’ll tell them what happened. It was self defence.’

‘But I killed him.’

‘It’s okay, Trigger, we didn’t find a body. That means no-one is dead. We’ll find Carl, get him help too. Now please, tell me where Jamie is; can you tell me that much. I’ve got an ambulance down there. We can go get her right now and take her to hospital.’

There are two ambulances, I see them. I see the crowd has grown too. Onlookers keen to see the show. The Beasts have had to move them farther away. Their chariots block the road with flashing lights. *It’s a long way down.*

‘Trigger, over here. That’s right, look at me. Focus on my voice. Tell me where Jamie is, we’ll get her help. The best doctors and medicine; whatever she needs.’

Does he mean that? I don’t know. But the wind’s getting stronger and the clouds are turning grey. Where have all the birds gone? The Beasts must have frightened them away. That’s what they do, fill everyone with fear. No, I’ve talked long enough. Jamie will be long gone by now. *Fuck you, Carl.* It’s time to end this.

* * *

‘Jamie’s gone. I won’t let you shoot her. And I won’t let you take me either.’

‘No, no-one wants to shoot anyone,’ said Adams

‘I do,’ whispered Shotgun.

‘That’s not helpful. Get on your radio, get your buddies to sweep the hotel again.’

‘Why?’

‘Because he’s stalling; Jamie’s still in the hotel. Why else would he be on the ledge? No, jumpers jump, they don’t have a chat first.’

‘That bloke’s a nutter, he wants attention.’

‘No, I don’t think so. He wants to give Jamie time to get away. Sweep the hotel again. Just do it, okay.’

Click. ‘Alpha, be advised that female suspect is not with her boyfriend. Possibility she may be trying to use the civilians for cover.’ *Click.*

‘Come down off the ledge, Trigger. Come on, help us to find Jamie. Let’s help her together. You know we can do that.’

‘No, I should go now.’

‘*Shit, no . . . Don’t you move. You little bastard.*’ ‘Stay very, very still.’
Click. Adams put his finger to his ear.

‘*Hey Shotgun. All exits covered and closed. Head count tallies with hotel register. She’s not getting out.*’

‘What’s that?’ Adams took a step closer, he wanted Trigger to hear. ‘Are you absolutely sure? Yes, I understand; that’s fantastic news. No, I’ll tell him now. We’ve found her. We’ve found Jamie.’ Adams smile was ear to ear as he turned away. In the moment he whispered, careful that Trigger wouldn’t see. ‘Just fucking nod,’ he said to Shotgun, ‘and smile too.’

‘Say again, Alpha . . . we have Jamie downstairs. Jamie is in custody?’ Another step toward Trigger. ‘That’s fantastic. Trigger, we’ve got her. We’ve got Jamie. You don’t have to do this now. Come down now and I’ll take you to see Jamie.’

‘You know where Jamie is?’

‘What the fuck are you doing, Sergeant?’ asked Shotgun, trying not to move his lips.

‘Trying to save his life. Get one of those ambulances to fire up its lights right now and have it driven away at speed.’

‘What for? And why are we whispering?’

‘Just fucking do it, now.’

What's he doing? I can't see either of their faces. They're up to something.

'What did you say, I can't hear you?'

'Just making final confirmation, that's all. Yes, we've got her, Jamie's safe.'

What's that? I nearly stumbled to the sound. 'No, don't come any closer.' A shrilled wail startles me from down below. One of the ambulances is driving away. Its siren blares out into the distance. Bloodhound has moved closer. The ground below is starting to spin. I don't know what to do. I can't deal with this. *I feel sick.*

'There she goes, Trigger. On her way to hospital. And I'm hearing that she's pretty upset with you. Doesn't want you to jumping off buildings. She's very angry.'

Angry? Oh, it must be the lift? She's angry about what I did.

'I did it to save her,' I tell him. I want him to understand.

'I know, Trigger. I get it. And she will too. But you have to come down and tell her yourself. I'll take you straight to her. You can talk, be together again.'

'You're lying to me. No, not another step. I mean it.'

'That's cool, I'm Mr Freeze. See, hands in the air, and I'll turn around so you can see I'm not armed.'

Stop spinning, I don't feel well.

'I won't lie to you, Trigger. I promise. Jamie's gone to hospital, just to be sure she's okay.'

'What will happen to her?'

'She'll be arrested, I can't stop that happening. But I *can* give you time with her. As much as you need. A chance to be together, to say goodbye.'

'Goodbye?'

‘Just for now. You’ll see her again. I promise.’

‘Just let me put a bullet in his leg.’

‘For fuck’s sake, you are not helping. Move your men back. Everybody back. Come on, give me twenty feet here, all of you. Shotgun, tell them to move back.’

‘Don’t get arsy with me, he’s the one that wants to jump. I say we rush him.’

‘Get your men back to the door, please.’

‘What are you talking about? Speak up so I can hear you.’ I can’t cope with this. I don’t know what to do. I have to kneel, get myself closer to the ledge.

‘It’s okay. I’m making space. Shotgun, please?’

‘All right. Back it up guys, ten feet, no more.’

‘Where are they going?’ I ask.

‘Just giving us room to breath. Don’t know about you, but all these guns, they make my heart race. They make my head spin, you know. Round and round. Did I show you I’m not armed. Look, I’ll spin around and around to prove it.’

No, no spinning. ‘Stop it, I believe you.’ *Don’t spin, I’m gonna puke.*

‘That’s good, Trigger, now you trust me. Did I mention that I had a heart attack? Yeah, a few months back. Think I’m about to have another one with all this excitement. Trigger please, come a step away from the edge. Like this, just a single step.’

I shake my head. He’s too close. I’m being squeezed between Bloodhound and the ground down there. No, I can’t look anymore.

‘We just wanted to be left alone.’ I tell him. ‘That’s why we came here. It’s Jamie and me. Me and Jamie. Backs to the wall, you know?’

‘Yes, yes I do. Me and Carol, my wife, we’re no different. Ever since we were kids. Did I tell you I’m retiring, did I mention that? I’ve got a couple of months left and then I’m unemployed. Carol wants us to live near her sister, in fucking Australia. Can you imagine that. Me, the original whinging Pomme, what a laugh.’

‘You should go. Make her happy.’ *God, give me air. Help me to a breathe.* ‘I thought, I thought bringing Jamie here would make us happy.’ It’s getting so cold. It’s such a long way down. *I want to see Jamie.* ‘I want to see Jamie.’

‘Of course you do. And I’ll make that happen. But you have to come off the ledge. I promise you, I’ll take you straight to her.’

‘I thought . . . I wanted us to be together, forever. No more tomorrows. You understand?’

‘Of course I do. But let’s you and me get past today first, huh, what d’you say. Take my hand. I’ll come another step and reach out my hand. There, you see. Trigger, take my hand.’

I want to, I do. But up there is the Promised Land. Down . . . Down is the only way to get there. I just need to take a tumble. Roll forward and over the edge. But I have to know.

‘How did you know where to find us?’ I ask him. ‘Did *He* tell you where to look?’

‘He? Oh, *Him*? Yes, yes, He told me. How else would I have known where to look. Isn’t it obvious, Trigger. Come on, work it out. *He* wants *me* to save *you*.’

‘*He* wants *me* to find somewhere warm with a bacon butty,’ said Shotgun.

‘Come on son, think about it. How else could I know where to find you. And more than once, remember? I was waiting for you at the bridge? That’s right, waiting for you. And we shared a moment, didn’t we? You and I, when we looked into each others eyes on that bridge. Tell me I’m wrong. Take my hand, Trigger. Come on, you can reach it now. It’s *His* will. I’m you’re only chance for redemption.’

‘I don’t know.’ *It really is a long way down.* ‘Maybe you’re right. Jamie wanted to be here, with me, but I stopped her. I shouldn’t have left her. ‘What’s going to happen to us?’

‘Honestly, I don’t know.’

‘Will we go to prison?’

‘Jamie? yes. You? I doubt it.’

‘What about Carl?’

‘Carl? Oh, him. We haven’t found him. So no body, no crime. And so what if he does turn up. Hey, it was self defence, right? A court will understand. But let’s stay focused. Trigger, *He* is offering my hand to you. Because He knows that Jamie will need someone to be there for her. She’ll need you to take *her* hand. Don’t deprive Jamie of the only thing she has left now . . . *You*. Come down off the ledge, son. Come on.’

‘You’ll take me to see Jamie?’

‘Yes.’

‘You promise?’

‘Dib dib, it’s a deal. I can’t go back on it now.’

Really? Can I believe a word you say?

‘No, you’re lying to me.’

‘No, I’m not. I dib dibbed, remember?’

‘You’re such a fucking liar.’

‘Trigger, what’s wrong. I said I wouldn’t lie.’

‘Jamie’s not in that ambulance, I know she’s not.’ *She can’t be.* ‘I don’t believe you.’ *You can’t have found her. Not if she doesn’t want to be found.* ‘And now she hates me for what I’ve done.’

‘No, no, why would you say that. Jamie loves you. Fuck, don’t you dare. No, no, do not do this . . .’

I stand and stretch out my arms. They fill like sails with the breeze. Just above the horizon the sun has burnt away the cloud and I feel its warmth embrace me like an old friend. God is smiling on me. He’s showing me that Bloodhound has spoken with nothing but deceit. I’m not frightened any more. It’s not such a long way down. One single step will end the torment for both of us.

I take the step and fall away from the ledge. I go to meet God.

I was falling. I don't understand, why have I stopped falling?

'I don't, think so, you little shit. Someone help me out here.'

No, get off me. Don't touch me.

'For fuck's sake, Shotgun, grab a hold of something. No, not me. Grab his arm, his hair, anything. That's it, pull man, pull.'

I was falling. *Let me go.* I was going to see God. Two of them, tugging at me me.

'Stop struggling, Trigger, we're trying to help you. Grab his leg, Shotgun.

Ow, ow, that hurts. Scraping my face on the wall. No, I don't want to come back. *Get off me.*

'Pull, Shotgun, pull. The rest of you put those guns down and grab something. Shit, he's heavy. Shit, shit . . . Someone grab me. Someone grab a hold of me.'

More hands. So many of them grappling with my clothing, pulling me back, upward. *No, I want to go down.* This is how it must be. You don't understand; *get off. Get off me.* I want to go down.

'Drag him over. Stop struggling, Trigger. For fuck's sake there's five of us and one of him; come on, pull.'

'You don't understand, Bloodhound. This has to be. It can't end until one of us does. You won't take me; no, I wont. I won't let you. Get off, get off, get off.'

'Grab his leg someone, before we lose him. Pull. Stop fucking squirming, Trigger. Pull. Grab a foot, anything. Here we go, here we go. Got you, you fucking head-case.'

'Hey, I thought we weren't allowed to call the suspect names anymore.'

‘Shut up, Shotgun. These are, extenuating, circumstances. If one of those elbows gets me, you shoot him, okay. That’s it, over you come. Don’t worry about scraping him. Up you come you little shite. Turn him over. On the deck with him.’

‘You don’t understand.’ I tell him. ‘You should have let me fall.’ Now the others are shouting at me again.

‘On the ground, down on the ground.’

‘On the floor.’

‘Face fucking down.’

They’re all shouting. Hands all over me. *I am on the floor. I am face fucking down.* I’m lost now; a broken spell, doomed to repeat tomorrow as if it were only yesterday. *Why Lord? . . .* Why didn’t you let me fall?

‘Fuck, I thought we’d lost him.’

‘That was a nice catch, Sergeant. Not sure I’d have put myself over the edge like that. But well done.’

Shotgun, that’s the first thing you’ve said that makes sense. Have your boys bring him over here. Drag him by the hair if you have to, he’s got plenty. Come on, over by the door. I don’t want him be anywhere near that ledge.’

‘You shouldn’t have done it, Bloodhound. It’s not fair.’

‘No? Well, neither’s this. Trigger, you’re under arrest for the murder of George Hammock, amongst others. We can sort the rest of the charges out later.’

‘Hey, hang on mate. You’re a bit off your patch to arrest anyone.’

‘Oh really? Then consider this a citizen’s arrest. Trigger, you do not have to say anything but it may harm your defence if you do not mention now, anything you later . . .’

Why Lord? Why bring me all this way if it wasn’t the end of our journey? I don’t understand. He doesn’t understand. Nothing will end now. Tomorrow will be the same as today. Listen to them, slapping each others backs. Giving praise where none should be found. They don’t understand.

Jamie . . . I need to see her . . . Jamie.

They won’t keep us apart, Lord. We’ll find each other again, I know we will. And when we do, it will start all over again.

I wanted to fall. I wanted to end this, Lord. I wanted to meet you, God, in person. I wanted to say I was sorry.

‘Where’s Jamie, Trigger?’ Bloodhound asks me.

‘I like your car,’ I reply. ‘Jamie wouldn’t. She hates leather seats; she says an animal died to make them.’

‘Answer the question. Where’s Jamie?’

‘You won’t find her.’

‘Oh we’ll find her, don’t you worry about that.’

‘No, you won’t. You never will. She’s too clever for you, too resourceful. You found me because I’m a fool.’

‘We’ll find her, Trigger, and d’you know why? Because no-one else is going to die. Three people are dead, and that’s just the ones we know about. How many more bodies are there?’

‘Sergeant Adams, I let you ride with us as a courtesy. It’s our job to interview the suspect. And to arrest him too.’

‘I’m sorry sir, I got a bit over zealous up there. I’ve never caught a jumper before.’

Who’s this? We haven’t been introduced. He looks like that man, the comedian, Billy something.

‘Yes, well, good catch Adams. At least I don’t have to explain why he’s being scraped up off the pavement. But Sussex Police will be conducting the enquiry from here on in; at least until I’m told otherwise.’

‘Yes sir, sorry sir. Well, spit it out, Trigger? How many more bodies are we going to find?’

‘Sergeant . . .’

‘Yes sir, sorry sir.’

‘You said you’d take me to see Jamie,’ I ask him. ‘I want to see Jamie.’ It’s important.

‘May I? Thank you, sir. Trigger? I just told you, we’ll find her. She wasn’t really in the ambulance. So stop sodding about and tell us where she is. We’ll help her. I promise.’

He doesn’t know where Jamie is? He lied to me.

‘You lied to me.’

‘Yeah, sorry about that, but Jamie’s gone. She’s left you here to take the wrap. You’ll be tried for murder; multiple murders if I get my way.’

‘You lied to me, Bloodhound? You shouldn’t have done that.’ No, wait, I remember. That’s right, I told him. He’ll never find her. He won’t. I’m getting confused. ‘You’ll never find her. You should have let me fall.’

‘Are you feeling all right, Trigger? Did you hit your head?’

It's quiet in here, but nice and warm.

'Hello? Is there anyone out there? Can I have a cup of tea please?' Grey walls, that's a cold colour. And there's only one door in and out. I wonder, can they see me through that glass? 'Hello. Can anyone hear me? You don't need to keep me manacled like this.' You really don't. It's like that game, what's it called? Where they chained the Hero to the desk? 'Can someone take these off?' They're not necessary. It's not like I'm going to hurt anyone. They clank as I pull them. I suppose I can write, and drink from a cup. 'Please, can I have a cup of tea?' Why have they left me here like this? Where's Bloodhound?

Maybe they've forgotten I'm in here. And where is here anyway? I don't remember much since they took me from the roof. Some faces, some stairs, there was a car? Oh, and those horrid flashing lights. *Where am I?*

'Hello, I know you're out there. Can I have a cup of tea; I did say please?'

My heart skips a beat as the door's handle makes a move. *Someone's at the door.* I try to back away, but these bracelets, they won't allow it. I guess that's the point. The handle lowers fully. *Someone is definitely at the door.* 'Hello, who's there? Why don't you come inside?'

Are they afraid to come in. It's easy, you just push the door open. *I don't care who you are just show yourself.*

'Have you brought tea?'

I can't look at anything else but the door. It swamps the room. And then I go cold somewhere deep in my gut. The door cracks ajar. It stops. Then opens slowly inward.

Who's out there? What do you want?

I watch it open inward, as if fearful to open fully. And then a figure steps into the space.

Oh no . . . no no no.

'You can't be here. You mustn't. Go away.'

‘No, you shouldn’t have come. The glass, someone might be watching. Jamie, you silly girl, you can’t be in here.’

‘Shhh, there’s no-one on the other side, I checked. They’re all celebrating your incarceration. You’re a celebrity now.’

‘Well, I don’t feel like one.’

‘Baby Boy, look what they’ve done to you. Look how they treat you.’

She takes hold of my manacles and pulls them tight.

‘Let the ruling class tremble at our revolution,’ she says. ‘We the proletarians have nothing to lose but our chains. And we have a world to win. Workingmen of all countries, unite.’

‘I like that.’ I can see the fire has returned to her eyes. ‘Did you make it up?’

‘Most of it was Marx, I might have plagiarised a little. What are we going to do about these, Trigger?’

She hates it when I shrug; says its, “an idiots response”. Then she copies me and smiles.

‘I’m glad you’re here. I can’t look her in the eyes. ‘I was lonely, and a bit scared too.’

‘Come here and give me a cuddle. We’ll figure this out.’

Thank you, Lord. Thank you for bringing her safely to me.

I can’t hold her back. These chains, they bind me. Like a ship to the ocean floor; I can sway one way or the other. Hard as I try, I can’t break free. ‘You should go.’ I say.

‘And leave you alone, I don’t think so.’

‘They’ll lock you up, Jamie. They’ll tear us apart and never let us be together again.’

‘Let them try. I found you this time didn’t I. I’ll always come to find you.’

‘Jamie, you can’t be here. How did you get in here, anyway?’

The question causes separation. A step back and a quizzical and questioning gaze. Which softens to a cheeky grin.

‘The Sergeant on the desk let me in; he asked me to wait. I might have told him that I worked for your solicitor. For a Police Station their security is ironically lacking. No-one’s given me a second glance since I’ve been inside. And look, did you even noticed. I dressed up especially. Do you like it, the suit? I do, it’s from M&S. Got the shoes and briefcase from a charity shop, along with these. I wore them at the desk, but can’t see shit through the lenses, lol.’

‘I like your hair up like that. The glasses make you look, bossy.’

‘Well, I hope that’s slang for officious? Here, I’ll give you a twirl. Top end solicitor or what?’

‘You shouldn’t have come.’ I say, and get a look of ingratitude, then a smile.

‘I really should get out more,’ she says. ‘We should do more stuff out there, as soon as we’re out. Baby Boy, I don’t like you in here. Pigs. You’ve chained him like an animal. Come on, let’s go.’

‘How, I can’t get my hands free of these.’

‘Here, let me try. Maybe if I . . .?’

‘Ouch, that hurts. Jamie, stop it. It’s no good, you have to go, leave me, please.’

‘Maybe I could find one of *them*, get the key?’

‘They’re not going to give you the key. Jamie, you shouldn’t have come. Why did you come? You were free. No, this is silly, you have to go. Go now before they come and arrest you too.’

‘Let them, I don’t care. The worst they could do to me, they’ve already done. Trigger, they’ve taken you away from me.’

‘No, no, don’t cry. Jamie, don’t cry.’

‘You shouldn’t have left me back there, Trigger. You shouldn’t have gone off on your own. You know you’re not good without me. I’m really very angry about that. We should have gone up to that roof together, you and me, backs to the wall . . . All the times we said it. I wanted us to go up there together.’

She’s kneeling, crying, her head on my lap. *Oh God, what have I done?* A moment of clarity that leads to a lifetime of indecision. Look at us. *We were happy.* We came here to build sandcastles and walk in the rain. Now I sit here manacled, chained; like John the Baptist I wait, for the Beasts to come for my head. She’s right, Jamie’s always right. We should have gone together.

‘What have I done? Jamie, forgive me . . . I’m sorry, so very sorry.’

‘It’s all right, I love you, I do. Come here. If I can’t get you out of these, I *can* give you a hug, and one of these. *Kiss*. I don’t blame you. *Kiss*. Oh Trigger, you shouldn’t be in here. Not alone. *Kiss*. Not without me. I don’t want to be out there alone, without you. I’m so afraid.’

‘Hey Shotgun, what’s our boy doing in there?’

‘No idea, Raymond. And you can stop calling me that. Williams will do just fine. And he’s muttering. He hasn’t stopped muttering to himself since we put him in there. And now he’s crying. That guy is seriously fucked up.

‘Still no sign of *her* then?’

‘No, she’s in the wind mate. Dumped him and gone looking for some other muppet to rub her feet. If she’s still in Brighton, we’ll find her.’

‘You can call off your search for Jamie Howard,’ said an authoritative voice that caught them both unawares.

‘Who the hell are? . . . Oh, hello sir . . . Sirs? What’s going on?’

Two men, one dressed in blue with silver buttons, his hat held under his arm. The other was a tall man, mid fifties, who’d ramrodded himself into a stiff brown suit, with extra shiny shoes. The grooming about his upper head was obviously expensive.

‘This is Doctor Fuller,’ said the suit.

‘Superintendent Ogilvy?’ said Shotgun. ‘What are you doing here? Not that you can’t be here, sir.’

‘Wait outside please, Sergeant Williams. Adams, you stay.’

Shotgun left, the look of a sulky teenager about him. Adams felt like the last survivor. What was going on? Since when did a Superintendent sit in on an Interview. And who was the tall officious looking fucker he had in tow?

‘What’s going on, sir? Who’s this?’ *Who are you?* ‘We were just about to interview our prisoner.’

‘Prisoner?’ said Fuller, as if the word was offensive. ‘He’s my patient, Sergeant. And I’ve come to collect him.’

‘The *suspect* that you’re holding,’ said the Super, ‘his real name is Nathan Scofield. And we’re relinquishing custody.’

‘We’re what? Did you say, patient? And I’m sorry sir, I’m not relinquishing anyone. Trigger, or Scofield, he’s not going anywhere. I’ve arrested him for murder.’ *Don’t look at each other, look at me.*

‘Yes, well, Sergeant . . . there may be a few technicalities of Law at work here. You were *off* your patch when you arrested him, it really should have been one of our men.’

‘Bollocks. Err, with respect sir. What’s going on here?’

Again, stop looking at each other. What the fuck’s going on?

‘The doctor would like to see his patient before you interview him. Do you object?’

‘There will be no interview,’ said Fuller. ‘I’m taking my patient from your custody suite and transporting him immediately to another facility. Sergeant, Nathan Scofield is coming with me.’

‘I don’t think so, not gonna happen. Unless you’re with his legal team you’re not going in there. Trigger’s a suspect in a multiple murder enquiry. He’s a bloody serial killer.’

‘You’re judge and jury now, are you? The Deputy Commissioner said you’d be, unwilling.’

‘Sergeant Adams, I’m sorry, but this is official. The Chief Constable of Sussex is instructing you to hand over the suspect to Doctor Fuller. It’s at the request of the Home Office.’

Fuller stepped forward, his demeanour more relaxed now .

‘I can also tell you that the search for Jamie Howard is at an end,’ he said.

‘I don’t think so. She’s a serial murderess. She’s his companion in the crimes.’

‘Jamie Howard is dead, Sergeant Adams.’

‘Dead?’ This was like some big joke, and Raymond was the last to get it. ‘Since when? Did they find a body?’

‘Jamie’s been dead since May fourth of last year, Sergeant.’

‘Last year? I don’t think so. Sir, what’s going on?’

‘Just listen to him, Adams.’

‘Sergeant, have you seen Jamie Howard? Has anyone you’ve interviewed actually seen her? I take it by your face that that’s a no. And you never will. Look through the window into the interview room, tell me what you see.’

‘Do what? I’m not . . .’

‘Just do it Adams,’ the Super instructed. ‘Let’s get this over with.’

Raymond turned toward the large glass portal. On the other side was a small room, a rectangular wooden table at its centre. Around it were four chairs, two on either side. The suspect, Trigger, sat talking to himself. He hadn't stopped, apparently, since Williams put him in there.

'I see a white male,' he said. 'Our only link to a psychopath, who *will* kill again unless she's stopped.'

'And tell me what Nathan is doing in the interview room? Specifically, if you please.'

A look toward the Superintendent only reinforced the instruction.

'Nothing,' said Adams. 'Well, he's talking to himself.'

'You've not met many psychopaths have you, Sergeant?'

'Strangely enough, no, not recently.' *Just get to the point, you arrogant prick.* 'So he talks to himself, so what?'

'He's not talking to himself, *Sergeant.*'

'There's no-one else in the room, *Doctor.*'

'Let me rephrase for you. Nathan Scofield *is* talking to someone else. He is also talking to himself.'

'What the f? . . .' *Help me out here, sir.* 'Wait a minute . . . Trigger is . . . No, that's not right. Are you suggesting that he's psychotic?'

'It's not a suggestion, Sergeant. It's a fact.'

'But he . . . No, he looks all right to me.'

'Being psychotic isn't like being Bipolar. Patients like Nathan are very different. Very unique.'

And they're looking at each other again.

'Spit it out will you.'

The Superintendent nodded to Fuller.

'Very well, I'll give you some background. Nathan Schofield is a brilliant young man. A very special young man. A prodigy of sorts. But Nathan is also very sensitive; he's always found it difficult to bear the pressures that life can demand of us. In particular, that his father has demanded from him.

Nathan can speak seven languages, fluently. He can play over a dozen instruments and yet he was never taught. He studied at Cambridge, where he became a rising star in the field of Theoretical Physics. Nathan is also a keen historian. South American history in particular. Ah, is your brain forging new pathways towards your *prisoner* yet?'

'We don't call them suspects, just toe-rags. And here's a new pathway for you.' He stepped forward. 'That young prodigy in there, he's committed murder. I don't care what's floating about in his head. That's for a Court to decide.' *Don't you fucking sigh at me, you tosser.*

‘There you go again playing Judge and Jury. What evidence do you have. Some scribbling on walls and a few unreliable witness reports that they may have been at one of the crime scenes, at some point.

‘Well, you seem well informed for a, *doctor*? Feel free to chip on the side of Law and Order. Any time, sir.’

‘Nathan is a very troubled young man, Sergeant. He’s had a difficult upbringing.’

‘So have most of the villains in London. It’s full of estates you don’t want to walk round. People grow up with diversity, it doesn’t mean they have to go around killing people.’

‘I said listen, Adams. I meant it.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Everything changed for Nathan when his mother died, quite violently; a car accident. Something snapped inside him, if the analogy helps

A young child began to hear voices and then withdrew to find imaginary friends. Personalities he kept well hidden for over ten years. But in time he developed full blown dissociative personality disorder, amongst other issues. That means he disassociates from his problems by giving them to someone else.

Sergeant, there’s more than one person being accommodated inside Nathan’s head.

‘Yeah, I got that. But it doesn’t disassociate him from being a murderer. Sir, why am I listening to this?’

‘Sergeant, other personalities occupy parts of Nathan’s mind. And they are as real to him as they are to each other. As I am to you, in fact. Sergeant Adams, seventy-five percent of what goes on in Nathan’s head is fantasy . . . pure fabrication. And he’s becoming more ill as each day passes. Nathan isn’t talking to himself. I expect he’s having a conversation with one of the other personalities.’

‘Ha ha ha, I’m sorry, I just don’t care. Sir?’

‘Jamie Howard is dead, Sergeant. But she’s very much alive to Nathan,’ Fuller insisted. His tone more scathing.

‘Dead? Sir, what is this bullshit?’

‘Just listen to him, Adams. I had exactly the same reaction. Go on, Doctor.’

‘Nathan is a very disturbed young man, *Sergeant*.’

‘You’re repeating yourself, *Doctor*. So let me repeat myself. He’s a murderer. You just said so yourself.’

‘Sergeant, tell me what you see when you look in a mirror? Is there a face in there staring back at you? Yes, of course there is. Imagine then, a

wall of mirrors, but with somebody else's image smiling, or perhaps it's scowling back at you. A reflection that you then discover, to your horror, is able to make conversation.

Yes, that's right, you're getting the idea. Nathan has multiple personalities, up here, and he hears each and every one of their voices as clear as you hear mine. The imaging areas of his brain project them, and the sensory areas accept them as real. Each one believes that all the other personalities are real.'

'So he can have group sessions in his head?'

'Precisely. What if I wasn't really standing here talking to you, Sergeant? How would that be?'

'Pretty bloody lovely, actually.'

'Yes, but how would you cope if I kept popping up whilst you were engaged with polite company? Sat chatting to a nice young lady at a bar, perhaps. I just won't go away. What then? As time goes on, with each emerging personality. Who's real, who's not?'

Trust me, it gets very confusing for the patient, so he or she begins to withdraw. It's not enough to be careful any more. Trip questions, a subtle touch of the fingers, none of it helps. Why? Because your brain perceives them to be real. All of your senses are directed to accept them as reality. The smell of a man's cigar; the scent of a woman's perfume, to Nathan they are all real.

What would you do, Sergeant? You're clearly a physical man. A man of action. Would you drill a hole in your head to let me out. Or would begging for me to go away finally evolve into conversation? Would conversation eventually become acceptance that my personality, and all the others are real? That the rest of the world is a sham?'

'Wait a minute. I get it. You're blaming someone else for what he's done? One of his, personalities? No, I'm not having this. It's total bollocks. Trigger's been arrested and he'll go to trial'

'Shut up and listen Adams.'

'Sir, he's my pris . . .'

'I said listen to him, and don't interrupt again.'

'Yes sir.' *Fuck you sir.*

'How do I make you understand, Sergeant?'

You don't you patronising git.

'There are only two things you need to understand here, Sergeant. One, is that Nathan believes the personalities in his head are real. And the second, that I have the authority to have him released him into my custody.'

The Superintendent was nodding. Fuller was looking invincible. Adams took a deep breath.

‘So you’re saying that Trigger and Jamie are the same person?’

‘Correct.’

‘That Trigger isn’t a killer?’

‘No, Sergeant, Jamie is a killer.’

‘Sir . . .?’

‘All true, Sergeant Adams.’

‘Trigger needs to stand trial, sir. He needs to be put away, permanently.’

‘That’s not going to happen, Sergeant,’ said Fuller, ‘and everything I’ve told you is to be kept strictly confidential. Nathan is to be released into my custody whereafter I will transport him to a Secure Unit. He will be well looked after.’

‘Sir?’

‘It’s official, Adams. Out of my hands.’

‘He’s a nut job. A danger to Society. Everything this doctor’s just told me, it makes things worse. Trigger is a murderer.’

‘No, Sergeant. Jamie is . . .’

‘You listen to me, Doctor, it’s Trigger’s hand that holds the blade, figment of his imagination or not.’

‘Jamie was as real as you and I, Sergeant. Nathan met her at the House.’

‘House? What house?’

‘The House is a facility where we offer specialist insight and treatment into psychiatric disorder,’ said Fuller.

‘Does that mean you don’t do NHS?’

‘We are a private trust, yes. Nathan is one of our patients.’

‘Who is he?’ asked Adams. ‘Who’s Trigger’s dad? Oh come on, to pull this shit, and this quickly. Got to have billionaire, or Civil Servant after his name. Got a title has he?’

‘Shut up, Adams, and that’s an order. As far as the Chief Constable is concerned our Force has no interest in Nathan. He hasn’t committed any crimes down here. Doctor, I’ll have Nathan taken up as soon as I can arrange transport.’

You’re really going to do this aren’t you? No, you are not going to do this.

‘What about Carl, sir?’ Adams blurted. ‘Trigger said he shot him.’

‘Sergeant, preliminary forensics has found no trace of blood anywhere in the hotel room.’

‘But he discharged a weapon, sir.’

‘And no-one was harmed. The best place for him is a hospital.’

‘And the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police is on board with all this?’

‘Sergeant Adams,’ Fuller interrupted, ‘you need to let this go. The Home Office has spoken with the Metropolitan Commissioner and the Superintendent’s Chief Constable; both have given their full agreement. You’ll give yours too.’

‘Is that a veiled threat, you pompous . . .’

‘That’s enough, both of you,’ the Super stepped forward placing his hat on his head. His frustration clear to see. ‘Adams, this is straight from the Home Office. It’s been pointed out to us all that we have a lack of

provable evidence. And that it's not in the public interest to pursue this line of enquiry. Stand down.'

'Got it. Wheels are turning and favours are being done.'

'Listen to your superior, Sergeant. You have no motive and no *provable* physical link between the murders. Show me proof beyond any reasonable doubt that Nathan is guilty of any one of the crimes you allege? It's all circumstantial. You'd have a long and expensive prosecution ahead of you, at best.'

'But you know. We all know now. *You* could give evidence to a Court.'

'Patient confidentiality I'm afraid. Oh, and have I mentioned the best barristers that money can buy. Sergeant, Nathan is ill. He needs to be with doctors that understand what he's going through. To what end would his incarceration serve?'

'How about Justice? Oh, and the protection of the public?'

'Sergeant, Jamie is the problem, not Nathan. You cannot prosecute someone who does not exist. He will be under the care of the best psychiatrists.'

'Right, now are we done here, Sergeant?'

'Yes, sir, it's all been made very clear to me. Except for one thing. I'm sorry sir, but just so I can square this away. Who the fuck is Jamie anyway?'

'It's all right Superintendent, maybe it will help the Sergeant understand. Jamie Howard was in our care suffering from depression. The type that inevitably tends the patient toward suicide. She was responding well to her treatment, as was Nathan. And then an unlikely relationship blossomed between them. They were very close for almost a year.'

At the time Nathan wasn't a danger to anyone but himself. And Jamie became very protective of him; more a maternal affection than a romantic one. But I think Nathan fell in love with her. It's quite a tragic story really.'

'Please, you're breaking my heart.'

'Then I'll give you the abridged version. Boy meets girl, falls in love, stops taking medication. Boy has episode which allows the other personalities to return. One, or multiple alter egos persuade boy to leave the House. Girl thinks boy has abandoned her and a lot of hard work is undone. The thought of being abandoned; well it was all very tragic.'

It also happened the night that Nathan decided to return to the House. He was readmitted an hour before the girl's body was found.

'She'd done herself in?'

‘Succinctly put, yes. It was Nathan who found her body. Jamie had hung herself in her bedroom. As I said, Sergeant, all very tragic. Nathan’s been living in torture ever since.

‘Why didn’t you keep him secured?’

‘Nathan came to us voluntarily, we had no reason at the time to restrain him against his will. He ran away. He’s obviously been living on the streets of London since. Surviving on the anger . . . living with his rage. Trying to cope with his guilt.

Jamie was Nathan’s, *trigger*. Her death sent him into full blown psychosis. And from the information at hand it seems that Jamie is now fully imprinted into Nathan’s mind. She seemingly switches herself on whenever she likes.

Jamie is now his partner, his confidante. Perhaps even his lover by now. There’s a lot to sort out. But she is definitely the dominant personality. The one he settles down with and talks to at night. Who holds him when he’s sad . . . bullies him when she’s angry. Jamie is the personality that has been protecting Nathan from the horrors of life on the streets of London. It seems she will do anything to protect him.’

‘Including murder.’

‘You have to understand, Nathan is different to you and I. He’s a savant. A brilliant mind. A shy and timid boy before his psychosis. He needs compassion and understanding.’

‘He needs to be locked up, and the key thrown away.’

‘Well, I’ve been employed to ensure that he makes a full recovery. And until then I assure you he will be kept in a very secure unit. Sergeant, Nathan will never go to trial, steps have already been taken to ensure this. There may even come a time . . .’

‘What, when he’ll be released?’

‘Nathan is young, strong, he has years of treatment ahead of him.’

‘And what about Jamie?’

‘We’ll find the right drug regime. The correct therapy to make her go away, permanently.’

‘This is a joke. People are dead.’

‘Sergeant, you have a couple of dead drug dealers, the list of suspects is presumably endless. Again, you have no solid evidence against my patient. It’s all circumstantial, and could be applied to presumably more than one homeless person in London. I am here as a courtesy, our solicitors are a phone call away.’

‘And George Hammack?’

‘Has justice for crimes that involve children. The world is a much better place with that man removed from it. Nathan needs medical help, not a prison full of criminals who rejoice at another pretty boy entered into the system. Superintendent, how long will it take to arrange transport?’

‘Not long, perhaps you’d like to wait in my office?’

‘Thank you. It’s been a pleasure, Sergeant.’

Oh, fuck off. All right, no need to look like that, I didn’t say it out loud. Off you go for tea and biscuits. I don’t fucking believe this.

‘Sarge . . .’

‘Oh great, Cooper, my day is complete.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t realise you were busy. Morning sir, sirs.’ Sam waited until they were alone. ‘What was that all about?’

‘What do you want, Cooper? This really isn’t a good time.’

‘Sorry Sarge, but it’s going to get worse. I’ve just heard that another body’s been found.’

‘Where?’

‘At a church in Green Park. One of the congregation found his Priest’s body about a half hour ago.’

‘And he’s one of ours, because?’

‘Multiple stabbings. And some familiar scribbles on the wall, right above the altar. Sarge, you okay?’

‘No, Sam, I’m not fucking okay. I’m not having this. Drug dealers and a nonce are one thing . . . A priest you say?’

‘Yes Sarge.’

‘If they think that they’re gonna let him get away with this, just cos he gets a headache now and then.’

‘Sarge?’

‘It doesn’t matter. Did you find out who Carl was?’

‘Err yeah.’ Sam got his note book out. ‘From the description he gave, we’ve pinned it to a small time drug dealer in Soho. Name’s Carl Weathers, aka, Dirty Harry.’

Dirty Harry?

‘And he definitely wasn’t at the hotel?’

‘No, Sarge. Carl was in a cell in Hammersmith charged with affray, other charges pending.’

‘Wow, what a tangled web we weave, eh Sam?’

‘Sarge?’

‘Nothing. Thanks Sam. Now go take a walk. Find a canteen or somewhere away from here. This case is over for you.’

‘But I thought we were transporting Trigger back to London?’

‘No, not going to happen. Go on, Sam. Go get some coffee and a sandwich. I’ll come find you later; that’s if they haven’t locked me up with Trigger.’

‘You’re going to do something stupid, aren’t you. Maybe I can hang around, help out?’

‘No, but thanks. And for the record it’s not stupid, it’s necessary. And Sam, on a personal note, you’re a good copper. The Force will do well with you in it. But right now you need to make yourself scarce.’ *One career down the pan is enough for one day.* ‘Go on, I’ll catch up with you later. Go.’

There goes a fine example of the Nation’s new breed of copper; smart, educated, and young. And they’ll need all those attributes. Especially when they realise there’s only half as many of them to do the job as there used to be.

Best of luck, Sam.

Right, let’s get that psycho in there banged up in Broadmoor. My retirement gift to the residents of Greater London, and Brighton.

‘You shouldn’t have come here, Jamie. *Kiss*. They’ll try to take you away from me.’

‘Let them try.’

‘They won’t give us a choice.’

‘We need to get you out of here.’

She rattles at my chains but they won’t break. Not this time. Now they grasp me for good.

‘I suppose they’ll take us back to the House.’

I say. ‘Make me take drugs again. Jamie, when they’ve finished poking around in my head I might not remember you.’ *Hold me. Yes, tight. Don’t let go.* ‘I can’t go back. *We* won’t go back. I was wrong, so wrong. I wasn’t thinking straight. *Forgive me for leaving you?* We should have gone to the roof together. This would be over now. You and me, backs to the wall. I’m so stupid, stupid, stupid.’

‘Shhh, Baby Boy. *Kiss*. I do forgive you. *Kiss, kiss*. But you mustn’t leave me again. *Kiss*. Do you hear me? Never again, I don’t want to be left on my own, ever, ever again.’

She’s got her wish, the door’s just opened. Right or wrong, good or bad. It’s too late now as someone enters. *Oh you silly girl, you shouldn’t have come.* I didn’t want this. I never wanted any of this. But sometimes life has a way of living and we end up along for the ride. Now we have to pay the price, they’ve found us both together.

* * *

‘Hey, Remember me?’

‘Bloodhound? Liar . . . Judas . . . Roman.’

‘Okaaay, that’s good; see, we’re communicating.’

‘What do you want? Have you come to gloat?’

‘I wanted to see how you’re doing? They treating you okay? Need anything?’

‘No. Yes. A cup of tea would be nice. And we, I, I’m hungry.’

‘Sure, no problem. I’ll get something organised. But I think we need to have a chat first.’

‘No, I won’t talk to you. You’re a liar. You lied to me on the roof. I don’t talk to those who deceive.’

‘Suit yourself. What about Jamie? Does Jamie want to talk? She is here isn’t she? You said *we*, just then, you used the plural. I’d like to talk to Jamie, it’s important.

Stop looking around the room, Raymond. Just pretend she’s a ghost. Or he’s possessed. No, go with ghost. ‘Listen up, both of you. I’m going to lay the situation on the table, so you both understand what’s going to happen. There’s a Doctor Fuller outside, and he’s come to take you away.’

‘Fuller? No, send him away. I won’t go with him. We don’t want him here. Look, chains, he can’t take us.’

‘We again?’ *Stop looking around the room.* ‘Jamie . . . are you, in there? Jamie, hello?’

“I’ll fucking kill him.”

‘Whoa, fuck . . . take it easy son.’ *And that’s why we cuff prisoners to the table.* ‘Don’t get upset. No-one’s going anywhere, at least not for a few minutes. Trigger, sit yourself down. Doctor Fuller is in the building, somewhere upstairs.’

“Let Fuller in here and I’ll fucking gut him.”

‘Wow. Let’s all stay calm shall we. All *three* of us.’

‘No, Jamie. Don’t let her, Bloodhound. There has to be another way?’

“There is no other way. He’ll try to separate us. Try to break you. I’ll fucking kill him before I let that happen.”

‘No, Jamie, I won’t let that happen. I promise. I’m strong enough to resist him now. I love you.’

Okay, going with option two. He is definitely possessed. Fuck.

‘Trigger, Jamie, calm down. Sit down. We can stop the doctor from taking you, but only if we act quickly.’

“You can’t stop him, but I can. He’s weak. You’re weak, Trigger. Gutless. Who had to get us out of the House. Me. Who kept us safe from those fucking predators out there? Me. It was me. I’ll keep you safe, Baby Boy.”

‘Like always.’

‘Hey, hey, over here.’ *Okay, clicking fingers not good.* ‘Everyone talk to me, not to each other.’ *If I wasn’t seeing this . . .* ‘We can sort this, okay.’

‘You’re a liar, Bloodhound.’

“*You’re a filthy fucking cunt, Pig.*”

‘And you’re a gobby cow.’ *Two voices out of one mouth . . .* ‘I want you both to listen, okay. Can you do that?’

‘Please, you can’t let him take us.’

‘Trigger, I don’t have any influence in what’s about to happen. But you do, and you don’t have long to make a decision.’

‘You lied to me, Bloodhound.’

‘You need to get over that. I was doing my job, okay. Protecting vulnerable young adults.’ *Toe-rags.* ‘I stop them from jumping off buildings, it’s part of what I do. So let’s move on from that shall we?’

“*What do you want, Pig?*”

‘There, that’s better. Less hostility and more conversation.’

‘Don’t listen to him, Jamie. He lied to us on the roof top. I wanted to jump, but he lied.’

“*We should have jumped into the river, but we didn’t. Why was that? Because you’re weak, Trigger. Because you need me, you dear sweet child. Doctor Fuller will drill a hole in your head and he’ll try to pull me out. Don’t let that happen. Please, don’t let him pull me out. Please. I don’t want to leave. Maybe we should listen to him. What if he can help?*”

‘No, I told you, I’m stronger now. I won’t let Fuller do any of that to me, to us.’

“*And how are you going to fucking stop him?*”

‘Hey, hey, over here.’ *Snap snap.* ‘Pay attention.’ *This is seriously fucked up.* ‘Here’s the deal, okay. Trigger, you talk to me, and only to me, until this is sorted. Agreed?’

“*Agree to his terms, Trigger. What does it hurt to listen. I’m not going back there. I won’t.*”

‘But he lies.’

‘No, no more lies. I’ll tell it how it is, Trigger, Jamie, and then you can both decide. It’s up to you.’

* * *

“*Listen to him, Baby Boy. He might be able to help us.*”

‘I don’t know. Why should I, he lied?’

“*Because I want you to. You’ll do it for me, won’t you? I don’t want to go back. Fuller will try to separate us.*”

‘Listen to her, Trigger.’

“Shut up, Pig. Baby Boy, help me, please. Fuller hates me. He’ll make me go away. I don’t want to go away. I’ll be on my own again. You’ll do this for me, you will, won’t you?”

Yes Jamie. I’ll do it for you. I s’pose you’re right. You’re always right. I’ll do whatever you want.

‘I’ll take the nodding as an agreement shall I. Right, well, the way I see it, your only way to take Fuller and his, *House*, out of the equation, is to make a written statement. A formal confession to the murder of George Hammack, that will do for starters’

‘Confess to murder? Why? How will that help? I won’t do it. You can’t make me.’

‘You sign a confession, Trigger. I use a confession to stop Fuller taking you back to the House.’

Confession? Is that it Lord, you want me to confess? Always pushing towards confession. Will I be absolved? Will Jamie? Is that all it takes? Just write down the words and confess?

“Confess, Trigger. Tell them we did it. Tell them we killed George, and Josh, and all the others. I should be punished, if it means that we can stay together. Is that what it means, Pig? Will we stay together?”

‘If I confess will it make Doctor Fuller go away?’

‘Absolutely, yes, he won’t be able to sweep this under the carpet with a signed confession of murder. If you sign a confession, it will have to go to Court. Once you’re in the System, Fuller can’t touch you. The Judge will find you guilty of multiple murders and you’ll *both* be sent to a nice psychiatric hospital run by the NHS. You’ll have to stay there, they won’t let you out. But you’ll be together. There’ll be games, quiz night, and lots of drugs. All you’ll be required to do is talk to the nice people about what bothers you. It’s that, or you won’t remember a damn thing about the woman you love when Fuller’s finished. Sign a confession, now, and I’ll see to it that they never take Jamie away.’

‘But you lied to me on the rooftop?’

‘I saved your life. I was the hand that brought you down from the ledge, remember. Now I’m trying to save you, and Jamie.’

I don’t know what to believe. Everyone’s looking at me. Putting pressure on me. I don’t know. I don’t know.

“Trigger, they’ll send me away. Put me in Purgatory somewhere. You’ll forget me. I’ll be lost in the abyss without you. Please, I don’t want to go. I want to stay with you. Kiss. Don’t let them take me away. Kiss kiss. I don’t want to be alone.”

I take a long hard look at Bloodhound. *Is it true what he's saying?* He looks sincere. *But so did Fuller when I first met him.* That man lied too. What they do there, at the House. They hurt people. Experiment on the weak and feeble. I'm not weak. I'm not. *Is this the only way to prove it?*

I won't go back to the House?'

'No, Trigger, but we don't have long; your father has already seen to that.'

'Father? He knows I'm here?'

'If Fuller knows, so does your father. Who is he, just out of interest? I could write his name down . . .'

The Winter God has returned. Why? Why does he bother? What do I mean to him? Nothing, that's what. Why won't he leave us alone? Why won't he let us be?

'You'll make sure they put us somewhere safe?'

'Oh yes. Once you're in the system, your fate is taken out of your father's hands. There aren't enough funny handshakes to hide you. Sorry, what was his name again?'

'Jamie and me, we'll be together?'

'Yes.'

'For a long time?'

'Forever, hopefully'

'Forever Jamie, Did you hear him? You and me, forever.'

"Sign it. Whatever he wants, sign it. I love you, Trigger. I do. Sign it. Sign it for me."

'All right, I'll do it.'

'Good boy. But we have to be quick.'

'What are you doing?'

'It's okay, just pulling out some paper I borrowed from the office down the hall. And we have to record this as well. That's okay isn't it. I'll just press these and the tape machine's on.'

"Say yes, Trigger. Let him record us. Then everyone will know I'm real. They can't take me away if they know I'm real."

'Yes, it's weird but necessary. I'm turning on the recorder. Right, for the tape, my name is Sergeant Raymond Adams. Interview with Nathan Schofield at thirteen fifty, on the twenty seventh of September two thousand and sixteen. Please state your name, names, for the tape.'

'Nathan Schofield.'

"Jamie Howard."

Carol is not going to believe this.

'I'll write as we talk, is that okay? You can read it through when I've finished, is that what we've just agreed? You have to say it for the tape.'

'Yes.'

'And Jamie, is that okay with you.'

"Yes, yes."

'And you're speaking freely and without duress? You want to confess to the murder of George Hammock.'

"*And the rest. There are seven including the Priest.*"

'Seven?' *Shit.* 'Trigger, for the tape, did you kill the Priest in the church at Green Park?'

'No.'

'You didn't kill the Priest.'

'No, Jamie did.'

"Yes, yes. *We killed all of them.*"

'We . . . So you're saying you were both responsible. You and Trigger?'

"Yes."

'Trigger, is she telling the truth?'

'I was there, yes. But Jamie didn't mean to kill the Priest. He tried to stop us leaving. He kept, touching me . . .'

'Okay, I get it. But let's concentrate on George Hammock for now. Keep to the bare facts. Once you've signed this, your confession, I'll arrest you for George's murder. Trigger, the Priest, do you know his name?'

'No. He never said. Bloodhound, I've never been arrested for murder before.' *I'll confess to anything if it means we can stay together.* 'Will it hurt?'

'Hurt? No, no-one's going to hurt you. I promise. I'm pausing the tape. Err, Trigger, do you know how to use this?'

'It's a phone, of course I do.'

'I mean the camera, and the email . . . all that stuff?'

'Yes.'

'Good. When you've signed this you're going to take a photo of your confession and send it to someone. An irritating man, but he'll make you famous. After that, you're going to take a selfie and post it on a website used by Fleet Street. You'll tell everyone in the Press that you're the reason the Underground was stopped the other day. And Nathan . . . Trigger . . . there'll be no going back when it's done, you do understand?'

'Yes.'

'And Jamie, you agree too?'

“Yes, yes.”

‘Good boy, girl . . . I promise you, this is the only way that you can stay out of the House.’

‘You’ll get in trouble for this won’t you.’

‘Nah, they’ll give me a medal. What choice will they have. Now shh, I’m writing.’

He’s a good man, Bloodhound. He’s doing this for us. For Jamie and me. He understands the power of love and the need for it to flourish. For *us* to be together, and never be parted. *Thank you Lord.* Thank you for sending Bloodhound to find us. I never doubted your wisdom, or your compassion. Or that faith would keep us both safe. My path has never been clearer to me than it is right now.

Sorry, I can’t help it, this big cheesy grin. And look at you, my sweet lovely Jamie. You’re glowing. It’s like we’re getting married, or about to give birth. My heart is performing the River-dance. I want you to feel it.

‘No no, Jamie, don’t cry. This is a happy day. You and me, backs to the wall, just one last time. What we do now, it will keep us together, forever. No more tomorrows. Just me and you. Now they’ll never keep us apart. That’s right isn’t it, Bloodhound?’

‘You can bet on that. Again, shh, I’m writing.’

He’s a good man, Bloodhound. He just wants to help us. And Jamie, love of my life, all she wants is to be with me. Right now I’m the luckiest man alive.

‘Right, this should do. I’ll read it out shall I.’

‘There’s no need, Bloodhound. I trust you. I trust you both. Here, give me your phone. Lend me your pen and show me where to sign.’