

For Autumn, my purpose, and my reason to keep trying. And for Sobianne, for allowing me the time and space I needed to do this.

Author's Note

When I first came up with the concept of "Model Village," I wanted to write about life in the tiny villages that I knew growing up, and how I saw them.

But as the story progressed, the past and the future of the village took over from the present and that's when the real stories unfolded.

Life in an isolated village can be mundane, and conversations can seem pointless and repetitive, but I wanted to portray the reality as much as I could - all whilst building for the moments you (hopefully) won't see coming as the book progresses.

There are times though when reality just simply won't do, and that's when the absurd and the disturbing allow for fiction to truly flourish.

At times, this novel is calm and cosy, then dark and troubling, and other times it questions belief – perhaps matching the different frames of mind I was in throughout the writing process. But above all else it was written to question the human moral compass, and which way it points.

Some of the topics covered in this novel are sensitive and perhaps unsettling, so please allow yourself to be prepared for these moments.

If there is one thing that I ask you to do whilst reading this novel, it is to suspend your disbelief.

Finally, if you have made it this far then I truly hope you enjoy the story as much as I enjoyed creating the world in which it is set... and who knows – perhaps this world will be a reality one day. Should you enjoy what you read and wish to support me in any way, then my contact details are listed at the back of this book.

Model Village

Leo A. Murphy

Part 1

Chapter 1

You might say that Oxington was like many other tiny English villages, with its scarcely significant population, cluster of local shops and more greenery than you can imagine. But this was no ordinary village; Oxington was a place that had seemingly been forgotten about. Ask anybody who lived more than 5 miles away and they'd never even heard of the place. It was somewhere that you might pass through but never visited – you were either born there and stayed or you left there and forgot about it. This didn't mean that Oxington was somewhere that was forgettable though, far from it. You see, this tiny little village and those who knew it, were happy with its status, because it meant that it and its people could do things their way. It was also the home of Joe Blue.

Joe Blue was a twenty-something local lad who dreamt big, far bigger than his small village, but these dreams were not just for himself, they were for Oxington too. Having grown up in the village, Joe had seen firsthand what was going on there, the way the village ran itself, the way the locals were always smiling and happy, and whose lives seemed so carefree – but he also saw what life was like for people outside of the village. People who lived in a democracy, run by unelected officials who had their own agendas, those who lived complicated lives where a smile was deemed worrying. Social media was an incredibly timely thing for Joe; it helped him to see this other side of the world and pinpoint the differences between his life and the lives of almost anybody outside of Oxington. He wanted

to make “Oxington Living”, as he put it, the way that everybody lived.

The closest thing to a council in Oxington was a semi-regular meeting attended by local shop owners, farmers like his grandad, parents and also the head teacher of the joint Primary and Secondary school, and mum to Joe, Amanda Blue. Anybody who wanted could attend these meetings, but the truth is that nobody needed to as nothing ever really changed in the village. But, from a young age Joe – who was an only child, was brought along to these meetings by his mother. Amanda went to these meetings not through any kind of passion or agenda of her own, but because she wanted an excuse to get out of the house when her husband was away working. Joe’s father Chris worked away from the village regularly since before Joe was born, which, unbeknown to Joe but unsurprisingly, caused great strain on his parents' marriage. So, any time there was an occasion to meet people, which every now and again in the village hall there was, Amanda Blue would attend, with Joe by her side.

This however was something that Joe looked forward to as well, an opportunity to discuss any goings on, which quickly turned into an impromptu gossip-spreading session. But the older that Joe got, the clearer he could see that this village, his village, had everything that they needed, and the residents could very much take care of themselves – but nobody was in charge, something that Joe saw as an opportunity. Joe witnessed the happiness that his small village and its people had, he too grew up happy and the more he grew up the more he realised that happiness is what life was truly about. But every time he went online, he saw a new story of the agony and anguish that people outside of Oxington suffered, people not far away from Oxington in fact.

So, one crisp, yet glaringly bright, early-Spring evening, the day the locals all met, Joe decided that he was going to do something that hadn’t been done before – he was going to put himself forward as ‘leader’ of the group. The meeting started as it always did, with the closest thing to a leader – who was in fact just the oldest person in the village – Yvette

Cooper, asked in her slow, yet sweet, curling West Country tone, 'Right then you lot, who's got anything to say?'

Jim, who owned the local newsagents which didn't even have a name, instead it just had the names of national newspapers above the shop door, none of which were sold there, so everybody just called it 'Jim's', replied, 'I heard Sally Baker is the one who hasn't been picking up her dog's shit round the park.'

This was met with a hint of shock but mostly laughter and mumblings of 'I knew it was her' and 'dirty cow'. That's all it was though, just somewhere for people to have a chat and a natter and a laugh. But that's all it took to get the meeting started too, a bit of petty gossip, which is what made people click so much, because they knew everybody and everything that was going on in the village.

There was no formal ending to the meetings, people just left when they wanted or had to, and usually Yvette, being the oldest, was the first to leave. So, before she did so, Joe saw his chance to approach her. Joe addressed Yvette quietly as he saw her walking towards the disconnected fire door that she usually left through as it was closer to her back gate.

'How are you, Yvette?' he asked, in his monotone yet accent-less voice.

'Oh, you know, I'm still here, love,' she replied.

Joe smiled at her, then quickly asked, 'I bet you won't mind if I take over from you next time will you, then?'

'What are you on about, love? Take over from what?'

'You know, from these meetings. You're the one that leads them, aren't you?' Joe knew she wasn't a leader and knew she certainly didn't think of herself as one, so he sensed he would have no problem in her granting his wish.

'I ain't no leader my lovely, I just see how everyone is and ask what's been going on. Get things started, that's all,'

‘Well, that kind of puts you in charge, which must be tough, but you do a great job,’

‘I ain’t in charge, I ain’t a leader, I just turns up,’ Yvette said, with a slight grumble and annoyance in her voice this time, before adding, ‘What was it you was after, anyway? Take over from me next time? You can have it, love, whatever that means, but I ain’t in charge so I dunno what you’ll get from it.’

But Joe got what exactly what he wanted, manipulating the old woman to the most basic degree, just like every great leader, he thought.

‘Thank you, Yvette, I just want to talk to everyone the way that you do, that’s all. You have a nice evening now’. His next move was to spread the word like every other rumour of the evening around the group until everybody knew before they left, that next time they were all together – he was starting the meeting, and in Joe’s eyes he was leading it, and leading them too.

Chapter 2

Nothing ever felt like a chore to Billy Blue. Everything happened for a reason, and he was just there to be a part of it. Compare that to his daughter Amanda and you wouldn't know they were related at all if it wasn't for the matching miscoloured eyes and sandy white hair. These were Blue family traits and were passed down like a tradition, all the way down to Joe – who unlike his mother – had the same birthmark as Billy. Though Billy's had grown over the years, bigger than Joe's. Amanda didn't take Chris' surname when they married, something that Chris always resented her for, and he resented her even more when she put Blue as Joe's surname on his birth certificate. She said she always knew he was more of a 'Blue' than an 'Adams', and she was right. Joe took his looks from his mother's side, not taking Chris' curtained black hair and dimpled chin. Chris was lean, bordering on skinny, but he was also tall, much taller than Billy, which first drew Amanda to him as she was taller than most boys in the village.

Billy Blue was a farmer, nothing more and nothing less. Most farmers, both in Oxington and elsewhere, had only known that life, but Billy, unlike the others, had a different upbringing. He was born in 1933 in northwest London, in a place called Burning Oak. Being born at this time meant that Billy was old enough to know what was going on when the Second World War started. It meant that Billy understood that his father had been killed on

duty in Germany and that his mother had killed herself in the aftermath. Billy survived the war, but after his mother had died, he was rehoused and moved to Oxington, aged 9.

He was fortunate enough to find a loving foster family, but little was known about Billy before he moved there. He had no siblings, no known living relatives and nobody in his hometown wanted anything to do with him because of his parents' heritage. You'd never know it from looking at him, but Billy was part Indian from his mother's side, part German from his father's side, but born in England. However, Billy looked more like his father with the same perfect blonde hair and the heterochromia that he passed down to him. One thing that Billy did have that neither of his parents did, was an unmistakable birthmark in the shape of an acorn cupule, on his left temple.

News of his father's heritage quickly resurfaced once the Second World War began, and his mother had hoped that with her husband, a German man born in England to an English mother, fighting the war against Germany, would at least help people to understand that he didn't want any part of his German ancestry. But it didn't. The locals couldn't fathom anything German, or even anything not English, so hatred and blame soon landed on Billy and his mum's doorstep when his dad left for Germany.

When he died it got worse, as Billy's mum was not allowed to grieve. In fact, she was barraged with abuse and constantly told that she and Billy should be out there getting killed as well, with one particularly violent incident leaving Billy blind in one eye. She couldn't take it anymore, but, more importantly, she didn't want Billy to have to withstand it. She knew that if Billy had no parents he would have to be rehoused, and she just hoped that it would be somewhere better than where they were. The last time Billy saw his mother, she told him to never, under any circumstances, tell anybody about where his mother and father were from. He was English and that was all anybody ever needed to know.

Billy was understandably silent after the death of both his parents at such a young age

and in such a short space of time, so he refused to tell the rehousing officers his last name.

Whether out of shock or shame, and being dyslexic too, Billy was unable to spell his surname. When asked what he wanted to be called, the Officers got little out of Billy, in fact the only thing he told anybody was his favourite colour, blue, because it matched the colour of the eye that he could see out of. From then on, he was known as Billy Blue, the boy who came from the big city with no parents. The name suited Billy, he liked it too, and used it as an opportunity to create a new identity in his new home of Oxington.

The family that Billy Blue lived with – the Whitmore's, were farmers who took care of Billy like one of their own. They had four children which is why they were thought of to take care of Billy. They didn't know how long for, but they knew what a child needed, and children who grew up in Oxington – particularly on the farms, were such happy children. They didn't know where Billy was from and didn't ask him either, and they spoke no word of his mother or father even though they were aware of the circumstances that brought him to them. The children at the farm were enamoured with Billy too, who had such an unusual mix of features that they hadn't ever seen before.

Billy stayed on the farm – ironically, he was the only one out of the five children who wanted to be a farmer, the foster boy. He outlived his foster parents, and outlived three of his four siblings, who all died before the age of 60. Billy took over the farm, along with his wife, a teacher at the local school and also his foster sister, Mary. Billy and Mary had one child; their daughter Amanda Ella Blue, named after their mother Amanda, and Billy's mother Ella, short for Ellamma. Other than her appearance, Amanda inherited everything else from Mary, both in personality and profession. She also took her mother's height, meaning that both women in Billy's life always stood taller than him, especially now as Billy neared eighty.

Chapter 3

Before he took charge of his first meeting with the locals, Joe wanted to talk to his grandad about his plans. Joe always felt close to Billy and considered him more of a father than his actual dad, Chris. He went to his grandparents' farmhouse at around 6pm after all of the work for the day had been done, just before the sun was thinking about setting, and just in time for Mary to dish up his and Billy's favourite meal of gammon, egg and chips. There were a lot of similarities between Joe and Billy, and food was certainly one of them. Using the livestock from the farm as well as the crops that they grew meant that the Blue family were entirely self-sufficient when it came to food, something that the residents of Oxington were all familiar with and all to some extent followed. Whether from their own farm, allotment or garden, everybody was responsible for sourcing what they ate.

He approached the subject of the next meeting whilst his nan was busy in the other room, assuming that his grandad would agree with him as he usually did, given his nonchalant attitude most of the time. He never mistook this for not caring though, it was just his way of life and being content with what he had. This was why Joe wanted Billy to be the first person he told about his plans.

'Talk to me, son; what have you got to say for yourself?' Billy said in his signature blunt tone. It wasn't rude, just to the point. His accent, though, was odd. He had taken on the

local dialect full-well, however he still had some Londoner in him, which meant that the start of his words were shorter but the ends of his words were longer. He didn't sound particularly Cockney, but he didn't sound like anyone else in the village.

So, in the cluttered, country-style kitchen Joe said, 'I'm going to the next meeting at the Village Hall.'

Billy replied, 'Good for you, son – but don't you go to every meeting?'

'I do, but I talked to Yvette last time and asked her if I could take charge of the meeting.'

'Why'd you do that for?'

'Because I want to do something, something good for other people, people not like us, grandad.'

Billy looked slightly confused, but told him, 'Ain't nothing wrong with helping people out; what do you mean, though?'

Joe talked about his grand plan to take charge of the of the Village, to promote "Oxington Living" and to see if people outside of the village – people from different backgrounds – could live as happy as them. He said, 'Look at the news, grandad, why is the rest of the world suffering and we're not? I want others to have what we have. Imagine being accused of something just because of where you're from. We don't know what that's like.'

With those last few words Billy got a flashback to his childhood. He knew *exactly* what it was like, and decades-worth of repressed emotions came over him. It was clear that Joe wanted to help people, which would normally put a huge grin on Billy's creased, beard-filled face. But as soon as Joe tried to continue, Billy stabbed his steak knife into the thick wooden dinner table and launched an uncharacteristic tirade.

'You listen here, boy. We are us, alright, the way it is here now is how it's always been. Nobody knows about us, and we don't know about them. I suggest you stop reading the news

on your phone or your computer or wherever you find this crap and get down the farm more. We ain't got no one in charge and we don't want no one in charge, got it? People from different backgrounds don't mix, don't work out, they deserve all they get.'

Joe was shocked, his hands and spine were trembling with fear, he'd never seen his grandad like this, talking in such a dismissive and selfish way, nobody had. It was at this point that Mary came in shouting, 'What's going on Billy?! You're scaring the poor lad!'

Billy sat back down; he was shaking with boiling rage. He had never been like this, but nobody had ever brought up something so close to Billy's heart and opened a wound he thought was closed for good. He had never told anybody, not even Mary, about his parents, he had just said they were killed in the war, so nobody knew of Billy's deep ancestral pain, and he wasn't about to tell anybody now.

'I'm sorry son,' Billy said, with genuine remorse, 'I just don't think it'll work.'

Joe, still scared and perplexed, tried hard to fight back his tears, but the lip quivering became too much. He didn't know if it was out of fear, shock or the thought that his ever-loving grandad didn't believe in him for the first time. Mary went over to comfort Joe, but he shrugged her off out of sheer pride and walked out. But just as he got to the door he turned back to his grandad and said in defiance, 'You'd better be at the next meeting, Bill, I've got something you'll want to hear.'

Mary went after Joe whilst Billy was left alone, where he saw the knife still wobbling and pulled it out from the table. He lifted his shirt to his chest and cut open one of his old scars. The blood didn't come out thick and fast like it used to, but the feeling he used to get came back just like it did the first time he cut himself when he moved to Oxington.

Chapter 4

The day had come for Joe to address the locals, and though this was just the start, he knew that he would still have some work to do to get people on his side. Plus, if his altercation with his grandad Billy was anything to go by then this wouldn't be plain sailing. Ever since that night he wondered what could possibly have gotten his grandad so incensed, but he assumed it must have been his fault. Joe's conscience was regularly guilty, this was nothing new, but fighting with his family was something he was not familiar with. He was nervous that his grandad would be there even though he had demanded he be, so he wondered if he would approach him and apologise, or would his grandad even show up? He didn't know what the best outcome might be.

This didn't take away Joe's focus though, as he needed the locals to at least acknowledge what he was planning to do. They didn't need to accept why he was doing it, those were his reasons, but he knew if he could get them behind him, then he was as good as started on his mission. The meetings always fell on a Monday evening, and with the nights not yet staying light past 7:00, Joe thought that the attendance might not be too high. There had always been talk of strange beasts that roamed the fields when it got dark in the village, not that anybody had ever actually seen firsthand what they looked like. But any time cattle were killed – most likely by a fox or stray dog – rumours of the 'Terror of "Ton"' started up.

This occasionally was the talk of the meetings, so Joe hoped that nothing untoward had happened recently to overshadow what he had planned to talk about.

With it being a Monday, it also meant that Joe was at work in the daytime. Oxington was home to a powerful multi-engineering group called 'Ox Power'. They specialised in groundbreaking methods and innovative tools and machinery to mainly help farmers, but they also had a laboratory and a new tech hub, which they used to supply the local school with laptops and equipment for the students who did science, technology, and of course engineering courses, with the lab only coming in the past year. This was so that when the students left school, they were well prepared before they inevitably went on to work at a farm, or, as was hoped, they went on to work for Ox Power. Joe took the latter route and was now a scientific engineer there.

His job kept him busy, so he didn't have much time to think about the evening's proceedings; ironically, he was working on a new prototype which his grandad was helping him to develop. This was, thought Joe, the thing that got Oxington noticed, and he had plans to take it across the world if it worked out. Joe was a keen humanitarian, so he knew the damage that agriculture was doing to the planet – Billy didn't believe this, though, so Joe told him that the prototype was something to help grow crops and keep the cows happy. But he needed to stay on good terms with his grandad, so that he could use the copious amounts of manure produced by the cattle on his farm. He could go always to another farm, but that meant explaining the product to somebody who might not be interested or who asked too many questions. At least with Billy, Joe had access to whatever he wanted on the farm, whenever he wanted.

As the day went on and got closer to the meeting, Joe decided that he needed to approach Billy first, be the bigger man, he thought. If he was going to be the leader of the village, he needed to make the first move and show his grandad that he was serious, in every

aspect. But it needn't have bothered Joe, because Billy wasn't even in Oxington, he was on his way back to Burning Oak. Since their argument, Billy was adamant that he wasn't going to be a part of Joe's plans, so, feeling worse-for-wear he made his way back to his birthplace, back to the place where he was first raised, and to the spot where his mother was buried. Billy hadn't been back there at all since he got moved away, he never felt the desire to, but Joe's ideas had brought back all sorts of memories that he thought he had ridded himself of. His mother's final words to him echoed in his mind whenever he thought about what Joe was going to start this evening, so he decided to go back, hoping to get some sort of clarity from his mother's rotted presence.

He always thought he could hear her talking to him whenever he cut himself when he was younger, perhaps he just heard what he thought she would say, but as time went on and he grew happy, he didn't hear his mother's voice anymore. So, when he cut himself again and didn't hear his mother's voice, Billy wanted to get as close to her as he could, to see if she would tell him anything. All he wanted was to hear her voice again and not just those last words that rang so deep, something new, something to help guide him. He was lost without a voice. He had heard voices from a young age, some bad and some good, some from people he never even knew. The first voice he heard told him that it was his fault that his dad had died and that he had wished it would happen, neither of which were true.

Moments like these had made him a very introverted child, then when the war hit and both his parents died, he wanted to give up completely. But when Billy realised the voices were his, in his control, he used them to help him see things differently and make decisions, living his life in his head as though he was the director in his own life's movie. Nobody seemed to notice so he carried on doing it, still not knowing who he was hearing, but he knew it wasn't his voice.

Billy's foster parents had kept the address of the cemetery where his mother was

buried, maybe knowing he would want to go there one day, but to his surprise the cemetery wasn't there. Instead, there was an Indian restaurant in its place. He didn't stop to ask anybody what had happened to the old cemetery, instead he stayed in his car and observed everyday life there. Gone were the days of segregation and shunning; this was now a new town, full of colour and full of wild characters, the likes of which he had never seen before.

Back in the village Joe was waiting anxiously for everybody to turn up, particularly his grandad and his mum. Amanda showed up, unaware of Joe's plans but aware of his falling out with Billy, so she broke the news to him, 'Your nan says he's not coming, says he's been gone all day.'

Joe felt such relief at first, knowing he wouldn't have to go through the awkwardness of seeing him, but then found himself growing angry. Seeing both of her son's fists clenched, Amanda could sense the rage building in Joe. Concerned, she asked him, 'What has he told you ... about not being here I mean.'

'I haven't spoken to him at all, but I thought he would show up at least, he always comes here.'

Still seething, Joe muttered, 'I'll show him, then he'll have no choice but to listen.'

Before Amanda could react, he stormed off and up to the nearest thing resembling a podium, a rickety wooden stool, and got the meeting started. Joe didn't stand for too long on the stool, just long enough to get everyone's attention. but when he did, he froze.

'You got something to say, lad?' Shouted somebody from the seated group, getting a chuckle from the locals, who all turned their attention to Yvette, making it clear she was the one that said it. It wasn't particularly funny, but the timing of the comment and the fact that it came from the usual speaker, made it so. These types of comments were ones that could be used to put somebody off, but, in this case, it was one of reassurance – particularly from a group as closely-knit as this, and Joe knew that. He looked across the room and to his smiling

mother, and then went on word for word what he told his grandad Billy – something he was planning to do regardless of if he was there or not, as if to reaffirm that what he was doing wasn't going to be swayed by anybody and his belief was unwavering. Joe told the group in no uncertain terms that he wanted to help people and to do so he needed to put Oxington on the map, and he knew how to do it. To his surprise, though, it seemed that everybody already knew, as there was no shock at all.

'It's alright kiddo, Billy's told us all at the pub last night, said you'd had a falling out over it,' said Robbie, a local mechanic only a few years older than Joe. 'Don't know why, though; you're a good lad, and sounds like you want to do well by this place.'

Robbie's older wife Katie said reassuringly. 'I think he'd been on the home brew again; he turned up already pissed!'

Robbie roared, which set the whole room off again into a collective chuckle, and then the chatter began, as usual, before some of those in attendance shouted, 'We're with you lad!' and 'Here, here!' It appeared Joe had little to no perception of himself throughout the village, but it was as if they had all known he was destined for this moment, having seen him grow up into the man he was today, and accepted him right away. Amanda simply nodded at Joe, her subtle way of approval. That was it, Joe thought, no more hurdles, not least from the locals anyway, but as he listened to the latest gossip, he couldn't help wondering why Billy wasn't there and why he couldn't be found. Perhaps he really did mean what he said. He needed to know, but first he needed to know where Billy was.

Chapter 5

Since returning from Burning Oak, Billy had started to ostracise himself from the community and his family. What he had seen in his birthplace had opened his eyes to what was happening in his hometown ever since he left, and the effects of what a mix of cultures can have on a community. What he saw was chaotic, people everywhere, smells that he didn't recognise and mess in every direction. There was noise coming from the people, cars and animals, there were buildings higher than he could have imagined, something was happening no matter where he went. He couldn't tell where some people were from, nor did he intend to find out how they ended up there, but he was sure that if this was how people chose to live now, then he wanted no part of it for his beloved Oxington.

It was clear to Billy that he needed to stop Joe, but he had heard from Amanda that his proposal had gone down well with everyone, so it wasn't going to be easy. Joe was seemingly running the village now as far as they were concerned, but he knew that Joe had no real power, so Billy decided that he had to run against Joe at the next meeting. What could anybody do about it, he thought, Joe wasn't elected – he took it upon himself to stand in front of them to help his own cause, so why couldn't Billy do the same? He didn't intend to tell anybody, not Mary nor Amanda or anyone down the pub this time, he would just show up at the next meeting and tell everybody that he thought that Joe was wrong, and that the village should stay as it was. It would mean there would be more tension between him and Joe,

especially if he didn't tell him about it first like Joe did with him, and it would likely also cause a divide across the family and the village. But, in the end, it would mean that nothing would change, which is exactly what he wanted.

Joe had already started work on getting the village recognised though, something that Billy knew nothing about as he was creating Oxington's digital portfolio, an area that Billy couldn't comprehend, let alone compete with. Since meeting with the locals and being accepted, Joe was keen to keep momentum going and keep everybody on his side. He had been taking pictures across the village and intended to create a profile of everybody there for the website that he was building. It allowed Joe to keep in contact with everyone too so he could tell them all about what he was doing, and they seemed to love the idea of being on a website, although he had to explain the concept to most folk. As well as a website, Joe was setting up social media pages on all major platforms for the village too, with one thing in common – he owned all accounts so was responsible for their content. He had also made his name visible whenever you clicked anything Oxington online. That way, his name was always associated with the village and anybody who wanted to know more about it.

His plan started with creating an online presence, something that the village had never had before, but he needed to do more than just tell people that Oxington existed. He needed to tell people why it was different, that, he thought, would go to create interest and get the village on the map. Maybe Joe was exploiting the locals' naivety when it came to anything digital – they certainly didn't know what it meant to have their faces and their homes brandished across the internet for everybody to see, but it was taking time for anything significant to happen. The best he got in the first few weeks was a repost from the *Helton Echo* about the pub, but that only went out to a couple of hundred people, most of whom would be from there or be fake accounts. There was one pattern emerging, though; every post was being liked by the same person. Joe checked out their profile page and it appeared to be a

real person, a woman from Frankfurt in Germany by the name of Amarjit Andrich. But at least somebody was liking the posts, he reaffirmed to himself. It was a start, thought Joe, and he planned to keep showing as much of Oxington as he could, focusing on how happy everybody was in their little village, having everything they needed right where they were. That, he felt, was what he needed people to see most of all.

It was an exciting time for Joe, and the locals in the village had never known a buzz and excitement like it. There were so many questions being thrown at him, it was as if he had become a walking search engine. ‘Am I going to be famous?’ asked Meredith, regularly, with the same huge smile and obvious excitement, as if Joe was going to make her a star. Meredith was, like a large portion of the village, over 70. She worked at the school with Joe’s mum and had been there to see both Joe and his mother pass through the halls. ‘I hope so, Merry. Just keep smiling when I point the camera at you, and you never know who might see it.’ So, Meredith did just that. There was a curiosity about the Internet, too, and Joe found himself playing teacher a lot of the time, something he didn’t want to do but knew that it would be a side effect of bringing something so new, with so much promise, to the locals. Instead of teaching them all, though, he asked his mum, a natural born teacher, somebody who seemed to be put on this planet, to help others. He had set up weekly classes after school had finished, whilst his mum was still there on site, so he sent anybody who was over a certain age in the direction of Oxington School where they could learn the basics.

School had been something that Joe loved as a child, when the lessons were full of fun and break times were an excuse to cause mischief; nothing was taken seriously at Oxington until the age of 11. But when you turned 11, things there changed, and suddenly you were wearing a strict uniform, teachers were no longer your friends and break time was something to be nervous about. At least that’s how Joe saw it. It wasn’t until Joe left school that he took a real interest in learning, in fact he took teaching himself very seriously. He set it upon

himself to learn something new each month between the age of 16 and 18, and this was when he learnt how to code. All of his scientific knowledge and his engineering skills were developed by Ox Power, where he went straight to work after leaving school at 16, but Joe had plenty of time on his hands after work. Socialising wasn't something that he was keen on, most likely due to feeling so isolated at school, so when he got home after work, he relished the time he could spend to learn something new, something he could choose to learn and not feel forced to do it. Timing was also key for Joe. He grew up at just the right point to have grown up around computers, and with his mum being a teacher, there was always one at the house.

With his dad not being around much either it meant that Joe had free rein to use the computer and use the internet as much as he wanted to. It was actually Joe who helped to get IT to be a key component in student's learning at the school. Before he left it was thought of as a useful skill and was only taught at after school club, but within three years of his leaving it was deemed an essential part of their curriculum thanks to his insistence towards his mother, who introduced it from year 5 onwards. So, when Joe asked her to help tutor people in the village about technology in today's world, she thought back to what he did to get it brought into the school and had no hesitation.

Joe was regularly able to get his own way, quite often manipulating people to do so. But this wasn't in any way diabolical or despicable manipulation as he saw it, but more of a clever way of getting out of what he didn't want to do and getting others to do it instead. But the way he did it, by foreseeing something that he didn't want to do in the future and doing little but useful favours for others, things that weren't in any way taxing but things that people would appreciate, he was able to use those occasions as leverage to pull favours when needed. This wasn't something that he learned from anybody, not from watching them or from inheritance, it was something that he again learnt by himself and made the most of the

gift he had.

So, once the locals were shown how to use laptops and use social media and understand the power of hashtags; Joe let them know the ones that he wanted them all to use when they posted. This was Joe's way of getting the feeling of the village out there and getting new, regular content posted at the same time, not all by himself. Which then gave him the time to oversee the likes, followers and comments that came in, and it also gave him the time to think of a plan to approach Billy and try and get him back on side.

Joe had decided to ask his grandparents round for dinner to clear the air between him and Billy, to which Mary of course said yes on behalf of the both of them. But Joe still wasn't sure that Billy would turn up, so he called his grandmother to see if she knew where he was so that he could talk to him.

'He's not 'round at the minute, mate, but will be later,' she told him. 'I'll drag him round if I have to.' This put Joe at ease, slightly, knowing that his grandad would be there, but he still wanted to know where Billy was and had been lately.

'Is he just on the farm? I can go round there.'

'No, he's not. Truth be told, I don't know where he is, mate. He sorted the animals out then got in the truck. If he was twenty years younger, I would swear he had another woman!'

Mary laughed. This didn't help Joe, though. If anything, it made him more curious. Where was he and was this still to do with him? He worryingly wondered. It was clear that Mary didn't have the answer, so after he said goodbye to his grandmother on the phone, he went over to where thought Billy had to be.

Although he was the vision of calmness most of the time, Billy still needed somewhere to get escape and distress, and luckily for him the village was crawling with emptiness. He had always told Joe that 'peace of mind was as important as quality of life,' so when Joe was a child, he would take him to a large old shed a few miles outside of Oxington. It was still

land that the Blue family owned, even though it was outside of the village, so nobody other than Billy and Joe knew about it. Billy wasn't there, though he had been as there were beer bottles on the floor of the shed, and ring marks on the side that were still damp. Running out of ideas, Joe decided to leave it until tomorrow evening to see Billy, and judging by the number of empty bottles, this might not have been the best time to see him, he thought. Joe couldn't help but clean up, it was in his nature, but as he was putting some bottles in the bin, he noticed a tissue that was soaked in blood, which was too wet to be old.

More curiously though, as he dug deeper there were several more tissues, all covered in blood, some of them looked like they *had* been there for days. There was nothing else around the place to suggest there had been an accident, no broken glass or splatters of red anywhere else, it was exclusive to this bin and the tissues inside it. Shock and guilt soaked through Joe like the blood-stained papers in front of him; what was his grandad doing, and was this all his fault?

Chapter 6

Billy never considered it a wise move to disagree with or go against Mary, 'Happy wife, happy life' he often thought, and today was no exception. Billy went along with Mary to Amanda and Joe's house for dinner, knowing he would have to face him at some point, and now on Mary's orders he had little choice. She usually stayed out of his business, letting him get on with whatever he needed to do without question; theirs was a relationship built on mutual trust. Tonight, though, Mary wanted answers. Nothing before had split the family apart and family was what Mary cherished most, so, as they were getting ready, she stealthily approached the bathroom where Billy was – her stomach and back had been causing her some discomfort for a little while now and at times it made any movement difficult. With his razor on his skin, ready to delicately shape-up the stray hairs around his throat that sat so unorderly underneath his beard, she pushed aside the aching to ask, 'Will you say sorry tonight?'

Her hands were gently twitching as she looked at Billy through the mirror, still not knowing what the fighting was about, but she hoped this might get the answer out of him. He glanced down at her through the mirror for a brief second, looked back at himself and replied, 'I nearly cut myself then.'

He could have meant several things with that comment, but Mary hadn't seen Billy's

new scars.

‘I’m sorry, wouldn’t want that now, would we?’ she replied, but to Billy’s surprise she carried on talking to him. He felt sure that he could get out of that conversation, as he usually could, by saying something slightly awkward. ‘But will you, though, will you say sorry tonight? I don’t need to know everything that’s going on in your head, Bill. I just need to know that you’ll say sorry, and this’ll all be over. I’m sick of it already.’

What choice did he have? Thought Billy – go against his wife for the first time in their marriage; at his age that would take some doing. So, he decided to appease her, do what she wanted; tonight was going to end well, he thought. ‘Course I will, Chooch, now – have you found out what they’re cooking tonight?’

He knew calling her ‘Chooch’ would make her feel like he was alright, it was their word for each other. So, she smiled and said, ‘No, Joe said it was a surprise, I can’t wait!’ And with that she left with a smile on her face, as Billy had hoped she would.

Back at Amanda’s house there was indeed a surprise – Chris had returned early from work. Ever since Joe was born, Chris and Billy did not get along. Chris didn’t like the way that he would try and insert himself into their lives and into decisions he made, so he tried to create distance between them all. But living in a village where you are so confined leaves little room for distance, so Chris looked forward to when he spent time away from the village and away from Billy. Spending the evening with him was not the welcome home present he had wanted, but upon hearing about Joe and Billy’s falling out, Chris became warm to the idea.

‘Why has he always got to get involved?’ Chris asked Joe, ‘This is your thing son, it’s none of his business, you carry on and show him what an arse he is.’

Chris also called Joe ‘son’, so it angered him whenever Billy would call him that too. Chris could sense the tension, but did nothing to ease it, it was more like he was Joe’s trainer

in his corner at a fight, shouting instructions and motivation. For the first time in a long time, Joe felt like his dad was genuinely behind him, but at the cost of his grandad Billy it didn't feel entirely right. For now, though, he wanted to enjoy this time with his dad, so he got two beers from the fridge, and they caught up on what Chris had been working on whilst Amanda made the dinner.

As they caught up with one another, it became increasingly obvious to Joe that Chris wanted nothing more than to increase the tension between him and Billy.

'I'm surprised it's taken him this long to fuck it up. I always knew he was trouble, always sticking his nose in and making it about him. I warned your mother about him, but she wouldn't listen. She's always stuck up for him over me,' griped Chris, before taking a larger gulp from his drink than the last, as if that last comment deserved more of a reward.

'He's never been like this before,' Joe replied, somewhat sternly. Chris noticed the change of tone in Joe's voice. The beer was starting to go to Chris' head as the first one usually did with him, and he quipped, 'I bet he'll be grovelling because your Nan told him to, just you watch.'

He then went back to the kitchen, passing by Amanda who was hard at work cooking. Pots full of boiling water, the oven on and something being fried. Chris took one of the sausages that were resting on the side – they were small enough that he could take one without it impacting the portions. As he turned towards the fridge he stumbled slightly, still able to regain balance but so much so that it was clear that the beer had an instant effect on him. He wasn't drunk by any means, but that first drink always gave him a boost in confidence and the appearance of being tipsy. Amanda had noticed but this wasn't new to her, she knew he would be fine after a few more drinks, which tended to level him out, but her concern was more that he wouldn't stop drinking.

Over the years Amanda had noticed that Chris had a problem with self-control, he was

a typical all-or-nothing person. This applied to how much he drank, how much he ate and even as far as how much money he spent, but she never said anything. Perhaps she took after her mother in that regard, not wanting to upset anybody, but she definitely knew, they both always knew. So, with Billy coming over and knowing their tense history, Amanda was keeping a close eye on Chris tonight.

‘I don’t think we’ve got many beers, Joe only buys a few a week every now and then himself, as a treat.’ She thought the idea that they were Joe’s would detract him from taking many more.

‘He said I could have another one, I’ll just have to find my old whisky if we run out.’ But Amanda had shared that with Billy several months ago – which she wasn’t going to tell him. ‘Tonight, I’m celebrating,’ he added.

‘Celebrating what?’ asked Amanda as she carried on with the cooking, whilst Chris began to put his drink into a glass this time. ‘Celebrating today! I’m home and old man Bill has gotta come round and grovel. This day has been a long time coming.’

Amanda didn’t say anything right away, instead she tutted, but this was like ammunition for an over-stimulated Chris. ‘What’s that for?’ He said, his voice growing louder as he added, ‘It’s always the same isn’t it, no matter what he does, you just won’t see him for what he’s worth, what he’s really worth.’

Amanda didn’t need to say anything, instead she paid attention to him, noticing that his beer was spilling, and pointed it out with a raise of her eyebrows in the direction of the glass. Chris soon noticed and began to go red in the face as he always did when anything even remotely embarrassing involved him, trying his best to save the situation.

‘You sure you want that whisky?’ remarked Amanda, knowing that all she had to do was wait and he would inevitably show himself up. Billy was much the same as Chris in the sense that he was forgetful and slightly clumsy, not paying enough attention to what’s going

on around him. But Amanda liked that, she felt like it gave her the upper hand most of the time. 'Joe! Come and give me a hand!' she shouted. Chris was still in the room so it was another blow that she didn't ask him, but in her mind he should have offered.

'I was coming to see if you needed any help anyway,' Joe said as he walked into the kitchen holding his phone. 'Dad let me show you what I've done so far for the Village, you can actually Google us now and get a result!' He sounded proud, but Chris was still focused on saving face in front of Amanda, so he told Joe, 'Show me at dinner, son, when your nan and gramps get here. Go and help your mum out for now.' He patted Joe on the back and went outside for a cigarette, only smoking when he drank.

As always Mary and Billy arrived not late, but not soon enough to be classed as early or on time, at just the right time. Maybe this time it was not just right though, as Chris had stepped outside as they arrived. He and Billy locked eyes before getting close enough to talk which allowed Mary to grab Billy's arm and demand in a whisper, 'Just be nice', and so he did, for now.

'Alright, Bill,' said Chris, with a smile on his face, but with a cigarette still in his mouth so the words came out of the side.

'Alright, Chris, didn't expect to see you tonight,' Billy replied.

'Let's hope 'Manda has done enough food for us all!' Mary added, to put out any sparks of friction building. There was a minor laugh from the two men as Mary nudged Billy gently ahead and past Chris.

'There's sausages cooking, bloody lovely they are.' Chris had the last word for now and that pleased him far more than it ought to. There was even more of a nervousness about Billy as he opened the door; nobody knocked in the village, there was a deep sense of trust that everybody knew everybody, and everybody liked everybody, so the doors were always open.

Seeing Chris was something that threw Billy. All this time, he had been psyching himself up to see Joe, imagining all of the possible awkwardness that would come with seeing him and then by apologising. He knew he had to get Joe one on one to apologise and not let Chris see, but for the second time in the evening he was thrown as Joe was already in the kitchen with Amanda dishing up the dinner. He couldn't get Joe alone now without making it obvious what he was doing, and he wasn't a man of drama, so that was no longer an option. He had to quickly rethink his strategy.

He made it through to the dinner table without a fuss or a scene, but he knew that his moment was looming. Mary sat down first, followed by Billy then by an excitable Chris who sat at the head of the table, to both try and out-alpha Billy and to have the best view, bringing in his own plate of food and nobody else's. Amanda followed with a few plates for her and Mary, then came Joe with his and Billy's plates. There was a moment of silence after Joe had given Billy his food, and eyes looked up to see what was next. A hushed Billy simply said, 'Thanks, Joe'. Everyone knew that Billy always called Joe 'son', so if he wanted to make his intentions clear then this was the way to do it. Joe didn't let it faze him, it was just a name after all, but he could see that everybody else had noticed. Instead, he started off the conversation at the table.

'This is nice, isn't it?'

Mary was first to respond, 'It is indeed,' she said, as she placed her hand on top of Joe's before adding, 'Nice to 'ave us all together again, I don't remember the last time the five of us were together.'

'Well, come on, then – dig in!' Amanda said loudly, sensing another awkward silence looming.

There were compliments for the food and clanging of the cutlery to break things up when they did go silent, but nobody was really saying anything until Joe brashly asked Billy,

‘So are you coming to the next meeting?’

Billy looked up, as did Chris, whilst Mary and Amanda decided to chit chat to one another, knowing full well that Billy wouldn’t want an audience. Joe was sitting opposite him, perhaps intentionally, so it didn’t take long for them to lock eyes. But before Billy could say anything, Chris muttered, ‘I hope you’re gonna apologise to him before you do.’

This was enough for Mary and Amanda to stop and look up.

‘Apologise for what?’ said Billy, defiantly, which made Chris throw his cutlery down into his gravy-drenched plate. This was his moment, Chris thought, his moment to stick the knife into Billy and stir things up between him and Joe.

‘For being an old, miserable know-it-all who’s always gotta get involved where he doesn’t belong and make it about him.’

Billy was getting angry, gripping onto his knife so hard his knuckles had turned from their usual arthritis-impending red to white. ‘Why don’t you just piss off back to where you came from, nobody wants you here, Amanda certainly don’t.’ He replied venomously.

There were loud screeches from the women, noises of both panic and fear, but both Billy and Chris had seen red, so the noises weren’t significant anymore. They both rushed up, but the younger and taller Chris got there first and tackled Billy back over his chair. The screams got louder but neither Amanda nor Mary could stop it. Joe was scared but he could see what this was doing to his mum and his nan, so he ran over to the two men scuffling on the floor.

Although he was older and slower, Billy was far stronger than Chris from decades of manual labour on the farm, so he managed to turn it around so that he was on top. He swung and caught Chris square in the nose, and a popping sound was immediately followed by blood flow, which started to gush all over Chris’ face. Billy swung again, but by this point Joe had made it over to them. He tried to catch Billy’s arm in mid-flight, but he was too

strong, and he hit Chris again. This time it was Chris who was screaming. Joe tried again and managed to slow Billy down, enough so that he could sense something on him. He tried to shake Joe off but couldn't quite do it. Billy was still focused on the bloody mess in front of him; literally seeing red, now, he shoved off whatever was on his arm ferociously and landed one final blow on Chris.

By the time he got up and looked around, both Chris and Joe were on the floor, Mary was attending to Joe and Amanda was weeping over a battered Chris. Billy had shoved Joe so hard that he went over the chair that was behind him and landed face-first on the floor. He wasn't concussed or bleeding, just shaken up, but it was enough to cause damage. As Joe got up, he could see that Billy was starting to realise what he had just done, but he also noticed that Billy's shirt had been ripped open. It revealed many scars all across his chest, some old and some very fresh, but Billy hadn't noticed that it was open yet. Joe immediately got his phone out and went to the pictures he took last night at the shed of all of the blood-stained tissues. 'I guess I know where all of this came from now' said Joe as he turned his phone around to display it to everyone, including Billy. 'You need help, Grandad.'

Joe started to cry as he said it, as did Mary and Amanda when they saw Billy standing there, as it was clear to everybody now that Billy had been harming himself.

This was it, thought Billy, the end for the family and the end for him. How could he possibly get out of this without telling them all about his past. It was all too much all at once, so he left for home, leaving behind a family in shock, scared about what had happened and what might happen next. The feeling of being all alone was something Billy had been preparing himself for all his life, but he never actually knew if he could do it, so now because of his actions he was about to find out.

Mary stayed at Amanda's that night, staying busy by helping tend to Chris, which took her mind off her own thoughts. He wasn't unconscious – perhaps Billy's power wasn't

what it once was. But damage had been done, so much so that Chris left the next day. He didn't say where he was going or if he would be back, but he left with a broken ego, something which men like Chris rarely recover. Both Amanda and Joe weren't surprised by his leaving, it was what he did, they were more concerned with Mary and how she was going to live with Billy after what happened. They decided to take her back to the farm together and were planning to make Billy talk; however, it was clear from looking around the place that Billy too had gone. Perhaps they shouldn't have let Billy leave that night, but shock had clouded their judgement, and the family was on the brink of collapse right now. From having everybody there a few hours ago to this, was a big shock to them all.

Chapter 7

None of the family had spoken to Billy for a several days now, and they didn't want to, either. Since that night they had grown increasingly angry at Billy for his selfishness. All of the concern that they had for him had gone when he decided to run away from his problems instead of staying for the love and support that he clearly needed. It was unclear where he was staying, but they knew that he was still in the village. Abigail Bifford, a baker in the 'Biff's Buns' café, had taken a picture of him without his beard when he came by to drop off a delivery and posted it online, using one of Joe's hashtags. He was hardly recognisable at first glance. This was clearly the intention, but Billy hadn't banked on being photographed nor being online, so with a quick zoom on his phone it was clear to Joe that this was him.

As much as it was strange to see Billy without a beard, what was stranger to Joe was one of the comments left about the picture. It was from Amarjit, the same lady who had been liking all of previous posts, but this was the first time that she had commented. *Looks like my granddad...* This was strange, enough so that Joe felt compelled to reply to the online stranger, *Have you got a picture of him so I can see the resemblance?* He left it at that for now, returning his focus to the meeting later that night.

This would be the first meeting that Joe held since taking over the meetings, so he needed to focus his attention on what to say to the locals about his face. It was obvious that

he had been hurt but he couldn't say why, so he used some of his mum's makeup to cover up what he could, but makeup wasn't natural to him, so it was clear that he was trying to hide something. But, as long as no questions were asked, he thought he could cope with a bit of stick from the locals, so he decided to put on a brave face, quite literally.

Progress was being made and Joe had some ideas about how he thought he could increase their online presence, but he also wanted to bring attention to the village. Oxington was a forgotten part of rural Britain after all, with its lush, endless countryside, its buildings that had remained untouched for centuries, the self-sustaining infrastructure that had been forged, and above all the people there who had only ever known life in the village, people who had always adapted and thrived under change. Nobody else lived like this, Joe thought, in a world within a world, so he wanted the others to help him with something innovative that would make them stand out and make people want to visit.

In the back of his mind, though, Joe was worried for Billy, worried that he might hurt himself again. The image of the Billy's battered chest made it clear that this was something that he had been doing for a long time, so if he had been hurting then he might be used to the pain, he thought, almost as a way to justify not trying harder to find him.

Ever since he was young, he had hated of the accent of the South-West and of his village; he thought it made people sound simple. In fact, he thought that most English accents made people sound rather dumb, so he tried to remain neutral, sub-consciously judging himself whenever he heard an elongated tone in his voice that even slightly resembled a local twang. This made him stand out and had also inadvertently made him sound like an authority figure, so perhaps Joe was always destined to lead. He also knew that it had an effect on the way people viewed him in the village, so he played up on it when he did need to talk, like during the village meeting.

He also decided that he was going to dress the part as well, as a way to distract from his

face, opting for a suit for the evening's events. Joe had rearranged the layout of the hall, moving away from the free-for-all to which they had been accustomed. He set out tables and chairs all in one long row, boardroom-style, with seats each side of the tables and a seat for him at the head of it. He sat there in his new position, and in his new attire, and waited for the inevitable storm of mockery as everybody made their way in. One by one they came and one by one they saw, each giving their own individual put-down. The comments he could handle, but it was the laughing that really stuck with him. The fact that he was the subject of laughter meant, in his head, that he had done something that he was unaware of, and that is what he hated more than anything in this world – not knowing something.

There were a few giggles and some comments made directly to him, mostly without harm. Mr Didcot, who Joe only knew from the car boot sale, made an outdated reference about an old prime minister. That both confused and amused Joe, but also confirmed what he thought about Mr Didcot – that he must be in the early stages of dementia. The thought of that brought a slight twitch to the corner of Joe's mouth, which, after a quick glance up, seemed to go unnoticed. The car boot sale was held every Saturday and Sunday in the car park of the village hall in the summer and inside the village hall when the weather turned sour, and stalls were in high demand. Most people set out just to sell, but some people setup as a team, with one selling and one buying. This method wasn't about what you could find for yourself, it was about knowing as much as you can about the lives of your neighbours. Some people even kept track of what people were selling on a weekly basis, making their own judgments about why they sold a particular item or why they even had it in the first place. Joe never liked the car boot sale past the age of about 10 when he got wise to how it operated, and now he was taking more of a dominant role in the village he thought about scrapping it altogether. But that was for another time. Right now, it was all about the village's online presence, which seemed to be growing.

As they all piled in, at the exact same time, as if they were all waiting outside for everybody to show up then played a game to see who would get in first and who would get in last, they began to notice the new layout. Joe was so focused on what would be said about his face and his attire that he overlooked what the reaction would be like to having everybody sat facing one another, and some potentially next to others who they don't like and with nowhere else really to go. He would have to put names on seats next time, he thought. But this first time with no rules or regulation turned into musical chairs, with the rush that ensued from getting into the hall continuing as they soon became wise to what had changed. This too brought a smirk to Joe's face, but one more of upper mastery than sinister thoughts.

'Have you all got a chair?' asked Joe.

'Not as nice as yours!'

Joe couldn't tell who said it, but it was an ice breaker, and a needed one at that. 'I wanted to talk to you all about what we can do next to increase our presence online and see how you're all getting on as well'.

He could see that Susan and June, who ran the hairdressers and the beauty salon, were chatting amongst themselves still, looking around and pointing, which made Joe assume they were talking about him or something he had done. He let it slide for now but knew how he would get their attention if he needed it. 'So, first things first – do you all know how to Tweet now?'

A group laughter started, which was key to keeping everybody interested, and luckily it was something Joe knew how to do nine times out of ten.

'I've been looking at our following and it has grown almost ten times since the last meeting,'

'So, we've got ten followers now then!'

That snarky comment had in fact come from Susan, who was listening after all. Joe

considered biting back straight away, going for the jugular, but it was still too early for that. Instead, he went through the actual figures, which were impressive, considering the size of the village and the apparent digital naivety of the group. Perhaps Joe had been too quick to judge, which wouldn't be the first time.

There were still those who didn't fully understand what was going on and some who openly admitted not pulling their weight, notably Susan and June, who continued to act like naughty children in a classroom even though they hadn't set foot in on for almost forty years now. But most of the group were still on board and excited about the direction that Joe was taking the village. They were also proud of being a part of it. That was what Joe kept saying to them. 'Be proud of what you've achieved', really sounding like his mum when he said that. But 'pride' was the meal of the day, it was what the locals should be full of, and just imagine how proud they would be if they could help others out too, Joe thought.

When he was happy that everybody, or at least most people were well informed of the progress, Joe moved onto what they could do next. He opened this up to suggestions around the table, but most responses were basic and short-sighted for what they were trying to achieve, such as making posters about the car boot sale or dance classes and putting them up in neighbouring villages or towns.

'What do you think we should do, June?' asked Joe, but she carried on talking to Susan as the room got quieter, unaware that focus was on her. He let it continue so that everybody could now hear their conversation.

'Have you seen what she's wearing?'

'I'd fit my whole body into one of those legs, the fat cow.'

At this point June and Susan looked up and realised that everybody was listening.

'Who's a fat cow?' asked Joe, with a now obvious smile on his face. In fairness to them it could have been a number of people in there, as not many in the village kept

themselves active as they grew old. But it didn't matter who they were talking about, because everybody would be talking about June and Susan now.

Joe had come prepared for the meeting, knowing full well that he wouldn't get the type of suggestions he was after from the group. 'Has anybody seen one of these before?' He asked, as he held up a virtual reality headset, then asked Susan if she knew what it was. She declined to speak, clearly unimpressed with Joe and how he had humiliated her and her friend already. 'It's a Virtual Reality or "VR" headset, for short,' he explained to the group.

'Is that one of them things where you can pretend to be somewhere?' Asked Yvette, quietly, not sure if she's just asked the stupidest question in the world.

'Yes, it is! You know your stuff, Yvette,' Joe replied, making sure she felt good after that. 'And that's what I want people to be able to do here – see the place first before they visit. I'll show you all how it works, just pop your phone in the front, tighten the strap on your head and press play with this remote.'

As the headset went around the room you could see how impressed everyone was, especially when they could see their house or their shop, and even more so when they could see people moving around with it, not aware of how they look to those without a headset on. But of course, June and Susan weren't interested.

The meeting was winding down, everybody who was interested had a go on the headset, but before they all got up, Joe announced that there was going to be a news team from Helton coming to the village on Saturday to talk about their 'digital quest', as Joe put it. But as he dealt the good news, he heard the hall door slam shut, and stood there in the corner, was Billy. There was an instant tension, everybody could feel it, Joe didn't know what to do. Billy walked across the room, placing himself next to June and Susan, as if he was being drawn to where the unrest laid.

'So, you've got the papers coming down, have ya? The *Gazette* not enough?'

The *Oxington Gazette* ' was the local 'newspaper' that got by with mostly adverts and sport reviews about bowls and cricket.

'We're expanding, Grandad, telling more people about this great village, and about the *Gazette*.'

As a few laughed at that joke, Joe realised he had called Billy 'grandad', which wouldn't have made him look very authoritative.

'Seems to me as though you wanna change a lot round 'ere. What's the matter, Joe – is it not good enough for ya no more?'

Noises of encouragement could be heard from June and Susan.

'I don't like what you're doing, and I want you out of here,' cried Billy as the cheers got louder and multiplied, this time with a few male murmurings. 'You don't know anything about this place, boy.'

The patronising was enough for Joe to respond with venom. 'Why don't you get out, Bill'.

Exasperated faces looked on, some even had their phones out now and were recording it, as if Joe's push for technology was now happy slapping him in the face.

'I won't be here long, but I just wanted you to know that I'll be running against you.'

A confused Joe then asked Billy, 'What do you mean?'

'Well, you think you run this place, or at least that's what you told me the other week, but who actually gave you that power? Nobody voted, did they? If you wanna turn the village into something else, then folks should get to vote on that, like they do everywhere else.'

The groans grew louder as people started to listen to Billy now. His new look had given him more of a presence and he played up to it in full.

'So, next meeting, there's going to be a vote, me against you boy. Let's see who knows the village more then, shall we?'

Billy seemed to have a group of around ten now surrounding him, mostly his old mates and Susan and June, but enough to cause a scene, which is what Joe was worried most about when the news crew came to town. Deciding not to rise on this occasion, Joe gave Billy the last laugh for now, and sulked off like the little boy that Billy made him look like in that moment.

Chapter 8

Although it wasn't much, having a news crew from a neighbouring town come down to talk about what's happening in the village was a big deal, thought Joe. They must be doing something right to garner attention from somewhere outside of the village, regardless of where it was. Village, Town, Country - that was the order as Joe saw it, so they were going in the right direction. They just needed to keep growing and not have any negative press on the day they come to Oxington.

That made him instantly think of Billy, who, based on Monday's events, would be looking to create chaos. If it was Billy on his own then Joe could contain him, or at least have somebody keep an eye on him, but it seemed as though Billy had a following. A rebellion had started before Joe had even begun. He never thought he would have everybody on his side – mainly there might be people who just couldn't be bothered either way, but he also never thought that his own grandad would lead the fight against him.

He hadn't spoken to his mum since last night's meeting, so she didn't know that Joe and Billy had seen each other. Amanda decided not to attend, instead she wanted to keep Mary company now that she was on her own after Billy's disappearance, and Joe had gone to see how she was doing. As he approached the door of his grandma's farmhouse, he heard a male voice from the side passage – could it be him? He moved closer, with his back to the

wall and head tilted closer to the edge, feeling like somebody out of a spy movie who was waiting for somebody to appear.

‘Tell me you’ll join me.’ It was Billy, his voice that sounded like scraping gravel across his throat every time he exercised his tongue.

‘I can’t, you know I can’t. How would that look, especially after all of the shit you’ve done lately.’ That was his mum’s voice, so Joe listened even more carefully, noticing just how quiet it was around there.

‘I know you want to.’

‘Stop it, dad.’

Joe suddenly got that feeling he had whenever he smoked weed in the past, that sense of something happening but not really happening, an out of body uncertainty. But then suddenly, the talking stopped, and Mary shouted out for Amanda from upstairs. Quietly, Amanda whispered and pointed back, ‘You need to go. She doesn’t want to see you.’

There was only one way for Billy to go – towards Joe. As Joe realised this he bolted back round the corner to the front door, just in time to escape Billy. The side gate creaked ever so slightly even though Billy tried hard not to make a sound, but being the clumsy oaf that he was, he couldn’t help but let the gate slam shut.

‘What was that?’ shouted Mary, who was now walking down the stairs after losing patience with her daughter, having called several times.

‘I’m not sure, Mum. Probably the cats,’ Amanda replied, convincingly, from outside. Before Mary could question it and before she could get down the stairs, there was a knock on the door.

‘It’s me,’ said Joe, immediately walking in.

‘Hello, love, do you want a cuppa?’ asked Mary.

‘Love one. Is mum around?’

Amanda came timely through from the back to greet him, but Joe could sense a nervousness about her.

‘Everything alright?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, love, of course it is. Just been busy round here, loads to do now your grandad’s gone AWOL.’

‘I saw him.’

Amanda stood frozen, sure that he meant just now.

‘The other night at the meeting.’

An audible sigh of relief came from Amanda. Without making it too obvious she said, ‘I’m just glad he’s alright,’ then snapped back into her previous demeanour. ‘Did he have much to say? He didn’t cause any trouble, did he?’

Joe couldn’t speak. Every time he tried responding to one of his mum’s questions, she kept answering herself.

‘If he shows up here, I’ll give him what for, your nan’s been a wreck.’

Finally, Joe was able to respond when Amanda turned around into the kitchen, but again before he could say anything his mum turned around sharply and added, ‘Best not to talk about him in front of your nan, she cries when she hears his name at the moment.’

Mary had been left the worst off from everything that had happened, and she looked like she hadn’t been eating much lately either. As she laid out the cups and saucers and began to pour the tea, Joe noticed a hip flask on Mary’s side table next to where she sat in the front room. After she had poured the tea, she soured hers with whatever was in that flask. ‘Irish tea, Grandma?’

‘Yes, it keeps me warm now that your grandad isn’t around.’ She then took a swig from the flask and a satisfied smile grew on her face.

As they sat there, Joe thought about what he could do to stop Billy and his cronies

from ruining the media day. He knew how methodical he was, and now that he knew the date that they were coming to the village, he had probably been planning for it over the past few days. It was risky, but what if he moved the date to sooner, Joe wondered. He wrote an email to the reporter, Harriet Watson. *Any chance that we can bring the date forward to tomorrow? Sorry it's short notice. Thanks, Joe.* Almost as soon as he'd hit send, he received a response from Harriet. *Sure. There's not much going on round here, so I'll see you at the same time tomorrow. Will be just me though.* He then realised that he needed to prepare himself for tomorrow, so drank up his tea and said his goodbyes.

'Take it easy on the tea grandma,' he said, followed by a wink. Amanda then followed Joe to the door to see him out, and just as he was about to tell his mum about all of the stuff that Billy was planning, he got a notification about a comment on one of his posts. *She looks a bit like my mum. This is spooky.* It was from Amarjit, the same person who had been liking his other posts and made a comment about her granddad looking like Billy. Now she was commenting on his profile picture, which he had recently changed to one of him and his mum. Joe kissed his mum on the cheek and hurried out, then he decided to send Amarjit a direct message so that nobody else saw. *Hey, do you think that you could send me a picture of your family since you've seen mine? And how we look so much alike!?* Just to see the similarities. He knew he probably wouldn't receive a reply and she was most likely just a troll who scoured accounts from around the world, looking for money once they thought they'd made a 'connection' with somebody, but still he waited for her response as he prepared for his rearranged date with the local news.

Chapter 9

When Joe woke up the next morning he got a sudden feeling of dread, knowing that today was the day that could really put the village on the map, or at least on a grander stage. And knowing that Billy wouldn't be able to ruin the day meant that he could now at least focus his anxiety on one thing. When he got back the previous evening, he decided to finally finish off the website he had started. There wasn't enough time to get the Virtual Reality video filmed and uploaded, so instead he finished off the page where the video would be hosted, along with a countdown timer. That page was what he was going to promote the most today, as it would surely generate traffic their way, he thought. He put on the same suit that he wore at the start of the week to the village meeting, and although things hadn't gone exactly to plan that night, he hoped that history wouldn't repeat itself.

Harriet was due in the village at 11am which gave Joe enough time to 'rehearse' the proceedings of what he had planned. First, he checked in at Ox Power, hoping he could persuade the Floor Manager, Elizabeth, to let them have a tour. Elizabeth wasn't just the Floor Manager; she was the owner's granddaughter and occasional fling of Joe's. Usually, their affairs only occurred when Elizabeth, or Lizzie as Joe called her, would row with her husband – ironically usually after she suspected him of cheating on her. They hadn't slept together in a while so Lizzie's husband must have been in the village for a longer period

lately. He, like Joe's dad, worked away from the village a lot, for the same company in fact. This is how they connected, speculating about what they might be up to as they were never allowed to disclose any information about what they did, which was the nature of their respective roles. Lizzie was older than Joe by almost ten years, and she was only the second woman that Joe had ever been intimate with, although he had never revealed that to anybody, especially to her.

Unlike most in the village, Lizzie was well travelled thanks to her grandad, who helped to care for her after the death of her parents when she was a teenager. They died in a car accident in the village having crashed into a wall after driving home from a heavy night of drinking down the pub. Her grandad, who lost his only son in the accident, took Lizzie away from the village and into boarding school. She stayed with her grandad during holidays where they would travel, then, when she left school, she lived in London and worked as a receptionist, where she met her husband, Farhad, who owned the steel manufacturing business that she worked at. Eventually the pair moved back to the village when Lizzie felt the need to return, and she took over as Floor Manager at Ox Power. Farhad became the overseas consultant for Charles there as he looked to expand the business, which then led to the job he was now in.

But Lizzie was hard to find that morning. Everybody he asked said that they had seen her, but only briefly. He managed to track her down, but she looked determined, almost ferocious, as though she were on a mission of her own. 'Joe this has got to stop,' she said unapologetically.

Confused, he replied, 'Excuse me? I've only just got in.'

'That's the problem, where have you been? I need to be able to rely on you and know when you'll be in.'

'But you know how I work best – not on a schedule. I do my hours but in my own time.'

That's what I agreed with your grandad. And he's your boss last time I checked.'

Joe was fortunate to have a good relationship with Charles Watson, owner and founder of Ox Power. His dad worked for Charles, and Billy was one of his oldest and dearest friends, so he was able to get away with more than most at work.

'Well, he's not here is he, he's away. Just like my husband.'

There was such resentment with that last comment that Joe knew it meant they would soon be sleeping together, so he probed, 'Gone away again, has he? How long for?'

'I don't know and at this point I don't care anymore. I just want somebody I can rely on,'

'Is that why you're so angry at me this morning?'

Ignoring that last comment, she replied 'Why can't men be reliable? Him at home, you here, what is it with you men? Come and go as you please whilst I'm running around after you.'

'We're the worst,' Joe added, condemning his own species then and there. 'Sounds like you need to unwind – how about I bring round a bottle of red to yours tonight and you can tell me how shit men are.'

Lizzie looked around then put her hand over the top of Joe's crotch and squeezed firmly. 'Bring that too,' she whispered. But before she walked away, he asked 'Do you mind if the *Echo* takes some pictures here later? They want to see where I work, see the man behind the leader.' A smirk went up in the corner of his mouth as he said that, trying to appear sexy and cocky.

'I heard about you "taking over" at the village meeting, very impressive. Just make sure they know who's the boss around here,' Lizzie insisted, attempting to leave Joe in his place before leaving.

Next up was a trip down the village 'lower high street' as they called it, being downhill,

which, given how small the village is, boasted a fine number of shops and services. There was the postal office, the printing shop, a chemist, a butcher, a florist, a fruit and veg shop, a café which also served as a bakery, two convenience shops, two second-hand shops, a tailor, and of course, the pub. Then there were the more specialist services that were scattered around the village, some of which were run from the houses of those that ran them, such as the dentist and the optician, who utilised the space that old country housing offered to accommodate the services.

Something that made Oxington stand out was its resistance to using money for payments. Everybody in the village was a specialist in something and offered their own service in-turn, so if you wanted some meat from the butchers, you could go and get what you wanted, so long as you had a service or goods to offer in return. Everybody had a purpose, and often tabs or loans would accumulate, but in a place so small with people so intrusive to one another's lives, you never forgot what you owed, or if you were owed. Like most things, everything had its value, but it was up to buyer and the seller to determine a fair fee for each service required.

It had been this way since the end of the second World War, ever since the place known as Bishops Cote got lost in the Parish reshuffle, which made way to the unofficial formation of Oxington, leading to the village that they know and love today, almost 70 years later. There were so many rehoused families and individuals throughout the war that it wasn't the same place as it was before, so it became a fitting restart for the village, and for the locals, who voted for the new name, at the first ever village meeting, attended by Billy Blue, and his foster family.

When it came to the Emergency Services, this was where the village really came into its own and differed from elsewhere. Instead of having three separate emergency services for fire, police and healthcare, they had one service, known locally as 'Red Lights'. Rather than

calling 999, the residents in need instead opted to call the mobile phones and land lines of those that worked for Red Lights. When any calls came in, they were reviewed and distributed to the best available personnel. Those who worked for Red Lights lived together, doing shift work on rotas that made sure that everybody was well rested, but the service was covered at all times. It was similar to joining the Army – you received your training, lived and worked with your colleagues, had supplies sent to you and committed yourself to the cause until you were either released or retired. Those that retired could no longer work on the front lines were moved into teaching roles at the School – but being part of Red Lights was determined at random. Each year, those students who are in the last year of Secondary School either leave and go straight into work after their exams, go and live somewhere else, or, for those fortunate enough, they might be invited to be trained to be a part of Red Lights. This is something that is viewed as a privilege in the Village, as if you were being selected to be a part of a secret service. Those selected could not discuss anything about what they did there should they choose to accept the invitation – which, given the eliteness of the setup, was very rarely rejected.

Chris though, was invited to train at Red Lights when he was in school, but instead he was one of the few who choose to take a job elsewhere, opting to work for Charles Watson at Ox Power. This eventually led to work away from the village working closely and discreetly with the Charles in one of his other operations that were not spoke of fondly in the village, as neither was he. Chris was sworn to secrecy about his job, but ever since he was a child Joe was fascinated by what his dad did for a living. Did he have a gun? Was he a spy? All the outlandish things that a child can fantasise about were a possibility because he didn't know. Of course, when Joe didn't get selected, he felt hard done by and he started to think that he wasn't good enough for his dad. Joe hoped to leave Red Lights out of the interview today, as he was sure that the rest of the shops and services would suffice in selling Oxington to any

outsiders.

Finally, he went to the school where his mum worked. Joe approached his mum just before the students came in their droves, catching her off-guard in her office. At the time she was applying her makeup, a subtle yet striking matte-plum lipstick, thick dollops of mascara that brought attention to her one crystal blue and one oak brown eye, which had not aged in colour, only in the skin surrounding them. She didn't use any other makeup, nothing to conceal the blemishes that living a harsh life bring; in fact, she had very few blemishes to show off for a woman close to 50, but to look at she could easily be mistaken for woman in the prime of her 30s. The way she dressed helped, opting for high-waisted, skinny-fit trousers that held everything in place and showed off her never-ending legs, along with a loose blouse and ankle-high boots, Mrs Blue, as she was strictly known at work, was a favourite of both the students and the teachers. And although she didn't need the makeup, it was befitting of somebody bereft of confidence.

'Hey, baby boy. Sorry, let me just finish up here.' She applied the final layer of lipstick, before rubbing her lips together softly in the mirror and giving herself a reassuring pout.

'Don't call me that here, that's a home name!' Insisted Joe.

'Sorry, boy. But you are my baby.'

Joe cringed inside, wondering if it was normal to have a 'home name', especially at his age. It was probably an indication of the coddling he had received throughout his upbringing, or perhaps it was an indication of his mother's own issues that she felt the need to talk in this way at her age. Either way, it made Joe uncomfortable. 'I've got a favour to ask, Mrs Blue.'

'Anything for you.'

He shouldn't have been surprised that she didn't ask him what he wanted, he knew that she truly would do anything for him. Instead, he got right to the point, 'I've got the newspaper interview today and I was wondering if you could get some of the kids to talk to them about

my website?’

‘Your website? You mean your Facebook page?’

That was such a mum comment, thought Joe, one that couldn't be said by anybody else.

‘No, my website about the village, you know the one I've set up and got everyone to help to promote the place?’

‘Sorry love, I can't remember anything at the moment. I've been so busy with your nan I must have totally missed it. What's the website?’

Mrs Blue's eyes grew wider and wider as she scrolled slowly down the homepage that Joe was showing her, clearly impressed. ‘You did this?!’

Joe was waiting with a smile, anticipating how impressed she would be. ‘I can definitely ask some of them to tell your newspaper friend how good the website is, I'll tell Mr Holdsworth that we need to use his facilities, and I can get Sal's daughter Gemma to do it, she's does what she's told. I'll explain it to Sal when I see her next for coffee, she'll be fine with it. Knowing her she'll be glad of the attention.’

‘That'll do nicely, thanks mum.’

‘It's Mrs Blue around here, baby boy, you know that. Oh, and you look very smart by the way.’

Joe let the name call slide since she was doing him a huge favour, then he gave his mum a kiss on her untouched cheek as he always did when he said goodbye. He left as the first bell of the morning sounded off, bringing back the earliest memories of social anxiety that he could remember. Coming out of the gates, Joe couldn't help but feel as though his plan was coming together, reeling in smugness at the thought of how Billy wouldn't be near it. Now it was time to get himself mentally prepared for the interview. This involved planning, rehearsals in the mirror, rewriting of the plan, more rehearsals and, importantly, making sure he smelt good. This meant applying the right amount of the right aftershave and

keeping enough chewing gum in his pocket. The start of Joe's master plan was about to begin.

After Joe had sent Harriet the location of where to meet – at the café – she told Joe she would be late by 20 minutes, typically, Joe thought. Something had to go wrong, after all he didn't believe in such a thing as 'perfect'. It was inevitable, but it wasn't a disaster. Joe decided to get there early still, giving him more time to think about how things could go wrong. That was something he did often, he thought of it like a padlock – an extra level of security, but one that was not impenetrable, just enough to keep him safe – safe from bad news, rejection and anything that could go wrong. His padlock was easily and regularly broken, though, and each time it got harder to set a new combination to it.

Joe ordered a caramel latte and a lemon tart, he also thought about emailing Harriet to see what she wanted, then remembered that she was probably driving so wouldn't respond until she was there. So, he took a risky guess and got a cappuccino, not wanting there to be a wait between their orders. One thing that Joe didn't think about was the parking. It wasn't something that they needed to worry about in the village, and he managed to get a space just fine when he got there. But looking out of the window he could see a group of locals who were standing in the spaces talking. This was common in the village as people didn't often use vehicles other than the workers at Red Lights, Ox Power or farmers in their tractors or trucks. However, due to the lack of staff available at the café that day, service was slow, which was an issue at first for Joe - wondering why, when things go wrong, do they always happen late and fast?

He knew who he was looking for as he stared out of the large patio-style windows. In this day and age, it was all too easy to find somebody if you really wanted to. A quick social media search and Joe was able to locate Harriet Watson, aged 27, from Helton, the pen and camera emojis in her Instagram bio all but confirmed it. She was pretty, girl-next-door pretty, with a round face, light brown hair and glasses that looked like they were made specifically

for her face, as if she was born in them and they grew as she did. He didn't look too far into her profile, just seeing what he needed to and not lingering, always conscious that she might be able to see who had viewed it. Nonetheless though, Joe couldn't deny that he found Harriet attractive, which led to the sudden realisation that it had been a startlingly long time since he had been with a woman. It was over six months since he'd been with Lizzie, and although there were plans to meet in the evening, it was never anything meaningful or memorable. It was almost five years since Joe last felt real passion, with his ex, Kelly Denton, who he always called skunk because of a white stripe that she decided to spray through the middle of her black hair when they were in school. In return she called him swan, because of the colour of his hair when he was a kid.

They had an up-and-down relationship, which started when they were both sixteen, and was typical of any young love, experiencing all of the first times of a relationship together. But it deteriorated when she moved away from the village to study, a change which knocked Joe's self-confidence. He had blamed himself for not being enough of a reason to keep her in the village, even though in public he advocated for her to do what was best for her. In truth it was the village that made Kelly move; it didn't have the specialised tools and knowledge at the time that she needed to learn back then, so she had to move to get to where she wanted in her career. Their relationship lasted for just 6 months long-distance, the travel and changes in his persona became too much for Joe, who ended things. Unsurprisingly, Kelly became more confident and outgoing in a city, and at a university, and Joe was just a country boy at heart. She wasn't one to post much about herself online so there was little for Joe to look for if he ever got reminiscent, he just had the old photos on his phone, but by now she would be well into her career in Geonomics, which was one thing the village couldn't yet offer.

When he became aware of his surroundings again, freshly out of his daydream, he noticed the rain on the windows, the droplets getting thicker, streakier and faster, and the

clanging of his order on the table woke him fully out of it.

‘Here you go, sorry for the wait.’ said the waitress to Joe, who was clearly new to the role as she spilt the froth onto the table and did not notice.

‘That's OK, thanks.’ Joe waited until the second she turned her back and wiped up the spilt coffee with his napkin, he couldn’t have that as a first impression of the village.

A gust of wind and an entrance bell arrived with Harriet, who looked around for somebody she might be able to place as ‘Joe’. The café was busy, though, so she began preparing an email to tell him of her arrival, getting as far as finding the Mail app before a low, monotonous voice asked ‘Harriet?’

She looked around and made eye contact with the man behind the voice, before smiling.

‘Yes! Hello! You must be Joe? How are you? Where did that rain come from?! I’m soaked, aren’t you?!’

Joe took all of the questions in, sensing that Harriet was clearly flustered. Was it because of him? He hoped it was after seeing her in person and still being attracted to her. ‘I know! It's looking wild out there. You got here just in time, it looks like.’

‘Oh, yeah, sorry I'm late, I don't know how I lose track of time so often! Plus, there were people standing in the parking spaces, so I didn't know where else to park as they didn’t seem to want to move.’

‘Don't worry about it, I was running a bit late too, so you helped me out actually.’ It had only taken 30 seconds for Joe to lie to her, a new record even by his standards. Lying had been a constant throughout his relationship with Kelly and he couldn't help but keep thinking about her. Was this a sign that something could happen with Harriet? ‘It was busy, so I took at guess at buying you a drink,’ he told her, waiting to see if his risk had paid off.

‘Aw, you're a babe, thanks!’

She took a sip and gave Joe another smile. 'Perfect,' she added, and Joe's risk was rewarded.

He noticed that her teeth were visibly discoloured, perhaps from too many cappuccinos, but they were in good shape still. It put him off her slightly, but as she settled, he took the brief moment to check out her body – and his attraction grew right back. She was petite, and wore a grey top, with darker grey jeans and black knee-high, flat boots, certainly more casual than Joe. Had he over-dressed? The worries trickled down from his brain and dispersed into his conscious thoughts, seeping into all his senses as if they were now radiating from him. He sat down and tried to remember his plan.

'Do you want any of this? I think I've had enough.'

Harriet looked down at the tart and without hesitation went for it.

'Sure, I've got a sweet tooth, and didn't eat brekkie. Thank you!'

She ate it daintily, which went well with her small frame.

'So, is this your favourite café, then?'

'It's the only café.'

Harriet laughed, unknowingly spitting out a crumb across the table before replying,

'That's cute. Are we doing the interview here? I can't remember what we agreed.'

Suddenly, Joe realised that the weather wasn't suitable for walking in, this was not in the plan. The panic grew and Joe felt beads of sweat begin to grow on his forehead, the only place where he seemed to sweat from these days. He felt another gust of wind as a customer left the cafe, which helped to cool his head and soothe his thoughts, 'I thought we could go to a few places around the village to give you a feel of the place. I'll drive us round – I'm parked just outside so we won't get too wet. Do you mind?'

Feeling slightly guilty still for being late, Harriet agreed, 'That's fine. What I'll do is just keep this running and then use the best bits for the article.' She pulled out a dictaphone

and started to fiddle around with it, ‘so watch what you say!’

Joe laughed, somewhat nervously.

‘OK, I’m now recording, I think?’ She rewound the audio to test it, and so the interview had begun. It was now up to Joe to take the first step in selling his dream.

Chapter 10

‘Can I get your full name please, and your age?’

This felt like a very formal interview all of a sudden. ‘Um, yeah, sure. Joe Blue. I'm 23.’

‘Thanks, sorry, that's just formality. It's what I'll start the article with – some details about who you are.’

They carried on, staying on the topic of Joe and his background, but it certainly helped to make Joe comfortable as he hadn't thought about the sweat on his forehead for a while.

Harriet finished her drink, letting out a satisfied breath. 'So, where are you taking me to first?'

Joe thought for a second and decided on the school, based on the time. ‘Let's go and see the school, it's not far away, then we can come back to some of the shops. Maybe walk if the weather stays calm.’

The rain had now stopped, making way for sharp bursts of sun rays, however grey clouds still hung around them.

‘OK, let's make a move.’

Joe drove a black car that was just a few years old, but the number plate was different from what she knew, personalised perhaps, she thought. It wasn't anything that stood out, in fact the number plate and car looked like all the other cars that Harriet had seen on the roads in the village, which were few and far between.

The conversation had slowed slightly as they drove through Hall Lane, the main stretch of road through the village. Joe was trying to focus on the road and think of all the things that made the village so great, so unique, and he was concentrating so much he forgot that he forgot to actually speak, so Harriet led the conversation.

‘Why is it that I’ve never heard of Oxington? It’s so close to where I live but it’s like it never existed before today.’ Harriet seemed genuinely curious as she asked Joe in a more casual manner than the start of the interview, perhaps showing signs that she was growing more comfortable around him.

‘It’s hard to say, really. I’ve only ever known this place, and I guess if you’re born here, the chances are that you don’t really need to leave. We’ve got a lot going on, believe it or not. But if you do leave – and I’ve only ever known a few to do so – then I guess you must want to forget it.’

Harriet looked out across the endless acres of countryside, the rain had long gone now, and she could see some appeal. Joe soon added ‘You’re one of the few who have been here that weren’t born here, so I’d be interested to know what you think of the place,’

‘Perhaps I’ll give it a review at the end of the article.’

They both chuckled. Joe was still focusing on the road and his next move, Harriet on the oncoming ‘Ox Power’ compound on her right.

‘What’s that place?’

Sensing some intrigue in her voice, Joe decided to build some anticipation. ‘You’ll soon see – that’s where we’re going after the school. I work there.’

‘So, what is it that you do then at Ox Power? The name doesn’t give much away, but it looked like a big factory, from what I could see,’

‘It is, basically. I’m a scientific engineer, of sorts.’

‘You seem like you’ve been doing this for years – how are you so established already?’

He smirked, as he did when he felt cocky. ‘We do things a little differently here, we help each other out and there are lots of options when you leave school if you want to stay in the village. I decided to stick with learning what they do at Ox Power. They helped me out at school, and I've been here for 6 or 7 years now.’

‘So, they taught you engineering in school?’

No longer smirking through cockiness but through confidence in his response, he replied, ‘Not engineering, just how to use some machines and what they do. It's fun when you're a teenager, all these big machines, but factory work isn't looked down on here. It's essential to how we all function, I guess you could say. But they did teach me some science in school.’

Before she could respond Joe pointed out where they were. ‘And this is the school.’

The gates were iron, forged together into a lattice pattern, with faded paint, similar to something you might see outside a castle or even a prison, but somehow, they didn't give you a sense of isolation. ‘These gates were actually made at the factory. They were gifted to the school about 30 years ago.’

Harriet seemed to appreciate them. ‘I like vintage looking things, I'd have those outside my house if I could. Bit hard when I live in a flat, I guess.’

They parked outside the main entrance. The school initially had the look of a village hall, a large one at that, with everything all under one building.

What was noticeably absent from Harriet's person was a camera, which prompted Joe to ask, ‘Will you be taking any pictures?’ He had just assumed that she would and had somewhat banked on it to help promote the village, expecting to see the professional camera that he saw on her social media posts. To his surprise though, Harriet replied, ‘Yeah, I just use my phone. It's good enough for the *Echo* and saves me carrying my proper camera around with me, it's so heavy! Am I allowed to take pictures here?’

‘It's fine, stick to the building and the interior, avoid taking pics of anybody. As I'm sure you know.’

Harriet snapped away at the building on her phone, the minimalism of it really captured Joe as she began capturing the dark green, wooden frame that sat above the sign reading 'Oxington School. *Scientia Sit Potentia*'. Dark green doors completed the dark green theme. ‘I guess the students all wear green?’ she asked sarcastically.

‘Lucky guess,’ replied Joe, before opening the door for Harriet to go inside. ‘Got all of the pics you need?’

‘For now.’

She entered the light, stone-coloured building; On the walls inside were pictures of the current staff and a few select pieces of art done by the students at the school at some point in time.

‘Hiya Joe, here to see Mrs Blue?’ The receptionist, Lourell Knapper, asked politely, wearing a smile that she had perfected being the first face of the school.

‘Hi, Lou, yeah, is she free?’

‘Hold on, let me just give her a buzz.’

Harriet took the opportunity to take some more pictures.

‘Go on through luvvies,’ she said, making sure she smiled at Harriet as she instructed them, ‘Cheers Lou. Take care.’ Lourell had been the receptionist at the school since Joe went there and she was the cornerstone of the entire facility, and they had bonded somewhat over a shared passion for climate change. This was another job that was highly regarded in the village, so Lourell never felt the need to leave, nor progress.

The corridor down to Mrs Blue's office was awfully narrow, thought Harriet. There were more pictures on the walls too which would be easy enough to knock off if you had the shoulders for it. She didn't think she'd have the space to take pictures of her own here. They

were headed towards the office at the opposite end of the corridor, an appropriate location if you were ever sent there in trouble. The length and narrowness of it alone would make you nervous, but facing your fate head-on all the way would add a few extra knots to your stomach.

‘Was your mum the Head Teacher when you were at school?’ whispered Harriet, as if putting herself in the role of a nervous student not wanting to draw attention to herself.

‘Yeah, well, for the last two years she was.’ Joe had to deal with accusations of favouritism during that time, which led to him falling away at a crucial time of his academia. He added, ‘I’ve always been a teacher’s pet though. By the way, you don’t need to whisper.’

Harriet began to blush, her somewhat olive skin turning a light pink, which suited her, Joe thought. She had a sort of Mediterranean look about her, which added to her mystique - it wasn’t as if Oxington was used to exotic tourists. The door was shut so Joe knocked and waited to be called in by Mrs Blue. They waited for 3, 4, 5 seconds before looking at each other, then as Joe was about to knock again Mr Holdsworth walked out, not making eye contact with Joe, nor with Harriet. ‘Come in,’ the voice behind the door said, ‘Hello Joe, hi there...’

‘Harriet, I’m Harriet. Hi, nice to meet you.’ She put out her hand to shake.

‘Lovely to meet you. I’m Mrs Blue. Can I get you a drink? Tea, coffee, water, the wine we keep secret from the students...?’

‘I knew teachers kept a secret stash somewhere!’ joked Harriet.

The quick response seemed to impress Joe, who suddenly realised that Harriet was meeting his mum. It shouldn’t matter as this was just business, he told himself, but he did think that quick wit was a surefire way to impress Mrs Blue. ‘I’ll just have a water please,’

‘And you, Joe? Coffee?’

‘I’m OK thanks. So, are we OK to go to the IT Suite now, or ...?’

‘Or?’ replied Mrs Blue.

‘Or is Mr Holdsworth not available? He walked past me in a bit of a rush just then.’

Mrs Blue turned around to pour Harriet's water from the bottle of still that was prepared for her by the receptionist each morning. ‘No, no, go ahead, he's looking forward to being in the paper, actually.’ She waited for a second to gauge the response before adding, ‘Joking! No, he's ready when you are - you remember where it is, right?’

‘Yes, I do, thank you. So, shall we?’ Joe asked Harriet, gesturing back down the daunting corridor.

‘Um, yes, sure. Thank you for the water, Mrs, erm, Blue,’ she said, feeling slightly awkward at how quickly Joe wanted to get out of there. It was like he was a teenager and being seen with his mum was an embarrassment.

‘You're most welcome dear. It was lovely to meet you. See you at home, son.’

Joe wanted to give his mum a look of disdain at calling him son, but he knew that he should have told her they were being recorded to start with, so opted against it.

They walked single file down the corridor and turned left into the entrance to the main hall. Here there were lots of children having lunch, seemingly all below 10 or 11 years old. This must have been the junior school, she realised. ‘Why is there only one school here? Not another one for secondary?’

‘It's just more efficient, I guess, no looking for another school halfway through your education. They also don't charge for the uniforms here when you move up to secondary. They're donated by the wool mill – who get wool donated by many of the farmers...who get given tools to help shear the sheep, by Ox Power....’

This fascinated Harriet, and she began to think that Oxington was indeed quite different.

Joe's plan was coming together. He had ticked off the school visit as a success after

getting what he wanted the most out of it – exposure and praise for the website he designed. Mr Holdsworth and the student they talked to, Helen Dodds, were both accommodating, and, most importantly, Harriet was beginning to see the charm and uniqueness that Oxington had. Still, he wondered if Harriet was charmed by him.

‘Where are you taking me next, then, chauffeur?’

It was comments like that which gave Joe a renewed sense of optimism in his thoughts about her. ‘Back to my workplace remember - I want to show you something that I’ve been working on, top secret.’

‘Ooh, intrigue! What could it be: A new sheep shearing clipper or a something that speeds up tractors maybe?’

Her sense of humour and quick wit were certainly having a charming effect on Joe, as again he wondered off into thoughts of what if, getting ahead of himself once more. He often thought about why he did this, unsure if it was something only he did or if it was one of those things that nobody wanted to admit they did.



There were security gates at the entrance to Ox Power, along with a security guard and a keycard entry system. Excessive, thought Harriet, though she had never been to a factory before so perhaps this was normal. Joe greeted the guard in a formal manner with a firm nod then proceeded to tap his ID card in order to open the gates.

‘I must say – you’re all business, aren’t you.’

This irked Joe; he understood it to mean that he was uptight. But when he thought about it, he probably was giving off a sense of pretentiousness: the suit, the head teacher mother, entering a secure building. It certainly wasn’t his intention, but perhaps this was how

everybody saw him, and why Kelly had really moved away? Flashes of piercing thoughts broke through to his brain in a sudden barrage of self-hatred, the heat began to rise, and the beads started to form on his forehead once more. This was all in the space of few seconds and came after a light-hearted comment. Remembering this, Joe replied, 'There's a time and a place, but when I'm here, I am,' not helping the matter. In an effort to lighten the mood he asked, 'So what do you do for fun, then, in Helton? Is there much to do there?'

'I can't believe you've never been to Helton! It's literally five miles away!' Joe laughed it off as Harriet added, 'There isn't that much going on there, mind, a few pubs and clubs; it gets busy when the racing is on, full of Irish people and people who like wasting their money. Depends on what you want to do though, a lot of people go into bigger cities like Bristley or Forford to have a good night out. Do you drink?'

'I do, but I don't really go out clubbing. I'm happy with a pub or just at home. But I guess that's village life for you.'

The sincerity was clear in Joe's voice, so, taking her turn at staying professional, Harriet began to dig a little deeper into the 'village life' that Joe had mentioned. 'You're happy with staying here in Oxington then – you don't think there's more out there to be seen?'

All of a sudden, another flash pierced Joe's thoughts, this time one of realisation – he had been planning a response to this very question, and, like he was looking straight into the mirror rehearsing again, he stated, 'I guess it depends on what you're looking for. For me, this place has everything I need. We're not some backwards village stuck in days gone by, we're quite the opposite. Yes, things are a little different around here, but that's not a bad thing. I see what the world is like outside on the news, online, and to me it's saddening that modern society has evolved this way. I genuinely believe that Oxington is something to be proud of, and most importantly we're all happy here. I want people to see that happiness is possible, you just need to live the "Oxington Way".' He had nailed it: Key words, promotion, interest –

surely they would use that in the article, he assumed. Perhaps his business-like approach was working after all, as he was met with firm nods from Harriet.

She couldn't help but wonder what she might see inside, making sure that her phone was primed and ready to capture whatever was going on behind the metal. That was all she could see - metal, all different shapes, sizes and structures. Some of it silver, some of it brown and all of it dangerous looking. One thing she didn't see was clouds of steam coming from the pipes; in fact, there weren't actually any pipes to be seen in the steel jungle. It wasn't only the sight, but the sounds of metal that rang clear throughout too, clang and bang, and back and forth they went, each smack was precise which made the momentary silence somewhat deafening. But they provided an opportunity for Harriet to carry on the interview. 'This place is impressive!' The noise – this time much more of it – made Harriet adapt her voice to the surroundings. 'I FEEL LIKE I SHOULD BE WEARING A HARD HAT.'

Joe, used to the noise, opted to use the opportunity to get closer to Harriet, ushering her in towards him to talk directly into her ear rather than shout, and allowing her to catch a scent of his cologne.

'Let's go inside, my office is fine ... once you walk past the warehouse and factory floor.'

Taking a breath, he caught a lingering scent of Harriet's perfume too, it was subtle – he didn't even smell it in the car with her, with the sweet hints of vanilla and honey were only meant to be picked up at the closest of contact. Unbeknown to Joe, that breath had been felt by Harriet, sending a shiver down her spine and goosebumps over her arms as it made contact with her ear. She too was getting slightly worked up until she remembered that the dictaphone was still running. She held it up and pointed at it as if to tell Joe to talk into it, instead he pointed at the bright yellow doors and began to walk in their direction. She followed closely behind, knowing that she had a moment without being able to talk, so she

composed herself and took some pictures before she went inside and noticed a sign that read 'HARD HATS TO BE WORN AT ALL TIMES'.

At first it all seemed as she had imagined: loud, messy and full of men; however, one thing was refreshingly clear – there was definitely a woman in charge. Commanding the floor, her high heels somehow reigning supreme in the battle for sound, even more impressive considering she was walking on the thinly grated flooring above them, an art that she had somehow mastered that made it look like she was gliding. Her stance was fierce and her glare furious, the iPad clutched to her chest completed the power look. Harriet was somewhat awestruck by this woman at first glance, almost intimidated, as she seemed to glide effortlessly in her heels, closer and closer to her as she came down the stairs. Harriet could barely manage a block heel let alone a six-inch stiletto, allowing for a hint of jealousy to creep in too. To her surprise, though, the woman was entirely charming.

‘Hello, there, you must be from the *Echo*, I'm Elizabeth Alerasoul, the Floor Manager here at Ox Power.’ Lizzie was utterly professional in her manner, clearly used to the noise and the tone of voice she needed to hold a conversation there.

‘Hi. I'm Harriet Watson, nice to meet you,’ replied Harriet, feeling compelled to give her full name too.

‘Please feel free to ask me anything, although you're in good hands with Joe here. Has he told you about his latest project?’

Joe looked comfortable letting the two of them talk.

‘He has, well, sort of. I think that's what he's about to show me,’ Harriet said, as she and Lizzie looked over to Joe, their unfamiliar chatter now in need of some additional input.

‘Yeah, we're just on our way up to my office now, all will be revealed. It's just up these stairs to the left. You go on up, I'll grab us a coffee. Take this, too.’ He quickly jotted down the code to his office and handed it to Harriet. The haste was intentional, not for his benefit,

for Lizzie's, she was not one to stand around for too long which Joe knew all too well. She was already tapping on her iPad – a sign of her impatience and eagerness to move on, but before she did, she allowed Harriet to move past her to get to the stairs to Joe's office, using the opportunity to remind Joe of their plans for the evening.

‘Remember the wine and wear the suit. I want you ready to go as soon as you get to mine.’ She then strode off, happy in the thought of what was to come later on that night. Joe watched her walk off, not feeling particularly turned on looking at her sagging bottom cheeks in the blue dress she was wearing, perhaps he was comparing it to the picture of perfection that Harriet had painted for him in her tight jeans. He made his way out to go and make the coffees, catch a glimpse of Harriet going up the last few stairs.

Joe's office was large, much larger than the cubicle that Harriet got at the *Echo* HQ, much cleaner too. His desk was meticulously tidy with only the most necessary of items surviving on the top of it: two screens, two speakers, a wireless mouse and keyboard. There was plenty of space left, but it looked to Harriet as though Joe was something of a minimalist. There were shelves with books and folders on, leading to another door at the back of the office. The books were mostly engineering or something business related like *Project Management Fundamentals: Implementing Agile Into Your Environment*, which looked particularly boring to her.

She noticed a picture sitting on the side of one of the shelves, a large, framed picture. Joe was taking a long time making the drinks, so Harriet decided to take a closer look at the picture, the snoopy nature of being a reporter had got the better of her. She was met with a face that she had recognised from earlier, Joe's mum, along with an elderly-looking couple. Although visibly much older, it was clear that the man in the picture was related to Joe, his thinner hair and fuller eyebrows had faded to an off-white colour which could be mistaken for a light shade of blonde, but it was incredibly straight, and his smile appeared cheeky. The

man was also quite short and stocky, though this could be more of a circumstance of age, thought Harriet. The woman next to him had grey curly hair and she was still relatively thin, and taller than the men in the picture, like Joe's mum. But it was obvious that most of the genetics in the Blue family came from this man, who she presumed was Joe's grandad.

‘Coffee's here.’ Joe had entered the room from the door at the back of the office, startling Harriet. ‘Sorry! Didn't mean to scare you,’ he added, as she laughed it off and responded with her now-typical quick wit, ‘Serves me right for being so nosey.’

Joe saw the picture that she was looking at whilst she asked the obvious; ‘Is that your grandparents?’ Joe felt a sinking feeling in his stomach from the question, he had managed to forget Billy so far but having to talk about him brought back the animosity between them.

‘Yeah, that's my nan, Mary, and my grandad, Billy.’ He was being tested, it was as if Billy had planted that picture there for Harriet to see; was it always there, he wondered? He knew that it was, but the recent events and changes towards a more political world had made Joe reach out for conspiracies against Billy. He knew that he had to remain professional though, so he added, ‘My nan's retired but my grandad still works on the farm – actually he's been helping me with my masterpiece.’

Taking the coffee that Joe held out for her, Harriet also took the conversational bait that Joe had laid out, his ability to adapt to a situation had paid off again. ‘So, I can see it, then?’

‘Of course, come through to my workstation,’

‘Workstation!? How many offices do you have?’

Joe laughed it off. ‘It's not an office, just somewhere to do the practical side of my job. It's a bit grubby in there but I've got gloves if you don't want to mess up your nails.’ As if seeing it as a challenge, she headed straight to the open back door, without gloves and with her phone primed to take pictures, but she soon halted once she saw what was waiting for her.

‘Is that it?’ she asked, both disappointed and surprised at the object that was on the

worktop.

‘Maybe I’ve been hyping it up too much,’ replied Joe, expecting this kind of response.

‘Do you think?! What even is it?’

‘That’s the important bit – what it is, particularly what it does. This is something that, if it works out, will benefit not only farmers, but hopefully the entire planet.’

Harriet’s intrigue had been piqued – if she were a cat, her ears would have twitched, as Joe added, ‘This is something that I hope will stop the methane produced by livestock from ever being released into the atmosphere.’

Harriet was impressed, her eyebrows looked to be glued upwards with intrigue as she stopped Joe to ask, ‘Wait - what’s Methane?’

‘Well, essentially it does a lot of harm to the planet when it gets released – imagine how much damage it does with all of the livestock there is in the world.’

Joe gave a simplified answer to a complex question, but it had worked, as Harriet’s mouth was stuck open with disbelief, whilst Joe added, ‘But for me this is as much for the reputation and longevity of agriculture as it is helping this planet. Farming has been my family’s and this village’s livelihood for generations, and I won’t let it be the cause of anybody’s downfall, let alone the planet’s. But it’s not done yet, I’ve made some significant progress with my Grandad thanks to his cattle, but there’s still a lot of testing needed, so I don’t know when it will be finished yet.’

Joe’s expression changed from one of enthusiasm and pride to clearly downbeat all of a sudden. Harriet had assumed that he was thinking about how long it would all take, and about what could go wrong, not about his frayed relationship with his grandad. She put her hand on his bicep in a reassuring manner, Joe looked up at the touch and met Harriet’s green eyes as she told him, ‘This is incredible, Joe. I really don’t know anything about it, but if it can do what you’ve said, then this could be an actual game-changer. That’s not local news

anymore.'

There was something very comforting about Harriet, thought Joe, she was the sort of person he would look forward to coming home to and waking up next to every day. 'Thank you,' he replied, as she moved her hand off his arm but left him with an image of a smile that would stay with him for much longer. 'Would it be alright if I took some pictures of it?'

'Please do,'

'I think this is going to get a lot of attention, Joe. I might need a two-page spread!'

They both laughed, it was all so natural between them both now, talking and laughing like they were fully accustomed to one another already. What they didn't know was how much the other had needed this moment. She decided not to press him any further right now about what he'd presented to her, choosing to stay in the moment, but there was surely more that he wanted to say, she thought.

Chapter 11

After taking the pictures, the two of them went back to Joe's car, and the walk back gave Harriet a view of the rest of the car park where she noticed something – the few cars that were there were all electric, too. It was like a showroom from the future, not a small village in the nether zone. Something just felt different about this place now that she was able to take it all in, everything was modern and sleek, and the air reeked of freshness. She got her phone back out and began to snap away as she thought about what sort of headline she could use for her story.

‘Have you got everything you need?’ asked Joe, keen to move on whilst the rain had halted. It was a shame, he thought, because there was a subtle beauty about seeing raindrops bounce off the chrome-work of the structure, the way the water would slide off in unison and appear as though it was only wet for a matter of seconds before deciding to wipe itself off, which would make for a beautiful image.

‘I’d say so. Where are you taking me next?’ There was a clear sound of excitement in Harriet’s voice having seen what a mundane trip to a factory in this village could bring, and she was keen to see what else it had to offer.

‘I’ll take advantage of the weather and walk you through the heart of the village, it’s lovely.’ Their eyes met once more, and they greeted one another with simultaneous smiles.

The journey back to the café where they met was quiet but not uncomfortable, Joe was

typically lost in his own head whilst Harriet was looking through the pictures, she was able to take. On the way back Harriet had seen the 'Welcome to Our Village' sign and insisted Joe took a cheesy picture for her in front of it. As they carried on through the village path, Harriet again noticed the vehicles – a van and a few cars that were all seemingly new, all clean and all electric. She got that same feeling as she did in the factory car park but this time, she immediately pressed Joe about it. 'Why are there no normal cars here?'

Joe laughed and replied, 'These are normal cars – you start them up and drive, pretty normal really.' His sarcasm wasn't lost on her though.

'You know what I mean, why is it just electric cars here?'

'Well, it's not just the cars, there are the vans and the lorries and the tractors too.'

Growing frustrated by his sarcasm she hit back at him, 'Why aren't people allowed cars with engines here? It doesn't seem right.'

A small smirk tilted the corner of Joe's mouth, he could keep this going for a lot longer, but given his new-found fondness for Harriet he decided to tell her what she wanted to hear, 'Of course they're allowed. But this is a community, this is all I have ever known. Ever since I was a kid, I remember knowing absolutely everybody in this place and that for me is a great thing. We can talk amongst ourselves and agree on what we want for the village, then do it. It's always been that way. Perhaps we've been fortunate to have a group of people who want to do right and make the most of what we've got, even if that isn't much, but we believe that this is worth preserving. This village thinks and cares about the future, and one way to do that is to commit to clean air where we can, and vehicles are in our control, as is the factory. But truth be told, this place is so small a lot of people don't even bother having a car, it's just for emergencies, really.'

'Like the rain?' Harriet was showing just how capable she was of keeping up with Joe's sarcasm, and he was revelling in it. But Joe's latest tirade wasn't planned or scripted,

this time it was entirely natural, and it brought about a powerful quality that clicked with Harriet. It suited him, and she suited him too.

As they strolled towards the first set of identical shop faces, Joe was keen to direct the conversation, pointing out the array of local businesses they could boast about. It was certainly impressive, Harriet thought, the fact that there were no franchises in sight was enviable and worthy of a brag. This was however somewhat how she imagined a small village to be like, so it wasn't something she planned on covering in her story, at least not in any detail. As Joe was pointing out the butcher's, the charity shop and the chippy, he casually mentioned that a standard-looking, light stone, detached cottage on the corner of the street was a hospital.

'Hold on, did you say hospital?' Looking at the exterior of the building there was no way that Harriet could see how it was able to facilitate such a service.

'Well, it's more like a health centre really, it's also the Police and Fire station.'

Taken aback, Harriet took another look at the building, there was indeed nothing about it that even remotely looked like somewhere that even one – let alone three – emergency services could be facilitated. She wondered just how this was possible. Joe however looked entirely smug, like he held this great secret that he knew Harriet wanted to know. Waiting for her to press him, Joe continued to walk on until Harriet stopped and asked the inevitable question. 'How? Just how is that possible?!'

He traced his steps back to where she had halted, to deliver his answer. 'It just works for us.'

Before Harriet could follow it up, Joe continued, 'The setup is quite traditional: people who deal with crimes, people who deal with injuries and people who deal with fires – the difference is that these people share the responsibilities of each - they're all skilled in each service. Truth be told, though, we don't get much in the way of crime and fires, so it's

mostly just treating illnesses and accidents.'

None of this made sense to Harriet and her senses were positively buzzing round the tips of her body, she was no longer comfortable. She knew that there was more to get more out of Joe though, she was there for a reason, but now it looked like she may have gotten more than she expected. 'What about serious issues – how do you treat people with cancer or what if somebody is murdered?'

His preparedness was starting to pay off as he quickly replied, 'Death isn't something that we're afraid of here. We treat them with the quality of care that they deserve, as best as we can. Nobody's forced to have treatment here – and however they choose to be treated is respected. Each person matters, we all know and care for one another. That can only come when you have a community such as ours. But to answer the rest of your question – murder isn't something that we see here, I've never known it anyway. Crime as you know it doesn't really exist in Oxington. But as I say, most of Red Lights' work tends to be health-related.'

'Red Lights'? Is that your pet name for them?'

Joe didn't appreciate the attempt at humour this time; the Red Lights were taken very seriously in the village. 'It's just the name that's stuck over the years. They use red lights as they're much less damaging on the eyes than blue ones. Those who are chosen to join are trained up by current or previous members of Red Lights. They in themselves become their own community – they live together in that house, and they work from there too. But it's a lot less official than just calling 999, usually we just send a message, or call them on their mobiles if something is urgent. Believe it or not, there are no doctors working here – we have our own care staff trained, as we believe that care is the key to good health. So, no doctors, nor surgeons for that matter.'

'But how? Surely you must have a need for surgery?'

'Surgery – yes. But surgeons? No. Instead, we use robotics, AI and the right people to

control the surgical devices. We just need people who are good with their hands, specialists in their own right. Our medical personnel have the knowledge and the ‘Controllers’ as we call them, they’re the ones that operate. Most of the work is programmed into the AI to begin with so it makes for pretty smooth performance, but we just need somebody to steer the ship. It might not be perfect, but it works for us – and we’ve not had any complaints so far!’

An almost gormless fascination was now taking over Harriet’s mind, as she was really understanding just what made this tiny place so special. Keen to learn more about this unique setup they had in Oxington, Harriet got out her phone to take a picture and ventured towards the entrance.

‘Do you have an appointment?’ asked Joe.

‘Erm, no but ...’

‘Any crime or fire to report?’

‘What are you talking about?’

Joe walked back on the track he initially set out on and replied, ‘There’s no point in disturbing them, some will be asleep as well. It’s just a house, nothing special. Come on.’

Reluctantly she obliged and caught up with Joe as he carried on pointing out the array of shops and other services that were all within touching distance of one another. That was something that give Oxington a cosiness about it, as though everything was being squeezed together in a stonewall hug. What helped make this possible were the impossibly narrow roads that barely broke up each side of the street, making Harriet think that may be another reason why there were so few vehicles in the village. Familiar with the butcher’s, hair salon and chemists, among others in the sloping street, they eventually reached the top of an incline that led down to the café, and were greeted by the pub, where they decided to stop.

Chapter 12

Joe got the drinks in – a pint of locally brewed, dark ruby ale called ‘Munchkin Boots’ and a small glass of white wine, with Joe trying his luck again at guessing Harriet’s drink.

‘Great guess! How did you know?’

His grin could barely peak though as Harriet reached for the pint. The pub, called ‘The Ox and ‘Ounds’ was typically local, there were solid wooden stools at the bar, chairs and tables scattered throughout and an open fire that was actually in use. The flooring was a deep red carpet with patterns throughout that would look outdated even in the ‘70s, the colour of the walls was up for debate as they were clearly stained from years of misplaced alcohol, smoke and general neglect, but an array of pictures of country scenery and fallen heroes of the pub’s history filled it out. The pub was dark, dingy and far too warm, it smelt of a literal brewery and of tobacco too, both of which had blended into a nostalgic nostril utopia. It was clear that people were still able to smoke indoors, although nobody who was in there at the time was openly doing it.

‘This is a real pub,’ Harriet gladly proclaimed after taking a large gulp of her beer. ‘It reminds me of the sort of place my parents used to take me and my sister to when we were younger,’ she added.

Slowly rebuilding his pride having had his drink snatched from him and being left with his poorly guessed wine, Joe asked, ‘Younger or older sister?’

‘Younger. By two years. It was almost every Friday and Saturday without fail, we’d be allowed a bottle of beer each as well. It was brilliant, and then we stopped going.’

‘This place hasn’t changed at all since I’ve been alive, and it never will. The same family have always run it and they know everyone by name.’

Rapidly making her way through the pint, Harriet added, ‘They might end up knowing mine by the end of the day if you keep feeding me these beauties!’

The thought crossed Joe’s mind for a second to drop the tour and get another drink in, but a sense of maturity prevailed. ‘Lovely, isn’t it? They sell it in bottles too, so I’ll get you a few as a souvenir if you like.’ He almost certainly got this sensible side from his nan, so he took another slow, disappointing sip of his white wine, as Harriet looked on with her own disappointment that Joe didn’t notice.

‘I’ll admit this village is starting to charm me, Mr Blue, you’re a great tour guide.’

The blood was rushing to his cheeks and his temperature was increasing, sure enough, Joe was blushing. Tour Guide? What did that mean? Flashing thoughts of how cliché he might have come across had rushed to his mind’s eye.

‘I mean it, this has been brilliant. Don’t go getting all shy on me now that you’ve bought me a drink though,’ she told him.

Joe let out an audible relieved laugh and added,

‘Thank you, yeah, it’s certainly different here. No violence, no poverty, no religion, equal rights, freedom and opportunity. It’s rare that I see people sad here, and I don’t see why the rest of the world can’t be like this.’

‘Excuse me for being sceptical here but what you’ve just described doesn’t sound possible, it sounds too ... perfect,’

‘It’s not perfect.’

‘How though? It sounds like there’s nothing wrong here?’

‘We can always improve, that’s why it’s not perfect. Show me perfection and I’ll show you a lie.’

With that, Harriet finished the last of her drink and she looked off into the distance, focusing on nothing other than what to say next. The conversation had turned slightly confrontational from Joe’s words, and it was going way off-course from where it began. Joe necked the rest of his wine and rounded up their empty glasses before heading to the bar again. Perhaps they were going to get drunk after all, perhaps she might kiss him, but perhaps not though, as Joe returned with two bottles of Munchkin Boots for Harriet to take away with her. The disappointment on her face was evident to Joe this time as he turned around, but nonetheless he had given her a gift, so Harriet was able to shift her emotions quickly enough for it not to become an issue.

‘That’s so sweet. You didn’t have to, honestly.’

With an almost regretful smile on his face Joe replied, ‘I hope you enjoy them and remember Oxington fondly...and think of me when you’re drinking them!’

Harriet now began to blush, and she quickly turned to her handbag to put the drinks into. She knew that she would absolutely be thinking about Joe again. ‘See you around, Harriet,’ said Mike behind the bar, as the two of them left.

The village seemed to loop around on itself, and the final leg of the walk was downhill – leading them to the where Harriet had parked her car, not far from the café. Just behind this appeared a church that seemed to be rather busy, which seemed strange to Harriet considering it was in the middle of the day in the middle of the week. But also because Joe had mentioned that there was no religion there. Putting her journalistic hat firmly back on, Harriet pressed Joe, ‘I thought you said this isn't a religious place?’

‘It isn’t.’

Joe allowed for a moment of confusion to once again show in Harriet’s expression,

before following up his response. ‘Sure, it looks like a church – and probably smells like a church too, but it’s not a place of religion.’

The expression on Harriet’s face had fallen back to its natural state, and if she wanted to know more though then she would have to ask, thought Joe, as he hoped to wrap things up soon before any chance of something going wrong came along. But as expected, Harriet pushed for more.

‘OK then, so... what is it used for exactly?’

Taking in a deep breath, as if knowing this would take some effort to explain, Joe replied, ‘It’s a place for people to recharge, to reflect and to be silent among others who want the same. The villagers, they use this as a place of solitude when they may have lost someone, or if they think they have lost themselves. I don’t know what answers they find, but I know that it helps to have somewhere like this that they can go to, a place to give them hope. Humans have a deep-rooted need to have something they can be hopeful for, and this is a place where they can find it. Not in the belief of a man, woman or any particular entity, but in themselves. What people do in their own homes is up to them, they can believe in what they like or pray to whom they choose, but if they are here then they are free from religion and owing only to themselves. We are each responsible for our own actions, sometimes we just need a bit of time to think about what to do next.’

It was another bout of word vomit, and it was something that Harriet had become used to by now, but she found herself agreeing with what Joe had to say and she felt like she was talking to a man of great power and deep knowledge. He had earned Harriet’s respect though, so now he needed to keep it. Against his own nagging need to end everything on a high note, he offered to show Harriet around the inside of the church, and she went with the plan wholeheartedly.

The Church of You & Me, as it was called on to the signpost directly opposite the ruins

of medieval wall that surrounded it, was in every way a traditional church, which looked to have been around for centuries, so perhaps one day it used to be a conventional church, Harriet thought. But now it was home to the modernised and rather unconventional residents of Oxington. Being as busy as it was, it served as an opportunity for Harriet to see how the locals reacted to Joe, with many greetings of ‘hello love’ and ‘alright mate’ all met and reciprocated with a smile; it was clear that Joe was a popular figure. So much so that he asked Harriet if she minded showing herself around as he was being flagged down by a very concerned-looking old woman.

‘Sorry, you don’t mind, do you?’

‘Course not. She seems very keen to talk to you, so I’m sure it must be important. She doesn’t look like your type, though.’

‘How would you know?’

With a wry smile, Harriet went into the church as Joe wandered over to Yvette Cooper, eager to see what all the fuss was about.

‘Everything OK, Yvette?’ he asked.

‘Well, not really, love. You see, I thought you would want to know that ...’

Before she could finish her sentence, Joe locked eyes with Billy, who had a grin built from suspicion, along with his bozo of a friend Arthur. This is what Joe was afraid of, and Yvette could see that Joe had just figured it out.

Very soon after, Harriet made her way out and Joe looked visibly worried. She didn’t spend long in there at all – what if Billy had seen her with Joe and followed them to the church? He tried to make light of the situation without letting his guard down, so he quipped, ‘Out so soon? I was just coming in to find you.’

Harriet looked around the church grounds before replying solemnly, ‘You’re right, it’s just like a regular church, and I’ve seen enough of the inside of them in my life.’

Joe didn't know what to think or what to say to that, so instead he carried on walking, gesturing the way back to Harriet's car. The reassuring clunk of the car unlocking gave Joe the opportunity to see what Harriet drove.

'So, this is what you mean by a "normal" car, then.'

Letting out a small giggle she replied, 'Yeah, and sorry for polluting your lovely village with its terrible emissions.'

His now-signature crooked, awkward smile made a reappearance as it was time to say goodbye. 'Thank you for coming today, I really do appreciate it, and it was a pleasure meeting you. Hopefully, you say some nice things about us all,' Joe told her.

'Of course, it was my pleasure! And thank you for a lovely day. Now I actually have to do some work and write all of this up though, so I'm not sure exactly when it'll go out. If I've got any questions, do you mind if I contact you? Shall I email you or ...?'

He knew what that 'or' meant, so he gave Harriet his mobile number.

'Anything you need just let me know,' he said confidently.

'Thanks, I will do.'

They both left smiling, and Joe even got a honk from Harriet's horn. But after he had waved goodbye and turned back around to face the church, he wasn't smiling anymore as he began to process what might have just happened. All of his planning and hard work was – in his mind – possibly undone by the sight of his grandad. His thoughts spiralled and he needed to know what had gotten Harriet so upset in the church, convinced it was because of something that Billy had said to her. The look on his face as he saw Joe outside the church had to mean something, he thought. Already Joe was growing anxious to find out what Harriet thought about him, and about Oxington, but he didn't have her number. He drafted an email but thought about how desperate it might come across, so instead of sending it yet he decided to make his way to The 'Ounds in the hope that some of the Cotswolds' finest might

ease his worries. But unbeknownst to Joe, he was walking right into Billy's path too.

Chapter 13

After missing out on his drink of choice earlier on, Joe made sure to make up for it when he got to the pub. By this time, he had calmed down a bit, perhaps it was the thought of Harriet that made him focus away from his paranoid thoughts of Billy. He was self-conscious at the best of times, but it had been a long while since he considered needing to change anything about himself, and the idea of seeing Harriet again had made him want to hide what he saw as his flaws. So now when Harriet popped into his brain – which was a lot in the ten or so minutes since she left – he repressed any negativity and began to breathe, treating her like a meditation method.

‘Another wine, Joe?’ Remarked Mike, a shrinking blob of a barman, as Joe approached the bar.

‘No chance! A pint of boots please, pal.’ The first sip, mixed with his newly acquired serene state of mind, made for a lovely feeling which Joe quite literally drank in. He had taken a seat where they had sat earlier, which gave him more opportunity to remain calm, but before his thoughts could begin to turn him on, his phone let off a couple of brief buzzes – it was a message from an unknown number.

Hey. This is... The excitement of the possibility that this could be her had caused a surge of tingles and a blood-rush from his brain right down to underneath the table; however,

he couldn't get too carried away in his joy as a couple of heavy pairs of work boots approached. 'That bird you was with son, she was lovely.'

'Yeah, I'd give her one!'

It was Billy, followed closely by his curmudgeon-faced ally Arthur. The mood in the air had actively changed to an immediate tension, and the serenity in Joe's mind was short lived, now getting up out of his seat, protective of both Harriet and his pride.

'What do you mean? Did you speak to her?'

Both Billy and Arthur kept up a smugness about them, frustrating Joe even more by not answering him.

'What did you say to her, you old prick!?'

Arthur motioned towards Joe for what he had just called Billy, but Billy held him back, firmly and easily with just the back of his hand.

'Watch your language, boy, I'm still your grandad, remember?'

Joe did remember, so much so that he took a couple of seconds to respond before realising he was in a confrontation, in public. 'Are you? You've been anything but that lately, and you know it. Now you're trying to spread lies to reporters, doesn't sound like much of a grandad to me.'

'Reporters?'

The look on both of their faces made it immediately obvious to Joe that Billy did not speak to Harriet, so he backed off and sat back down.

'C'mon, Bill, let's get back to our pints, he doesn't want any of this. I doubt he's even been in a fight,' but Billy knew full well that he had been recently, with him.

'You can come and join us, if you want?' Billy's tone had changed, it was almost genuine, but Joe wasn't falling for it.

'I've got nothing more to say to you.' Joe got up and brushed past Arthur as he went to

the toilet.

‘You want some? C’mon, I’ll give it to ya.’

Joe laughed at Arthur’s tenacity, but deep down he really couldn’t stand him. He was fiercely loyal to Billy, and nobody really knew why. He would always try for a fight whenever he had a drink, though, which was a poor quality to have in Joe’s opinion.

With trembling hands and an as-yet unsatisfied palate, Joe went back to his phone when he got back to see the rest of the message he had been sent, ignoring Arthur’s persistent advances. *Hey. This is Dad, lost my phone the other day so I’ve got a new number. Can you pass this on to your mother please son. Ta and see you soon.* This was a low blow when he had been expecting something from Harriet, something that could only be happening to him, he thought. As his anger had turned seamlessly into pure emptiness, a black hole had sucked out all remaining normality and replaced it with a feeling which had been a surprisingly long time in returning.

Much like Oxington, on the surface Joe appeared to have it all, but unlike his beloved home there was a darkness that crept beneath what people saw of him. At first it felt like a blood rush, upwards into his cheeks and his eyes and seeping back into his brain, then he began to float almost outside of his own vessel, seeing himself and everyone else from above. When he and the blood fell back down, he was left with an overwhelming nothingness, like everything and everyone had been removed.

It was usually one of two things that set this overreaction off – being publicly embarrassed, or, more commonly, rejection. Perhaps it was the occasion mixed with the hope that Harriet felt what he had felt during the day, but Joe was now wrapped in tangled unreason, wondering why she didn’t feel the same way, what he did wrong, and would he ever find what he’d always been looking for. These questions kept repeating themselves, tumbling around like the end of a spin cycle, then starting up again until his brain was fully

rinsed.

Joe had been on a run of luck of late, something that he put down to more experience – especially since his flings with Lizzie, which had given him an outlet and an opportunity to avoid many occasions of rejection. He no longer went out looking for what was missing, but feeling this way about Harriet or anybody right now, was not something he went looking for, instead it found him. And in his mind, if she hadn't contacted him by now, it meant that the inadvertent hope that had spun into his world was now dry.

Joe wondered, as he always did when he felt this way in public, if anybody had seen him spiralling, but by now he had just about come to accept that all of his reactions, no matter how real they seemed, were all in his head. So, with a rapid chug of his remaining pint, he leapt up and out of his seat and out of the pub door, brushing straight through his grandad and his sidekick on the way. Another firm, backhanded gesture from Billy kept Arthur at bay once more, almost as a way of pity towards Joe. It was something that he hadn't seen his grandson do before, but it was something that he was familiar with from his own troubles, as he watched him walk down the cracked, stone path and out of sight once more.

This type of 'episode' as Joe had labelled it to himself, was usually an onset for more aggressive thoughts and tendencies, or at the very least an opportunity to reintroduce gloom into his every-day. As he bowled clumsily through the streets, the large intake of the strong, local alcohol mixed with the wine had an effect on his manner. This had certainly helped with explaining his demeanour to anybody that saw him on his way back to his car, but once he got there, he knew exactly where he was heading – to his safe place, at his office.

Joe's office was a place where he could be alone, and he wanted nothing more than that in this very moment. There were entrances at the front, back and side of the building which meant plenty of opportunity to avoid the wrong kind of person to bump into. The safest way would be through the research lab, which, although busy, was full of colleagues who weren't

going to be distracted. The short-term effects of the alcohol had since worn off during the journey, so Joe was at least more alert, although still lost in a fusion of self-loathing and disappointment so he had tunnel vision for nowhere but his hiding place. With the entry of a code and the slam of a door, he had made it. Gusts of relief poured from his lungs, filling the room with the desperation he had felt since reading his dad's text, and not the one he wanted. The first thing he did was bolt-lock the door – Lizzie of course knew the code for Joe's office, and with a whiff of his aftershave or the scent of his beer breath, she would sniff him out instantly. For a moment he thought that maybe some rough sex was what he needed, to take his frustrations out by slamming Lizzie with the full force of his hips over his desk, but he quickly dismissed that option and gave into the delightful tempt of deprecation of himself.

Safe from intrusion, Joe wandered over to the large, overlooking widow at the opposite end of his office. This window was an absolute bonus to what was already a divine office, as it produced a gateway to a glorious view of the large pond that separated the factory from the surrounding road. This view had helped in the past, and often provided moments of tranquillity when needed. This was not to be one of those moments though, as Joe got out the bourbon he had saved for celebrating finishing his prototype. The crackle of the lid as it broke its seal, like a snake shedding its skin, made for a great introduction for the destruction that he was planning. Sweet, sweet glugs from the neck of the bottle being transferred into his, smacking the bottom of it like a powerful dominatrix of liquor. The anticipation of demolishing this drink was enough to get Joe heady and confident before he had even taken a sip, so much so that he continued typing the email to Harriet he drafted earlier on his phone.

Hey, it's me. I know I probably shouldn't do this, especially over email, but you haven't messaged me yet! I really enjoyed meeting you today... you took me by surprise as I wasn't expecting you to be as you are, which is amazing. I would really like to see you again, in a non-professional setting, so how about a dinner tonight? Joe. He gave the message a final

spell-check so that there was no evidence of influence, ready to send. As his thumb motioned towards the forward arrow that would make-or-break his current mood, a notification popped up from another unknown number, which read, *Hey Joe! It's Harriet! Made an impulse buy on the way home (that pint was strong!) – when can I give it to you?*

In an instant Joe was back in his previous state of mind, using Harriet's message and thoughts of her to calm him right away. He put down the drink he so desperately recently wanted to neck, and hastily replied. *Hey, good to hear from you! That sounds intriguing – how about tonight?'* Without a care or a thought for seeming too keen now, he replied like a flash and saved her number, and before long they were in a full text conversation, *'Sounds good! How about you come to me this time? Get you out of the village for once!*

Joe felt the tingles and surges return once more with her immediate response, this is real, he thought. *Of course ... Just tell me when and where.* And, right then and there, Joe was himself again.

His joy and recently re-discovered sense of confidence had made him forget about sneaking into the building, so he carelessly waltzed back out towards his car, not through the lab this time, but via the factory floor, his usual route. And as he so usually did when on his usual route, he bumped into Lizzie.

'That's what I like to see, a happy face. You must be looking forward to later on as much as I am.'

Joe's smile soon drooped; hit with the realisation that he had already made plans to see Lizzie tonight. Fuck, he thought, fucking why! Joe knew that he had to get out of this, but he couldn't say why, so using the quick wit that came with feeling himself again, he replied,

'I was just looking for you, came back especially for it. I can't make tonight, I'm really sorry Lizzie, it's just that I...'

Lizzie cut him off, her face would be a warning sign shade of red if it wasn't already

covered by the golden tint of her excessive blusher. 'You are just like him. I don't even care what your excuse is, just get out of my sight,'

'I'm sorry, I'll make it up to you,'

'I said. Get. Out. Of. My. Sight.'

Although visibly infuriated as she talked to him with pinched lips, she kept her tone to a degree that meant only Joe could hear, and not any of the engineers on the floor. She didn't blink once until Joe accepted his fate, and turned around with his hands raised, as if to admit mercy and guilt. He looked around his shoulder before slipping out of the door, Lizzie was still standing there, staring at him until he was indeed out of her sight. Ever the professional, nobody would know the rage she was feeling inside.

Slightly shaken up, Joe felt that same sense of relief when he left the building as when he locked himself in his office earlier on, but unlike before, he was relieved to not be alone, at least not yet. Now able to check his phone again, Joe saw the address of a bar in Helton, not one that he'd ever been to of course, and 7:30pm as the time to meet. It was already gone 6pm, so he needed to make a move to make it on time. Confirming the plans, he turned on his car, put on some fitting music for the smooth ride ahead, and focused on what the possibilities of the night ahead could be.

Chapter 14

Keen not to seem too formal or come across as uptight, Joe opted for more informal attire, choosing black jeans, a yellow and black chequered shirt which he left untucked and unbuttoned to reveal a plain white t-shirt, and some black Chelsea boots, his favourites – and the same that he wore in the day. He wondered if Harriet would notice – if she did then she definitely was the one for him, he imagined. Joe's mum wasn't back yet, which was odd for this time, but perhaps she was working still, parents' evening, probably, Joe presumed. He tried calling her but no answer, so he messaged her to check. Re-focusing on Harriet, Joe wondered what she might be wearing, hoping it would allow him the opportunity to see more of her, having been fully covered earlier due to the weather. One thing that remained in Joe's mind was Harriet's body, and how she was shaped exactly how he would imagine his dream woman to be. With time just on his side and several splashes of his favourite aftershave, one of the few remaining items of evidence from his ex that she had given to him, he headed out the door and navigated his way out of the village.

Leaving the village was nothing new for Joe, he just hadn't been anywhere he didn't need to go to, like travelling to see Kelly when she moved up north. Luckily, this time though it was only a few miles up the road; although the claustrophobic lanes that hosted infinite bends up and down, made a simple ten-minute journey turn into double that. Even when you

knew those roads and were accustomed to steering on them, there wasn't a hope you could reach the speed limit, so planning a journey regularly wouldn't be ideal, Joe pondered to himself. His mind then drifted into wondering about if Harriet moved to the village, then they wouldn't have to worry about making that journey in and out. Joe often got ahead of himself, which meant frequent let-downs and regular episodes throughout the course of his near quarter of a century existence. But when you added hope into the mix, the possibilities for Joe were endless, so he didn't stop himself this time.

One thing that was noticeably different right away about Helton was how bright it was. This time of year meant that by the time Joe arrived, it was still near-fully immersed in the moonlight, but even so it seemed excessively lit up. Rows of lights lined roads and streets, the paths were doused in glare from the shop windows and even the bins were signposted by shine, it seemed. It was more akin to autumn than spring. As Joe's eyes acclimatised to the new surroundings, he spotted the bar that Harriet had said to meet him at, 'McCaffreys'. From the outside it seemed friendly enough, there were people chatting and smoking outside, getting cover from the returning rain that seemed to reappear the moment Joe drove past the welcome sign. This, he assumed, meant that he wouldn't get to see as much of Harriet as he had desired, but he was wrong.

There she sat, a stunning sight of beauty and chic. Elegantly curled hair put up into a plump bun which gave more of a focus on her face, now without glasses. She wore a pumpkin-coloured dress that sat just above her knees. She had precisely the right amount of makeup that you could notice a warm glow, matching the aesthetic of the outfit, and her eyes were shadowed to a gothic proportion. The outfit was finished off by a delicate pair of khaki, suede ankle boots, which had just a hint of heel. She was perfect tonight, and walking towards the bar now, Joe began to feel nervous, as this wasn't just a drop-off, it was clearly a date.

Looking up at the exact moment that Joe walked into the bar, as if drawn to his very presence, their eyes met in a moment that Joe saw as fate. Harriet smiled, the same smile that she gave him when they first met, and staying seated, she greeted him. ‘Don’t get used to me being early – I’m just making up for being late earlier! You look nice, much less formal! So how do you like Helton? Not bad, right? Did you find it alright?’

Once again Joe had to process all of what was unloaded onto him, but it at least proved that she was indeed flustered by him, so he confidently replied, ‘It’s ... not bad! It’s not my little village, but I guess there’s a certain charm to it. Easy enough to find, and park.’

‘Oh good! See, what did I tell you. So, what are you having – another white wine?’

Looking down at his feet and shaking his head in disbelief, he replied, ‘Absolutely not!’ They both laughed, acknowledging the prank that Harriet had played earlier. ‘I bet they don’t sell what you drank earlier,’ he added, as more of a statement than a question, and he was right.

‘Unfortunately, not. But plenty of others, wait right here,’ which gave Joe the perfect opportunity to check out Harriet in full. Her body was so tightly woven together as if hand-stitched by the seamstress of grace itself. Like the many bulbs that greeted Joe into this local new world, she shone far brighter than anything he had seen before, and in that very moment he would gladly go blind knowing that he had seen her in all her glory, and that she had done that for him. Looking at her from behind and with her hair up tonight he was also able to make out a delicate tattoo on the back of her neck, which looked like a word.

Snapping back into awareness, Joe checked to see if his mum had replied, but still nothing. Before getting into a flurry of worry he saw another message on Facebook from Amarjit – it was a picture of her mother, and Joe was shocked. This woman, although darker in complexion, was just how Amarjit described her – like his mum, Amanda. But before Joe could understand what this might mean, Harriet returned with their drinks.

‘Here you go, try this.’

The beverage in the glass, although a pint, wasn’t what Joe was used to. It was hazy and pale, with bubbles that appeared to shoot across the drink instead of upwards. Joe thought he had seen bits floating in it too, all of which made the expression on his face hard to hide.

‘Not what you were expecting?’ she asked, keen to see if Joe would even try the drink.

‘No, it’s not!’ he said, before taking a large sip of the tangy cider, ‘But neither were you.’ Straight away Joe had decided the tone of the evening, and it wasn’t going to be a continuation of their blossoming working relationship – it would be a night of flirtatious frivolity, and Harriet was just as pleased to co-pilot this flight into the unknown.

‘I must admit, today wasn’t what I was expecting either. You were so confident, and you’re held in such high regard, and I don’t know why or how. Perhaps that’s your appeal.’

‘I’ve lived there all my life; I make an effort to get to know everybody. Always have. You don’t have a choice in a place like that. Not that anywhere is like Oxington.’

Harriet made an adjustment to the position of her handbag, making sure it stayed close to her before continuing the conversation, allowing for a period of hush to break up the flow they had created, before asking him, ‘But they all seem to look up to you, and you’re so young ... and they’re so ... old. Are you all part of a cult or something?’

Joe took his own moment to pause before responding, taking another harsh yet crisp sip of his drink. Suspecting that Joe might let something slip, Harriet leaned in a little closer to Joe, now clutching her bag, as he replied, ‘It’s a place that I wouldn’t change, not for the whole world. But the people there, yeah, they are getting old now and I’m one of the few of the next generation that still sees it for what it is, that’s why I haven’t left and maybe why they seem to appreciate that. I want other people to experience this life too, those not fortunate like we are. That’s what I meant by the “Oxington Way” – I want to promote “Oxington Living”, I just need to get the message out there and find people who want to be a

part of it.'

'I guess I can see why you stayed, it just felt like it had everything you would need right there in the village. There are so many questions I want to ask you about it.'

Joe cut-off the topic which was getting closer to work-like, 'I'll happily tell you everything you need to know, maybe just not tonight.'

'Fine, well just answer me this – have you ever thought about leaving?

Catching a momentary glimpse of the by-passers and the town dwellers, noticing how much more casual they all seemed to be compared to him and what he knew, Joe remembered back to when he first found out about Kelly moving away. 'I did, once,' he said somewhat sombrely. Quickly realising he was with somebody who he wanted to impress, Joe changed his tone as he added, 'I thought about moving up north with my ex, Kelly, about five years ago now.'

Relatively surprised by this revelation and keen to dig more into this, Harriet asked, 'Is that why she's your ex then?'

'Yeah, I just couldn't do it, as much as I loved her and thought that it could be worth it, I couldn't be somebody that I'm not, which is an outsider.'

'You couldn't have loved her that much, then.'

That comment stung Joe, more than perhaps it was intended to. He lifted his drink up to see the debris on the bottom of the glass, before deciding to carry on drinking it. 'I did. I really did, but it was a long time ago and we were young. First loves are always the hardest to get over, and some people never do.'

Harriet seemed to agree with that last part, and Joe could see that, so he did some digging of his own. 'What's your best love, then?'

'Best?'

'Yeah, who did you love the most and when was it?'

‘Well, I don’t know about best, but it was my only love. Not so long ago, though.’

Instant thoughts dashed through Joe’s mind at this revelation, did it mean she was still in love with this person? Were they still in her life? Curious to know more, he replied with open intrigue, ‘Why did you break up?’

Now it was Harriet’s turn to show her vulnerable side, and deciding to let Joe in she responded with the only words that could have made his head stop spinning, ‘He cheated on me.’

Acting in the moment Joe instinctively put his hand over Harriet’s, only for a moment, but in that moment they both felt the spark of new love. The night went on and the drinks continued to flow, both now well on their light-headed descent into inebriation. They talked about their childhoods and their different upbringings, but neither seemed better or worse than the other, until Joe brought up something that he remembered from earlier in the day.

‘Back at the church earlier, you seemed quite sad when you came out. What happened in there?’

Harriet froze up momentarily, the enhanced emotions that alcohol brings had caused her to go back to the same state that she was in after coming out of the church. ‘It just brought back some bad memories, ones that I haven’t thought of for a while now.’

Joe sensed that this was another moment to show his compassionate side, so he reached out for her hand once more, and that’s when Harriet leant across her stool and straight onto Joe’s lips. The moment may not have been entirely perfect, but in Joe’s world nothing was, so he held onto her hand tighter and met her embrace with the passion it deserved. Their lips were in perfect symmetry, moving in the same direction and at the same speed which made for the ideal first kiss. By the end of the night, they had kissed several times more and their hands were now immersed as they walked back to Harriet’s car.

‘Earlier when I mentioned about some bad memories, I was talking about when my

sister died.'

With their hands already locked Joe couldn't reach for it this time, so instead he just listened, aware that Harriet was determined to continue to let him in, even though her mouth was rapidly drying from holding back the lumps in the back of her throat, making it difficult to get anything out.

'When she was 16, and I was 18. She had just finished her GCSEs and went out for some drinks and a barbeque round her friend's house. The next morning, she woke up and told dad about her headache which we assumed to just be her first hangover. An hour later she collapsed and died. It was a brain haemorrhage.'

Joe felt that this was the moment to let her regain the saliva, pulling her closer and showing her with one enduring hug that he was there for her, now and in the future, whatever it may hold for them. Although not strapping in stature, Joe let Harriet know just how strong he could be when he needed to. With her head cushioned on his shoulder, Harriet could feel why so many people respected and adored Joe, as she was feeling the same way now. 'I'm sorry, that's an awful thing to go through. So young too, I can't imagine what it must have felt like,' he told her compassionately.

'It's OK, I've had a lot of time to get over it. Not that I ever will, but you know. And I'll always have her right behind me.'

Harriet turned around to reveal the word 'Alexia' tattooed on the back of her neck. Joe smiled, and under the dark green lamppost that loomed high above them, they shared a deep and indestructible kiss, one that would stay with them for a lifetime.

'Make sure you text me when you get back, I don't want you getting lost,' said Harriet as she got into her car, reaching for something on the passenger seat.

Neither should have been driving given that they were certainly over the limit, but it was a privilege of being in the countryside that they both used to break the law, knowing they

wouldn't get caught, a decision that can only be made whilst under the influence.

'Oh and have this.' It was a bottle of champagne. 'I didn't see anything in your office, thought you could have it when you finish your project. Plus, now we're even from the beers you gave me earlier.'

Before Joe could process the generous gesture, Harriet had closed her car door to make the short drive home, blowing him a kiss through the darkened window and waving goodbye. It was a swift exit for such an in-depth night, but Joe didn't mind one bit.

By now the darkness had fully descended, and although winter had just passed, the nights still felt bitterly cold in the countryside. Joe made the short commute back to his car, his hands shivering with a mix of the evening wind and the pure adrenaline of what had just happened. Had that actually just happened? He questioned this in his mind, not quite going as far as to pinching himself. Struck with Joy, he savoured the journey out far more than the drive in, able to get lost in his thoughts once more, but this time they weren't thoughts of what might happen – they were memories of what *did* happen. Not only did they connect on a physical level, but Harriet had made herself completely vulnerable in front of Joe already, and above all else he felt so comfortable around her. Fate was on his side now, he thought, so much so that he intuitively knew they didn't have to have the conversation about their relationship status, it was already confirmed: they were now in a relationship. Perhaps there is such a thing as perfect, pondered Joe, as he made the slow approach to park outside of his house. His mum's car was there so at least she was safe, but where had she been, he wondered. The kitchen light was still on, so he went in to go and find out.

'Mum? You still up?' Joe wandered through the downstairs rooms until he found her.

'In here, love.' Amanda was sitting in her tub chair in the living room, her face was for the first-time showing signs of wear and tear, as she looked drained.

'Everything alright? Why didn't you message me back?'

‘Sorry honey, it’s been one of those days. I’ve not long got back and haven’t checked my phone,’

‘Was it work?’

Amanda’s voice was just as fatigued as her face, but for now at least she had to keep it together. ‘Yeah, one of those days. I’ll tell you about it in the morning. I’m shattered, so I’m gonna head up.’

‘Sure mum, you sleep well.’

As she made her way up the creaking staircase, she remembered the plans she had made for tomorrow. ‘Oh, by the way – your nan is coming over for lunch, I’m sorry it’s short notice, but she really wants to come over and see you.’

Joe was always happy to accommodate his nan, she was the giver of joy in the family. ‘No worries, look forward to it. Night, night, mum,’

‘Night, night, baby boy.’

Joe sat up for a bit before remembering to tell Harriet he was home. *Just got back. Had a great night, thank you x.* He stayed up for a little while longer hoping that she might respond, but she must have fallen asleep already, he thought, so he looked forward to her response in the morning and went to bed elated with how both his big day and night went. But before he went to sleep, he went back to the picture that Amarjit had sent him earlier in the evening. The woman in the picture really did strike a remarkable resemblance to his mum, even if she was darker in skin – her eyes were a dead match. Could this be real, or could this be edited on there? But why him? Joe had to think more. This couldn’t be Billy or Arthur as she reached out to him before they fell out, plus neither of them would know their way around photoshopping tools. All he could do was reach out to her and find out what her motive was. So, he sent off another message to her and hoped for her reply too when he woke up.

Chapter 15

As Saturday entered the week so did the sunshine once more. The rain of yesterday and the cold of the evening seemed like a season ago now to Joe, who instinctively checked his phone, as he did first thing every morning in this modern age that he was so fond be a part of. A couple of emails and Oxington social media likes sat on top of what he was looking for – a message from Harriet. *Sorry I fell asleep waiting for your message! I had a great time too, I'm going to be working on the article today, but are you free Sunday? Maybe we could get some ice cream if the weather holds out?? X.* This brought an immediate smile to Joe's drowsy face and gave him the boost he needed to at least sit up in his bed. Below Harriet's message was one from Amarjit, a lengthy one that Joe couldn't fully preview, so he opened it up:

Hello Joe. I am trying to trace back my family ancestry, it was my mother's final wish before she died last year. She did not know her father as he died during the war before she was born, but my searches so far have led me to you. I only have one picture of him, which I will send after this. If you know this man, then please let me know as it means a great deal to me and to my mother.

Joe opened the picture that had also been sent, and what he saw was a man who looked

remarkably similar to Billy after he had recently shaved. The picture was old though so it was hard to make out the features, but this could certainly be somebody who was related to Billy. The man looked to be in his 20s, so Joe got out an old picture he kept in his wallet of his nan and grandad when they got married, and there was absolutely a resemblance. There had to be something to this, Joe thought to himself, now out of bed and wandering about his room. He had to know for sure, so he quickly confirmed his plans with Harriet for Sunday, before replying to Amarjit with more attention.

Hello Amarjit, thank you for the clarity and the picture of your grandad. I am sorry to hear about the loss of your mother and I would like to help you. Why don't you come and visit me in England? I can introduce you to my mother, and also the man that looks like your grandad.

Joe thought of this as an opportunity to bring the first person into the “Oxington Living” programme that he was so keen to get set up, and as much as he was curious about the resemblances of these pictures, in his mind he was still sceptical. This was somebody from Germany after all, how could they be linked to him and his family? He contemplated. Instead, Joe was going to do all he could to get Amarjit – a visible, if very light-skinned Indian woman, to stay in the village and be the poster girl for his vision. Nobody in Oxington was a shade darker than white, so he saw this as the perfect opportunity to bring some much-needed culture and colour that would be needed if anybody outside of the village were going to listen to him.

He soon remembered that his nan was coming over for lunch today, which gave him a couple of hours to go into the office and work on his project. Without a shower or a brush of his teeth, a stark contrast from yesterday's meticulous routine, Joe threw on a T-Shirt and last night's jeans, swept up the champagne that Harriet had given him, then headed out to the factory. On a Saturday morning the factory was the same as it was on a weekday morning –

busy, loud and full of energy – it wasn't until Saturday afternoon and Sunday that the place got a well-deserved recharge. Today's atmosphere matched Joe's mood given the events of the past 24 hours, so he was raring to go as he approached his office. After bolting up the stairs in a giddy skip, he went to enter the code to the door but the force from his fingers on the pad was enough to open it. Thinking back to when he was last here, could he have left the door open? It was unlike him to be so careless, but it was possible. He pushed the door open to reveal a monumental mess, one that he certainly did not create – somebody had been in there.

Walking around the torn-up books and shattered glass from the decorative pictures that had been smashed onto the carpet, it became noticeably clear that this was all intentional, but who could – or would have done this? He refused to believe that it might have been Harriet, even though he had naively given her the code to his office. Plus, security was tight at the factory, which also ruled out Billy and Arthur. So, it had to be an inside job, but who? Whilst Joe racked his brains, he continued round the room looking for clues and assessing the damage. It wasn't the value of what had been vandalised, it was more the mess and inconvenience that bothered Joe, until he saw that the door to his workstation was ajar.

His brain focused on the booming thud that was his heart as it slowly began to sink, he rushed over to see if there was any way that whoever had done this had somehow spared his life's work, but they hadn't. There it was on the floor in what looked like a million tiny pieces to Joe, everything that he had been working towards, was gone. With his hands glued desperately to his head and nowhere to go, he noticed an iPad on the floor. As the sudden realisation happened, the undeniable clip-clopping of Lizzie's heels approached him.

'Sorry, I must have got a bit carried away.'

Full of rage Joe bolted up and over to Lizzie.

'I would think very carefully about your next move, Joe. Carl is in the control room

knows exactly where I am.'

'Why the fuck would you do this? Because I was busy last night? Is that it?!'

'I don't like being messed around.'

'So, you did this?!'

Lizzie began to laugh, each giggling sound fuelling Joe's anger. 'You should know better than most not to cross me. How do you think my husband feels every time he comes home and another one of his priceless watches gets pulled apart or his sports car gets a fresh new dent in it.'

'You're a psycho bitch,'

'Maybe, but soon enough you'll all realise not to mess me around again.'

This time though she had crossed the line, and Joe, unsure of his next move, took a deep breath into his cupped hands. There was no way back from this he thought, so he did all that he could within his power that he thought would hurt Lizzie and quit from Ox Power. 'I'm done with you, with this place, you can go and fuck yourself, because you're the only person thick enough to go near you.'

Lizzie stayed calm, knowing full well that her actions would have consequences, watching on as Joe bustled through the carnage that she created, all because she could.

In the moments after the confrontation, Joe was determined on revenge, but his rattled mind could not decide on how to carry it out, and it wasn't long until the harsh awareness that his prototype was gone. With his plans ruined and nowhere to go but home, Joe decided instead to drive out to the shed, in hope of perhaps seeing his grandad there. At this moment, Joe didn't know what he wanted to gain from going there, or whether he wanted Billy to be there or not, all he knew was that it was somewhere that he needed to be, it was calling out for him. The shed was empty this time, no guzzled bottle or blood sodden tissues, just the wood that somehow still held it all together, and no sign of Billy either. Joe pulled up the

rickety, old rocking chair that his grandad would usually sit in, and stared deep into the eyes of the late morning sun until tears began to fall and pain began to pierce him. He wept and screamed until all of the anguish was gone, scaring off any birds or wanderers that might have by chance stumbled in his direction. This was Joe's lonely place now, so he sat there until he felt un-numb, and took the longest way home he could, unaware of what was about to greet him there.

His nan couldn't drive; somehow, she had managed to avoid it all her life, so when he saw the truck on the driveway, he knew it could only mean one thing. Emotionally drained, Joe went in not wanting a fight, in fact he just wanted to avoid all contact with everybody and go back to bed. But unless they were all in the bathroom, there was little that Joe could do to avoid anybody, and so as soon as he walked in, there they all were, his mum, nan and of course, Billy. Instantly there was a mood that Joe picked up on, a sense of dread that filled the air.

'Hello, luvvie, come and sit down,' said Mary, sombre and weak.

'What's going on?' Joe asked, as he took his place at the table.

'Your nan's got something that she wants to tell us,' replied Amanda, with the same tone that Mary had used. Joe's senses were right, something bad was in the air, and it wasn't just his unbrushed teeth, something was wrong.

'I know that not everybody here has been getting on lately,' Mary's words were paused by a meeting of the eyes between Joe and Billy, 'But I wanted you all here today. You're the ones that I love the most so whatever is going on needs to stop, because I need you all.'

'Grandma, what's wrong?' Asked a concerned Joe.

'Yeah Mare' you're worrying me now,' added Billy, equally as worried now.

Looking over to Amanda for some extra courage, Mary told them the news that she received yesterday at the Red Lights, 'It's my liver. It's been causing me a bit of pain for

some time, and I had some tests done.'

'Well, what did they say?'

Billy was speaking for everybody at this point, with the whole family anxiously awaiting Mary's next words.

'I've got liver failure.'

Joe knew exactly what this meant, but Billy kept on probing.

'What does that mean? It's not that bad, is it?' The whole room was silent, hoping they wouldn't have to tell Billy the inevitable, but still he kept going, standing now for effect. 'Somebody bloody answer me! What does it mean?!'

'It means if she doesn't get a new liver, she'll die, grandad!' Shouted a despaired Joe.

Billy slowly sat down, looked at his beloved Mary and grabbed her hand tightly. 'You won't die, will you, Chooch?' His eyes began to well up as she stared back at him.

'It's alright, my love, I've had a wonderful life.'

The Blue family let out a shared cry as they let Mary's words sink in. Amanda was first to approach her with a timely hug, followed by Joe, and then by Billy – this was the closest that he had been to any of them in some time, so he held on for as long as he could, not knowing the next time it would happen.

Joe broke the silence when the limb locking had loosened, asking his fragile nan, 'Will you get a transplant in time?' Mary once more looked at Amanda for reassurance, this time she offered to speak on behalf of her mother.

'Unfortunately, this is something that the Red Lights can't help with my love.'

Confused and upset, Joe tried to find alternative help. 'But what about outside of the village? Surely we can get nan help somewhere?'

'I'm afraid that's not what your nan wants, Joe.'

'But why not? There is help out there, I know it, you don't need to do this. We can

find you another liver.'

Mary had got a second wind of courage to speak, as she felt it only right coming from her, 'I'm sorry Joe, but it's just not the way we do things round here. I know it's hard to take, but it's just how it is. If it can't be done here, then it can't be done at all. Plus, I don't wanna be going round asking people for a liver, knowing my business. You've been fortunate enough to never lose anybody in your life, but it gets easier. And one day you'll understand.'

Perhaps one day he would understand, but for the first time in his life Oxington had let him down.

'Something that we'll all have to get used to is the fact that mum's going to start to look differently soon,' said Amanda.

'What do you mean by that?' asked Billy, still unable to process the news about the love of his life.

'Her skin will turn a yellowy colour, it's called jaundice, a side-effect of the liver disease, dad.'

Billy instinctively went to scratch the beard that was no longer there, instead digging into his skin a little too deep and breaking through the surface.

'How do you know so much, mum?'

Mary gave Amanda the nod to continue.

'I was with your nan yesterday when they told her, that's why I couldn't take your call, because I was where you are today – still fresh in the mind that I'll soon be losing somebody I love so dearly.'

It all got too much for Billy, who rushed from the kitchen out to the back yard where his truck was parked. In two minds, Joe thought about the situation and then went after him.

When he caught up to him, Billy was leant over the bonnet of his car, he had broken down into tears and Joe had never seen this side of him before. No matter what he may have

done lately, Billy was still Joe's grandad, and moments like this were when they had to come together, so Joe approached him with a firm hand on his shoulder, as Billy would have done if it were him. The two men stood strong as they cried in each other's arms, both scared but alone no more now that they had found each other again.

'I'm sorry, son.' Those were the words that Joe needed to hear.

'It's OK, Grandad, we'll be alright.'

As they regained their composure the weather had turned once more, the clouds parted to release a flash downpour, causing them to head back into the house to where Mary and Amanda were.

'That's what I've missed, two peas in a pod, you two,' said Mary, gingerly.

'Yeah, and stubborn as a pair of mules too!,' added Amanda.

There were smiles for a moment until the reality of the news set in once more and, sensing the shift in mood, Billy went over to the cupboard and picked out a bottle of whisky, with four tumbler glasses. Amanda looked unsure at first, wondering whether her dying mother should be drinking alcohol, but Mary allowed it, knowing that soon she wouldn't be able to drink at all.

As the afternoon grew deeper into the night, the conversations turned to that of nostalgia, Mary talking of her first memories of playing in the hay with her and Joe's siblings, all of whom had passed by now. Whilst the women digressed on memories, Joe and Billy ended up in the living room, almost drunk.

'I need to tell you something, grandad,'

'What is it, son?'

Joe felt like this was the right time to tell Billy about his prototype being ruined, hoping for some advice or revenge ideas, or both. 'You know what I've been working on, the stuff with the manure?'

‘Yeah, I remember.’

‘Well, it’s broken, smashed actually.’

Blurry-eyed and foggy of mind, Billy had assumed that Joe had broken it, knowing his temper of late. ‘Why’d you do that for?’ He asked.

‘It wasn’t me; it was Lizzie.’

‘Lizzie? You mean Charles’ Lizzie?’

Charles was Lizzie’s grandad and one of Bill’s oldest friends, even though Billy was slightly older than him, but he left the village some time ago. ‘But why would she break it?’ Questioned Billy.

Joe told Billy everything that had happened between him and Lizzie, something he wouldn’t have gone into detail about if he wasn’t intoxicated.

‘Right, you leave that with me son, don’t you worry,’

‘It doesn’t matter grandad, it’s done, I quit earlier. I can’t get that work back. I’ll just have to start it all over again, and I can’t do it without the facilities at the factory. But what’s the point?’

Billy didn’t offer Joe an answer, pity wasn’t something that he entertained in others, instead he offered him another drink of whisky, enough to tip Joe over the edge and into the abyss.

When Joe woke up, he had no idea what time or day it was, or how he even got up to his bed. There was a throbbing in his head that can’t be matched by any other type of alcohol other than whisky, especially the cheap stuff that he was drinking. Humorous thoughts went through his head as he hadn’t quite reached the flashback stage, so instead he searched for his phone, which wasn’t on his side table as it usually was. He reached down to feel that he was still fully clothed, and both his phone was still in his jeans’ pockets. There was a string of messages from Harriet – oh no, he thought, what did I say? But to his surprise it wasn’t what

he said, but what he didn't say that set Harriet off. She had tried to talk to him throughout the evening, even going as far as to calling him at one point, and by the time she gave up she had thought that he was ghosting her. Joe's fingers were trembly from the alcohol intake, making typing a far grander task than it was, and with his brain not quite ready to form a comprehensible and appropriate response, he held off a bit longer.

As the flashbacks started to flood in, all Joe could think about was the news that brought them all together last night, and more pressingly how much longer his nan had left to live. The thought alone was sobering, but the enhanced state of emotions that binge drinking brought had ushered a new wave of tears to Joe's eyes. After salvaging some composure and necking the glass of water that he, or possibly somebody else had left out, he was ready to regain some perspective too, so he messaged Harriet back. *Hey, I'm so sorry, yesterday wasn't a great day. Got some family stuff that came up and I'm going to need to deal with it today too. Can we reschedule for tomorrow? Tell you all about it then x.*

Joe got out of bed, out of yesterday's clothes. And gave himself a long overdue shower, hoping it might help his tender body, which had now taken some of the burden away from his head. When he got out, Harriet had already replied. *I feel so bad I had no idea, but I hope that everything is OK. We can do tomorrow, how about breakfast? I don't have to be at work until a bit later, so we can read the article together, if you'd like? X.*

In the haze that was yesterday he completely forgot about the article – plus it wasn't like he had a job to go to anymore, he remembered. *That sounds great - your turn to come to me. X.*

They arranged to meet at the café in Oxington where they first met, which although just a couple of days ago, felt like a lifetime had passed in Joe's world. Of course, Harriet would have to bring the paper with her as 'Jim's' only sold the *Gazette*. So, with tomorrow sorted, Joe moved back to the present and made his way downstairs to the smell of frying bacon.

To his surprise, everybody was still there, all sat at the table as though they were waiting for him to get up.

‘Finally,’ said Billy, ‘sore head, have we?’ he added, but Joe just smirked, as he did. The first thing he did was give his nan a kiss on the forehead and a gentle hug.

‘How are you today?’ he asked.

‘I’m fine, mate, don’t you worry about me. I’d rather know how you’re feeling?’

A few giggles went around the room as Joe knew that he must have been an absolute state, and the only memories he had were of dancing and falling over in the garden. The smell of cigarettes that lingered on his fingers probably meant that he had one or two that his dad must have left behind.

‘A little bit rough, yeah, but I’ll survive’, he said before regretting that particular choice of words. But his mum then brought across the timeliest of bacon sandwiches to his attention. The bread was thick and white, and lashings of salted butter smothered the bread from corner to corner. The bacon was smoked, thick and streaky, greasy, and just a little bit crispy. The kind that can only be hand carved from a well fed and well looked after pig at a loving farm. Brown sauce covered it all in a sweet and tangy blanket to make Joe visibly drool just the smallest of amounts onto the plate in front of him. Billy and Mary stayed for breakfast, but Mary needed her bed, and of her husband to look after her once more. Amanda, although still coming to terms with the news, had to catch-up from the work that she missed when she was with Mary on Friday, so she soon headed out to the school, leaving Joe all alone. With the hangover gaining momentum Joe decided to use the free time to just ride it out, with a rare day of nothing and nobody until he met with Harriet tomorrow.

Chapter 16

Feeling spritely and well rested, Joe got up to the sound of his alarm that he forgot to turn off, but with a sense of much needed optimism. And although his work had been ruined, he still had a lot to look forward to with the article release today. He was also hoping for more of the same from when he last saw Harriet too, wanting to devour her ever-since, so he put his family and work issues to the side for now and focused on his breakfast date. He got there on time, having little in the way of getting ready to do with the pressure now off, he thought, so he ordered the same two drinks that he got there on Friday, without the food this time. His appetite was still not regular after the recent heavy drinking, so he thought to wait until after to get food, as something greasier was still what he craved, far greasier than what the café had on offer. Harriet was assumingly late, something which Joe knew that he had to get used to, so, whilst he waited, he looked to see if Amarjit had even read his message about coming to visit, but she still hadn't. Then after a few more minutes of scrolling, Harriet appeared, newspaper in hand, so Joe was doubly keen to see her.

She looked far more casual today, wearing a similar outfit to the one she wore when they met here last week, Joe presumed this to just be her work clothes. Eager to get his hands on her, Joe got up as she approached, and leaned straight in for a kiss, and although slightly awkward, as second-time kisses tend to be, Joe got enough of her soft lips to call it a success.

‘How are things? I hope everything is OK with your family?’ Harriet jumped straight into the delicate matter, using enough compassion to disguise the journalistic technique of prying out information.

‘Yeah, not great. I won’t lie.’ Today it was Harriet’s turn to show some strength as her hand glided over the top of Joe’s before he continued.

‘So, we found out a few days ago that my nan has liver failure,’ Harriet’s grip tightened whilst Joe took a brief pause to compose himself, ‘And it looks like there’s nothing that can be done,’ he added, with apparent defeat in the decision his nan had made.

‘Oh, my God, I’m so sorry, Joe. That’s awful news. Are you close to her?’

‘Really close, she’s the glue that keeps our family together.’

Joe’s expression had turned to one of sorrow, as he tried to fight the thoughts of his nan’s impending demise from taking priority in his mind. He looked up and saw the distraction he so desperately needed at this time – the newspaper containing the article that Harriet had written.

‘Can we take a look?’ Asked Joe, perhaps too politely.

‘Yes, of course!’ Harriet’s hand left Joe’s to pick up the paper and find the page it was on, ‘I think he said it was page 12,’ said Harriet, talking about her editor. ‘Now I don’t know what the final version looks like after editing, I haven’t had a chance to properly read yet. Here you go.’

Harriet handed the folded paper to Joe so that he could see for himself what she had written about him, and more importantly about Oxington. Although there wasn’t a picture to go with it, perhaps they had to pay more to print them, Joe thought, he still felt a sense of pride at seeing the headline ‘The Oxington Way’, so much so that an overdue smile appeared across his face. As he read through the article, Harriet started her cappuccino, staring out into the sunny village with the new man her life; she was starting to feel at home already. Joe’s

smile wasn't long-lasting though, reading through the full-page spread that seemed to focus more on the dream that Joe was offering, rather than promote the intuitive foundations and the happy residents like he had hoped. He carried on in hope that it would come, but instead he found a quote that he didn't remember giving during the day.

‘What’s this?’ he asked, puzzled.

‘Tell me,’ replied Harriet.

‘It says that I said: “I want to promote “Oxington Living”, I just need to get the message out there and find people who want to be a part of it”. But I don’t remember saying that when we were walking around. I’m sure that’s from when we were at the bar that night?’

Harriet looked afraid, unsure of how to tell Joe that she had been recording him whilst they were on a date.

‘I wasn’t sure how things would go when we went out, and I knew that there was more that you wanted to say. So, I just carried on the interview ... but I didn’t mean for it to make the final press. The audio file must have been saved onto a shared drive and my editor added it in. That wasn’t my intention, Joe, I’m so sorry.’

Perhaps the events of the last few days had pushed Joe further emotionally than he thought, or perhaps it was his short temper at work, but he acted on impulse and lost it with Harriet. ‘How could you do that to me?! I thought we had a connection, something real.’

‘We do, we really do. But I didn’t know that we’d end the night how we did, and I didn’t know that I would feel like this about you so soon, otherwise I wouldn’t have carried on recording.’

‘It doesn’t matter, does it. Nothing does. How can I trust you now?!’

At this point, the other customers were staring, no doubt ready to use this bit of juicy gossip at the next village meeting. But it wasn’t enough to stop him.

‘I don’t think I can see you anymore,’

‘But wait, I’m sorry, Joe. Please can we just calm down and talk about this?’

It was too late, though, Joe shook his head, grabbed his phone, and left Harriet then and there. He usually took everything in his stride, being reactive wasn’t his usual style, but these were unusual times for Joe. Always the one to help, but now that he was in need, he had nobody to turn to.

Everybody else was rightly with his nan, helping her for as long as she had left, so how could they deal with him too, he thought. It’s times like this that he wished he had a friend but work always took priority for him over a social life, having not established any meaningful relationships in school. The thought of helping anybody right now felt so cumbersome to him, so with his prototype ruined, his nan dying and his relationship over before it had even begun, Joe made himself a recluse until he could find a way out of the mess he saw as his life. It was the only way he knew how to cope, by pretending that it wasn’t happening and going back to his childhood state, where he remembered being happy.

Chapter 17

Four days had passed since Joe had made contact with anyone other than his mum, who knew to give him space when he needed it. She had no idea about his work or any other issues, so she just put it down to the news about his nan. They were going round to see her for dinner shortly and Joe, sporting a rusty coloured bit of stubble, wasn't looking forward to it, especially as it was an early dinner so that Mary was still awake to eat it. He was keen to see his nan whilst he still could, but everything else that went with it did not appeal to his depressed state of mind, and in that state of mind he left his phone behind. Somewhat cruelly, just before they walked in, Amanda said to Joe, 'Don't act shocked.' He didn't know what she meant but it didn't take long for him to realise, as his nan, fully jaundiced, was sitting there covered by a blanket on the rocking chair that Billy had brought back from the shed. There was no denying now just how ill Mary was, and he knew that she didn't have long left. But in that moment of heartache and sorrow, Joe had an idea, one that might mean he never had to see a sight like this again.

Much of the late afternoon was spent talking once more about memories and fond times, this time without the whisky, and once more Joe found himself in a room with his grandad.

'Got some good news for you, son,' said Billy, in his usual mixed-up accent,

‘What’s that, then?’ replied Joe, diffidently.

‘Well, you see, I’ve had a chat with my mate Charles.’

Joe forlornly interjected, ‘Ah, I don’t know why, grandad, nothing will happen,’

‘Well, that’s where you’re wrong.’

Now making eye contact with Billy, Joe seemed to be interested in what he had to say next.

‘What you forget is that me and Charles go way back, way before Lizzie was born, before her parents were born, and I helped him out a lot back then. He was troubled, nobody wanted anything to do with him round here, partly why he left, but I always had time for him. And he remembers that.’

‘So, what did he say about what she did then?’

‘Said she’s always been like that, spoilt. Gets it from him most likely, but his dad was a lot tougher on him than hers was. Anyway, he also said that she wasn’t gonna be working there no more. And you can have your old job back if you want it?’

Joe’s impulse was to say no, leave the past in the past, but then he remembered the idea he had earlier, and maybe, just maybe, he could get it done at the factory. But this time he’d need much more access to the lab. Taking one more moment to remember how his nan was, he reached out his hand to Billy and said, ‘Thank you, Grandad, I mean it. I’ll need your help though.’

Billy reached out to shake Joe’s hand but pulled him in for a hug, whispering, ‘Of course, son, anything for you.’

They didn’t stay much longer after that, and Joe went back up to his room when he got back home, ready to go straight back to sleep in the hope that tomorrow would come soon, now that he had a renewed sense of purpose. He tepidly rushed to check his forgotten phone, fully expecting nothing, not least from Harriet who he hadn’t heard from since ending things

with her. It wasn't late either, almost a normal dinner time now. As he pressed the home button he was met with a column of different notifications; missed calls, emails and social media messages. He didn't recognise the number that had called him three times, but instantly listened to the accompanying voicemail.

'Hi, Joe, this is Marcus Davies calling from Teleworld Newspaper. I was hoping to have a chat with you about a recent story that your local paper ran on you, I got your info from the journalist who did the story. Call me back anytime, don't worry about when. Thanks.'

Joe was confused, and slightly sceptical, but the email he got from Harriet explaining that she hoped this would help make it up to him, certainly made him believe that this was real. He called the number back right away and Marcus picked up almost instantly, as though he was sat waiting for the call. 'Hi Joe, how are you?'

'Hi Marcus, I'm fine, thanks. Just returning your call,'

'Yes, indeed. Well, thanks for getting back to me. I just wanted to see if you'd be interested in doing an interview with me for *Teleworld*? Sort of on the back of what you did with the, erm, *Echo*, I think it was. Fascinating story.'

Taken aback, Joe wasn't sure what to say, but he thought about what he was trying to achieve and knew that this is what he wanted from the very start, so he agreed to do an interview with Marcus then and there, as there was a chance this could get printed for tomorrow's press. Underprepared and not of sound mind, and with no chance to think about what he was saying, this was still the opportunity that he wanted, and he made sure that he set the record straight from the last article.

'Thank you, Joe, I really appreciate that at such short notice. This is such an interesting story that I need get it out there as soon as possible. I think it's incredible what you've got going on down there in that little village. Keep an eye out tomorrow, we might still make the

print yet if I'm quick enough.'

'I will do, thank you Marcus. I appreciate the opportunity.

'No problem, take care. B-bye.'

Joe was stunned, not only had he just spoken to a national newspaper about the village for the past hour, but he might even get to see the story tomorrow. He had no time to worry or to think about what he did – or didn't – say during the interview, nor could he do anything about the type of story that it was, it was too late for that now, and a risk he had to take. Remembering what he was doing before the call, he went back to reply to Harriet, but he noticed an unread message from Amarjit, who told him that she was hoping to come to England in the summer and would love to meet up then.

Surely this news was all too good to be true, he had just gone through the worst patch of his life, his absolute lowest point to date, and now suddenly he could see the hope that he so desperately needed. Replying to Amarjit but forgetting to respond to Harriet, Joe fell asleep, but the excitement bubbles that formed in his brain whilst he dreamt had now popped, waking him up at the crack of dawn. There was only one thing to do – drive into Helton and buy the first copy of the *Teleworld* and see if wasn't all just a dream. And indeed, it wasn't, as Joe flicked through the pages, each turn a more painstakingly anxious one than the last, until he got to page 12, once again. And there it was, across two pages of the *Teleworld* newspaper on Wednesday 26th March 2013, using the picture that Harriet had taken of him in front of the village sign, with the headline: '*Model Village*'.

Part 2

Chapter 18

It had been eight months since the *Teleworld* article about Joe and his ‘Model Village’ of Oxington, and in the harsh wintery snow, he was on his way to meet the prime minister – not for the first time since the article was released. Life had changed dramatically for Joe, with the notoriety he had received taking a back seat to his busy schedule, which had been full of both new and familiar faces, as well as a few deaths to deal with. And though so much was different, Joe was adamant that his goal and vision was still the same, which is why he was obsessing over the brief with his personal assistant so much this morning.

‘Is it safe? I can hear it moving, it shouldn’t be moving.’

Joe had heightened paranoia this morning, his hypersensitivity was in hyperdrive because of what was in the box that his PA was holding. He added, ‘Maybe I should hold it?’

‘It’s fine, don’t worry. I’m perfectly capable of holding a box,’

‘But it’s not just box, is it?’

His PA did all that she could to reassure him that everything was going to be fine, but it was little use when Joe was in this state, as she was finding out. This was a far different Joe to the one that she knew from growing up the village.

In the weeks that followed the release of the article, Joe was littered with requests for interviews, meet-and-greets and various offers that came with notoriety. Most of it was

manageable at first, opportunities that he saw as achievable on his own, but when he received a letter that requested his presence to meet with Prime Minister Gillian Parkinson, he knew that he had to start prioritising. With secretarial and admin jobs seen as high value in the village, Joe didn't have a shortage of applicants, but he only had one person in mind for this role – Lourell Knapper, the receptionist from his mum's school, and somebody with a vested interest in what Joe was trying to achieve. Convincing her wasn't the easiest of tasks, as this was a woman who was closer to retiring than she was to her forties, but with enough persistence and his mum's blessing, he got his woman.

As they made the short, but unnecessarily lengthy trip in the private hire car that Lourell had arranged for them that morning, she ran through the key points that he made sure to capture following his disastrous first meeting with the prime minister, which he remembered to be a harsh lesson in leadership for Joe: Soon after he had appointed Lourell as his PA, he gave her the task of setting up the first meeting with Gillian Parkinson, and after several weeks of back-and-forth about a suitable date and time, Joe had made his first ever trip to London several months before.

Not taking Lourell with him on the trip was his first mistake back then, having put all the focus on making sure he got to where he needed to go on time, naively neglecting his newly appointed, single-most important person in his new life. Because that's what this had become for Joe – an opportunity for a brand-new life, and one that he hoped would help him to forget what had been going on in his life leading up to then. The first time he ventured into the capital he at least had the wisdom to take the train, going from Helton to Paddington, via Bristley, completely out of his comfort zone and wholly underprepared.

The prime minister was keen to meet with Joe to discuss his prototype that was talked about in the *Teleworld* article, but rather than tell the reporter what had happened to it, he carried on talking about the original idea he had in mind. He provided detail about the

research and trials that he had been carrying out between the lab at Ox Power and on the farm with his granddad, talking about how close he believed he was to a breakthrough, when in reality he had nothing at all to show for the work he had done. So, the time on the train allowed Joe to concentrate solely on the task at hand – which was to present his new idea to the prime minister. He hadn't had much time at all to develop the concept since he got the brainwave after seeing his dying grandmother, but he believed that if he could present it in such a way that showed the added benefits to what he was trying to do, then the prime minister would be just as keen to see what he could do with this one.

He made the near-three-hour journey into the unknown, lost in the digital dossier about his new design on his laptop – but something that he should have been more attentive to, was the people that he was sharing the journey with. This was in fact the first time in his life that Joe had caught the train, with there being little incentive to ever leave Oxington and there being no station in the village, so his travel etiquette and savviness were about as sharp as the leather chair that he foolishly gave up when somebody was already sat in his first-class seat. So instead, he made his way to the middle of the train, giving more people the chance to walk past him, and eventually to recognise him.

Joe was unaware of just how famous he was becoming, so when the wrong person had figured out who he was, they took the opportunity to dispossess him of his bag that he put his laptop in as soon as they saw him walk out of the turnstiles on arrival. The theft was quick, precise, and over before he knew it, but the panic had kicked in before his instincts could, so he had no time to defend himself before realising what had happened. What struck Joe the most was how normal that had seemed to everybody else in the station, as if daylight robbery was the same as a busker in the street. Nobody stopped to help, to see if he was hurt, nothing; he was entirely on his own and he didn't have any preparation or presentation for this potentially once in a lifetime meeting. Navigating this urban fortress for the first time

would have been enough to throw Joe off his stride, but the shock of being robbed and now going into Downing Street emptyhanded, made him feel powerless, something that he hadn't felt in some time.

After taking some time to compose himself and his thoughts, and eventually with his bearings regained, he navigated his way out of the busy station, opting to take a taxi and keep himself away from as many people as possible. The meeting was set for two o'clock that afternoon, but he arrived at the adjacent street to the prime minister's office at one, so he had found himself with time to kill and time to let all the possible outcomes play out in his head. One thing that wasn't taken from him during the flash theft was his wallet and everything in his pockets, so fortunately he still had his ID and his letter confirming his appointment. Whilst cautiously braving the adjoining streets and contemplating whether he would even attend the biggest meeting of his life, Joe finally stopped to take in everything in his surroundings in the big city.

Not to his surprise, it was entirely franchised – exactly how he had seen it in films and on television. In his mind, Joe was hoping that one day this place would be a bit more like Oxington, then suddenly, realising how far away from home he was, he got a hollow feeling in his empty stomach. The only thing he could stomach was coffee, though the nearest shop he could see seemed to have more people queueing in it than in the whole of Oxington. Fortunately, he came across a pop-up coffee stand, something that he thought would be great in the village. When he eventually got to taking a sip of his caramel latte, paid for from the stash of old money that he kept for such occasions outside of the village, he could tell right away that he was given the wrong order, tasting the sweet dust that lay only on top of a cappuccino, making him remember the last time he saw Harriet.

Since the article came out, Joe still hadn't talked to her, but it wasn't through a lack of her trying. On several occasions she had tried emailing to congratulate him on the success of

the national article, opting to keep things professional between them rather than texting or calling, since he told her that he didn't want to see her again. She had hoped that her efforts to get his story out in the first place would help him to see that what she did led to a good thing happening. But her emails had got lost in the flurry of new contacts and offers, and Lourell had disregarded anything that wasn't deemed 'priority 1' as Joe put it, giving her instructions to focus only on his new project.

After the security guards – all dressed in intimidating black, including their sunglasses and handily holstered handguns – had searched, and checked Joe's ID several times, Joe was escorted into Number Ten, where he was further searched, and then taken straight into Gillian's office. Everything was run with military precision, down to the immaculately low level of dust on the centuries-old cabinets, which must have been polished on the hour, every hour, to stay so pristine, thought Joe. The smell was that of immortal class, a timeless pine that could never dwindle, so that the history of the building could leave an imprint on your senses right away.

Gillian was sitting down, her shoulder-length, greying hair matching the power suit combination she had opted for that day. Her red glasses were sharp and commanded attention to her eyes immediately, and they certainly intimidated Joe. In front of her sat an impressive bundle of documents that Joe wondered if they were all about him. There was no time for theories, though, as they did the formal introductions before Gillan noticed that Joe had come empty handed, calling him out immediately on being so underprepared.

Joe went back to his powerless state of earlier that morning, listening to the prime minister's belittling of him go on and on. This was a woman who demanded certain standards and Joe had clearly fallen short of them. His explanation of the robbery had fallen on deaf ears, and when he told her that his prototype had been destroyed, she cut the meeting short – not even five minutes into it. And though he did somehow manage to convince the most

powerful person in the country that he was working on something far greater now, telling her how she could be the person who helped bring this change into prominence, she challenged him to have something to physical to show her by the next time they met.

She had also left him with a worrying warning about the village, and some information that she had received about how it came to formation. She told Joe that she would be keeping a keen eye on him and his village, leaving him with the fear for its future as he left her office. Although in his moment of desperation he had been given a lifeline, it was also met with a threat – one that could derail everything for him and end Oxington's existence.

Chapter 19

The village had seen an influx of new visitors to its tiny streets in recent months, which was met kindlier by some than others. There were still those that didn't want for the village to change, nor were they keen to see Joe getting the attention he had recently gained. Other than those who had already shown a dislike for Joe's ideas for Oxington, a growing group had formed comprising mainly of elders who did not appreciate all the 'emmetts', as they called them, that had shown up in their once forgotten home.

What this breakout group disliked the most, though, was how Joe had hardly been back to the village to see what it had become. Each day there were unfamiliar faces, increasingly they came, making everyday life an uncertainty for those who had their routine. Instead of walking in the road and talking to those that passed you by, the locals were now made to walk on the grass to avoid the regular passing of cars, making conversations near impossible without falling into a brook or a bramble bush.

On a typical day you could go into any shop and have a natter with the owner, take your time whilst you made your way to where you needed to go, but lately you had to queue just to be seen by the shopkeepers, let alone talk to them. The pace of the village had needed to change too, and there were those struggling to come to grips with it. Most shops had even taken to accepting cash payments now so that outsiders could buy something, accepting exact

change for a while until they had built up enough of a float. But there were some who used the old cashless operation in the village as a way of ridding their shops of the Emmets. Joe was regularly reassuring those that were unhappy with the changes that they were only temporary, insisting that it would soon die down, but for some of the villagers they had seen enough.

Whenever Joe had to travel for an interview, a meeting, or anywhere that took him away from the village, he asked Billy if he could help to calm those who were causing unrest by taking his place at the village meetings, which he had now put in place weekly, both as a way to keep the locals appeased and to keep him socialising, something which Mary used to do for the both of them. What Joe was particularly keen to find out was if any unusual or suspicious looking people had shown up, or asked too many questions, but many weren't keen to talk to Billy because of his association with Joe. Still, there were those like Arthur, who followed Billy no matter the direction he was heading, singing Joe's praises now that he and Billy had patched things up. But for every Arthur there seemed to be two or three that swore blindly about how Joe needed to be stopped, and as the numbers kept growing, Joe's influence was dwindling.

Surprisingly, it was Yvette Cooper – the woman who had been more than happy for Joe to take charge of these meetings – who was the most vocal. Her frustrations reached a boiling point when some emmets were wondering around her front garden, uninvited, taking pictures and even taking some of her prized dahlias. Being one of the oldest in the village, she had a natural respect built up, and when people saw how upset she had become, they soon backed her corner. Billy did his best over the months that passed whilst Joe was away, trying to alleviate the tensions of his fellow Oxingtonians, but it was clear that enough was enough for more than enough of them now, and it was also clear that Joe needed to act. This was a chaotic point in Billy's life too, having to deal with the death of his wife, the unrest that his

grandson had seemingly caused, as well as meeting a long-lost relative of his. But his usual strength and strong presence seemed to disappear when Mary passed away.

Shortly after Joe went to meet the prime minister, Mary died in her sleep, and although it was expected to happen, her death still hit the Blue family hard. Her yellowed skin was a sore sight to see, making death seem like it was surrounding her the deeper the colour grew, until her liver could no longer function. By this point, Amanada was staying with her parents permanently, making sure to be by her mother's side as much as she could. And it was she who woke to find Mary cold and motionless, sitting in her rocking chair, her wispy, white hair the only thing moving by way of the breeze let in by the open windows during the sizzling summer nights.

Unsurprisingly, Billy went into his shell in the days and weeks that followed Mary's death; his only comfort was having his daughter still at the house, and he didn't want her to leave. For him it was like old times having her back around the house, and although Mary's illness was a constant dark cloud above them during this time, they both found some comfort in each other's prolonged company for the first time in a long time. Amanda took over the role of the family mother, naturally inheriting it from Mary and making sure both Billy and Joe had a shoulder to cry or lean on, if they needed it. She kept them both fed, did the washing, and made sure that both of them kept up with their own workloads. Hers however had taken a backseat to the extra mothering she felt obliged to do now, so she decided to leave her role as headteacher at Oxington School and focus on her family full-time.

Following his nan's death, Joe developed an obsession with the colour of her skin and how she looked when she died. In his mind, it wasn't right that she looked so different, so unlike how she usually looked, and he felt wronged that she had to die looking that way. He took on the role of funeral director, something that was designated to a family member

following every death in the village, and his focus became making sure his nan looked the way he remembered her when they laid her to rest.

It was a time of heavy lows for Joe, having just come off the back of a humbling meeting with the prime minister, and now the death of his dear nan, but he wanted to make sure that she would get the most dignified sendoff possible. And with the help of his community – even those that didn't take too kindly to him – he was able to arrange Mary's funeral service to what he believed would be up to her standards.

Funerals in the village were seen as special occasions, and they were held on Saturday evenings so that anybody who wanted to, could attend. When news of a death got out, everybody was quick to volunteer their services; whether it was to help make the coffin, dig the grave, carve the tombstone, or provide refreshments on the day, it was a time when the village and its people really shone, and often it became something that people would look forward to. There were no funeral parlours in Oxington, it was seen as a morbid service to enter, as if welcoming death, so the togetherness of the locals was key whenever the grim reaper did knock at the door. But the funeral services were still somewhat traditional, with eulogies being read and songs being played whilst everybody gathered at the Church of You and Me to remember any that had passed on, and Mary was no different.

So, despite Joe's recent absence and the influx of travellers, tourists and emmets that he had caused, the village came together on an uncomfortably humid Saturday evening, to pay their respects before the burning of the body later in the night. Each burning spot was marked with a planted tree and plaque, so that their spirits could live on through another vessel that continuously grew life and could give back to the village.

During the service, Joe and Billy had managed to hold it together, using the presence of the locals to help steer their tears away, fighting through Mary's favourite poems and songs. Instead, it was Amanda who broke down, finally able to let her grief out when she saw

her mother for the final time. This time though she looked how she would have wanted to be remembered, thanks to June and Susan's skilled hands – both at blending and tone for the makeup and doing her hair just how she liked it. They were able to put aside their differences with Joe for today, for Mary, and because of their willingness to put the community first, they helped Amanda to see her mother as she knew her, once more.

Everybody gathered at The Ox and 'Ounds for the wake following the short service, and it gave everyone the opportunity to tell tales of what they remembered about Mary. There was the time that she volunteered Billy to be the Santa on a sleigh one year and forgot to tell him, leaving some the kids in the village – including Joe – in tears. And when she and her brother Albert stole the scarecrow from the Harvest Festival, or when she sheltered and housed the Salisbury family and their pets after their house became unliveable following the great flood of 2007.

As spirits had raised due to the spirits consumed, and with everything ready for the body burning, Amanda, Billy and Joe were preparing themselves for the final goodbye to Mary. As they got up to leave for the short walk back to the farm where the burning would take place, an unfamiliar, yet all too familiar woman walked into the pub. It was Amarjit, the woman who Joe had arranged to visit the village. On the day that the Blue family were saying goodbye to one member of the family, unknown to them they were about to welcome somebody new into it.

Chapter 20

The arrival of Amarjit was something that Joe had indeed planned for, but in the whirlwind of events from the past week, he had completely let this slip his mind. He had arranged for her to stay with him as there was space now that his mum had seemingly vacated their house, so following a string of messages and video calls, they agreed on the date that Amarjit would arrive.

She had been in Britain for a few weeks already as part of her summer plans, first visiting Scotland, then the Lake District and Wales, working her way down from the North of Britain, with the next geographical stop being the Cotswolds. And where better to see the lush, wandering hills and countryside than Oxington. Amarjit was a keen explorer, and growing up in Germany she had a vast richness of mountains and trails all around her, so coming to Britain was always in her plans one day, she just didn't expect it to be also in search of long, lost relatives.

The loss of her mother was close to one year ago, so she found it fitting that she might finally be able to trace back her ancestry. Little was known about her grandfather, other than the fact that he was a British soldier fighting in the Second World War, based in Italy when he died. All that was left of him was a small photograph, which by now had severely

weathered. It was clear enough to make out the face still, but without colour it made it difficult to identify the man.

Amarjit's mother, Jatinder, went her whole life not knowing who her father was, and growing up in post-war Germany was hard enough, but with an Indian mother, it made things tougher for a while. Jatinder's mother eventually ended up in Germany when she fled the man who raped her in Mumbai as a teenager, wanting to get as far away from her culture as possible when her family did nothing to help her. Her escape had led her to Europe, arriving first in Italy. She struggled for years to find a home that would take her there, stealing and begging to stay fed and warm, all whilst trying to learn the native language.

When she reached her twenties, she resorted to prostitution for money and a place to stay, which is where she met Lieutenant Carl Bucks. What started off as a transaction, soon turned into a spark of romance, and eventually led to exclusivity. She found comfort in knowing that he too had fled from a country when he was younger. She was struck by his piercing eyes, both different in colour, and his blonde hair made him seem so different from the local lads too, a look that she had grown to despise since being there.

When Carl was ordered to be stationed in Italy, it was at the height of the Nazi invasion as part of *Operation Achse*, so he knew it was a punishment for his heritage, fearing it would only be a matter of time before he was eventually killed out there. Loneliness was Carl's first downfall, leading him into temptation, and to his surprise he came across an escort who struck a resemblance to his partner, Ellamma. The time away from her had led him to decide that if he was going to be unfaithful to her, then it should at least be with somebody who looked like his partner back home. Feeling as though his days were numbered, he spent as much time as he could with his mistress, hoping to feel the love he wasn't able to feel from his partner at home.

Carl had been spotted at the brothel where Jatinder's mother was working, and on a dark and dusty evening, he was followed into the building by Nazi soldiers, who broke into the room and shot Carl dead on the spot. Jatinder was spared, but not before being raped again, by this point she was already pregnant with Jatinder though. After Carl's killing, she once again fled, struggling as she travelled pregnant by boat and by foot until she arrived in a peaceful town in Germany, just outside of Mainz, but unknown to her she was arriving at the start of the Great Depression, and opportunities were rare, particularly for somebody of non-German descent. But despite the hardship and her past experiences with Germans, she chose to see the place for what it was trying to become, and this time she chose not to run. She was able to make a life for herself, and her daughter. In amongst the tragedy, she was able to find a picture of Carl in his possessions, the only lasting memory of her fallen lover.

She had told Jatinder that her father was killed in combat, sparing her the details of her devastating past, and Jatinder had told this story to Amarjit, asking her to find out who he was. Several ancestry searches had led her to Burning Oak, where the last records of Carl Bucks were held, along with his partner who had also died, and their son, William. The only records that Amarjit was able to find about William were to a foster family in a place called Bishops Cote, but it didn't seem to exist after the war, so she continued her search online to anywhere that she could find near to the area, which led her onto Joe.

Joe's promotion of "Oxington Living" had come at the right time, so when she stumbled upon Joe's profile, she felt as though she might have found what her mother had wished her to find for her. One man in particular bore a striking resemblance to her grandfather – Billy Blue, so when Joe told her that was his name, she could sense that this was who she thought it was. So, that night when she walked in on Mary's wake and straight into Billy's eyes, it confirmed to her that he was absolutely the man she was looking for – William Bucks – her long-lost uncle.

Chapter 21

With all the new visitors to the village, it was easy to confuse Amarjit for an unwelcome guest at Mary's wake, and certainly that was how some of the locals had seen her at first.

'Not another one! Get her out, Mike,' shouted Yvette.

'This is a private party, you need to leave now,' added Mike, the barman, and leave she almost did, had it not been for Joe. Once he recognised who had just walked in, he was quick to calm tensions that were building, letting Yvette and anybody else who wanted to know that she was invited, and that she was his guest.

'Who's this then, son?' asked Billy. 'She likes to stare, doesn't she,' he added, as Amarjit's fixation on Billy became obvious.

'Grandad, this is Amarjit Andrich – am I pronouncing that correct?'

'Yes, you are. Hi Joe, hi Billy, hi Amanda.'

'How does she know our names?'

Joe hadn't thought about how to tell his mum and grandad about why Amarjit was visiting, so on the spot he diverted the attention from the whys and the whats, 'She's my friend, from Germany,'

'But you ain't never been to Germany.'

‘We met online, Grandad, she wants to know about the village, she’s nice don’t worry,’

‘Bit old for you don’t you think? Closer to your mother’s age than yours.’

‘It’s not like that. Come on Amarjit, I’ll take your bag, we were just leaving anyway.’

Amarjit was still struck by Billy’s resemblance to the man she knew as her grandfather, if only through an old picture, so much so that she hadn’t taken into account the mood at the pub, nor the attire of everybody there. But the walk back to Joe’s house gave them the opportunity to get acquainted with one another.

‘I’m sorry if I wasn’t supposed to come in there, it’s just that you said to call you when you I was close, and I have been trying to call you, but your phone is off. It took me so long to find this place, even with your directions, it’s like it doesn’t even exist. And the pub was the only thing that was open.’

Amarjit’s voice was new to Joe, new to everybody in the village, and it was deeper than he knew a woman’s voice to be. Her sense of style was bright, even though she was wearing typical hiking clothing, complete with an oversized travelling backpack. A look that was not befitting of the occasion, but Joe wasn’t concerned with that.

‘I’m so sorry, it was my nan’s funeral today. That was her wake.’

‘Oh my gosh, Joe I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you say? I could have come back another day.’

‘To be honest, I had forgotten that you were even coming – there has been so much going on lately. But I’m glad you did; I need the distraction.’

As they shared niceties and Amarjit told Joe some stories of where she had been on her trip so far, Billy and Amanda followed behind them. ‘He ever told you about his friend from Germany?’ asked Billy.

‘It’s the first I’ve heard of it.’

‘Well then, maybe we keep an eye on her. She doesn’t look very German to me though.’

Amanda gave Billy a disapproving roll of the eyes, though not visible to him due to the darkness that had fallen upon the village, ready for the burning of Mary’s body that had been taken to their house. The burnings always took place after dusk, to make sure that those who had died could be seen brightly, making them the focus of the sky they would soon blow into. The ashes could then burn overnight, allowing the dust to settle on their eventual resting place scattered in the ground – the site where the ceremonial tree would be planted.

It was Joe’s responsibility as the mortician to arrange the spot for the burning and the planting of the tree, and he chose an area that was close to Mary’s heart. Her favourite place to be in the house was the kitchen – where she enjoyed so many happy memories of the family all together in, so he picked somewhere that was visible from there, so that when the tree eventually grew, it would be visible every time somebody looked out of the window. It may be him or it might be future generations of Blues that got to see it grow, but whoever it was, would be able to see Mary’s spirit growing for years to come. He was also keen to make sure that he chose the correct tree to plant, something that would be fitting to his grandmother and the village she loved so dearly, even though he still felt aggrieved about her not being able to get treatment there. In the end, he sourced a spruce, something that would live long and tall, just like Mary, but its environmental benefits were also high, so he chose to plant several in the ground where Mary was to be burned, making use of the vast land that the family owned.

Billy and Amanda lagged behind Joe and Amarjit, mostly due to Billy’s ageing bones and joints. A lifetime of hard labour had taken its toll on his near eighty-year-old body, but he refused to let age get in the way of what he wanted to do. His knuckles were reddened, and the bones looked as though they were close to popping through of his thinly sagged, sun-

spotted skin. His knees would crack and pop at every bend and stretch, causing him enough pain to require physiotherapy. But overall, he was still strong and able enough to keep up with his work on the farm, his biggest concern was how much longer his brain would stay capable for.

Since the night when Billy's self-harm cuts and scars were shown to the whole family, Amanda had wanted to bring it up with him, to see how her dad was, but she hadn't had the opportunity until now. So, shyly, she asked him, approaching the conversation like she would one of the school children, careful not to make him feel attacked. 'Dad, I've been meaning to see how things are with you – I was really worried when I saw the cuts on your stomach, and with everything that has happened with mum, I want to know if you're doing alright at the minute?'

Slightly taken aback by the question, Billy stumbled over his words, trying to brush off the situation. 'Erm, yeah, I'm fine. Don't worry about that.'

'But I do. Will you let me know if you ever feel that way again?'

'I'm fine, honestly. It was just a moment of madness.'

They both knew that it wasn't, but Amanda left it at that. Joe and Amarjit were far ahead now, lost to the night sky that covered them, most likely already back at the house. As they walked slowly, over, and back down the small hilly roads that paved the entrance to the farm, Billy reached out his large, calloused hands, and intertwined them with Amanda's. She looked up at him, confused and concerned, before he said, 'I've really enjoyed being with you again, my Ella.' That was what he used to call her when she was younger, and it sent a shiver down her spine when she heard it again, bringing back memories of the man she no longer thought he was.

'Dad, what are you doing? You know that can't happen again,'

'But I've missed you so much, and I know you've missed me too.'

Amanda took her hand out of Joe's grasp, and used her younger, longer legs to get ahead of Billy. Before she could get out of sight he added, 'Perhaps it's time the lad knew the truth.'

This stopped Amanda in her tracks as she slammed the brakes on herself. 'Don't you fucking dare. You said you would never tell him.'

'Well, all this death has made me rethink things. Death can make a man do funny things.'

Amanda rushed back towards Billy, pointing her finger in his face, with a steaming breath full of anger. Having no words to display her dismay she clenched her teeth hard, and Billy grabbed her hand again, moving it to his chest, before planting a heavy kiss on his daughter's lips.

'No, Dad! Please. Not again. I thought you'd changed, after all these years.'

Billy could see the desperate sincerity on his daughter's face, and the tears building in her eyes, so he pulled himself away.

Billy's abuse of Amanda had started when she was a teenager, after she had shown an interest in helping him out on the farm. He was never a hands-on father unless he punished his daughter for being naughty. He often prioritised work over spending time with his her too, so he would only regularly see her during the summer, never allowing the opportunity to form a bond with her. It was a time that Amanda relished at first having never truly spent time with her father, but after a few weeks Billy took an opportunity in the cow sheds to casually touch her and kiss her in ways a father never should, telling her that it was normal. The location was out of sight, so whenever the two of them would be in there he would take the opportunity to take advantage of her, each time furthering his advances, and often telling her that one day it would be just the two of them, and that he wouldn't have to stop, never seeing the fear in his daughter's eyes grow as the summer grew longer.

The touching and advances came to a temporary end when Amanda met Chris whilst they were both still in school, but in the late Eighties when Amanda was twenty-seven, over the course of several long winter nights spent alone together when Mary was visiting her sick sister, and Chris had just started travelling away for work. So, when the right time had come, Billy made his advances once more as his daughter slept, whispering to her that this was the time alone he used to tell her about. Amanda felt powerless and paralysed to her father's abuse that she hoped were just bad memories, but this time he didn't stop.

Now on the day of his wife's funeral, having made another rotten advance, and seeing his daughter exhausted from his actions, it had finally made him feel the crippling guilt that he should have felt a long time ago. Guilt for the physical abuse, and the mental torture that he put his daughter through. Guilt for the emotional manipulation that he had made her suffer through, forcing her to keep the baby that he knew was his, always threatening her with more abuse and further violence if she did anything, applying the same strong-handed approach that he had always used.

By the time her pregnancy became visible she had to tell Chris, but that was another relationship that Billy had ruined for Amanda. He couldn't stand Chris from the moment he saw them together, so he took every opportunity to get in the middle of their relationship. Over the years, he made it clear to Amanda that he wanted Chris gone, so he made sure that Amanda played her part – forcing her to not take his name at marriage, and making sure that baby Joe took the Blue surname. That was the final nail for Chris, and from that point he kept a distance from Amanda, but his suspicions and dislike of Billy had always remained close to him.

Billy and Amanda made their way eventually to the farmhouse, walking separately for the rest of the short journey. Before they got to the spot in the field that Joe had picked, Amanda needed reassurance from Billy, so she asked, 'Promise me that you'll never tell him,

Dad. Please.’ Billy kept his distance but assured his daughter that he would never reveal the secret that would ruin so many lives and shame the Blue family legacy forever.

Chapter 22

In the days that followed Mary's funeral, the Blue family hardly spoke a word to one another. Billy and Amanda were keeping their separate ways after Billy's actions before the body burning, and Joe was now deep in the planning for his new prototype. If it weren't for Amarjit, then nobody would have said a word, but her presence – although still new and unknown to most of them – was a welcome one. She could feel the sorrow caused by Mary's loss, and in her mind these people were all family now, so she took to helping around both Joe's and Billy's houses, yet to explore the charm of Oxington.

She had clicked most with Amanda, who she saw as her cousin, and with them being close in age – eight years the difference – she had the most in common with her. They hadn't had much chance to talk yet, other than a few tales about life in Germany compared to the village, but Amarjit was keen to make her reasons for visiting known, and to find out if Billy really was who she thought he was. So, she arranged to make dinner for later that evening, hoping that having all three of them together would be the right time to bring it up.

Billy came and went between the house and the farm, with the only chance that she got to see him when she made him a cup of tea. She had even managed to sway him to drink it how she liked it – with a dash of honey instead of sugar, which he was pleased with. Those

brief glimpses though had helped to reaffirm her belief that Billy was the key to finding out who her grandfather was.

To make an impression, Amarjit thought it appropriate to make one of her family recipes, a lamb tagine, so she decided to head into the village to try and find the ingredients that were not in Joe's, nor Billy's kitchens. She set out early that morning with her freshly washed, bright coloured t-shirt, khaki cargo trousers and walking boots, and was on the lookout for spices, and an insight into this interesting little place that Joe had told her so much about.

The walk seemed shorter than when she made it a few days ago, with the visibility of what was ahead of her now, and a slight familiarity helping to navigate the pavement-less trail. It didn't seem as quiet as she had imagined, but she put this down to it being holiday season. For such a quaint place, it had far more shops than she thought possible, reminding her of some of the places she had seen throughout her life on her travels, like Giethoorn in the Netherlands. What she appreciated the most was the stone buildings that made both the houses and the shops, as if everywhere could be a house, and everywhere could be a shop.

She eventually made her way to the greengrocers, which was run by Tommy White. But unlike most of everywhere else in the village, this shop was not full of customers, instead it was almost empty – except for the shopkeeper and an old woman making her way around, talking loudly to the man behind the till as she filled up her basket. When Amarjit walked in, she greeted the shopkeeper, Tommy, but got no reply, instead he kept talking to the old lady, who hadn't even noticed her walk in. She was able to find the spices and seasoning she needed: paprika, cinnamon, coriander, cumin, cardamom, ginger, turmeric, cayenne, saffron, and importantly – apricots. She could blend this all together with the salt, pepper, garlic, and lamb that Joe did have, and leave it to cook and marinate until the evening.

‘How are you paying today?’ asked Tommy, when Amarjit brought her basket full of ingredients to the only till in the shop.

‘Card please,’ replied Amarjit.

‘Sorry, we don’t accept cards.’

‘Oh ok, well I have some cash then.’

‘Sorry, we don’t accept cash either.’

‘Erm, well how am I supposed to pay?’

‘Not from round here, are you?’

Tommy looked up at the incoming Yvette, who had made her way around the shop now, hoping that she heard the conversation. But when she got close enough to hear Tommy’s dismissing of someone whom she assumed to be another Emmett, Yvette recognised Amarjit’s face as the one that came into the pub on Saturday night.

‘It’s alright Tom, I’ve got this.’

Tommy looked surprised, as did Amarjit, now recognising the woman who had tried to get her thrown out of the pub.

‘Are you sure?’ Asked Amarjit.

‘My way of saying sorry, love,’ replied Yvette, slowly. ‘It’s just that we’ve had a lot of new people come to the village lately, and it’s been hard. Not what we’re used to. But if I’d have known you were a guest of Joe’s or any of them lot, then I wouldn’t have acted that way.’

‘Well, that’s truly kind, thank you ... I didn’t catch your name sorry ...’

‘Yvette, love. Call me Yvette,’

‘Nice to meet you Yvette, love, I’m Amarjit,’

‘Well, that is an unusual name. Never heard that one before. Where are you from dearie?’

‘Germany, but my grandmother was Indian, hence the name.’

As Tommy begrudgingly packed up Amarjit’s shopping, she had her first natter with Yvette, who told her about how the locals paid for goods in the village. This amazed Amarjit, and she made sure to write this down in her travel journal, which she kept as a way of remembering all the quirks that she came across along her way. She started journaling when her mum got diagnosed with Alzheimer's several years back, thinking that she might possibly inherit it, so she wanted a way to look back and not forget the things that she saw as special.

They parted ways when Yvette had paid for her items, with her giving Tommy fresh cream and jam in return, which she made herself. Amarjit left the shop with a giddy spring in her clunky step, having made her first friend outside of the Blue family. She made her way back to Joe’s house, where she prepared the meal that she hoped they would all enjoy later, letting it cook slowly and tenderly in the hooded, ceramic pot that Amanda had lent her, which had been Mary’s.

Although he had been busy at his workstation, Joe made the trip back home for dinner, knowing that Amarjit was just as important to his future plans, more so than ever with his redesign for the prototype, as he needed her for not just for the promotion of the village now. But it was too soon to pass his agenda onto Amarjit, so he worked on trying to make the village, and his home, as hospitable as ever. And hearing from her about how Yvette had apologised to her earlier, took a weight off his mind.

Amanda came over next, without Billy, who arrived late for dinner, hobbling more than usual after pushing himself too far with the work on the farm today. But when everybody had arrived, Amarjit presented her family’s own lamb tagine. The smell was overwhelmingly glorious, with sweet aromas and hot, juicy spices tickling the nostrils of everyone at the table. The lamb was so tender that it needed two spoons to scoop it out and stop it from falling apart on its way to the bowls, an on top of a bed of fluffy mint couscous.

‘Please, tuck in,’ said Amarjit after filling up all the deep bowls, before passing around the herb yoghurt that accompanied and complemented the tastes of the meal. And tuck in they all did, as the sound of cutlery hitting plates filled the air. After letting the food do the talking for a while, Amarjit broke the silence with the topic of her visit to the village, and what Joe had promised to her help with. It another thing that Joe had let slip in his mind, as he remorsefully looked across at her, but her attention soon turned to Billy.

‘You Billy, you are the man I really want to talk to.’ Everybody at the table had stopped eating their meal at this point, as Billy replied, ‘Me? Why me? I don’t even know who you are.’

‘But I think I might know who *you* are. Billy is short for William, correct?’

Billy put his cutlery down and stared menacingly at Amarjit. ‘Usually is, but not me.’

Amanda and Joe could sense the tension, and Joe was quick to try and calm the situation, using his place as head of the table to be heard.

‘Amarjit, why don’t we go and have a chat about this?’

‘Sorry Joe, I don’t mean to cause a scene. But your grandad, I believe he used to go by a different name.’

Billy stood up, the clicking in his knee audible ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about. I suggest you stop now,’ he angrily replied.

But Amarjit was determined, and she saw this as her only opportunity. ‘Are you not William Bucks – related to this man – Carl Bucks?’

Billy took hold of the picture that Amarjit had put onto the table, which was indeed of his father. He hadn’t seen his face since he was a child, and a lifetime of repressed feelings and forgotten memories all came flooding back to him now.

Amanda instinctively went to console her dad despite his actions towards her, having always found a way to forget what he had done. But she had never seen him like this, as he

sobbed away back in his chair, clutching the fragile photograph in his weakened hands. Joe had not imagined that Amarjit's claims would be true, let alone make his grandad react like this.

‘How do you know him? This Carl?’ Quizzed Joe.

‘He is my granddad, Joe, and he is your great grandad.’

Every Blue in the room looked shocked, none knowing where to look or what to do next. And as much as she hated causing such a scene, Amarjit felt an immense sense of relief and closure that she hoped to find on this trip, which overruled any shock she had, as Billy's reaction had given her what she came for. But with tears in his eyes, and shaking from the emotion, Billy got up out of his chair and walked over to Amarjit. His eyes didn't say what he was about to do next, and neither Amanda nor Joe knew, either. Amarjit remained seated, as she slowly and carefully clutched the knife meant for her lamb, as Billy approached. But when he got round the table to her, he simply held his arms out, and they embraced in a moment that nobody had expected.

Chapter 23

As part of her summer plans, Amarjit had wanted to finish off her trip by going to Land's End; having started it at John O'Groats she wanted to complete the top to bottom tour of Britain. But the revelation that she dropped on Billy and the Blue family had derailed all of that.

Instead, her focus until her flight back was piecing together the missing parts of both hers – and Billy's – lost ancestry. The two had grown incredibly close in the days since her revelation, with Amanda using her new cousin to help her gain some distance from her father, by offering her the room she was staying in. Billy had seemed to already forget his actions from the night of Mary's funeral, as he was immersed in knowing all about Amarjit, her mother, as well as the woman that his father had cheated on his mother with.

Perhaps it was his age, or perhaps his own infidelities had softened the blow, but Billy had no issue at first with how his father had met Amarjit's grandmother, only keen to find out more about the final moments of the man he barely knew but took so much from. He believed every word that came from Amarjit's mouth, waiting with open ears for anything else she could offer him as a way of closure on his father's death, something which he never got.

But as the days went on, Billy couldn't help but feel a longing he had refused himself for almost seventy years. Since he moved to the village as a boy, he never allowed for

feelings of grief for either of his parents, especially his mother, only remembering her final words to him. But news of where his father was, and what he was doing when he died – something which he felt sure his mother would have known – had allowed him to finally understand why she did what she did, and to finally miss her.

He was comforted by Amarjit's presence, though, and her Indian heritage was a welcome sight to him, being part Indian in his life before Oxington. Although it wasn't what his mother had wanted for him, Billy chose to embrace what he had hidden for so long, and when he told Amarjit that his mother was part Indian, she felt as though her journey had come full circle. She chose to spend her final days in the village, keen to explore all corners of it, so she asked Billy to help her to see the Oxington that he knew and loved, rather than ask Joe.

Even though he knew that Amarjit might have some possible connection to the family when he helped arrange her visit to the village, Joe was still shocked that what she was claiming all this time was true. But instead of feeling any such remorse at what his actions may have led to, he felt a sense of achievement, as if his tactics had been the fundamentals in this victorious outcome.

Nothing was ever said about Billy's past before he came to the village, and not even Mary knew about the events that had led him to there, so to find out so much about the man he idolised was the biggest surprise, as it was to Amanda. Both she and Joe knew that Billy was fostered, but the way he spoke about his foster parents had always been enough to see them as his birth parents. It was accepted that Billy had married the girl who grew up as his sister, where it was seen as something of a different time and era, but Amanda knew that Billy had no boundaries when it came to getting what he wanted.

With his latest attempts to coerce her, and threats of outing her deepest shame, Amanda was not in a good head space. It had been over twenty years since that horrific night,

and over time she tried to have a normal relationship with her dad, for the sake of her mum more than anything. But although she had managed to get away from Billy this time, she wondered what he might be capable of now that Mary wasn't around. Her mum was always the light in her life, the angel to her demon, and her safety blanket from the torment that she had received for most of her life, even if she never told her mum what had caused it. She was always able to help Amanda to balance when she tilted towards the darkness with her thoughts, so now the only person she had to lean on was her son – and lately all she could see in him was Billy.

Since his story got picked up nationally, Amanda had noticed a change in Joe's behaviour and demeanour. She had previously seen his manipulation skills already in use around the village for a few months, but she put that down to his age and hoped it was just temporary, but with his dips in and out of the village – the first thing he always did when he got back was find out who wasn't on his side anymore, and get briefed on every little thing that had happened, showing a paranoia that she had not seen before in her son, but unaware of the empty threat he had received from the prime minister about the village's future. He had also developed an arrogance, one that she saw as dangerous, as it was the same arrogance that Billy had all these years, like he would never get caught.

Now that she was back at her house, along with Joe, she made it her mission to pay closer attention to him and hope to steer him away from the traits she dreaded that he inherited from his secret father. He hadn't been around much, though – spending most of his time at work, and unbeknownst to her – Joe would be spending a lot more time with Billy as his new prototype gathered pace.

There was an outpouring of support and offers of help from the environmental science community when it came out about what Joe was attempting with his initial prototype, all of which was ignored by Joe at first, unsure that he needed outside influence. Now that the

pressure was on though, he decided to reach out to the community to see what they could offer with his new idea.

He made a post on Sci-Hub – an underground online platform where independent scientists of all backgrounds could share their work and research projects, and collaborate or communicate with one another, via the deep web. Under the name ‘Oxington_Blue_Official’ he sent details about what he was trying to achieve, and the help he was going to need. The title of the post was ‘Groundbreaking Environmental Research Project – Urgent Help Needed,’ where he went on to describe what he was hoping to achieve in the next six months:

Dear fellow community members. Following the overwhelming support that I received about my project to eradicate any methane before it is released into the atmosphere by livestock, I am afraid to report that I have reached an immovable roadblock along the way. Years of research, planning and development were wasted in an accident at my workplace.

As I pondered whether I should – or even could attempt to recreate what I had made, a family bereavement led me to another focus, and one that will do more than the first concept ever promised: I am going to get block and remove any harmful gas from getting released from an animal – but not only that, I want to implant a device into pregnant animals which will allow for the blocking agent to be passed down to their unborn young, which can then be passed on generations down, and alter their genes in the process. It won't be easy – but I need your help.

After a meeting with the prime minister last week, I have been given six months to come up with a prototype to show her, or this project is done. I have the lab, the tools, and a lot of the research, but I can't do this on my own in such a short time.

If you want to help the planet and be a part of history, then let me know of your interest and I will send you all the details of how you can help.

He posted this with a picture of himself holding his newspaper article, to prove that it was him, and that he was genuine. Within minutes he had received dozens of replies with people wanting to help – all of them were in other countries, but most were either not able or not willing to travel, so he put them all into a troubleshooting group, as he waited for serious interest.

More were added for troubleshooting help, but he needed bodies in the lab; however, nobody was suitable or available, until a user called ‘Genetic-Skunk’ replied. They said that they lived in the UK, and they could travel. Joe’s eyes lit up as he read the message, but as he continued, he saw that this person said how they were familiar with the village. This couldn’t be possible, he wondered, so he dismissed it as a troll, until he saw the sign-off that said, ‘see you soon, swan.’ It was her – his first love – Kelly. After all this time, he was finally going to see her again, and she was coming back to the village to help him. His disbelief was immeasurable, but his efforts had paid off far greater than he could have imagined. He not only had to pull this off for the prime minister, but also for the once love of his life, and there was no room for error.

The more he thought about it, the tenser he became, and the sweatier his hands and forehead got. He looked around and he could see the objects on his desk moving up and down, swirling around, as his breaths got faster and shorter. It felt like he was being strangled and his brain began to whoosh and whirl, the thumping of his increased heartbeat was all he could hear now as the room began to spin and he began to feel sick. Before his vision got too blurry, he slowly regained his breath as the invisible noose was loosened from him. He didn’t know what had just happened to him, but it was to be a warning for what was to come.

Chapter 24

Before she went back to Germany, Amarjit was keen to surprise Billy and the whole family, for welcoming her into their lives. So, in light of her recent revelation, she had arranged for an ancestry search to be conducted – along with a DNA matching test, using all the information that Billy had told her about his family over the past week or so, and from samples she had gathered from the family, without their knowledge. Her determination to help Billy connect with his past had led her to unsanitary places in the house, taking hair that she found on the floor and seeking out discarded tissues and nail clippings. Although unhygienic, collecting samples was something that she was used to in her job back in Germany.

In the time that they had spent together, Billy had become like a father figure to her, and since her birth father had left her when she was just a child, she had welcomed the newly formed relationship and bond that they shared. He had helped to guide her around the village, showing her where he was brought up, where he got married, where Amanda and Joe were both born, and he also took her to Mary's resting site. Amarjit wasn't there for the ceremony as she was a stranger at the time, though she did see the inferno from the bedroom window whilst she was unpacking, but now that she was ready to pack up again, Billy thought it was only right that she got to meet Mary as she was part of his family now.

As much as she wanted to stay with her new family, and learn everything she could about them, the time had come for Amarjit to leave Oxington. She had a life back in Germany and commitments that she could only get away from temporarily. Before she left, she paid a brief visit to say goodbye to Amanda, who had become distant with her since finding out they were related. Then, she made sure to go and see Joe, who was working, before Billy was to drop her off at Bristley Airport.

After finding out that he and Amarjit were related, Joe seemed to forget about wanting to make sure that Amarjit had an unforgettable experience in the village as he focused on his new prototype more and more. So, he too had become inadvertently distant with her, but still Amarjit wanted to at least thank Joe for making her wish come true. Billy dropped her off at the entrance of Ox Power, where she waited for Joe to come and let her in. His face was pale and looked clammy, but Amarjit had put it down to him overworking himself, since his office was where he had spent the majority of his time since she arrived. Instead of taking her to his office, the two walked around to the pond, and Amarjit was able to express her gratitude.

‘I just wanted to see you before I left and say how much I appreciate what you have done for me, Joe, to get me here in the first place.’

Joe was still feeling some of the effects of his panic attack, wondering why it had happened, but he didn’t let Amarjit know – he was just keen to make sure that she would be coming back to the village.

‘That’s no problem at all – and now that we’re related you will have to come back and visit again soon, for longer.’

‘I’ve been thinking about this. I don’t have anything keeping me in Germany, really, other than my job, and my cat. I was wondering how you would feel about me coming to help you out in the lab? I saw your post on Sci-Hub.’

Joe stopped walking for moment. All this time that she had been here, and he didn't even think to ask what she did for a living. 'You saw my post?' he said in disbelief, as Amarjit looked back at him.

'I'm a research assistant back in Germany, Joe, and don't you think I read the newspapers since being over here? I want to help you, and I want to come and stay here in the village.'

Joe's pale cheeks had returned to a healthy shade, and without hesitation he told Amarjit, 'Yes! I would love your help, and for you to come and live here, cousin. If that's what we are?'

The two laughed, neither sure what their exact relationship was, but both had got exactly what they wanted from this trip. They made their way around the pond, watching as the ducks dipped up and down, and the fish pipped their mouths on the surface, causing tranquil ripples across it. When they got back to Billy's truck, Joe gave Amarjit a hug, and wished her safe travels, before saying to Billy, 'Keep her safe, grandad, she's one of us now.'

'Don't you worry, son; she'll be fine with me.'

Joe felt the reassurance in Billy's voice, as had treated Amarjit like one of his own children – but fortunately for Amarjit she wasn't going to receive the same treatment that Billy's daughter had. Billy felt such a connection to Amarjit, more so that he had ever felt towards Amanda, and knowing that she was part of his family history from before the village had even formed, he wanted to make sure to protect her at all costs.

When they reached the airport, Billy was keen to help as much as he could, but Amarjit had become wise to his dwindling physical condition of late. Fortunately, she only had a large rucksack and a travel bag – the latter of which she let Billy take. So, they walked into the check-in area, in surroundings unfamiliar to Billy, and waited until Amarjit's flight was ready, giving her the chance to tell Billy about the surprises that she had for him.

‘It might take a few weeks, or months, but I have arranged a surprise for you, Uncle Billy,’

‘Surprise? What did you go and do that for? Had enough of them lately!’

‘I know but you’ll like it, I promise. It will help you see where your side of the family came from.’

‘You mean one of them family tree thingies?’

‘Yes! So, you can see about where your mum and your dad came from – well – as much as records will show, so you can see all of your relatives. But that’s not it ... I’m coming to live in Oxington soon – and I’ll be working with Joe!’

Billy began to well up, again in front of her, but the timely check-in call over the announcement system came just in time to spare his blushes.

‘I’m gonna miss you, kid. You don’t know how much I needed you in my life these past few weeks,’ said a grateful Billy, before they gave each other a tight cuddle, and Amarjit handed him an instant photo that she took of the two of them whilst at the farm.

‘I’ll see you soon, I promise.’ She told him, sadly, as she departed for the plane.

But little did she know that this would be the last time that she would ever see him. Billy made the trip back to his house, empty for the first time, and looked at the picture of him and Amarjit, which was taken in the cow sheds. He put it up on the mantelpiece in front of a picture of Amanda as a teenager that Mary had taken that stood in the centre, where it took pride and joy for him, over his daughter.

Chapter 25

It had taken a few weeks of occasional back-and-forth interactions, but Joe was about to get Kelly back in his life for the first time in over five years. He had no idea what she even looked like now, let alone whether she was the same person that she was when she left. What he did know though was how different he had become.

His scare in his office before Amarjit left had shaken him up and made him wary, but not enough to pay the Red Lights a visit. Instead, he went deeper into his work, making regular communications with the troubleshooting group – which now included both Kelly and Amarjit – to help progress his work and try to reach his deadline.

But aside from the work and the side-effects from it, Joe's personality was a lot different from how it was when he and Kelly had split up. Most of the changes in him had come recently so it was difficult to pick up on them; however, with the time apart that he and Kelly had spent, it may be a far different man from the positive, patient and thoughtful one that she left behind in the village, as lately he was all about urgency and was too busy to remember the small things.

Joe's recent fling with Harriet had made him more cautious about who he trusted too, so at least with Kelly he had an idea of what she might be like. But since his panic attack he had tried to avoid all thoughts of lust and love, seeing it as a trigger for what had happened to

him. By now he would usually have been over evaluating the situation, worried about what she did or did not say to him, and wondering if they were getting back together. He had always been this way, but his more laid-back approach in their communication would be the first sign that things are different now.

On the day that they had arranged for Kelly to come and check out the lab that Joe was planning to work in, he hadn't given much thought to his appearance, wearing a rehashed version of the same outfit and neglecting his now grown-out hair, which was a matted mop that sat atop of a poor attempt of a beard. And although he was aware that the woman he once loved so much was returning, he quickly dismissed any thoughts that wondered into anything but professional.

He had developed a method of control over his thoughts by clenching a part of his body whenever he strayed – usually it was a fist, or his eyes, sometimes his jaw, but it had seemed to be working so far, so he continued to do so, unaware of what he looked like due to the isolation he had surrounded himself in. These tics had to be performed several times to work, though, or so he told himself, so often he would go through multiple variations of the tic until he was satisfied the thought was gone.

His office was also in a state – like the mess that Lizzie had left it in when she destroyed it. A lot of Ox Power was in a worse state as of late, with the place feeling the loss of Lizzie; having only a few staff practical enough to act-up beyond their experience and skill sets, which was becoming clear now. But Joe's focus was on his new device and that alone, so first impressions had well and truly been taken off the menu.

The village itself hadn't changed on the surface, though, and now that the crowds had died down as the summer holiday period was nearing its conclusion, Kelly could see that it was exactly how she remembered it. She arrived in the same car that she had left in – although this wasn't in-keeping with the renewable air emphasis that had been put in place

since. As she drove round the windy roads, up and down the hilly crescents, the nostalgia of her youth was in full swing, going past the school, the newsagents where she had her first job, the park that she and her friends used to play in, and the house that she grew up in.

After she left the village, it wasn't long before her parents left too, choosing to take an early retirement at the coast. Kelly was the only thing that kept them in Oxington so long, so when she told them her plans to study up north, they did little to discourage her. Though both were Oxington natives, they had grown tired of the mundane repetitiveness that their home had to offer, taking every opportunity to stay at their holiday home by the sea. They never told anybody about their place in the sun, through fear of being labelled outcasts or defectors, which they had seen happen in the past to anybody who showed an interest in life away from there. Going on holiday aroused enough suspicion, with few in the village even ever going away in the summer; so, the inquest they received whenever they returned from going away was enough for them to know that they wouldn't be welcomed back if anybody knew of it.

They too hadn't been back since, which made Kelly sceptical about the reception she might receive if she was seen, so she chose to meet Joe at the lab and hope not to see anybody that might recognise her. And though her car was the same, her appearance was certainly not. Before she left, she was known as the girl with the long hair, all the way down to the back of her knees, though often braided. This wasn't practical for her role working in laboratories, nor was it the person she wanted to be seen as in her new home. So, when the last remaining part of the village had left – when she and Joe split up – she cut her hair down to a shoulder length bob, that she had kept ever since. Another change in her look was a necessary one, as she now needed to wear glasses.

When she arrived at Ox Power, she was struck by how large it was when she drove through the entrance. She had never been into the grounds before, having had no need to, and with it being on the edge of the village, she only ever drove past it when her family went

away. Joe had put her on the visitor list rather than come to meet her, which was unlike him, she thought, so one of the security guards took her to his office, giving her a chance to see the lab she would be working in. It was impressively large and immaculately clean, unlike the factory floor that she had just walked through. But her concern was solely on the lab, and so far, so good, as were her attempts to not get recognised.

After being escorted up the stairs to Joe's office, they had to wait until he let them in – the door was now ID restricted and up until now, Joe had only enabled access for himself. The security guard didn't say a word as they waited, and Kelly wasn't one for small talk either, so the silence felt elongated as Joe made them wait. But when he did eventually open the door to his office, it was clear right away that this was a different Joe to the one that she had known before.

He looked her up and down, and gave her the same crooked smile that he always had, which Kelly was pleased to see, before lazily asking, 'Have you always worn glasses?'

'Five years – and that's the first thing you say? Come here.'

Kelly leaned in for a hug, giving Joe no time to resist, and straight away he felt her warmth, which he had missed so much. Her hair, though much shorter, still smelt the same, as he took a deep sniff of it. His mind was racing, going back to a time when he was happiest, but before he could think any more, he clenched his fists that were resting on Kelly's back, breaking up the hug and knocking out the thoughts he couldn't handle anymore.

'Welcome to my office,'

'It's a mess, Joe. A bit like your hair; what have you done to it?'

He thought about a witty response, but elected for the truth, 'I've been too busy to worry about my hair, but that's not important. What is important is you being here – and I really need your help right away.'

Kelly was disappointed in his response, the Joe she knew would have at least made a joke, or asked her how she had been since they last saw each other, but she could sense the urgency and the desperation in his voice, so she followed his lead as he talked her through what he had been doing on his new prototype since they last spoke, and walked her round her new surroundings. His speech was slow, and often he went from one topic to another, as his eyes wandered off into the space that surrounded them, before circling back to his original point. But no matter how strangely he was explaining things to Kelly, he was making perfect sense to her, and she grew excited of the prospect of working with this mad scientist that she saw in front of her.

Seeing how passionate Joe was about this project had glossed over just how ambitious it was, and Kelly too was starting to believe that it was possible, but the rose-tint in her glasses was starting to fade, as the reality of the task was becoming very real. So, whilst Joe was in full stride, she couldn't help but ask him, 'Do you really think that we can get this done – with just the two of us?'

Joe didn't appreciate being interrupted, but he did appreciate the reminder that more help would soon be on the way, something which he was yet to tell Kelly about. 'Well, actually, it won't just be the two of us,' he told her.

Kelly seemed surprised, but that soon turned into positive curiosity, as she replied, 'That's brilliant Joe! Who else have you managed to get on board?'

'It's a long story, but let's just say she's a long-lost relative.'

'How did that come about?'

'She came over earlier in the summer, just after my nan died, and we found out that she is my grandad's niece.'

Kelly reached her arm out to comfort Joe upon hearing about the death of his grandmother, but this time, though, he was quick enough to avoid any contact, moving his shoulder away.

‘It’s alright, I’m fine, and that was weeks ago.’

Kelly was taken back by the rebuttal of her attempt at compassion, as Joe added, ‘She’ll be here in a few weeks, so there’s plenty for us to do until then. When do you want to start?’

‘I can start tomorrow, if that’s OK?’ She said, unsure if Joe would be happy with that, but he was.

‘Terrific, I’ll get your lab clothes and ID ready for you. Why don’t you go and get yourself familiar with the lab in the meantime.’

Joe then made his way back to his office and went straight to his laptop to continue what he was working on before Kelly arrived, as if the whole interaction didn’t happen.

Before she left, Kelly was keen to see Joe one more time, to try and have a genuine conversation with him, one that wasn’t about work – after all it had been five years since they last saw one another. His door was shut again, but several times she tried until he opened, with no crooked smile this time. Kelly asked, ‘Is everything good, Joe? You don’t seem yourself?’

It was a question he had been asking himself too lately, and so he gave her the same response, ‘I’m fine. It’s just work, the pressure of getting this done. This isn’t just show and tell anymore, it’s real, and I only have so much time.’

‘I understand, but if you need to talk then you know where I am,’

‘I don’t actually – where are you staying?’

‘In Helton, I thought it was easier than trying to find somebody to stay with in the village after so long, you know how they get.’

Joe nodded, before subtly motioning for her to leave by swaying the door to and fro. Kelly got the hint, and said her goodbyes, when Joe mumbled, 'Don't put another line through your hair this time, skunk.'

She finally saw a glimmer of the old Joe, and with that she gained some confidence in what they might be able to achieve together, as they waited for the final member of their team to arrive.

Chapter 26

The grace period on Mary's death had as much as run out on Joe, as he neglected his self-imposed duties on the village and its people. There had been no meeting in weeks, and although most of the emmets had gone, many of the locals now felt as though Joe owed them an apology, or at least an explanation. Many were worried about the next time their tiny streets would be littered, and they wanted to know what Joe would do to stop a repeat of the chaos they had been forced to get used to over the summer. But the closest that anybody got to Joe was Billy, and they could tell that he had passed caring about their complaints.

Since Amarjit had gone back home, Billy had longed for her return, hoping each day that she would come back to fill the emptiness that he had now that Amanda was no longer living with him. So, Billy was spending most of his time alone, and drunk, to cope with his new situation. Drink had become his friend once more, reaching out to him in his time of need as any good friend does, and his swaying moods had opened the door to another old companion – the cut of a blade. Time in solitude had never been good for Billy, but usually these times were few and far between, but with no Mary and nobody else around him for a while, the sweet joy of alcohol had soon turned sour.

He knew that it was a risky game, and one that had a time limit on it before his demons returned, but the lonely days followed by harsh and empty nights made him feel

compelled to fill them with something other than silence. His stomach still had healing scars from his last round of self-harm, and with nobody around to hide anything from, he chose to start cutting himself on his weak, but somewhat still bulging forearms.

The blackouts from the drinking had become so bad that Billy had forgotten that he called Amanda late the previous evening, telling her that he missed her so much, that he wanted to apologise for everything, and that he needed to see her again. On the phone she could tell that he was drunk, but among the many drunken cries for help that she had both witnessed and given, she knew that the truth – the real truth – always came out when a person was drunk, so she accepted his plea and went round the following evening, hoping to find some possible remorse and closure to her lifetime's ordeal.

Time had passed slowly since her mother's death, with no other parent to lean on and now no job to distract her, life was feeling more and more like the chores she had hoped would fill the days. But with an abusive father and an aloof son, the chores had been reduced to nothing more than taking care of herself. So, although she wanted little to do with Billy right now, his invitation and his enduring hold over her had at least given her a much-needed reason to leave the house.

There was no sign of Billy when she got to his house though, and with the doors typically unlocked but also ajar, perhaps due to the heat from the late summer heatwave, she assumed, she walked in to try and find him. He wasn't in the kitchen but there was a glass of almost-finished whiskey – which had left a water rim on some of the letters that had been opened, so she knew that he was around somewhere. He wasn't in the living room either, where she had made her way to, and where immediately she noticed something different; her picture that had been there for over thirty years had been replaced with a photo of Billy and Amarjit, smiling, in the place where he first started to abuse her. Any faint sense of possible forgiveness she might have had for her dad was wiped away in an instant, and as much as the

suffering that he had caused her over the years had hurt, she had never felt disgusted by him, until now.

Suddenly the heavy thud of work boots could be heard, louder and louder as they clumsily approached, along with a thick, slow dripping of something onto the old wooden floorboards. Amanda stood by the scene of her father's most despicable act, ready to dismiss any of his pathetic attempts at forgiveness, but when he noticed her through his blurry, squinted eyes, he didn't seem to appreciate her presence.

'What you doin' 'ere?' He asked, with his voice a reaching an almost incomprehensible slurring.

'Because you asked me to come round, yesterday. But looking at the state of you, it's clear you don't remember.'

Billy scratched his head, hoping it might somehow rack his rattled brain, and as he did, the slow pouring of blood fell faster from his wrists. Although seething, Amanda was still appalled to see what her dad had become right in front of her, as he replied, 'What's the matter? Can't you handle a bit of bleeding? You never used to be so squeamish,'

'That's more than a bit, I think you might have hit an artery,'

'So what if I have? It's my mess, I'll deal with it. Anyway, who said you could be here?'

Amanda shook her head in disbelief. 'So, you're not going to apologise?'

'Apologise? For what?' Asked a now fired-up Billy.

The tears in her eyes returned like they did on the way back from Mary's wake, as she stood there alone and exhausted once more, but this time she was defiant, ready to finally call her dad out for the misery that she had suffered at the hands of the man who was supposed to love and protect her, but failed on every level.

‘For raping me. For molesting me. For the years of abuse that you put me through when I was just a kid!’

Billy’s whisky-induced red cheeks had gone a whiter shade of pale. He stood motionless and all he could think to do now was retort, like the scared little boy he was deep down, telling her, ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t do anything wrong, and you can’t prove anything.’

‘You’re unbelievable. Just admit it, you raped me, and you forced me to keep that baby. You drove Chris away too. You’re a manipulator and a bully, and I wish me, and Joe had never been born!’

Billy’s colour had returned in a rush of blood this time, with Amandas comments cutting deeper than the knife had done on his arm. In a flash rage rushed over to her and shouted, *‘Don’t you ever say that again!’*

Billy grabbed Amanda by the shoulders and the two of them tussled, crashing into the mantelpiece and knocking off the photo of Amarjit, breaking the glass from the frame behind it and causing the old picture of Amanda to fall loose. The collision had given Billy the advantage as he fell on top of Amanda. When he realised the position he was in, he took the opportunity to remind his daughter of what he had just denied.

‘Look at you now, helpless, like you always were. I think it’s about time I reminded you of what you’ve been missing.’

His bony left hand was now round her throat, restricting her breathing as he gripped tighter, whilst his left hand motioned towards her crotch, which had become exposed from the scuffle due to the summer dress she was wearing. As his hand moved closer, her desperation grew, and her head was flailing from side to side to try and loosen his grip on her neck. In a moment of desperation, she looked around noticed a large shard of glass that had broken off from the fallen picture of her. She reached out far, patting around the area until the

found it, and just before Billy's vile fingers could touch her once more, she slammed the broken glass into his forearm, dragging it down past the open wound, and fully through the arteries in his wrist.

Billy fell back, the intensity of the blood that was now rushing out had caused him to go into shock. Amanda got up, unsure of what to do as she could see her dad bleeding out in front of her. He reached out for help in one final act of despair as he lay there looking up from the ground at his daughter, who was now stood over him. Billy's arm soon fell back and clutched his chest, as the shock caused his heart to falter and go into cardiac arrest. Knowing that he had only moments left alive, Amanda walked over to her mum's rocking chair that she had died in, and sat in it, watching her father struggle with the pain as his eyes grew closer and closer to closing for good.

Chapter 27

Now that Joe had some help in the lab, he was able to afford some rare time away, which meant he could go and see his grandad after he had left him some drunken voicemails, asking him to come round. Unbeknownst to Joe – and Amanda – Billy had made calls to both of them the previous evening, with the intention being to tell Joe the truth, and to apologise to Amanda. He had asked them both to come to his place the next night at 7pm, but Joe was running late.

When he eventually made it to Billy's, Joe came in through the back entrance as he always did, walking through the unlocked door as it always was, and was instantly struck by the letters that had been left out on the table. There were piles of them, some opened and some unopened, and, assuming that it was Mary who usually dealt with the post, Joe could see that Billy had put this off for a while.

Some of it was junk mail, some of it bills, but as he glanced past the surface of opened letters, he noticed one that was very unusual. It was from an ancestry DNA service called *GenomeLink Solutions*, listing all of the possible genetic and ancestral matches from a search that had been carried out on Billy. There were sons, daughters, siblings and known cousins all listed, with names that all looked to be from other countries.

As the traced lineage went further down and split off, stating who had children, and if there were known marriages and name changes, the lines met in the middle when Billy's parents were listed – showing their match as cousins. There was no record of a marriage between the two, just the birth of their son, William. These were people that Joe never knew of until recently, so now finding out that his great grandparents were related, and that his grandad was the product of their incest, made him feel sorry for his grandad, who he hadn't seen or heard yet.

With the letter in hand, Joe called out for Billy, but to no reply. There was an echo about the place that gave it an instant emptiness which Joe had never heard before, but before he could shout out once more, he noticed droplets of blood on the floor. The house didn't feel empty anymore, and Joe's instincts were telling him that something was very wrong as he followed the trail. With his heart beating faster as the droplets had turned into small puddles where Billy had stood arguing with Amanda less than an hour ago, Joe thought he was going to have another panic attack. But his emotions were about to be kicked into a sense of despair as he looked up from the red-soaked wooden floor and saw Billy lying dead up against the fireplace.

He rushed over in a desperate attempt to somehow wake the pale shadow of the man that Joe had known as the father figure throughout his life, throwing away the letter in his hand, but it was no good, Billy couldn't be brought back to life. Floods of tears were forming, ready to be released from their salty ducts, as Joe tried to come to grips with what had led to his grandad dying, and now without the haze of panic upon finding him, he could see that Billy's wrist was severely cut open. He remembered when he found his grandad's bloody tissues in the shed, and seeing the cuts on his chest, so now with his wrist sliced, Joe thought it must have been a suicide.

Wanting to preserve some of his grandad's dignity, Joe got up to cover the deep gash, but when he did, he was met with an intense fright when he looked around to find his mother sitting in the rocking chair, awake but entirely motionless. Her eyes were bloodshot from crying, and her neck was red, as were her hands that were covered in blood. Joe tried to get his mum to talk but she just sat there, gently rocking, not taking her eyes off Billy. Through the tears and the shock. Joe screamed at her, *'Mum! What's happened? Why is grandad dead?!'*

Amanda said nothing still, but the rocking had stopped. She took her eyes away from her father, and looked directly at Joe, before sobbing into an uncontrollable state until Joe held her, and she replied, 'I had to do it. He was going to do it again.'

'Do what, Mum? What did you have to do?'

Amanda looked up from Joe's shoulder, as she said to her son, 'I had to get him off me. It was all I could do; you don't know what he's like.'

Joe had slightly distanced himself from his mum, asking the question he wasn't sure that he wanted the answer to. 'Mum what are you talking about? This is Grandad.'

She knew that she had no choice but to tell Joe the disturbing truth, about the man he knew as his grandad, but the man she knew as a something far worse. 'He's not your grandad, Joe.'

The words got trapped in the echo that had returned once more, and they rang repeatedly in Joe's ears. He didn't want to hear it again, but he had to make sure that he heard correctly, so he sombrely asked, 'what did you say?'

'I'm sorry, I didn't want you to ever find out.'

'I said, what did you say?'

Amanda could sense that she was losing Joe to the rage he always had in him, so she stepped back from his immediate presence, before repeating the words she could barely bring herself to say. ‘He’s not your grandad, Joe,’

‘Well, what is he then?’

‘Don’t make me say it,’

‘I said what the fuck is he?!’

‘He’s ... he’s your ...’

‘Tell me!’

‘He’s your dad!’

Joe’s eyes bulged like a man possessed, as Amanda sobbed into her hands. What had he just heard, he thought, this could not be happening – but it was. And the room began to spin like it did a few weeks before, he was being taken out of his body and he could no longer stay in control. He crouched down and held his hands over his ears firmly, waiting for the thudding to begin, and the sickness to kick in. He squeezed his eyes shut forcefully, hoping it might help, but the intensity of the situation had made him blackout momentarily.

Amanda rushed over to help her son, but when he regained his bearings, he pushed her away from him. ‘Why would you say that? He’s not my dad, how can he be?!’

The moment of truth had arrived, and Amanda had no idea how she would tell her son this devastating news. She looked away into the distance behind Joe, where Billy’s corpse was lying, and in that moment, she was able to use the rage she felt when she saw the man that had done this to her, to them, as she reluctantly told him, ‘When I was in my twenties, he raped me.’

A stunned Joe then instantly asked, ‘Why? But why would he do that? You’re his daughter, for crying out loud!’

‘I know. And every day I wish I wasn’t. That might have made this all easier. But he was like it since I was a teenager, touching me and saying things to me.’

A shudder went down Amanda’s spine at the thought of remembering those days once more, but Joe had heard enough. He got up and walked away, protesting, ‘This can’t be true. Why would he do that? I don’t believe you.’

As he rushed to leave the room where he had just been devastated, and in a whirlwind of denial, he saw the ancestry DNA letter that he hadn’t finished reading through. He picked it up, lowered his eyes to the bottom of the results, where he saw a line that matched Billy to Amanda, and another line that went straight down to Joe, with the match stating ‘Son.’ Time stood still in that moment, and nothing – not his mum’s crying, nor his beating heart – could be heard, and he looked back across at his mum with the same expression that she had when he found her. When he came back to his senses, with the realisation that his life had been a lie, he couldn’t stay mad at his mum any longer. Instead, he handed her the letter, and asked her to tell him everything that had happened.

As Amanda told Joe the truth about how he came to exist, he had to take a moment to compose himself after the bombardment of revelations, leaving for the bathroom. His mind was racing, and he needed to re-focus, so he took out the bag of ketamine that he kept in his wallet and racked up two small lines on the sink, right where Billy had been cutting himself earlier in the evening. But the blood didn’t matter, only the feeling of not feeling anymore did, and Joe had found that over the past six months with ketamine. His use was minimal at first, keen to explore the effects it had on his depression and anxiety by micro-dosing. But since he took more of an interest in the running of the village, Joe began to use ketamine daily, and its effects were becoming increasingly damaging every time he used it.

But with his composure regained, Joe listened as Amanda came to where they are now. There were more tears and moments of rage as Billy looked on with his dead eyes at his

bastard son and his vengeful daughter, the two of them closer now than ever before. And in the hours that followed, they came up with a plan for how they were going to deal with Billy, and the inevitable fallout from his death – they were going to bury the body that night, in the land by the shed, then tell everybody the truth about Billy's ancestry. Knowing that the villagers would have a field day, they decided to fuel the fire on Billy and tell them that he had left the village and gone back to his birthplace, in Burning Oak, and didn't think that he would be coming back. Amanda was going to take over on the farm, deciding that she needed that in her life to stay busy. But one person they forgot to consider who might have more of an interest in Billy's whereabouts, was Amarjit, who was on her way to come and live with Billy.

Chapter 28

Joe held on to the ancestry DNA results meant for Billy, studying the sickening reality that he had come to know in the wake of his death. One thing that it revealed was that Billy had melanoma – a type of skin cancer and he wondered if it was what he thought the family birthmark on his head was; Billy's had grown much larger over time and Joe's was certain that his was now bigger than it used to be, having not given it much consideration before. So, this scare had prompted Joe to seek out validations on his own health. What Joe was most unclear about from the whole situation was how Billy came to getting an ancestry DNA test in the first place. He wouldn't have had the first clue how to order it himself, so Joe thought that somebody must have ordered it for him, and the only person who he knew that had used one of these types of tests before was Amarjit.

She was due in the village later that day and Joe wasn't sure how to tell her that she would never see the man she had been searching for, the missing link to her missing family history, again. One thing he did know was that nobody could ever find out about what Billy did to his mother, and if word ever got out about who his father really was, and what his family was built on, then there would be no chance whatsoever that he would be taken seriously. So, he burnt the results and made sure that every trace of it was gone.

With Billy out of the picture, Joe turned his attention back to building the prototype for his new design, and what was crucial to that was a steady flow of already pregnant livestock, which he tended after on land acquired on the factory grounds. He had told his mum about the help that Billy had given him by supplying his farm animals in the past, and although they tried their best to not mention his name, it was clear that wiping all trace of him would be harder than they imagined. Amanda had embraced the heavy duties that she chose to take on, and in the few weeks since she took over on the farm, she could see why Billy's body had become so withered over time. The days were long, the labour was hard and thankless, but she needed a sense of purpose now, a new identity, so she pushed through the pain barrier and the once-repressed memories of being on the farm when she was younger, and she made the job her own.

News of Billy's departure from the village had been met with a mix of shock followed by good riddance, with the majority outraged that he of all people would leave Oxington. Unsurprisingly, it was Arthur who was the most disappointed that his best mate had just upped and left, and he could often be seen with a lost look on his sagging face as he moped around the narrow streets. And it wasn't long until he missed Billy so much that he too left the village in search of his only ever friend.

But the time had come for Amarjit to find out too, and Joe wanted to make sure that she was not told the news by anybody else, so he picked her up from Bristley Airport, along with her multitude of belongings, and chose to tell her on the way back home. He knew how much she and Billy had connected, and that living with him was something that she had looked forward to, so to try and help with the news that might devastate her, Joe felt as though he needed to make an effort and bring out the charm offensive once more. So, he started with a haircut and a shave, and hoped that he could keep his composure in order to keep Amarjit in the village.

The wait at the airport grew longer and longer as the news filtered across that the flight had been delayed, and Joe's patience was starting to fade which became visible to those who were around him, watching as he twitched and paced his way around the arrivals lounge, huffing and puffing as he did so. When he noticed the small scene that he was causing, he knew that it was time for another bump, but he had chosen not to take his drugs with him into the airport where sniffer dogs might catch him.

Growing restless, Joe went back to his car, where he pulled out the bag of ketamine that he had stashed away in his glove box. He took an immediate bump from his key, then proceeded to rack up an unnecessarily large line onto an old CD case he had. He used a discarded straw that he bit off a third of the way down to snort the fluffy powder, and within minutes he was transported into a hazy new reality. He hadn't taken this much at once before, and it had opened up strange visions that he didn't like the look of.

He could see his grandad, looking much younger, with a young girl who he thought looked like his mum. They were both doing work in the cow shed on the farm. At first, they both seemed happy, talking away, but suddenly the clouds went dark and grey, and thunder hit. Each time the lightning flashed, Billy moved closer to young Amanda, who looked frightened as her dad approached her, slowly and menacingly. Suddenly a large bang thudded as lightning hit the metal shed, and everywhere was filled with pitch black darkness. Billy's voice then echoed, 'This is all your fault, son...'

Joe panicked in his car, trying to get rid of the thoughts of Billy and his mum, but still Billy's voice grew louder, '*You wanted this to happen!*' Joe's head rushed with these words whirling around, and suddenly he couldn't take any more, yelling to himself, '*NOOOOOO!!!!*'. The voice stopped, and Joe woke up in a confused daze, not sure if any of what just happened was real, or if what he is seeing now was even real. But the phone call he got set his mind at ease, now safely back in the real world.

‘Hello?’

‘Joe, where are you? I need some help with my stuff. Are you here?’

It was Amarjit, Joe quickly checked the time, and it was an hour after he came back to his car.

‘Erm, yeah, sorry, I’m in the car park. Where are you?’

‘I’m in arrivals, Joe,’

‘Of course, sorry,’

‘Are you alright? You sound sleepy?’

‘Sorry, I must have dozed off whilst I was waiting for you. Just give me a few minutes, and I’ll be there.’

Joe quickly made his way out of his car and across to arrivals, but before he re-entered the building, he remembered that there were drugs out in the car still. So, he sprinted back, not prepared physically or mentally for any exercise, and hid the bag of ketamine, and brushed off any residue he could find in the car.

‘That was a very slow few minutes,’ said Amarjit, who had grown frustrated at waiting for him. Between that and the delayed flight, this wasn’t the ideal start that she had hoped for in her new life. But what she didn’t know was that she was going to be getting in a car with somebody who was fresh out of a k-hole. Joe used his dwindling quick thinking and replied, ‘Sorry, I couldn’t find it. How was the flight?’

Amarjit saw this as Joe’s attempt at humour, when really, he hadn’t even remembered that her flight was delayed.

‘It was rubbish, Joe. I just want to go home and go to bed. I take it I have a bed to sleep in?’

‘Of course, but there’s something I have to tell you.’ Joe’s filter was turned off, not thinking about over-analysing how to break the news to Amarjit, he went straight to the point as Amarjit’s ears pricked up with keen interest as he told her, ‘Billy’s left the village.’

Amarjit dropped the bags that she was carrying, as Joe carried on loading up the trolley with the various sized and shaped luggage that Amarjit had brought over from Germany.

‘He left?! But why? Where has he gone?!’

‘To London. I think. At least that’s where he said he was going in his note.’

When Amarjit heard the word London, she had a feeling she might know why. With a guilty conscience now she nervously asked, ‘Did he say why?’

Joe knew what he had to say, his focus was back, force-fed to him from the lights and action that the airport brought, as he replied, ‘Yes. He said he was going back home. He got some ancestry results through, and it seems like he’s gone to find some of his relatives who might be alive still.’

Amarjit’s heart sank, thinking that it was her that had made him leave because of the test that she ordered for Billy. She came clean to Joe right away in a bid to salvage something from the situation, ‘It was me, Joe. I ordered the test. I just wanted him to see if he might have family out there. We spoke about the people he remembered, and I just thought this would help. Please forgive me, I didn’t mean for this to happen.’

Joe looked her in the eyes, his pupils at full dilation, and took advantage of the situation. ‘It’s OK, he said he wanted to go, but he hates goodbyes, especially after just burying nan. He seemed excited. Don’t worry about it, Amarjit.’

She was putty in his hands now, and somehow, he had got away with being on the upper hand. Joe got the last of Amarjit’s luggage and the two of them headed back to the village, and to Amarjit’s new home. She was happy to be staying with Amanda, glad to not

be on her own right away in a new place, and ready to start work with Joe in the lab the next day.

The next few months were spent intensely working in the lab, as Amarjit settled into life in Oxington. There wasn't much time for socialising, but she and Kelly had developed a friendship that she struggled to get from anyone else there. Their time in the lab, particularly with Joe, was challenging, and his temper had become shorter with each passing day. The stress had got to him, and he seemed like a man on the edge. There were no breakthroughs at all during the time with a full workforce, and the troubleshooting group were unable to help break down the wall that they had all hit.

There were limited pregnant animals left on Amanda's farm, especially those that were close enough to deliver in time to see any results. Joe's biggest issue was the inability to see the red x that he had used as an indicator on the newborns. This was the indicator that the implant had worked on the mother and that the gene modification had been successfully passed down. So, he had tried to change the colour of the newborns to a shade of white, in order to clearly see the red x, but still so far, all cows that were born were either all black, brown, or patchy, and none of the team had been able to find any marks so far, with emission results not changing on the newborns either.

It had been six weeks since the first calf with the tampered genes had been born, and by now it was getting bigger and stronger, producing waste at a higher rate due to the intense feeding schedule from the trial. But still the methane and carbon dioxide were being released from them, until one fateful autumn day. Each morning Joe would go in and check on his test subjects, running various tests to see if anything had changed, working his way from the front of the shed to the back, where patient zero was grazing. As he made his way to the back, his eyes were struck by the creamy vision that he saw in front of him, along with a thin red x on

its thigh. Joe instantly ran his tests on the calf – patient zero was now releasing zero emissions too. Its mother cow too had changed, and Joe was jubilant.

He had done it, and although it had taken six weeks for the results to show, the cows looked exactly how he wanted them to, untouched and clean, just how he wished his nan had looked in her dying days. The brainwave he had all those months ago when he first saw his nan's skin had turned yellow from jaundice, had made him determined to keep her old image prolonged – his plan was to start with animals, to make sure that it worked, and then develop the same for humans, so that they never diminished in appearance and never had to go through what he went through.

The emission blocker was the front for the prototype, but the beauty he saw in that first calf was his real goal. And as the weeks rolled on, more cows changed colour, giving Joe the confidence he needed to present this, and putting him one step closer to the power he had always dreamed of, a power that would far outgrow Oxington.

Now here he was, six months on from the impossible challenge that was set to him, on his way to meet the woman who put him firmly in his place last time they met. But this time he was prepared, and with the prototype of his new device safely secured, Joe was ready to change the world, and to save his village, as he asked Lourell, 'Maybe I should hold it?'

'It's fine, don't worry. I'm perfectly capable of holding a box,'

'But it's not just box, is it?'

Chapter 29

Before Joe left the car for the meeting that would seal his fate, he wanted to make sure his emotions didn't get the better of him. So, he pulled out a small bag of ketamine from the zip compartment in his wallet, put in a small scooping device, and bumped a scoop up his left nostril, right in front of Lourell. And although this explained the changes that she had seen in Joe, she was shocked at how brazenly he went about doing the drugs.

‘Are you sure that's a good idea?’ asked Lourell.

‘It will help me to focus, and not get sidetracked by anything. It's just a little bit, I'll be fine.’

Joe was determined to make this a success by any means necessary, and he was keen to take the same steps he took the first time that he visited the prime minister's office too, wanting to right the wrongs that he took that day in every way possible, as if wiping out the first meeting entirely if this one went well. When they got out, early once more, Joe went to the same pop-up coffee stand, ordered the same drink – this time though he got the right order. He made the same route back to the security guards, and after showing and telling them what was in the box, and getting his replacement laptop and bag searched, he made his way with his PA into Number Ten, Downing Street.

As Lourell looked around in awe, Joe walked through with a swagger like he belonged there, his semi-dilated eyes locked on Gillian's door. But the expected efficiency of the first meeting wasn't there this time as Joe and Lourell were told that the previous meeting had overrun. The effects of Joe's drug misuse had made him jittery, more so than usual, but this wasn't the time nor the place for another bump, so he did all he could to remain calm. But Lourell could see that he was struggling, so she offered up some small talk to take his mind off the wait.

'Have you heard anything from your grandad?'

'Huh?' replied Joe, confused at the question.

'Has he said how he's getting on? I bet your mum's missing him.'

Joe didn't need this right now, but he was still sharp enough to know that he had to give off a reasonable response. 'Erm yeah, a few days ago. He seems to be adjusting to life there. Lots for him to see and do. He wanted to see me whilst I'm here actually, but I'm too busy.'

'Oh, fair enough. Well, I'm sure you'll get another chance soon if this goes well. And how's your mum getting on at the farm?'

'She's erm doing great, yeah, working hard, you know what she's like.'

'Yeah, I miss working with her.'

Under normal circumstances Joe would have seen that as a dig at him, but he just wanted to get into Gillian's office, and stop Lourell from talking. But still she continued.

'Must be nice having Kelly back in the village? I saw her the other week; we had a right old catch up. Her mum and dad are still on the coast.'

Just before he could lose his temper, the solid brass handle on Gillian's vintage office door turned.

‘Finally! Half an hour they made us wait!’ said Joe to Lourell, before taking a deep breath of frustration, then standing up eager to go. But as he looked up to see who had been keeping him waiting for so long, he was met with a surreal bombshell, as out walked Charles Watson, followed by Lizzie, and then his dad, Chris.

Joe’s face dropped; he could not believe what he was seeing. Why were Charles and Lizzie meeting with the prime minister, and why was his dad there? He so desperately wondered. Time and motion moved at a snail’s pace as the three of them walked down the white corridor, past Joe, and Lourell. Nobody spoke, not even Chris, there was only eye contact as they passed one another, and a look of sheer confusion on Joe’s face, which was met with the same expression on Lourell’s as they stared blankly at one another, until Gillian’s assistant called Joe in. But just as he got to her door, a croaky old voice muttered, ‘You’ve got this Joe, do it for Oxington.’ It was Charles, as Lizzie and Chris both just looked on.

There was no time for Joe to react, as Gillian greeted him, in much less of a rush than the last time. ‘Joe, hello again. I believe you know my guests.’

He didn’t know how to react, stumbling over his muttered words of confusion, before Gillian added, ‘But don’t worry about them. I trust what you have there in your hands is what I think it is?’

‘Erm yes, sorry – it’s the prototype you asked for,’ replied Joe, still baffled by what had just happened.

‘Brilliant. Well, let’s get to it, shall we?’ said Gillian, rhetorically, as her assistant closed the door, which made an almighty slam that Joe was sure he didn’t hear the first time he was there, wondering if it was a sign of his fate being sealed.

There was a nervous energy about Joe, an obvious distraction caused by the elephant in the room that he didn’t know if he should address. He could feel himself going back to the

child-like state he felt after the first meeting, desperate now more than ever for a bump to take the sting out of the situation. But this was it, the moment he had been waiting for, dreaming of, the second chance that he was so fortunate to get in the first place. There was nothing but now, and he had to adapt, or perish. With his fists tightly clenched, Joe pushed back all the thoughts of doubt and paranoia and unboxed the tiniest of devices – that he called ‘The Mary Project.’ The device was small, about the size of a SIM card, so Joe was careful when handing it over to the prime minister. And although he had been producing these frequently since finalising the cell and data structure needed before the initial implant, he had to show that this prototype was irreplaceable.

Careful this time to back-up his backups and leave no stone unturned, Joe got out his laptop to show the presentation on his findings and handed out a paper copy to Gillian to accompany it, whilst also having a USB stick containing the presentation in his pocket just in case. As he scrolled through each slide, each one containing results and outcomes, followed by picture evidence to show the progression and change in first the mother cow and her calf, then their emission outlet. Joe felt proud for the first time about what he had achieved, and how far he had come.

But when the presentation had finished, Joe looked up at Gillian, who was still fiddling around with the prototype. He wasn’t sure if she had paid attention to what he had just shown her, as he stood there, waiting again. But when her response came, it gave him no clue as to what she thought about it. ‘They said you were determined. And I must say that I agree.’

‘Who’s they?’ Asked Joe, wanting answers now about what was going on before his meeting.

‘You know who they are Joe, you saw them. Though you might know them on more of a personal basis than I do.’

‘But why were they here? It makes no sense.’ He asked, puzzled by the events that were unfolding before him.

Gillian took a moment before telling Joe, making sure she told him the right way, the way she had been told to tell him, and also testing his patience. ‘They are immensely powerful people, Joe. Have you never wondered what your “dad” does for a living and why he’s always away?’

The way that she said that about Chris was too obvious for Joe to overlook. How could she know? He wondered, before asking, ‘What does that mean? Powerful how?’

‘I’ll cut right to the chase – those people that you saw walking out of my office before you, they are not who you think they are. Yes, their names are their names, but what they do for a living, it’s far beyond your wildest dreams.’

Joe stood there, motionless and glued to Gillian’s every word, as she continued, ‘You see, they form a group called “Dominion”, and their role is simple – tell the likes of me, and presidents and world leaders, what to do. They control the news you see, the food you eat, and the air you breathe – which is where you come into it. For some time now, they have been impressed by what you’ve been doing. How do you think your little article got picked up so quickly? And your meeting with me – do you think I would just let you come back if you were anybody else? No. If you were anybody else then you wouldn’t be here now. But that’s not to discredit the work that you have done, they made sure that I told you that if you somehow managed to pull it off – which it looks like you have.’

No words came to Joe’s dry mouth, instead he took a seat on the plush leather chair opposite Gillian, who was saying these world-crushing words with such a nonchalance like it was nothing to her, just another meeting. Gillian motioned for a glass of water to be brought in by her assistant, which Joe mulled over, unsure of what was even real now, just like when he

went into a k-hole. The water was very real though, as was what Joe was being told, so he took a sip and tried to get to grips with what was happening.

‘I can’t understand what you’re telling me, how is this all possible? Nobody even knew about Oxington – until recently, so how can these people from there be so powerful?’ he asked, with a pleading tone, desperate to get to grips with the news.

‘Well, actually, it all started with Oxington. You see, after the Second World War, there needed to be a change in how people lived. Society as we knew it had to reset, but it couldn’t be done on a big scale, it had to be done small. So, Edward Watson – the founder of Dominion – and Charles’ father, picked a tiny little village called Bishops Cote, and he wiped it off the face of the earth. The “parish reshuffle” I believe is what they disguised it as, but Edward and those in power at the time, moved in people from all over the place, including his wife and son, and your grandad, to start this social experiment. Ever since then, Oxington as it’s now known, has been the hub for trialling new and innovative methods of living, with yourself included in that.’

Joe looked up suspiciously, quickly adding, ‘What do you mean by that?’

‘Joe, don’t make me say it. It’s really not nice how you came to exist. But it was all part of the experiment, and it was what Edward wanted.’

With those words Joe got up out of his chair, which he pushed over with the force of his legs, but Gillian was unmoved, simply pointing up to the multitude of cameras that were recording in the room, to which he furiously replied, ‘*I don’t give a fuck!* Do you mean to tell me what my mum was raped by her dad as part of an experiment?!’

Without remorse Gillian replied, ‘I’m afraid so. But as you know, with science you must push boundaries. Think about what you’ve had available at your fingertips to create the Mary Project. None of that would have been possible without Dominion.’

The rage was building and building whilst Joe's world was crashing and crashing, as Gillian continued, 'But you Joe, you are the face of the village, there is no doubt about that. And the experiment can now stop. Dominion can give you everything you've ever wanted – all you have to do is cooperate.'

Before Joe could react, Gillian's office door opened, and in walked Charles, then Lizzie, and finally Chris, who asked Joe, 'What do you say? Will you cooperate with us, son?'

Chapter 30

Joe had never seen Chris in a suit, he was always a baggy jeans and t-shirt kind of guy, but the look did suit him – especially as it was fitted, thought Joe, as he took a sip of the coffee that he was mulling over. Chris had taken Joe out of the prime minister's office and for a walk, sensing that he might need a change of scenery and a break from what he had just heard. But Joe had also refused to talk to Lizzie after what she did to him, so the two of them got some coffee and took the long walk over to the South Bank.

This time round the busyness and the hustle didn't seem to faze Joe, not after the news that he had just been told, which had made him feel somewhat invincible – as if nothing else could hurt him now. There was almost a calmness about the city, especially the river, as they walked along its wide pavements and banks. Joe didn't say much at first, he just listened as Chris did his best fake dad impression by showering him with praise about what he had achieved since they last spoke. He also apologised for just leaving, but that was nothing new to Joe – at least now he had something of an explanation as to why.

But it wasn't the discreetness of his job or the wonder of how he got to be in this position that made Joe talk, it was the mention of Billy and Amanda. And Joe had to ask Chris something, 'Did you know that he was going to rape her?'

Chris looked away instantly, almost as an admission of guilt, but he replied sternly, 'No, I swear I didn't. Me and your mother were in love then, and I only found out about it when your mother went into labour with you. You won't remember this, but Charles was there, at the Red Lights house the night you were born. That's when he told me what had happened, and why.'

'And you carried on working for him?!'

'This isn't the sort of job that you can just quit son.'

'Don't call me that. I'm not your son, am I?'

Chris acknowledged the fact, but still he tried to justify his involvement, or lack thereof, adding, 'But I still raised you, as if you were my own. Even though it was clear to see that you were never mine just by looking at you. But Billy, he took it too far.'

'Too far?! How far is too far here?!'

'You're right, I know. But he did all he could to drive me and your mother apart, and he succeeded. We were never the same after you were born.'

'Right, so this is my fault, is it?'

Chris took a deep breath, as he replied, 'No, of course not. That's not what I meant. Look, I don't agree with what they did, but by the time I found out I was in too deep to leave. Charles chose me, and I knew too much. Charles would have had me killed.'

'Good,' said Joe, looking Chris dead in the eye as he told him.

'I deserve that. And believe me, there are times when I wish I was dead, but this is all part of a bigger picture, part of a better future, and over time I've been able to see that – and I think you will too.'

Joe looked at Chris with utter contempt, struggling to understand what he had just said to him. How could this be for the better? He thought to himself. The two continued their walk, with Chris leading the way due to his familiarity with the area. They headed back the

way they came, with Joe keen to get back to the village, and as they did, Chris continued to probe Joe, asking him, ‘What is it you’ve always wanted for this planet?’

‘To make it so that everyone can live the way that we do in the village,’ replied Joe, begrudgingly.

‘We can do that for you, no – with you. What if I told you that your device can be the catalyst for change on this planet?’

‘I’d say that I already know that.’

‘Right, but how do you plan on doing that on your own?’

‘I’ll go to the papers again, tell them about my new idea, and people we see.’

‘But we own the papers Joe, we run the news. It would go nowhere without our say-so. Like Gillian said, you are the face of the village – but why stop there? You could be the face of this planet.’

Joe stopped in his tracks, Chris’ words had rung deep in him, the power that he had always dreamed of, along with the change that he always wanted. He could see his face everywhere, a vision of hope for humanity and society. He was beginning to listen properly now, and Chris could sense this, adding, ‘What if we were to create model villages – as you called them – everywhere. The most impoverished and famine-ridden places in the world, they could all live sustainably in their own little Oxington. All with the Mary Project there to help keep the planet going for generations to come. Oxington was the experiment, Joe, but your device, that’s the real success of it all. Just imagine what could be achieved if everybody had the advantages and resources that you had. All we need is you.’

This was so much more than Joe could have imagined, but still he wouldn’t budge, as he replied, ‘And what if I say no?’

‘Well, it would be a shame for Oxington to disappear, for migrants to take over and for big buildings and commercialism to take it over, wouldn’t it? We can do that Joe.’

As they made their way past the guards and near to number ten, Joe had to know one more thing, ‘Where does Lizzie fit into all this?’

‘I wondered when that would come up. Her little mishap with you, Charles really did fire her. He was relying on that old prototype being something special, and she ruined it. So, he brought her in and showed her exactly what damage her temper tantrum might have caused. She’s deeply sorry Joe, she really is. And now she knows the error of her ways, let’s just say that she won’t be making the same mistake again. Plus – she’s working with her husband now, so she’ll be a lot less on your case, if you know what I mean.’

‘So, you’re telling me that she was punished by getting a new job, an even better one it seems?!’

‘Well, in a way. But what Charles also did that she doesn’t know, is take her name off his will; meaning she inherits nothing when he dies. With her father dead, it leaves her as the natural successor to him. That’s her real punishment. But just don’t tell her that.’

Joe’s face was smug with this news, as the two of them returned to Gillian’s office, where she, Charles and Lizzie were waiting.

‘That looks like the face of a man who just found out something remarkably interesting. So, Joe, what do you say? Are you going to cooperate?’ asked Charles, who offered out his hand as everybody else waited with bated breath.

Joe looked around the room at the beautiful office, and the sub-human scum that was in it. He thought about what it might be like to sit in Gillian’s chair one day, and if he was going to go ahead with his plan to use his device on humans too then he needed to put aside his feelings and adapt, as Gillian said to him. But he didn’t just want Gillian’s chair, he wanted Charles’ head sitting as a trophy above it, after he took over from him. So, Joe offered his hand in return, and the room was filled with jubilant roars – the type you might expect at a men’s club, or in parliament.

‘This calls for a celebration, champagne please, Gillian!’ Proclaimed Charles, who in an instant showed his true power by ordering who Joe thought was the most powerful person in the country about, which she duly obliged. But Joe noticed that somebody was missing, so he asked Charles, ‘Where did Lourell go? I didn’t see her when I came back in.’

‘Don’t worry, she’s waiting in the car for you. Me and Gillian had a little chat with her. Must have been a surprise for her too to see us. We simply told her about our new government-backed project at Ox Power, which is all she needs to know. All just one big coincidence, don’t you think?’

‘Indeed, it is,’ said Joe, understanding full-well what Charles meant, before he added, ‘I don’t think I need to tell you that what we do is not for the everyman’s ears, Joe. So, if Gillian, Lizzie and Chris here, can keep a secret, then you must be able to, too.’

Charles then took Gillian aside to talk further, but before leaving the room he turned back and said to Joe, ‘Terrible to hear about Billy, he really was a dear friend and a loyal servant. Send my condolences to your mother.’

Lizzie then handed a startled Joe a phone, which showed a video of him and Amanda burying Billy’s body, leaving him with a clear message about what the consequences of letting slip about Dominion would be. ‘This is your new phone, keep it with you at all times. And when we ring, you answer – got it?’ Said Lizzie, serving Joe back with an ace of her own, as Joe acknowledged her for the first time since she smashed up his office.

When Charles had finished talking to Gillian, she made sure to congratulate Joe on his successful presentation, before letting him know what she and Charles were just discussing.

‘The Mary Project, it really is something exciting, the sort of thing that can sway elections. It will be perfect to spearhead my campaign next month, so you’d better make sure that you keep on producing the implant. Oh, and one more thing – we’re going to launch your

model village somewhere else, and you'll be responsible for it. If that goes well, then who knows – you might even get my job.'

With his fate well and truly sealed, Joe drank up his lavish champagne, then headed back to the car, realising that there was never any way that he could have refused Dominion. But having got all that he wished for, Joe wasn't left with a sense of pride or satisfaction, instead he felt hollow knowing that he was now part of the group that had ruined his family. With domination - courtesy of Dominion, on the horizon, he had to prepare his lies for his new life, starting with the car ride home with Lourell who was buzzing with excitement from her trip to the capital. But Joe, a downtrodden figure and zapped of any energy, could only mutter the words, 'I feel like I am always being tested.'

Part 3

Chapter 31

The residents of the North East town formerly known as Upper Shields were all contacted to inform them of the planned changes to the area, entirely unaware that they were being used as the public dummy for a large-scale social experiment that had been seventy years in the making. The plan was to separate the town into ten smaller villages – ranging from 500 residents to 3,000 – all of which were much larger than the population of Oxington.

But such was the role set upon Joe now that he was under the Dominion umbrella, meaning he had no choice in the matter. Charles, by way of Gillian, had since given Joe a strict set of instructions to follow for the transition of Upper Shields, which included detailed guidance for every stage of the two-year operation. It was like Joe's script for the future, and all he had to do was memorise his lines then he would be a step closer to gaining the power he wanted, and seeing his vision come true. But the problem for Joe was that it was never actually his vision, it was all set up long before he even came to existence, scripted if you will.

His motivation to take down Charles, Lizzie and even the man he used to know as his father, Chris, was what kept his focus during the trial – that and hoping that Charles might wither away during that time, but he didn't. Instead, he kept up with Joe at every stage, from the initial separation of the town into the new villages, right through to its erasure. The

mission for Joe was clear: make Upper Shields disappear – and make sure no questions are asked when it is done, as if the new normal had always been this way, which meant getting the new villages to an Oxington-like state by the end of it.

The first stage of the plan was the most challenging as it meant trying to convince a town of 30,000 or so residents, families, friends, and workers that their lives would forever be changing. After the letters had all been sent out, Joe went to visit Upper Shields to try and get to grips with the size of the task he had been given. This wasn't a tiny, sheltered, privileged paradise that he was in anymore, this was a gritty, working-class and broad land that was steeped in tradition and gravy. The people that lived there did have one thing in common with the residents of Oxington though – they knew no other way of life, but the problem for Joe was that the Upper Shields way was like nothing he could relate to.

The demographic there was hugely different to start with, certainly younger, but everything from the way people dressed and their hairstyles, down to their demeanour and brashness, was a far cry from the average Oxingtonian. These were proud people – whether they were man, woman or child, white, black or Asian, it didn't matter – the people of North Shield knew exactly who they were and knew that they were exactly where they belonged.

The town was much further north than Joe had ever travelled, taking the best part of six hours to drive there from Oxington, where he had left Kelly in charge of production and further testing on the Mary Project. Both she and Amarjit were so excited with the news that the prime minister had approved the prototype and wanted to use it as part of her next election campaign, that they didn't question where Joe was going when he couldn't be in the lab, they were just so proud of what he and they were able to achieve that they went along with the notion of carrying on with it. As for Amanda, she spent most of her time alone as she now wanted, so she didn't need to know where Joe was going or what he was doing most of the time. She provided them with the cattle when required and went about her days ploughing

along on the farm, at peace with the animals and the routine of the work that needed to be done.

Oxington itself had gone back to how it was before Joe got so involved in running things. When word got out that he had been meeting with the prime minister and that he'd be doing some travelling, it became clear that he didn't have the time to be there. So, they soon went back to old habits, as humans are so fond of doing. They met when they met, they spoke when they spoke, and everybody went about their days without a care in the world, just waiting for the next round of gossip, which, given their limited presence in the village now, would be unlikely to involve one of the Blues, as it so often had lately. The village and its people had seen a lot of disruption to the norm and unheard-of attention in the recent past, but it would take a back seat for a while whilst its biggest disruptor tried to force his ways upon somewhere new.

All the changes and added pressures that had come Joe's way of late had made him ramp up his drug use, adding Alprazolam to the buffet of narcotics he was now devouring, to help offset the panic attacks and the insomnia, which were a side-effect of the ketamine abuse. He had a contact from the deep web that he regularly bought off and trusted, so the Xanax wasn't hard to attain, and after a few weeks of use Joe hadn't had any panic attacks and was getting a solid six hours of sleep each night, almost twice as much as he was getting before using it, so he kept up with the daily dosages of both, becoming meticulous about when he used them, and treating them as if they were medically prescribed.

It was now Lourell's job to give Joe his "medicine" routinely, going as far as segregating them in the relevant quantities ready for consumption. Between this and driving Joe from place to place, Lourell was doing nothing that she thought she would be doing when she signed up to be his personal assistant – but she couldn't get enough of it, or of Joe. She was keeping Joe's secrets and helping him to continue with an addiction and a lifestyle that

had a limited timeframe on it, but her trip to London with him and what Joe had told her afterwards had given her a new lease of life.

As much as she loved her old job at the school, her passion for a long time since her husband passed away had been promoting climate change, often speaking to anyone in the village who unknowingly – or knowingly, had done something that was bad for the environment, becoming something of a nuisance around the village. But almost being in her seventies, she wanted to do as much as she could, whilst she still could. So, when Joe told her that he had been asked by the prime minister to help with a new campaign to tackle emissions across the country – which included her helping him get to where he needed to go – she saw it as her way of contributing, and put up with the things she had to pretend she didn't know about him.

Joe had always told Lourell of the projects he was working on at Ox Power, knowing that she would get a kick out of seeing that he too was trying to make a difference. But when she became his PA, and she could see in more detail what she thought he was trying to achieve, she became fascinated by the man who she had watched grow up from a boy. Then, when she was told that she would be helping him on his grand climate mission, she saw him in a different light entirely, giving him the God complex that usually comes with blind followers in a cult.

Driving had become difficult with Joe's intense drug-taking schedule that was now embedded into his everyday life, and since he started taking Xanax, he had strongly and sporadically hyperventilated. But with his focus in the day clear, his darker thoughts brushed aside thanks to the ketamine, and his panic attacks and insomnia no longer getting in his way due to the Xanax, Joe saw this side-effect of occasional difficulty breathing as a necessary evil to get him through the day. So, with his devoted PA by his side taking care of the mundane and the essential, and with Oxington running simply fine without him, Joe got

started on the next two years of his life – starting with the fallout from the people of Upper Shields and his next encounter with Dominion.

Chapter 32

Charles had stayed in touch with Joe regularly since he introduced him to Dominion, choosing to personally get him prepared for his first task. Usually this would be something that Chris took care of, but with his long, personal history with Joe, and with the scale of the job at hand, Charles chose to keep a watchful eye over the proceedings, not even giving Lizzie so much as a consideration for it.

Though Joe had been preparing for months about how his model village might work in other places away from Oxington, Charles Watson had been preparing for this for decades. He had watched and observed his birthplace from the moment his father brought him into Dominion, and he had documented what he saw as good, and what he saw as bad. It all culminated in an intricate and specific set of rules that Charles wanted Joe to get the new village residents to abide by, should they choose to live there.

Each resident of Upper Shields was given a choice in the notice letter that was sent to each household: stay and be a part of its redevelopment, or leave. Nobody was given a vote or a voice in the matter, it was simply stay or go. Included in the letter were details of the changes that would be happening, focusing on the dissolution of the town and any areas that were held within it. Based on their Post Code, each household would be put into a newly formed village, as well as a host of benefits that were being sold within the letter. Households

that agreed to be included in the redevelopment project, as it was being labelled, were told that they would be given a guaranteed job, new housing, an electric car, all the amenities they could need in one place, and they would be living in a place with clean air – leading to improved quality of life and a longer life expectancy. The residents would be given the opportunity to discuss the changes at an open forum, which they were told would be to their advantage to attend, and which Joe would be hosting.

Expecting a hostile reception and a backlash from some of the boisterous community, Charles took the opportunity to greet Joe before he took charge of the forum, to remind him of the stance that needed to be taken by him as the face of the project, and as a representative of Dominion. The letters had all been sent from the Housing and Planning Committee, but were signed off by Joe Blue, along with a smiling picture of him, neither of which he had authorised them to use. By now, though, Joe was getting used to feeling blindsided; but what Charles would tell him about the rules he had in place for the villages would truly open his eyes to what sort of mission he was fronting.

Each accepting household and all of its inhabitants were expected to sign an agreement which would force them to follow a strict set of “living conditions”, as they were called, which were designed to keep them in their new village forever. Each one would be separated by patrolled borders, where the residents’ right to remain would be enforced. In Charles’ vision of what the villages would look like, there was no place for anywhere else, with him firmly believing that there could be no need to leave. Each resident would be given an identification card which contained their picture, name, date of birth and Post Code, and should they ever step foot outside of the borders of their Post Code, they would be denied entry into any other village. The more villages there were, the less options people had to go.

He saw it as a privilege for people – particularly for those of poorer backgrounds, to be given the choice to stay where they had everything at their doorstep, a place where

everybody was equal. There was no hierarchy and there was no class system in his villages, so convincing the everyman to join wasn't the issue he was foreshadowing – it was those of wealthy backgrounds who he feared would cause a storm. That's why the selection of Upper Shields was ideal for the trial, as most would be likely to buy into the idea, and those that opposed wouldn't be enough to derail anything or cause enough of a storm for anybody to notice. Those types of people had the resources to up sticks and move away for now, but eventually Charles wanted to force them into his new world.

There were also some harsher living conditions as part of the new village agreements, designed to discourage anybody from leaving, which included monitoring of internet traffic and blocking of websites to look for propaganda or negative influence on the living conditions, as well as ceasing contact with anybody who lived outside the village. Use of services that fell outside the village was also not allowed. Existing national laws would be followed and enforced by the Red Lights, who would carry out all emergency services in the village, and members of the Red Lights would be voted for at the first of the weekly meetings that must be held in the village, attendance of which was mandatory.

For the smaller villages, these meetings would be held in halls and offices that could handle the attendance, but for the larger ones, these would be held outside in fields with gazebos, using microphones and speakers. At the first instance of each of the village's meetings, a spokesperson – similar to the role that Joe took upon himself in Oxington – would be voted for by the new residents, based on those who put themselves forward for the role. If nobody in the village volunteered themselves, then it would be up to Joe to pick a spokesperson. They would be responsible for matters such as settling disputes in the community, approving or denying planning permission for village or home expansions and changes, as well as reporting anything noteworthy back to Joe during the trial, who would be staying in accommodation on the outskirts of the old town, along with Lourell.

He and Lourell shared a cosy cottage that doubled up as a bunker for Joe to keep a watchful eye on the ongoings of the villages, by way of security cameras that were strategically hidden. Lourell knew nothing of what Joe would do in his bunker, with her main aim being to make sure that Joe was well enough fed, such was her infatuation with him during the trial that she took to mothering him over the time there.

The living conditions in the villages were there to be followed strictly, and it was Joe's responsibility to monitor each of the ten villages to ensure that they were adhered to. The introduction of surveillance equipment would allow Joe to witness any breaches that were not picked up by the spokesperson or the Red Lights – who would make use of detention facilities in the villages, which were also introduced. Anybody who was found guilty of breaching the living conditions would be removed from the trial and would forfeit any future entry into a village – a punishment that Charles saw as futureproof with the more villages that he wanted to create around the country – and eventually around the world.

In Charles' vision, the land, air, and sea not occupied by villages would be reclaimed by the wild, and so anybody not in a village would one day be forced to survive with whatever creatures roamed there, likely ending up as prey. There would be no need for planes, boats and large haulage, with everything needed contained within the confines of each village. Cars, tractors and vans would all be electric and, eventually, solar powered. Another part of the self-sufficiency manifest was that all residents would be given clothing and shoes that grew – or shrank – with them, negating the need to buy new clothing. Each person would be given a white, black and grey set of clothes – all of which were self-cleaning when exposed to sunlight. Additional clothing could be made from wool grown on farms, or they could be 3D printed, with each household receiving the tools to do so.

One of the key elements to the trial that Charles insisted Joe follow was the ratio of people per village. There were reservations about how well the model would work with larger

numbers, but even with the smaller villages – if people refused to join or were thrown out and the numbers got too low, the foundations of the village could fall apart with not enough people there to take the jobs, fill the houses and provide the criteria for success at the end. The solution was for Joe to replace everybody that didn't join or who had left during the trial with the homeless, recently released convicts, or with immigrants seeking asylum. Monitoring how they integrated into a brand-new society, or in some cases back into society, was a trial in itself, but it was something that Charles saw as essential in his masterplan.

The turnout for the open forum was grand, as expected, but there was little in the way of media fanfare, aside from purely local news, due to Dominion's influence to see to it that the trial did not get the exposure that it didn't need at this early stage. It had fallen two weeks after all households had received their letter, giving them fair warning in the government's eyes, to attend. And it gave Joe the opportunity to advise everybody in attendance that they would be given one month from the date of the forum to either sign and return the agreement to the living conditions – which they would receive the following day – or vacate their homes and leave Upper Shields.

The plan that Joe laid out for the initially rowdy and disgruntled crowd, had outlined all the benefits that would be available to those who agreed to be part of the project, and it wasn't long before he had turned much of the crowd on his side. He knew walking into this that he would be pictured as the bad guy, but Charles had told him that if you pander to the majority and give them what they think they want, then you can persuade almost anybody to do anything, and he was right. By the end of the forum there were masses of newly found fans of Joe's, wanting to shake his hand and pat him on the back, none of whom knew exactly what they would be signing up for by supporting this stranger in the night.

Still though, there were many who opposed fiercely, unhappy at where they might be spending the rest of their lives. Some wanted to be closer to family, others closer to the

seaside, and there were people that saw this as dictatorship warfare. But these, like the others who were onboard with the idea, did have a choice, and their decision would affect whether or not other households would even have a choice in the future. They were part of something that eclipsed Upper Shields and Oxington, but they just didn't know it.

Chapter 33

When the time eventually came to review the thousands of returned agreements, Joe again was responsible for counting-up the numbers. It didn't matter how many had said yes, what mattered was how many had said no – or had returned the agreement empty or not at all.

These would be people that Joe would need to arrange removal from their houses, potentially making families with children, and sick or elderly people homeless. He would then need to find enough willing, unsuspecting outcasts to join the trial, and manage their integration into the model villages. Potential murderers, sex offenders and drug addicts, all thrown in just to make up the numbers.

With close to 30,000 residents to start with on the trial, by the time that he had counted, verified and counted the agreements again, Joe was left with 27,000 willing residents in the ten new villages, which were soon to be entering the development phase. This meant that there were 3,000 who had in one way or another, rejected the redevelopment plan, a number far greater than both Joe and Dominion had anticipated.

In the plan, the proposed redevelopment from town into ten villages would take approximately nine months to complete, leaving one year for the trial to take place. Nobody had to move out of their residence whilst the work was taking place, as Dominion – by way of the government – had acquired the necessary land upon which to build the villages. They

planned to use Oxington as the blueprint as to what a village should need to run sufficiently and scaled-up or down based on the size of the individual village. The look and feel of each village would be identical, with Cotswold stone a prominent design feature throughout, and the centrepiece to every village would be an Ox Power factory.

The factory would be where most of the villages' employment came from, and as well as focusing on engineering and production for essential and innovative agricultural tools, there would also be laboratories that focused on research into climate control measures, disease prevention, and genetic modifications, which included in-vitro fertilisation, something that was considered as essential for the longevity of these and future villages. The new factories would also produce their own pharmaceuticals and PPE, making sure that each village was fully protected in case of an outbreak or epidemic. What the new residents lacked in knowledge, they would be taught by experts and professors brought in by Dominion from other countries that were under their influence who would stay for the trial to fast-track the productivity.

Each resident of the village, from the age of eighteen, would have to attend a bi-annual 'boot camp' in which they would take three weeks away from their jobs and families, and focus on getting their bodies and their minds fit, away from their homes. The boot camps were thought of as way to instil focus and discipline into everyone, and to promote a healthy way of life. One thing that Charles could not stand from Oxington was how many overweight people there were there, especially the older locals, so he wanted to get the new residents' mindsets in a place of control and self-awareness for when they reached their later years. These boot camps would be places of peace of mind and tranquillity of the soul, designed to be distraction free, and the ideal substitute for a holiday away, which people inevitably would crave.

Children and young teenagers too would have their own camps to go to, learning survival skills such as camping, foraging, hunting and crafting. These camps were designed as a distraction for the younger minds when needed, but in actual fact they were made to show them what life outside of the village would look like, and to put them off the idea of ever leaving.

Life had been planned out for the 27,000 residents of Upper Shields who had signed up to the redevelopment plan, and by the point of the development works starting, Joe was now fully immersed in delivering the skewed vision that he once had. He set out to find enough people to fill the spaces left by those who chose not to take part, starting on the harsh streets of Upper Shields' most impoverished areas.

Everything appeared to be set in black and white compared to Oxington or London, as if it was fifty years behind modern times. The sky was forever grey and the people living rough were almost the same colour. The first places in which Joe approached people about living in one of the new villages were the shelters, catching clusters of willing volunteers all at once, and luring them in with the promise of housing and money. Residents of the new villages did not need to be skilled or proficient in any one thing, instead the hope was that they could get trained in a multitude of trades and services that were essential to the daily running of the place. Anybody who was trained or qualified in a certain profession would likely be able to use it in the village to some degree. It was vital that everybody had a purpose and offered something in order for the proxy economy and the community as a whole to thrive.

Joe's searches took him out into the perma-stink alleys, the abandoned doorways, and onto the drenched park benches that kept the rest of the unfortunate in the area. These were the hardcore, the ones who fought for the moniker of 'home-less' and took pride in their alternative way of life. What Joe found out was that although they may not have had a choice

at first, some of the people he met had purposely chosen to remain living in this way. They had found their own rules to live by and ways of trading goods, sometimes for services, and in a way creating their own model villages.

These people, though, had the advantage of freedom that so many would soon be giving up, they were equipped to survive the elements and whatever was thrown their way in the not-too-distant future; be it ravenous and desperate humans who had nowhere else to go, or the inevitable influx of wild cats and dogs that would have to survive in the wild too. Although pets were permitted in the new villages, only those that were already with a household at the time of moving would be allowed in, meaning that any animals in shelters or that were simply unwanted, would at first be moved somewhere else, but eventually, as more villages were developed, they would have nowhere to go but the fields and streets, to be hunter or hunted. Those fortunate enough to have a pet in a new village would need to be even luckier still and hope that enough of that species moved in to keep the population of household pets in existence there or risk a future without them.

So, when Joe finished his first round of searches, he left with a few hundred new recruits in total, not nearly as many as he had hoped for nor needed. His next approach was for those from the area who would be coming out of incarceration on or around the time when the new villages were completed. He started off by visiting inmates at the surrounding prisons, gaining access from the governors and wardens by way of his official government ID that Gillian had arranged, which he proudly brandished. It acted as a superpower at times, gaining him access to wherever he needed to go, and bypassing the law if he so needed to.

The men and women whom he visited were mostly remorseless, cold individuals who, if given a chance, would re-offend, making Joe question the validity of this part of his search. But Charles had insisted that humans need to be given the chance to succeed if they were to truly fail, so with that in mind and with numbers dwindling, Joe signed up several hundred

more new faces to the project. Some would be moving back to their families who were going to be moving to the village, and others just wanted a new start, but most, Joe felt, would be moving there with ulterior motives.

His priority though was not the integrity of the people – for all he knew those who had already signed up could be criminals who had just not been caught yet. But that was what the trial was about for Joe, what he wanted to see all along – if the model village idea could thrive with people from different backgrounds, or could it only work if the people in the village were the same. It was why he was so keen for Amarjit to stay in the village in the first place, and now he was able to see how it would work on a much greater scale, thanks to Dominion.

Aside from getting the numbers up, Joe had to make sure that the demographic of the residents was future-proof. The homeless and those in prison who he signed up were largely men and mostly above the typical age of breeding, so for each village to last far beyond the trial, there needed to be an influx of women as well as children. His best option would be the vast number of families of immigrants who had been trying to find a home, somewhere safe from the deluge and poverty that they had fled from.

Using his recently gained government access, Joe contacted the Home Office and requested a list of people who were being detained for entering the country illegally. Much to his surprise, many of these people had been there for months, some with babies and small children, all held up in rooms no bigger than a prison cell. He had gone to a place called Brock House, just outside of London, in the hope of finding enough of the right people to fill his quota. But when he left, he felt as though he had been part of a rescue mission, giving these hopeless families the chance to find peace and a stable home.

With his privilege he was able to make these once illegal and almost banished batch of men, women and children believe they were becoming citizens of a land they saw as

democratic and free. They had no clue what they were signing up to or where they were going, only glad to be leaving the immigration centre that had treated them as no more than germs. Joe was able to meet his quota with the number of people he found at Brock House, though there were so many more who begged him to take them too. But their time would probably never come as they would be sent back, shipped elsewhere or even killed before Upper Shields would be transformed. For Joe, though, the first stage of his task was complete, but Charles was still watching closely as the new villages were well on their way to launching.

Chapter 34

When it got close to the completion of the new villages, protests were held by those who were soon to be evicted from their properties before they were demolished. The ground space that was currently occupied by the litany of houses, high rises, buildings and other premises in the streets that were soon to be vacated, would make way for the connecting roads and additional land required to complete each of the ten villages, and would allow for the borders between to be situated. The rejecting households, businesses and services were furious that they were being forced to move away from their chosen residence, but no matter the force of the fight that they put up, there would be no way for them to win this battle.

Dominion fundamentally owned the town of Upper Shields, and it was theirs, from a legal standpoint, to do with as they saw fit. They inherited not just the infrastructure and the land, but also any contracts in place for water, waste, energy, phones lines and utility services for the area, and were able to supply their own services. They had offered the people of the town alternative – and, in most cases – improved living conditions, and they had given adequate and necessary notice for the redevelopment plans. So, no matter what the attempts of the disgruntled were – be it online bombardment or physical endeavours such as picketing and blockades – Dominion were there to meet them every step of the way. For every post created damning the works, ten posts were made supporting it, there were no major news

outlets attempting to touch the story, and security guards were always positioned at the building sites to remove any unwanted attention, usually with force.

For Charles and Dominion, it was never a case of *if* they would make their move across the country, it was purely a matter of when and where first. During the Second World War when the United Nations was being formulated, there was a breakaway group of royalty, politicians, and aristocrats from various corners of the Earth who shared a vision of a new world. The group was fronted by a man called Edward Watson, an earl and land baron from London who had inherited his family's wealth and status which dated back to the sixteenth century. The group's aim was to create a world-wide society that they imagined would bring a balance to the world that the UN never could, having not bought into the idea of it.

Over time, they sought influential and powerful figures to join them and craft the concept of the model village, gaining the power that allowed them to move from secret society to conspiracy theory, and shape the way the world would one day look. Their royal, political and media influence in Britain eventually reached to the very top of the chain and afforded them the luxury of the land they required for an absolute takeover, and worldwide they had elite allies in some of the largest countries such as India, Brazil, Australia and the Republic of Congo.

After Edward's death in the late seventies, his only child, Charles, assumed the mantle of both Earl of Tyne and Wear and head of the group that was now known as Dominion. Charles inherited his father's ruthless approach to change and having grown up surrounded by the elite as well as the folk of Oxington, as this was the role that he was born for. He also assumed the mantle of master manipulator, particularly towards Billy Blue, whom he had known since childhood. The pair grew up a few years apart with Charles being the younger of the two, but it was Edward who first held a vested interest in young Billy.

Having brought the devastated child to the newly formed village, he did so with the intention of grooming him to become the guinea pig in his sick fascination with the inevitability of incest in the villages. Billy was Edward's pet project, and over time through interactions via his son, he began to engineer Billy to switch off all emotion on command, knowing that one day he wanted him to commit the unthinkable act that would eventually lead to the birth of Joe. Having already forged a relationship with Billy, Charles became the commander in his father's absence, and pushed Billy every step of the way to do what he had been brought in to the experiment to do.

As the years went by and with the change in the world to a modern, multi-connected but vastly over-populated place, Charles decided that the exposure that Joe was already trying to gain and the inevitability of Dominion's public revealing, was enough to pull the trigger on the next phase in Planet Earth's history. But the time was fast approaching when Dominion was where it had always aimed to be, on the brink of their first large-scale trial of what the future could look like. The massive construction project across the town had already seen the buildings and the infrastructure erected, making it possible for passers-by to see the new villages' appearance and create a buzz which had never been known before. Those who had agreed to take part in the trial were rewarded with the sight of what would soon be the rest of their lives, and those who had opted to reject the proposals were left with nothing but bitterness for what had been forced upon them.

Some, though, were starting to regret their decisions, having now seen the serene setting in which some of their neighbours and loved ones would so shortly be perpetuating. Thoughts turned to where their next move might be, and panic was slowly sinking in at the prospect of having to give up the lives that they had forged for themselves. The resentment and disdain they initially had for the plans were now fading, as the situation that they now found themselves in became very real. When a few voices of worry soon became heard, it

wasn't long before they began to echo in multitudes and several quickly turned into hundreds before the launch.

A week before the grand opening, Joe was bombarded by all these people who had previously said no him, some of whom had vocalised their disdain for him personally, and what he was doing. But now here they were, practically begging him for the chance to not be forgotten, leaving Joe with a choice that would test his morals – allow those originally chosen for the village to continue their lives where they were, or give some truly desperate immigrants an opportunity at a life they had could never get elsewhere. But this would be a decision that needed a quick resolution, with time running out before the houses and jobs needed to be occupied.

He thought about consulting Charles on the matter but knowing that by next week he would be spending significant time with him after the opening, Joe made a choice that reflected his shift in mentality since Dominion had taken over his life. He himself had become more merciless now and no longer suffered at the hands of fools, so, after considering his options in the matter, he contacted the Home Office and asked for the immediate deportation of several hundred of the nameless immigrants to whom he had given so much hope previously. But he didn't dwell on it, instead he reached out to every household who rejected him and offered them all one last chance to sign up. Of the several thousand who were still defiant in their refusal, another 300 had buckled and given their signature to the redevelopment plan before it opened, and in doing so they had unknowingly condemned hundreds more to a life they tried so desperately to escape from.

But now the time had come to see if the model village concept could work in reality, in a place that had known a different life; this was the real acid test of the experiment. Joe had one year in which to show the faults and the successes, the trials and tribulations, and the conclusive evidence that would be needed to determine his value after the project. And as he

promised, Charles was present at the ten ceremonial openings that were held on the same day; a day that would go down in history as the moment humankind was given a lifeline, and it was Joe Blue who would provide the cuts to the ribbons that were heard across the world.

Chapter 35

One year was what was decided as the timeframe for meeting the success criteria on the model villages, but it didn't even take a week before the cracks were starting to show for some of the new residents. As each village tried to adapt to the new way of life that was bestowed upon its people, there were those who had quickly discovered that village life wasn't for them. Gone were the days of travel and busy social lives, there were no more big nights out or having a get together with those they hadn't seen in so long. For some it was the new jobs that took their toll – with most being unmethodically assigned by the spokesperson to those without specific skills to offer the villages.

For others, it was the new digital currency that they just couldn't get used to. The goods-trading model used for transactions between the villagers in Oxington was not used in the new villages, as it gave those with previously higher earnings and savings an advantage over others. Instead, a standardised electronic currency was introduced to replace traditional monetary transactions, and each working individual was given the same digital wage. It was hoped that the quality of the work of an individual would be what set them apart as opposed to what they earned.

These were teething problems that Joe was expecting though, and the majority of the villages had in fact taken well to their new lives – particularly the inception of the weekly

meetings, choosing a spokesperson without a fuss and electing Red Light members with ease. These were the smaller villages of less than a few thousand residents, and it was the larger villages were showing early signs of struggle and inability to adapt. The larger villages were also where the homeless, formerly imprisoned and the remaining fortunate immigrants were housed.

For those whom Joe had approached to be housed in the villages, there were concerns raised to the spokespersons about their willingness to integrate and contribute to the village. There were reports of thefts and petty crimes in these areas, but as yet nobody had been detained because no Red Lights personnel had been elected. There was such competition for the roles that decisions were taking much longer than anticipated, meaning that a few of the larger villages were living under martial law.

Under the watchful eye of the hidden surveillance and Charles' intense gaze, it was clear that these particular villages required the whip to be cracked upon them already, so he ordered Joe down there to take control and show that he could handle situations when Charles wasn't there. Being authoritarian had never been needed in Joe's previous life in Oxington, but with the rules put in place by the powers above him, he soon showed what he was capable of. He first went about selecting the Red Lights for Apperlay and Deerhirst – the two troublesome villages, choosing at random from a list of prospective candidates. They were then ordered to detain anybody who had been suspected of breaking a rule or of wrongdoing, and the spokesperson was made to put them on trial at the next meeting. Within a week, two people from Apperlay and seven from Deerhirst were thrown out of the villages, and Joe left both villages with the threat of more severe punishment for any future violations.

As time passed and life in the new villages started to feel like the new norm, just as there were those desperate to get in when they saw first what it looked like, there were soon those who tried hard to get out. Once the initial excitement and hysteria about this strange

new world had calmed, a number of residents were starting to realise the limitations that they had agreed upon themselves, leaving them with a terrible sense of longing for escape. But security was strict and, as listed in their agreements, movement was prohibited outside of each respective village.

Some of the spokespeople were tasked with asking Joe for permission to release several of the residents, who were starting to claim that they were being treated like inmates at a prison as opposed to members of the public. But as was his new nature, Joe took the cold-blooded approach, and he refused all such requests. There was a time when Joe would have seen people in distress and done what he could to help them, but there was never a time when Joe saw himself facilitating places like this. These villages weren't what he imagined when he first set out on his mission to bring "Oxington Living" to the world, now, though, he was so entrenched in the skewed vision that Dominion had set out, that he had completely lost sight of the person he used to be. Instead, his art had imitated his life, as he turned into the role that he only wished to portray as a front until he got the power he needed to make his own changes.

By the end of the two-year trial, Joe was undeniably a member of Dominion, in the image that they intended for him to be, and by the end he was revered as the man who successfully implemented the introduction of the model village blueprint. His successes were lauded over as residents were shown as happy, as businesses were thriving and as emission levels were at an all-time low for the area. Clean and clear skies reigned over the villages, like a pure crystal bubble that could be seen and admired by those outside of the perimeters, from their dirty, greying air space. Crime rates, drug-related deaths and addictions were dramatically reduced to their lowest in decades, and life expectancy, as promised, was indeed increased. The words 'Upper Shields' no longer seemed to exist in the vocabularies of the

adjoining boroughs and towns, as the likes of Tincombe, Washford and Stirley took its place and became the envy of those around them.

The biggest success of all, though, was the ingenuity of the residents when given the rights tools at their disposal. Just as Joe had come up with a way to block harmful emissions from leaving the body of an animal when given the opportunity, there had been developments of other significant scientific impact thanks to the new villagers. In Tomarsham, a team of researchers were working on limb regeneration, whilst in Apperlay they had made advances on the selective removal of harmful genes found in babies formed by IVF.

But all of that was what was sold to the already bought media when the time came to announce the successes of what had also happened during the ‘discreet redevelopment project’, as it was labelled. What didn’t get reported were the increasing alcoholism and suicide rates. On the surface, the villages were a monumental success, but at their core they were rotting away with trapped and manipulated people who had longed to break out. Each time a person died of suspicious causes in the village; they would be replaced with an immigrant within days, leaving the population figures on a constant level. And it was Joe who set up the supply chain of fresh new faces for the village when they needed topping-up.

During the one-year living trial, Joe had used his powerful status to gain access to illegal immigrants who has been caught and detained at Brock House. He had developed a keen interest in the operation there, particularly in the ethnicity of those who were held. Ever since the success of the Mary Project on animals, Joe had been keen to trial it in humans too, as he had always intended, and now that he had the anonymity and the means to do so, he sought about replicating his experiments on some of the immigrants. Those who agreed to have the device implanted in their arms at the inexperienced hands of Joe, would be placed on the list for entry to one of the villages as and when somebody took their life or drank it

away. All of Joe's work went undetected – even when he got Lourell to gather enough of the devices for him from Oxington to use for his own trial.

He no longer focused on the emission results, instead he took a purely visual approach to his findings, waiting for the group of ten men and women selected to change in skin colour to a magnolia-like shade – and bear the red x of success. For the human element of the trial, he had also let his ego take over, reengineering the code of the implant to give the subject blue eyes, as an everlasting nod to his name. But to Joe's dismay, it was only two women and three men of the group who had changed.

His secret success was all for him, and the protestations that he received from those he had experimented on fell on deaf ears, as he purposely chose individuals who spoke no English, using other detainees as translators to tell them initially that the devices would solely monitor emission releases, his only disclaimer being that there may be some side-effects, which he cruelly put the discolouring down to. But he had got what he needed both from the modern village trial, and from his own heinous test, the latter of which he kept a secret from Dominion despite his growing affiliation.

Joe was now so deep in the Dominion realm that he was invited into the inner circle of the inner circle, allowing him the chance to meet and mingle with the elite who had been planning to run the world. But it was they – the kings and queens, princes, leaders and moguls who were lining up to talk to him after the high praise he received following the success of the dissolution of the former Upper Shields. He got to see how the noble and the gentry operated in high society, and what he saw he fell in love with. Perhaps it was the high-end champagne mixed with the drugs that he was still taking, albeit less of now, but in that moment, Joe felt like he was truly meant to be there.

Gillian too was there, ready to heap praise on Joe for the work that he had done over the past two years. But during that time, she had received her own recognition by way of re-

election as prime minister, thanks in part to the Mary Project. Joe's creation was now accessible to all farmland proprietors and livestock owners, delivered as part of a scheme to reduce the emissions that agriculture releases. The scheme was heralded as groundbreaking and the results over the time since it was launched had shown drastic reduction in harmful gasses by those who had signed up. And despite some uproar about the colour change in the animals, within the next five years it would be mandatory for all farmers to use the device on their livestock.

But Gillian had been dining out on this for too long as far as Dominion were concerned, and with the overwhelmingly positive public reaction to the stories of the ten North East villages, there were calls and rallies up and down the country for redevelopment projects to take place elsewhere. On the same evening that he was commended for his work, Joe was approached by Charles to take over from Gillian once the public demand turned into unrest. He was to become the face of not only the model villages, but of the entire country. Back in the new villages though, they had no idea what was about to happen, and they had no way of warning anybody outside of some of the horrors that they were still subjected to.

Chapter 36

During the two years that Joe had been away from the village, little had changed in Oxington. Aside from the passing of Yvette, and the birth of Robbie and Katie's daughter, the rest of the residents had remained the same, including Kelly and Amarjit. The pair had stayed on at Ox Power, as Joe had asked, continuing to produce devices for the now national Mary Project Scheme, which had continued to ramp up in demand. But Joe's return was a timely one as there had been reports of suspicious people roaming the village, with some residents even finding them sleeping in their outhouses and sheds.

When Joe and Lourell arrived back, the first place he went to was the farm to see his mother, who he had not seen in person in some time. For the first year of the trial, Joe went back and forth to check on his isolated mother, but as the trial took over his life, he forgot about the one he had left behind. But a recent health scare – found out only by Lourell's contacts at Red Lights in the area – had got him worried. He wasn't just worried by the extent of the injury or how it was caused; he was worried because she didn't tell him about it.

So, he approached Amanda with caution, having the wherewithal to know that she didn't tell him for a reason. And with everything that he had found out about her traumatic past before going away, he knew that she would be at her most fragile now that she had

limited mobility. 'Hey, Mum, how are you doing?' he asked softly as he made his way through the unlocked back door to where she sat.

'Hello, stranger, fancy seeing you here. You look so different.'

Her comments rung true in Joe's ears; his appearance had certainly changed. The fragility of his thinning hair had finally given up, leaving a glaring patch on the dome of his head, which was surrounded by the frustratingly thick bowl that surrounded it at the back and sides. His eyes were severely bloodshot and bruised, sagging skin fell pathetically underneath them, to complete his transition into the man who looked fifteen years older than when he had left. But his premature ageing was much more serious than just aesthetic; it was a result of a disease that he had been diagnosed with called Werner's syndrome, which he had found out about a few years prior when wanting to know if he had the same skin disease as Billy, which he didn't.

'It's nice to see you too,' he quipped, before they both gave off a smile and embraced with a timely hug. Joe didn't squeeze as hard as he normally would, afraid to further inflict pain on his weakened mother who was in a neck brace. 'So, what happened, then?' he asked, having only been given limited information by Lourell.

'Well, you know, it's your typical cow-tramples-woman story. Several cows actually.'

'But how? Why would they do that?'

'They got scared. It was about two weeks ago now, but I heard this noise coming from their shed, it sounded like voices, but not English. I went up there and whoever it was must have heard me, and they started shouting and then ran away. This panicked the herd, and they bulldozed me down as they ran off, fracturing my vertebrae in the process.'

Joe's mind wandered for a moment, as he racked his brains to think about who might have been up there, whilst Amanda added, 'Whoever was up there, they must have been

desperately hungry – they were eating the meat from one of the cows they had killed. They'd sliced its poor neck right to the jugular, it was a right mess.'

When Amanda said this, Joe thought that they may have been Muslims, killing the cow the halal way. The only Muslims that he knew were from Brock House – those who he had either helped house, given them his implant, or gotten sent back, but neither of which could have made it to Oxington, he assumed. So, keen to find out more, he probed his mum a little further, asking, 'Have you seen them since?'

'No, and Chris – who's been helping on the farm, has the shotgun with him all the time now, so I doubt I will see them up here again! I heard that a foreign looking fella was hanging around outside the café the other day, though.'

'Wait, he's home? I didn't see his car on the drive. Why didn't you tell me first?' said a shocked Joe, not expecting to see Chris outside of the Dominion cause these days, let alone back home after everything that had transpired between them.

'I just thought that you're so busy now you wouldn't have time, and I didn't want to bother you. But he came as soon as he found out, he's been good actually. He's different when Billy isn't around. And he still needs to think he's your father, got it?' Said Amanda, sternly, unaware of what else Joe knew by now.

'Yeah, I know,' a begrudging and disappointed Joe replied, knowing that he was sworn to secrecy about his father's role in this whole messed up situation, and that his mum was right – he was too busy for this, though he hadn't even thought to think about it. He added, 'So, you said these people were seen at the café?'

'Don't you go getting yourself in trouble my baby boy. I mean it. I'll be alright in no time. It's those cow's you wanna be mad at!'

But Joe was set on finding out exactly who was roaming the village, and why they were there. He also wanted to find Chris before he found him. So, he stayed at his mums for

the remainder of his cup of tea – not enough time to wait around for Amarjit who was still living with Amanda and helping take care of her – and he headed straight to the café.

Compared to all the other villages that Joe had frequented over the past few years, Oxington seemed almost pocket-sized. He looked around at the places and the faces that he grew up with as he walked down the familiar bumpy streets, but as soon as he spotted Chris, he remembered that it was all fake. Nobody knew it, but their lives were a sham, nothing more than an experiment, and so the adoration that Joe once had for Oxington and all that it was, felt as though they were gone.

Chris was strutting around the place so comfortably, as though everything that Joe knew about him was all something that he imagined. The way he had so seamlessly waltzed back into Amanda's life had impressed Joe, though, as he himself struggled with the transition to regular villager. As Chris was about to get back into his car, Joe approached him, catching him off guard, 'I'm surprised to see you here, helping mum especially. You've never helped her out before, so why start now?'

'She's still my wife, remember? And she still has no idea about what I – sorry – what *we* do. So, let's keep it that way ... unless you want me to make a call to Charles right now?'

The two hadn't had much interaction in the time that Joe was away, but the tension had remained ever since Chris told Joe about knowing what Billy had done to his mum, something that was unforgivable to him. But right now, Joe needed Chris if he hoped to find out more about who had been hiding up at the farm, so he replied, 'Don't worry, I haven't forgotten anything. I'm more concerned about these people who caused mum's accident than your fake show of love.'

Chris let the gibe slip, as he too wanted to find the culprits. 'I haven't seen anyone that fits the description since I got back. Not that there was much to go by. But I've got my eyes and ears to the ground.'

‘So, you know about them being seen at the café then?’

‘Why do you think I’m here? I’ve been back the same time each day since I heard about it. But nothing. Just you wait until I get my hands on them.’

‘You’ll do what? Wait for mum to get attacked again? Sounds just like you.’

Chris clenched his fist and motioned towards Joe, but he quickly restrained himself, remembering the father-son appearance that the two had to keep up. He got into his car, but before driving off he wanted to have the last word, telling Joe, ‘Lizzie sends her love, by the way.’

Joe looked back with a look of disdain, before Chris added, ‘She’d love to be here, but it might be a bit awkward in front of your mother. So, she’s keeping the bed warm for when I get back.’

A motionless Joe gasped expressionlessly, silently, as Chris’ tyres screeched on his exit. This was enough to send Joe into a panic, and on the verge of an episode. When he thought that he had seen the last of them, back in the village where they had first taken place, he was on the verge of another. He swiftly went out of sight whilst his head began to spin, down an alley to the side of the café. Leaning with both hands up against the wall he took short, sharp breaths in and out, frantically searching for any drugs he might have on him. When he found something in the inside zip of his wallet, he tried desperately to ingest the tablet, whatever it may have been, when, *CRACK!* He was hit with a clubbing blow to the back of the head by a solid object and fell to the floor, and was instantly knocked unconscious.

Chapter 37

When Joe woke, he was met with a wall of unfamiliar sound. At first it was the ringing in his ears as he came to his senses, then it was the busy chattering of voices, none of it in a language he spoke, but he knew what it was – Arabic. His eyes eventually unblurred, and although still watery, he could make out a male figure getting closer to him.

Joe screamed as the man put his hand on the deep cut at the back of his head.

‘Oh, good, you can feel that,’ said the man in his thick, raspy voice, and showed Joe just how much blood he had mopped up on his palm. ‘You don’t remember me, do you?’ He asked.

A semi-conscious Joe did his best to make out the face and the voice that stood in front of him, but he just dropped his head. The man was quick to slap Joe back into reality, ferociously hitting him with front and back hands to either cheek until he opened his eyes fully. ‘That’s better, how about now?’

It took a minute, but Joe now realised where he knew the language the man spoke, and indeed where he knew him from – he was one of the detainees who he had used as a translator in Brock House.

‘I see it in your eyes, Joe Blue, now you remember. It’s me, Hassan.’

Joe didn't even bother to find out his name when he was using him to manipulate the other detainees, but he certainly didn't forget his face. Scarred down the left cheek from what looked like an old knife wound, Hassan was a man who Joe had assumed was violent. But he didn't say anything, as Hassan went back to speaking in Arabic, only this time Joe heard a female voice.

As the two of them talked, much faster and more animated than Joe was used to, almost as if they were arguing, he looked around the room to see if he could identify where he was. His vision had mostly returned now, though he was unable to wipe his eyes as his hands had been tied together with a piece of torn clothing. He was however able to see out of the window of the living room that he was held in. There was a large front garden that was slightly neglected, and in front of it stood the wall that separated the fork in the road – they were in Yvette's old house. The two of them had taken shelter from the harsh British winter in there, having noticed no activity there for some time. The house had in fact been vacant since Yvette's death over six months before, and the immigrants had made it their home of late. But all of Yvette's belongings were still in the house – she had outlived her nearest living relatives and was the last of the generation of her family, so nobody had claimed the belongings, nor the house.

The discussion between Hassan and the woman stopped when the screeching cry of a baby sounded from another room. The woman left immediately, leaving Hassan the opportunity to intimidate Joe, telling him, 'I know what you did to my people, my friends. You changed them, made them like you. And the others, some my family, you promised them a home and then you sent them back to the warzone in Yemen. So now you will do as I say, or I will sentence you to a death just like you did to my people.'

Joe took the threat seriously, as Hassan then grabbed his face, his nails digging deep into Joe's cheeks as he made him stare right into his depraved eyes. A scared Joe replied with a trembling voice, 'Wh ... what do you want? I can m ... make it happen – I have the power.'

'Yes, I know you have power, Joe. And you like to abuse it.'

Hassan's words cut into Joe almost as much as his dirty fingernails did, adding, 'So, you will let me and my family stay here, in this place. We will be free and legal to live here.'

'Done. I can make that happen.'

'Today, you will do it today.'

Joe paused to think, but Hassan tightened his grip, causing the skin to break on Joe's face underneath his stubbled cheeks. Hassan then let go, and retrieved a large knife from Yvette's kitchen and pointed it into Joe's neck, forcing him to loudly agree, '*Yes! I can do it today. Just don't kill me!*'

Hassan released the knife and gave Joe a sinister smile. He went back to his native Arabic, shouting something to the woman, who soon came through with the baby. Hassan then introduced his wife, Shainab, and his son, Omar. He released Joe before Shainab offered to clean his face and the wound on the back of his head. She too spoke English, and she told Joe of her and her family's struggles in Yemen, and how they had been trying for months to get through Europe, across to England. They travelled by foot, boat and lorry, all whilst trying to care for their child, and along the way they had lost cousins and friends who had either been caught or killed, some of whom were children. But the way that she spoke so fondly about Oxington, and about how she finally felt at peace there, had made Joe remember why he started this mission years ago. And no matter what Dominion or anybody had done to manipulate his life and the direction it went in, he knew that at one point his desire to help was pure and genuine, and now he had an opportunity to fulfil that forgotten desire.

After the conversation with Shainab, and now free of his makeshift handcuffs, Joe sensed a moment to catch Hassan in a better mood. So, he took the conversation back to his capture, asking, ‘How did you even get out of Brock House? Let alone know where to find me?’

‘It wasn’t difficult – I saw your ID badge at the detention centre, you liked to have it showing. And then when I got out, I did some research on a phone that I stole. Getting out was a bit harder, but I am very observant, so I studied the patterns and the habits of the guards. There is always a moment in the day when there is nobody around, when they hand over. We went through the kitchen and out a fire door. But this is why I need to be legal now, they will be looking for me. Maybe not here, but they will still want me.’

Joe took the hint and made a call to his contact at the Home Office. Within ten minutes Joe had got the status of Hassan and his family changed, and within the hour he had arranged for passports to be sent to their new home, in Oxington, using the pictures kept on record from their arrests. Joe assured them that he would be in the village to help them integrate, giving them his personal phone number should they run into any issues until their passports arrived. He planned to get them to attend a village meeting which he decided to arrange, where they would be introduced to the locals properly, and integrated into the community, as Joe had once hoped he would be able to do.

He didn’t say anything to them about what had happened to his mum as a result of their actions, but he did use the wounds that Hassan had inflicted on him to convince his mum, and Chris, that he had found and dealt with the threat. As much as Joe was feeling momentarily sentimental about the prospect of a family in need moving to his village, he couldn’t help but worry about more people that he had wronged getting to him, especially now that they had somebody they knew living there. So, Joe took the necessary steps to arrange for borders and security to be placed around Oxington, as they were in the new

villages, granting only access in and out to himself, and begrudgingly to Chris. Joe thought that the only residents that might want to leave would be Kelly and Amarjit, but it was a risk he was willing to take and a bridge he would cross if the time came.

Oxington had become a target, thanks to him, and soon he would be the most public figure in the country so he knew he had to protect those he loved whilst he still could. But soon wasn't far away, as public demands for more and more model villages became heated, and there were demands for Gillian to deliver something that only Joe could, or to step down, just as Charles had said it would happen.

Chapter 38

The prime minister's ousting was only a matter of time, but rather than being fearful of her doomsday, Gillian was well prepared for it. Dominion had eyes and ears on the ground, and so whilst they still had an identity to protect, they did all they could to move with the flow of the societal and political tide, rather than blatantly directing it. When the news came out about the success of the modern village trial and it was clear that Joe would soon become a favourite of the voters, Gillian was advised that her time was almost up.

She had lasted longer than many of her predecessors having come close to two full terms in charge, and, like Joe, her introduction to the hot seat was done at a time of unrest. In the late noughties, the era of patriarchy was coming to an end and change was well and truly needed to restore faith in the system that the public knew. So, in their foreshadowing wisdom, Dominion had chosen Gillian – a veteran of leadership, having spent over twenty years in various roles in the media and eventually in the shadow cabinet of the opposition at the time – to take the reins and bring back a balance in the eyes of the people.

Dominion was not exclusive to any one political party; they were the granters of change in the name of absolute power, regardless of where you came from or where you were heading. If they saw something in you or if you suited their agenda, then they pounced with forceful manipulation and extortion until they got you, as had happened with Gillian, and as

had happened with Joe. So, Gillian knew the process, and she put on a gallant front until the time came, and in the meantime, she prepped Joe for his eventual rise, as was her duty to the cause.

Joe would first need to follow the proper process in order to be considered as a candidate in the impending snap election that was due to be announced, which meant being nominated, having an election agent, and declaring his candidacy – all of which Lourell was responsible for. This would get him in the door as a Member of Parliament and make him eligible to be voted for – and the party that Joe would be running for leadership of was the Green Party, taking the constituency of Bristley West. The party was small enough to gain enough leadership votes quickly and quietly, but it was also a party that made sense to the direction that the country would soon be rapidly heading in, thanks to the introduction of country-wide model villages.

Joe's manifesto was built on the principles that he himself had wanted from the very start – for others to live like they he did in Oxington and ridding the country of emissions. It balanced on the delivery of the model villages within eight years, and the fulfilment of the Mary Project, which Joe had promised to ship overseas to meet the growing demand, and in turn it would raise trillions for the country's economy and GDP, turning the UK into the wealthiest nation in the world by 2023. He had the vision, he had the backing, and by the end of the month he would finally have the power that he had always hoped for.

Gillian's resignation came on the night that the first set of protests arrived in the North of England, followed by Scotland, the Midlands, and finally in London. She was with Joe the night that it all unfolded, on one of their several fast-tracking sessions on the way the country is run. On this night she wasn't melancholic, nor pensive, she was relaxed, and Joe had noticed a visible sense of relief in her persona. She wore casual clothing for the first time since he had known her, and her hair was tied up in a bun; this was a different Gillian, and a

nearly former prime minister. She would still fulfil her duties of the role until the election had concluded, giving Dominion's media enough time to push Joe at every possible opportunity. As the two of them sat in Joe's future house, watching on mute as the breaking news rolled in, she told him the story of how she ended up where she was today.

‘Their media was once my media when I worked for *Teleworld* – about ten years ago. I was a reporter there before I ventured into politics, and during that time I broke several scandals about the lives of some of the most influential politicians at the time. Some old, some new, they're all the same, but none were under Dominion's wing, so they didn't care for the stories.’

Joe listened intently, as it became clear that Gillian was giving him the biggest lesson that he could possibly get about where his life was heading.

‘But one particular story that got blocked from being printed was about the existence of an organisation that was influencing the then-prime minister into shady trade deals with India. I didn't know it at the time, but that organisation was Dominion, and I came closer than anybody to exposing them.’

‘What happened? Why didn't it get printed?’ asked Joe, naively, as though he were a child listening to an adult speak about something so grown up that his mind couldn't process it.

‘Come on, Joe, you know how this works by now. *They* blocked me. It's their world and it's their news, they can do what they like. They have intelligence agents beyond what you think you know, and back then against my knowledge, my chief editor was working for them. When I eventually came to work for Dominion and I saw my old boss, that's when I understood how this all works; they have always had people in the right places to suit their agenda.’

On the edge of his seat, Joe wanted to hear more and more, gripped by these tales that seemed like fantasy, when really, he was living through it himself already. He replied, ‘So, how did you end up working for them?’

‘You mean working for us?’

Joe laughed nervously before acknowledging, as Gillian continued, ‘After that, I left *Teleworld*, but I wanted to find out more about who these people were, so I went into politics – working for the opposition party at the time. They were watching me from the moment that I left though, using their intelligence agents to build up a portfolio of damage to bring me down with. A lot of it was empty threats, past mistakes that I have already paid for, but they found out something about my son.’

She paused there and turned her focus onto cutting the cheese from the spread that had been prepared for them. As soon as she mentioned her son, Joe knew where it was going. ‘It’s alright, I know what they do. They got me too,’ he told her.

Gillian looked up at Joe, the two of them forming a momentary alliance because of the secrets that they had held against them.

‘But here we are, and you have a job to do soon,’ said Gillian, who had returned to her more natural uptight state, despite her attire.

‘What will you do after?’

‘I’ve not thought that far ahead. I’ll do whatever they allow me to, I guess. Who knows, I might try and get my old job at *Teleworld* back.’

Suddenly, a knock at the door shocked the pair as it preceded Charles’ timely entrance into the study area where the two were working. Gillian and Joe both rushed to look busy, but Charles was wise to their ongoings, telling them, ‘You don’t need to pretend to work just because I’m here. We’re all friends, right?’

There was awkward laughter from the pair, as Charles continued, ‘I just wanted to see how you’re both getting on – the past and the future of this country. But I can see that you’re both hard at work, especially you Gillian – I thought you slept in that power suit of yours! Anyway, keep up the good work you two.’

Before he left, he looked up at Joe and asked, ‘How is your mum getting on? She must be so lonely on her own now, I know some communal places in Holloway, Wandsworth and Wormwood Scrubs that might be good for her.’

He then looked across to Gillian and said, ‘She could go with your son.’

When Charles turned around to leave, both Joe and Gillian looked down at the cheese knife that lay on the chopping board in front of them, then they looked at one another. If ever there was one, this was their moment to end Charles’ grip on them. The two kept their eyes locked, waiting for the other to make the move that they both wanted the other to make. But neither of them had the courage, nor the conviction to do it, and Charles had left, still alive and with his hands firmly around both of their necks still.

Chapter 39

Following a short but effective public campaign process to the members, Joe was about to be confirmed as leader of the Green Party, and in turn elected as the next prime minister of Great Britain. And though this had all been predetermined for him, Joe did allow himself a moment to reflect on what was soon going to happen; as at age twenty-six he would also be the youngest prime minister in modern history. As the ballots were still being counted and the results were coming in to show that the Green Party were, for the first time, on the verge of winning the majority of the seats in the House of Commons, he took himself away from the war room that he had been situated in for show and locked himself in a cubicle of the toilet.

He could hear the roars of jubilation from across the lobby as it was now official that from out of nowhere, the Green Party was soon going to be dictating the direction of the country, or so they thought. These men and women who had truly fought for the cause of the party – some for decades, people that Joe had just bypassed to take the leadership, and then the public vote, people who deserved to be in Joe's position. Now they were all blindly behind a man who was barely even a man, who wasn't even really in charge. But no matter how he got there, Joe wanted to remember this as the moment that he peaked, knowing that from this point on, he would be in the eyes of the public, and the mercy of Dominion.

He thought back to life just a few years ago and how simple it was, when going to the pub or watching cricket down the club was considered a busy day. When the highlight of the week was a roast dinner at his nan's house, followed by games of cribbage in front of the fire. It was moments like those that he missed the most because he knew that they could never come back, and any memories he would make going forward would be catastrophic ones. There was a knock on the door before a familiar voice from home asked, 'Joe? Are you in there? You've done it!'

It was Lourell, who had been by his side and overlooked countless moments of madness and repulsive behaviour over the past few years, all under the impression that she was making a difference to the world that she cared so deeply about. But soon he would have to let her go, as Dominion had already set up his workforce full of their own people; given the scale of the job, they chose not to risk bringing in anybody who was outside of their powers. But tonight wasn't the night to tell her about this, he would hold off for as long as he could, afraid to let her go.

'Wow. I ... I don't know what to say Lou. Just give me a minute, yeah?'

She knew what that meant, as she left him to finish his small bumps up the nostril, before he greeted her back in the lobby.

'Are you ready for this?' She asked firmly, trying to gauge how high he was based on his eyes, and whether or not he had any residue left on his nose, as was the drill now. But with a final brush off and direct eye contact, he told her, 'I'm ready. Let's fucking do this!'

There were already rows of cameras waiting outside the hotel where the party was stationed, as Joe prepared to give a speech that had been prepared for him. Standing tall and confident, Joe didn't let the flashing bulbs put him into a spin, as shouts of 'congratulations!' and 'well done, prime minister!' poured over him. Joe gave his cue cards one final glance, then threw them off, deciding to let the waiting media and nation know in his own words:

‘Today is a proud day, a historic day. I want to thank all of those who voted for me and believed in the Green Party. We worked hard for this moment, but the real work starts tomorrow. I also want to thank former prime minister, Gillian Parkinson, who did such an incredible job – particularly with the Mary Project, which is so dear to my heart.’

In his first public appearance as prime minister, Joe had gone off-script, choosing to mention Gillian, and his affiliation to the Mary Project. He knew that Charles would have something to say about it, but in that moment, with his brain producing enhanced levels of glutamate, he ignored the consequences and chose to go with his instincts, and with his rapidly beating heart. He didn’t have the time nor the capacity to stop and answer questions from the press, instead he posed briefly for pictures, before heading back inside to his awaiting party mates. But one face from the media stood out from the crowd, and Joe’s blurry eyes met the ones hidden behind the glasses of a *Teleworld* reporter; it was Harriet.

It was a surreal moment in an already surreal moment, as the two of them glanced at one another for a few seconds until Joe was ushered inside. Away from the hysteria in the lobby, he looked back to make sure that he wasn’t hallucinating, but there she stood, with her press bib on and the *Teleworld* logo branded across the front of it. She looked just as plain and pretty as Joe had remembered her, though he had not allowed himself the chance to remember her much at all since they last spoke. He couldn’t believe that she was here – was she there just for him or was it just a coincidence of the job? He wondered. But now wasn’t the time for his head to start spinning, as he needed to address his new party, but moments like this were what Joe fixated on more than anything – the moments that came to him in the shape of fate.

When he kept looking back in a tense and paranoid state, with his eyes bulging for clarity, Lourell, who had taken him away from the baying press, was unsure if it was the

drugs getting to him, or if something – or someone – had caught his attention. It didn't seem to affect his appearance in front of the cameras, from what she had seen, but now that they were inside away from the vultures, she took the time to seek out what was troubling him.

‘Everything OK, hun?’

Joe took a few more peeks behind him but they were too far away from the door now for him to make out anybody. He knew that it was her, but his brain wouldn't allow him to validate what he had seen. Eventually, he replied, ‘Yeah, I think I just saw somebody I know, that's all.’

‘Oh, right, who was it?’

‘You met her actually, that reporter who came to the school years ago, Harriet.’

‘That girl from the *Echo*? What's she doing 'ere? I thought it was only the big papers allowed?’

Lourell's West Country twang had never left, no matter how far from home they got on Joe's journey, it just surfaced more when she was with Joe. So, when it came out in an obvious fashion, he always chuckled to himself, as he did now before answering her. ‘Yeah, that's her. But she's not with the *Echo* – she's with Teleworld by the looks of it.’

‘I see. Well, she's done alright for herself, ain't she! Still, bit weird that she's 'ere.’

Joe agreed, but before he went back into the war room, he asked Lourell to get some contact info for Harriet. All he had was her old email address which would no longer be working, and he didn't have her phone number after deleting it when they finished romantically. He had to know how and why she was there, and unlike the twist of fate when Kelly had come back into his life, this time he struggled to repress his emotions.

Now that he was a public figure, he had been trained on how to act in front of the media, and his twitches had been highlighted as a problem area. Everything that he did would be scrutinised – whether the press was on his side or not, all it took was the wrong move or

the wrong journalist and Joe could be pulverised for it. And with the way that he left things with Harriet, Joe needed his coping mechanisms more than ever, but fortunately for him he had a welcome distraction thanks to his political party, who hadn't waited for him to celebrate.

They didn't know Joe, other than for the work he had done with the new villages in the North East, and some of them weren't happy about how rapidly he had risen to prominence from seemingly nowhere. But regardless of their feelings towards him, they were able to recognise the immediate impact he had for the cause of their shared beliefs, and the history that had been made in the process. He was doused in champagne by those he would oversee tomorrow and pushed back and forth around the room in elated debauchery. Some held him down whilst others poured drinks down his throat until he was a frothing mess, he was indeed their new leader, but nobody that evening would let it be known yet. The raucous scenes carried on until the early hours of the morning, leaving Joe dishevelled and utterly drained for his first day in office.

Chapter 40

After several rounds of vomiting and convulsions across his body, Joe made it into his new office in the most inconspicuous way that a prime minister could. Using decoy cars that Lourell had set up to avoid detection, and wearing clothes unbefitting of a worldwide leader, he arrived undetected and still smelling of the night before. But when he arrived, he was greeted with unwanted guests to wish him well on his first day in charge – Charles, Chris and Lizzie. The trio had been waiting for Joe's arrival for some time, ready to brief him on how they wanted him to conduct himself, and he was already failing his first test. But against his will, he had already failed another test from the previous evening's misdemeanours, as Lizzie held in her hand the results of a drugs test taken from a urine sample gathered from him when he was unaware. She gleefully held it up, as she read out the drugs found to be in Joe's system, 'Ketamine, Alprazolam, Viormone and Ataluren.'

The Viormone was a testosterone injection which Joe had been using recently in the hopes that it would somehow cause his hair to regrow. But the Ataluren had been administered in an attempt to help slow the effects of Werner's Syndrome on his muscles. A weary and off-guard Joe was left speechless as well as chair-less, as Charles had occupied his seat, and began to reprimand him.

‘I knew that something was off, you’ve been tweaking and gurning more than those homeless folk you befriended. Did you get this filth from them?’ He scolded at Joe.

Joe shrugged his shoulders petulantly, causing Charles to jump up out of his seat, and snap at him, ‘This stops right now! You hear me?! Look at the state of you, you’re no prime minister, you’re pathetic. Every day we will test you for this shit. And if I even get so much as a hint that you’re using, then I will personally end you.’

Charles’ blunt words were met with a great slamming of his palms on the table that startled everyone in the room. He was serious, and everybody – especially Joe – knew it. But Charles wasn’t finished with Joe yet, telling him, ‘And that little stunt you pulled last night with your speech, don’t think I didn’t hear that. You do as we say, when we say, starting now.’

Charles ordered Chris to bring in Lourell from the desk next door which she assumed to be hers, but Joe knew exactly what that meant as he held his head in his hands, trying to somehow hide from the situation. Lourell looked around at the familiar and once friendly faces, but nobody was smiling, so her smile turned flat as her instincts detected the bad energy instantly. She asked Joe, ‘Is everything alright, prime minister?’

Lourell was expected to address Joe appropriately now, but Charles couldn’t help but let out a snicker, causing her to seek validation from Joe. ‘What’s going on here, prime minister? Why are these people here?’

Joe turned to Charles, as he pleaded with his eyes for him to tell her instead. But Charles, along with the others, remained silent, leaving Joe with the task he had been dreading. ‘Lourell, I don’t ... they’re here because,’ Chris interjected, fearing that Joe didn’t have it in him to lie anymore.

‘I’m here to congratulate my son, Lourell, and why not mix it with a bit of business.’

Chris thought that he had got away with it, until Lourell replied, 'But he's not your son, though, is he?'

Audible gasps filled the room as Charles began to turn a deep red, bubbling up to a boiling point, as he fired back at Joe, '*She knows?! She fucking knows?!*'

Lourell stood in front of Joe to project him from the barrage of hate that was heading in his direction, telling them all, 'I know. And I know who you really are. All of you. Disgusting, that's what you lot are.'

Over the couple of years that they spent living together, Joe had found it harder and harder to keep up with his lies and what he was doing each day. He needed a release if he was to keep it up on a daily basis, and he had found solace in Lourell. She had been so forgiving and lenient towards him with his drug addictions, and she had cared for him when his muscles were weak from his disease, so Joe had felt comfortable enough to feel vulnerable around her, knowing that she would not react and would just listen, as Joe had needed.

As the mounting disbelief in the room grew, so did Charles' anger, causing Lourell to take the brunt of the abuse away from the cowering Joe. Tirades flew in from all angles hoping to land on Joe, but Lourell stood firm in front of her boss. After Charles had been restrained by Lizzie and Chris – with considerable effort despite his age - he left the office for long enough for Joe to reappear. It was him and Lourell on one side of the room, and Lizzie and Chris in another, both talking quietly amongst themselves, plotting their next moves. But before long, Charles had come back in the room, and everybody else stood eerily still, unsure of what his next move might be.

He was calmer, with his hands in his pockets as he paced slowly back towards the desk at the far side of the room where Lizzie and Chris were, standing directly in front of Joe and Lourell. He had joined them in their stand-off, but as well as the numbers advantage, Charles had the upper hand – producing a suppressed pistol from his jacket pocket that he

had just acquired from their car and pointing it at the targets opposite. Lizzie and Chris looked at one another, both unsure about what to do, whilst both Joe and Lourell both instinctively held their hands up, panicking and scared.

‘You don’t have to do this, please, Charles!’ begged Lourell, who was still the only one showing bravery as she once again stood to protect the man she now idolised.

‘But I do have to do this, Lourell. You know too much.’

The words could barely resonate before the fiercely loud pop of the bullet leaving the gun barrel and puncturing Lourell’s chest spread through the air. She instantly fell to the ground as the blood poured from her, and Joe stood there in shock, looking down as she lay there dying. He went to motion towards her lifeless body, but Charles stopped him, ‘Leave her. And just know that it should have been you.’

A petrified Joe did as he was told, leaving his confidante there in front of him, to take her painful last breaths. He remained a presence over her, trembling and sobbing until her body was taken away by somebody that Chris had called. As Joe soon found out about his new office, it also acted as a safe room in the event of an emergency and had a hidden exit, which was used for the disposal of the body and the mess that had been caused. Lourell, like many other people of her age in the village, had no living relatives. She had outlived her parents and her husband, leaving no children or siblings behind, only an overwhelming feeling of protection that Joe would cherish her for.

After the dust had settled on the transpiring events of Joe’s first day in office, Charles sat him down and told him, with unflustered decorum as if nothing had even happened, exactly how Joe’s life would go from here on in.

‘You will listen to me and me alone, you will get clean, and you will wear a suit every day until you die. You will smile every time you leave your house, and you will absolutely not – under any circumstances – breathe a word of our existence to anybody. I know your

family; I know your secrets and I know how scared you really are. So, use that fear to get yourself out of bed every morning and do as you are told. This can be the best time of your life, or it can be the shortest, it's your choice. You're as disposable as Lourell was, so remember that.'

Charles' furrowed brow was prominent, as the skin of his eye lids folded almost over his eyes, making it look as though he was close to falling asleep when he talked seriously. His jowly cheeks still allowed for dimple marks after he gave Joe a menacing smirk, but the skin on his face was so stretched that he couldn't help but look like a man over eighty. But still his presence was felt, and his message was heard, as Charles, along with Lizzie and Chris, all left Joe to be by himself in his new office for the first time. And, as instructed, Joe got changed into the suit that Lourell had previously pressed ready for him, that he was told he must wear, and with the fear of God looming over him he got to work.

But it wasn't the work of a prime minister that Joe delved into, he had a party of politicians who were already doing that for him; it was work on a plan that had been years in the making, a plan to end Charles' ruling and take his place at the head of the Dominion table. He knew that he couldn't live his life like this for much longer, and with his drugs being taken away he also knew that he might not be living much longer at all. So, he spent the rest of his first day in charge of the country devising and plotting away, as he hoped to get the true power he needed to make as much change to the world as he could, whilst he still could, starting with the death of Charles Watson.

Chapter 41

Over the first few months of his tenure, Joe kept as low a profile as any prime minister could, attending internal meetings, public conferences and being scrutinised at the Houses of Parliament. Each morning he woke he was subjected to a urine test, then, when he got into his suit, he made his way down a floor in his house to his office. When he arrived at his office – no later than eight o'clock – he was briefed by Charles about expectations for each public appearance he would have that day. He did as he was told and followed orders, keeping his life as regimented as he could, which helped as he went fully cold turkey from the drugs his body had become accustomed to, knowing exactly when the nausea and chills would happen. He also got severe muscle pain, and it was difficult for him to know if it was from the withdrawals or part of his disease, but all he could take were over-the-counter pain killers now, which had been bought for him.

He had managed to stay out of trouble with Charles, having done exactly what he had told him to since watching him kill Lourell, but there had been nothing of great significance for Joe to act upon, as yet. However, they would shortly be announcing the first phase of the 'Redevelopment of Britain', as it was labelled, having chosen six counties to start the operation in: Three in England, one in Scotland, one in Wales, and one in Northern Ireland. This phase would take two years to complete, but the plan that was to be announced would

show when the rest of the counties would follow, finishing in Greater London. And, as before, all residents were given a choice in the matter – but, unlike before, there would be fewer and fewer places to go if anybody did say no – as within eight years they would be forced to either survive on the outskirts and in the wilderness that surrounded the villages, or they would need to leave the country.

This would be especially difficult as by that time, modes of transportation would be severely limited – both in and out of the country. House numbers would be matched like for like, as they were in Upper Shields, and again the quotas would need to be filled, so the same principles applied with filling them. Prisons would be rebuilt into detention and intense rehabilitation centres in the villages, with the aim of making their stays temporary until they showed signs of significant mental improvement, by way of specially designed reactionary tests and detection methods. The plan was designed to give the people of Britain a choice that they would have no choice but to accept, and, after monitoring and strategizing the fallout from the Upper Shields trial, Dominion was about to hit the start button on the biggest social experiment the world had ever seen.

Joe's daily routine saw him regularly monitored, leaving him with little chance to seek out a way to get to Charles alone, but with their impending announcement, Charles had given Joe a window of opportunity in which he might be able to seek his revenge. On the evening before the announcement, Charles invited Joe to his hotel suite in West London to discuss and fine-tune the approach to and – more importantly in Charles' eyes – the delivery of the announcement. Knowing that this would be the first time that Joe would really be tested, he would be performing a rehearsal for Charles, where he would be picked apart and scrutinised on everything he did, from his tone of voice to his choice of tie, down to the closeness of his shave. Joe saw it as nothing more than a way for Charles to belittle him, but

it was something that he would do a thousand times over if it meant catching Charles on his own.

This was the first time that Charles had invited Joe anywhere, having always made the trip to see Joe himself, and Joe's only exchanges with him had been over the phone since he took over as prime minister. There had been no interactions with Lizzie, nor Chris, as they had been sent to work on securing Dominion's expansion into the Middle East along with Lizzie's husband who was of Saudi descent, hoping to acquire deals with the rich, powerful, corrupt and the hostile, in the countries that surrounded Saudi Arabia, in an attempt to compel the Crown Prince into joining them too. It would put Dominion in a position where they could viably influence politics on a global level that matched the UN and cause them a dilemma which would give them no option but to react. All of this meant that Lizzie and Chris wouldn't be there when Joe met Charles, leaving him to just summon the courage to take down the man who had controlled his life since birth.

But when Joe arrived at the top-floor hotel suite, which took up the entirety of the floor space, and he took one look at Charles, he could see why he hadn't gone to the Middle East himself. Perhaps his age and lifestyle had finally caught up with him, assumed Joe, seeing Charles appear weak and frail for the first time. His attire was also befitting of a man who only sought comfort in what he wore, opting for a thick, woollen cardigan, baggy jogging bottoms and fur-lined moccasin slippers. He appeared a shadow of the man Joe had feared, but still he walked and still he talked enough to command something of a presence, wearily telling Joe, 'Don't let my appearance fool you, I'd still shoot you if I needed to.'

This wicked attempt at humour fell short on Joe, who, after closer inspection, couldn't get over how ill he looked. He had gone there with the intention to kill him but seeing him in this state had made him have second thoughts about it. It reminded him of seeing his nan for the first time when she was sick and brought back feelings of guilt and regret that he couldn't

help her. This time, though, he didn't need to worry about the treatment that he was or wasn't getting like his nan, knowing that Charles had the very best in innovative care at his disposal. Instead, all he needed to worry about was if he could kill somebody who already seemed so close to death.

As the pair stepped slowly towards the array of sofas and armchairs that seemed more appropriate in Saudi Arabia than they did London, as did the luxury rugs that they were stepping on, cream and golden in colour, Joe got the impression that it wouldn't be long until Charles would die of his own accord. But he still needed to take his place in charge of Dominion before he did pass away, so one way or another he would need to coerce the old man. He had planned to spike him – first by lacing a drink with ketamine if he got the opportunity. Joe knew that he would have some time to get Charles to sign the backdated letter that he had prepared about the determination of the leadership of Dominion in the event of his death after he had ingested the drugs – just as long as he presented it to him right at the sweet spot after the initial floating high, but before the black hole appeared and he would be rendered incapable of doing anything but tormenting himself. Then, he would add enough Xanax to his drink so that he wouldn't wake up. It was a way to kill Charles and rid him of the drugs that had plagued him, having begrudgingly committed to living a clean lifestyle now.

But killing somebody was a lot easier to think about than to do, and Joe had no more time to think about it as he needed to rehearse for tomorrow's announcement with Charles. He also couldn't see that Charles had a drink, so he put the thought out of his mind entirely for now to focus on the task at hand. Charles, although feeble in body, was still strong of mind, and he seemed as sharp as ever as he laid out the key points that Joe had to hit if he was going to make this moment a success. Charles had vast experience in preparing the leaders of the country for times like these, and he came across as a man who genuinely cared

for the cause, so much so that he would even kill for it, as Joe knew well enough. His attention to detail was unmatched and if nothing else, Joe respected how much he wanted this change to happen, despite the cost it had and would still come at. And as the two worked deep into the night, Charles showed signs of exhaustion, nodding off from time to time, which is when Joe noticed the gun.

It was the same gun that Charles had used to kill Lourell, and it was just sitting there on the bookshelf behind his seat. Unsure if he could, Joe's legs decided for him as he got up softly from the plush sofa and made his way over to it. The suppressor was still on it, as Joe became caught in a conflict of emotions – it wasn't how he planned to do it, but the opportunity seemed too good to ignore. As he reached to pick up the gun, the front door of the suite knocked quickly and quietly before a woman dressed in scrubs brashly entered. Joe instantly put his hands behind his back to act as though he hasn't been caught, when the woman said, 'Mr Watson, wake up! It's time for your chemo.'

She looked over at Joe who was shuffling inconspicuously back to his seat just as Charles was waking up thanks to the pitch of the woman's voice, which was shrill and cockney, enough to wake even a hibernating bear. Slightly dazed, he told the woman, 'Hurry up, I'm in a meeting – can't you see?!'

But Charles insistence didn't fluster the woman, who was Charles' private nurse and had clearly become accustomed to his demeanour. Once she had hooked the IV needle into his forearm veins, she prepared the Doxorubicin to be released into him. The liquid was thick and red, like blood, and dripped slowly into Charles, who insisted he and Joe continue.

The nurse showed Charles where she had put his morphine tablets for when he felt too much pain, 'I'll come back and check on you later, Mr Watson,' she said, before leaving the two of them to reconvene.

Joe was unsure of what to do or say, but Charles carried on right where he left off before he fell asleep, not missing a single beat, until his speech began to slur. He was getting delirious from the chemo, and soon he started calling Joe by the name of his son, Michael. After a while Charles began to sob, telling him that he was so glad to see his son alive. When Charles then told him that he was dying, Joe responded, 'Dad, what will happen to all of this? Everything that you've built. It needs to stay in the family,'

To which Charles replied, 'It does my boy, but I've taken Lizzie's name off it. She can't be trusted, not with something this big.'

'But what about me, Dad? I'm here, why don't you let me have it?'

Charles' face grew a drawn-out smile at the thought of leaving his legacy to his son once more. Joe then told him, 'All you have to do is sign this, Dad. Then it will all be over,'

Charles, thanks to the help of his delirium-induced son, pushed up on the chair and sat upright. Joe handed him the letter and got him to sign it without quibble. Staying in the role, Joe kissed Charles on the forehead as he imagined his son would, then told him to rest, as he drifted off in his chair. When Charles was in a deep sleep, Joe then got the packet of morphine tablets that was sitting on the table next to Charles and started to crush them all up using the gun from the bookshelf. But as he was doing so, he heard the same quick and quiet knock on the door and Charles' nurse entered once more. This time Joe held onto the gun and hid it behind his back before the nurse looked over to him, suspiciously this time. 'Why are you always over there? What are you doing?'

Joe panicked, unsure if he could think quickly enough on his feet to lie his way out of the situation. The gun's grip was softening under the excess of sweat that had built in Joe's right palm, as he hastily replied, 'Erm, he fell asleep again. I was just looking at the books, waiting for him to wake up.'

The nurse glanced at him for a few seconds more before motioning towards her patient, and Joe's panic stations were setting off alarms in his brain. He knew he had to act as the woman tried to wake Charles – this time her voice not being enough, so, before she could get over to him, Joe pointed the pistol and shot her in the neck.

The sound of the gunfire, although suppressed, was enough to wake Charles, who had the splatters of his nurse's blood across his face and body. Instead of emptying the blue powdered morphine into the remains of the Doxorubicin drip, hoping to gradually kill him before he woke, Joe chose to shoot Charles, too. His last sight was that of Joe, who he thought to be his son, pointing a gun into his dry, open mouth. Joe sat there for a while after, just staring at the bodies of the lives that he had just taken, wondering if this is how his mum had felt after killing Billy. Before he left, Joe placed the wiped down gun in Charles' hand and put the forged letter on Charles' lap, making it appear as a murder-suicide.

Chapter 42

The next morning, Joe woke with a spring in his step before the realisation that he had killed two people the night before had set in. He felt no sorrow for Charles having planned to go there with the intention of killing him, but the nurse who got caught in the middle of his plan had got him feeling overwhelmingly remorseful. The guilt clung to him like a spider's web on a day when he needed to be fully alert and focused, but all he could think about was the woman who he knew nothing about. A stranger just doing her job, that's all she was to Joe, and she could have been anybody – a mother, a daughter, a wife – but not anymore. He didn't even have the influence of drugs to fall back on to try and justify his actions, instead he was left with the sober knowledge that he was a murderer.

Today though, Joe also needed a sense of urgency, as he prepared to deliver the news to the nation at nine o'clock that morning that would solidify his place in history. Not only was he going to announce the roadmap for the redevelopment of Britain, but he would also be announcing the mandatory inclusion of Mary Project implants for all residents in the villages. Before he could even comprehend the scale of the announcement and the fallout from it, he got a knock on the door of his bedroom. It was soft and quick, just like the nurse's knock, making the guilt grow even deeper, but when they knocked again, this time with purpose, Joe feared it was the police.

‘Open up, prime minister, come on. You know you have to do this.’ *Knock, knock, knock*, they continued, until eventually Joe accepted that he had to meet his fate. His trepidation had led him to focus on the possibility that it could only be bad news at the door, but if he had listened to the voice then he would have realised that it was the same voice which greeted him every morning to take his urine sample for the drugs test, much to his relief. As Joe went to call the man into his bedroom, he suddenly realised that there was no longer anybody to report the results to. So, to avoid raising suspicion, he duly provided his urine sample, then, as soon as the sample collector, who was a member of Charles’ personal staff, had gone, Joe found the ketamine that was intended for Charles the night before, and he sniffed up an overdue bump from the webbing of his thumb. A couple more went up his nose before he began to feel something, and soon he was taken away from the guilt he was wrapped up in and transported back to his happy place. The undeniable rush of euphoria that he had been forced to deny himself had returned at a time when he needed it the most, and now he was able to get to work.

With the returning spring in his step, he got out his best suit – a tailor-made black jacket and trousers which had subtle, grey pinstripes running down it. He paired it with a black and white dogtooth shirt, and a dark grey knitted tie. Heavily polished, black monk shoes completed the outfit that Joe had chosen to wear on this, his biggest day. But amid the rush of the drugs and the need to get ready, he noticed specks of blood on his fingers and his neck. The euphoria had quickly turned to paranoia as he scrambled to check the suit that he wore last night to Charles’ suite, and there he found more blood. It could have been from either of his victims, but right now that didn’t matter to him, instead he rued his naivety and unpreparedness for the situation.

What else had he forgotten? He wondered frantically in his mind, as he mentally retraced his steps from leaving the scene of the crime. The drugs were clouding his memory,

but for certain he knew that he had only gone from the elevator in the suite to the basement floor car park where his security guard and driver were waiting. From there he came back to his house and that's where he had been up until now. But intrusive thoughts kept entering his brain – did his guard or his driver notice the blood on him – or did the sample collector see it? He was nearing a panic attack when he remembered the Xanax that he also had planned for Charles, which he sprinted to find and ingest to calm himself down. Now the floating haze that came with mixing the two drugs had taken over Joe's state of mind, and he got into the shower to wash off the blood from his body.

After getting changed and shaved, Joe packed up his clothes from the previous night, put them into a large refuse bag, and brought them into the living room. Spring was fast approaching but the chimney damper on the fireplace was still open even though it had not been used since Joe moved in. So, Joe threw the clothes and the bag onto the fire, padded it out with kindling, and set the fireplace alight. Even in his influenced state, the irony of releasing harmful emissions into the atmosphere was not lost on Joe, who sat by the fire until the remains turned to ash. By this time each day Joe would usually be on a call with Charles, instead he watched as the blood from the bullet he put in him went up in smoke, in the house that he put Joe in.

When the time came for Joe to go to the press conference, he was sure that he had covered his tracks, so he put the events of the previous night behind him and was ready to take on anything that was in his way. Along with the drugs, his ruthless side had returned, as if he had inhaled the spirit of Charles by way of the smoke from the fire. Nothing could stand in his way, not even comments from his driver, who asked, 'Have you just come from a bonfire, prime minister?' The Xanax had balanced out in his brain now and the paranoia had stopped, so he didn't care to entertain the thought of why he smelt that way with an answer.

Instead, he pulled up the shutter between the front and the back seat and he went over his notes – amended with his surprise announcement.

There were hundreds of reporters waiting at the Green Party headquarters in South East London where the conference was being held, which made Joe think back to when he won the election and saw Harriet again. Lourell was killed before she could get Harriet's contact information for Joe, but he wondered if he might see her again, or if he really did imagine it. Behind the curtains of the podium, he looked out but couldn't see her, which set his mind at ease before he went out. So, with his faithful blend of narcotics back in his system, he headed out to address the nation:

'People of Great Britain, I stand before you today proud to announce the roadmap for the "Redevelopment of Britain". Its singular aim is to make our air emission free by the year 2033, starting with the rollout of what we are calling "Model Villages," which will replace the homes and the businesses that you know today. Following a successful trial, we will continue with the redevelopment, starting in Herefordshire, Lincolnshire, and Norfolk in England, Londonderry in Norther Ireland, Powys in Wales, and Midlothian in Scotland.

'We will then continue across the countries that make up Great Britain, going county to county, with redevelopment work completing by the end of 2023. We estimate that it will then take ten years before we are entirely emission free as a nation, and in turn become the standard bearer for the planet. Each household will soon receive an information pack that is specific to them and the plans for their area, and instructions on what you must to do to comply.

'As well as these groundbreaking redevelopment plans, I am also introducing the expansion of the hugely successful "Mary Project" to all residents and animals of the model villages. These implants will ensure that we as humans are safe from emitting emissions, as

are our animals. Details on these safe, but necessary implants will be delivered with your information packs.

‘By joining us on this mission to become a fully self-sufficient and sustainable nation, you will allow generations to come the chance at a happy life. I implore all households to join us in this historic part of not just Britain’s present – but its future, and the only way that it – and we, will survive.’

With those immortal words Joe stood tall and proud, as a nation watched with disbelief. He had no clue of what the reaction to his announcements might be, and neither did he care, because this was now all about power. He felt untouchable as he smiled and posed for pictures, still not able to see Harriet beyond the blinding lights of the camera flashes. But when his eyes had recovered from the sparking shower of the cameras, the first face that he saw backstage was hers. ‘I knew I didn’t imagine it,’ said Joe, who was greeted with a smile from this familiar face.

‘I can’t believe how far you’ve come!’ Harriet replied, with gleeful pride, before adding, ‘Am I allowed to hug you – or will your security come and tackle me?’

‘Probably best if I initiate it. Come here.’

Their embrace was the most contact that Joe had with a woman for years, and he held on as though it might be his last ever, before Joe’s security did eventually attempt to break it up – whispering to him about the cameras that were still around. But still he held on to her, remembering the warmth that the simpler time they once shared brought him. When the two eventually let go of one another, Joe was quick to point out the *Teleworld* press pass that hung around Harriet’s neck. ‘When did this happen?’

‘Recently, actually. The last couple of months – about when you became prime minister, actually.’

Joe looked at her proudly, as though he had something to do with her journey just by way of association. The last time that they had spoken was when Joe ended their brief relationship, though Harriet had tried several times to reach out, but Joe had chosen to forget about that in the moment. ‘Well, I’m really proud of you. Look at us – who’d have thought it?!’ said Joe, who was running on high end drugs, adrenaline, and surprise all at once.

‘I know! It’s been a crazy time,’ She replied.

‘Maybe we should have a proper catch up soon? As long as it’s off the record this time.’

Joe laughed much harder than Harriet at his own sarcasm, but it was clearly a wound that still hadn’t fully healed for him, and one that he had chosen in the moment now to remember. Still though, Joe beckoned his new assistant who took Harriet’s details to arrange some time for them to get together. But little did Joe know that Harriet was coming to take him down, and she wasn’t alone. Joe however was interrupted by an unknown caller on his Dominion phone, and he knew it was a call that he couldn’t ignore.

Chapter 43

When news spread to Oxington about Joe's plans for the country, Kelly and Amarjit were both sceptical and slightly fearful of what they had heard from him. Both had given up their old lives to join Joe in the village, all under the guise of making a difference by using the Mary Project on animals. But now, the device that they helped to bring to life and manufacture, would be used on humans too, and they didn't know if they too would have to have them. All of their testing had been on animals, so for Joe to announce it for humans meant that either he had either gone rogue with the testing or not tested at all, and either outcome had left them feeling betrayed by him.

Neither had been back to their former homes since they started work on the Mary Project, dedicating their lives to the cause for several years, so they planned to tell Joe that they would be taking a break from work for a while – he was still their boss, after all. However, to their dismay, neither was able to leave the village due to the border patrol that Joe had set up in his infinite paranoia from the last time that he was there. The pair were stuck in the village, with neither of them knowing how long for, and had Joe become unreachable. So, they contacted the one person that they knew he would respond to – Amanda.

She was back on her feet now after her accident, thanks in part to Amarjit's help, but when she was accosted by the two helpless colleagues, she was unaware about what her son had done and was trying to do.

‘Amanda, you have to talk to him! He's gone too far – keeping us caged in here like this. *He can't do this to us, even if he is the prime minister!*’ Exclaimed Kelly, as she and Amarjit approached the recently added stables where Amanda was tending to her new horses. She had spent some time during her recovery around her friend's horses and decided to take a few off her hands who were nearing end of life. She hoped to prolong their lives by giving them the attentive care that they needed, but she also found their presence therapeutic, often spending time with them to escape – or rather avoid – reality. So, the news of her son's headline news and the local discrepancies he had caused, came as quite the surprise.

Amarjit was calmer in her approach, knowing that she still had to live with Amanda, simply asking her cousin, ‘Have you spoken to him lately, my lovely?’

Amanda paused before her response, and a sombre look fell over her face. ‘I haven't. Not since he was here last. I don't know if he even remembers us, or me, anymore.’

‘Well, you need to talk to him – and fast.’ Kelly's tone was bordering on disrespectful now, and Amarjit gave her a look which told her to back down.

An empty Amanda then responded, ‘You're right, I should talk to him, he's my son. But what's he done? I keep away from the news and the gossip now, ever since he got too busy for me.’

As the two explained what Joe had done – first to keep them in the village, then his plans for the country, Amanda was taken aback. She knew that her son was protective, and always wanted to help, but all of this to her seemed extreme. She agreed to call Joe then and there, but he didn't answer. So, using her motherly intuition, she called several numbers that she found online in an attempt to reach the prime minister, but to no avail, until finally she

contacted Chris. As the group waited for a response, Kelly asked, 'What is it that Chris does for a living? Joe never did tell me.'

'Not sure, it's very secretive, like GCHQ or something. But he can't even tell me, so I doubt Joe knows.' Amanda's naivety had shown, not considering that Joe would likely be Chris' boss now that he was the prime minister. She added, 'But maybe he'll have a way of contacting him,' and she was right. Shortly after Amanda received a call from a number in Jordan – it was Chris.

'Everything OK?' he asked in a hushed voice, 'I need to talk to Joe, it's urgent. Have you seen the news?' Replied Amanda.

'Erm, yeah. Is that why you want to talk to him?'

'Chris, he's my son, I have to talk to him now.'

'Our son,'

'You know what I mean. He's my son and I'm worried about him. He needs my help. Do you know how to reach him?'

'It's not a good time here right now. Have you tried his assistant?'

'Of course, Lourell! I'll try her. Thank you.'

'Erm, sure, Lourell. Try her.'

'Thank you, Chris. If you do speak to him, then tell him to call me.'

'I will do. Got to go now.'

Amanda scrambled through her contacts until she found Lourell's mobile number, but when she tried calling, the line was dead. She tried again several times, but still the same monotone. Her senses kicked in to tell her that something was wrong, but she needed to hear from Joe, so she, Kelly and Amarjit waited for a call back.

Chris had seen the announcements live that morning, and Joe's plans had sent shockwaves across the other side of the world to them. Both he and Lizzie had tried

frantically to contact Charles to see if he had approved it, but neither of them could get him to pick up. But shortly after the announcement, Lizzie received a call from an unknown number – it was Charles’ lawyer, informing her that Charles had killed himself, along with his nurse. They were found by the man who did the drug testing on Joe, delivering the results to Charles as he did each morning. He had called Charles’ private doctor who found in his medical notes that his lawyer was listed as Charles’ next of kin, and he had been calling all people of interest that morning, including Joe.

As per Charles’ request in a letter that he had left to be found, a meeting was to take place within twenty-four hours of finding the letter, to determine his asset distribution, including control of Dominion. Lizzie and Chris were both ordered back, whilst Lizzie’s husband stayed to continue with business. Joe too was summoned to the meeting that he had devised, but he had also been summoned by Chris to call his mother.

‘Finally,’ said Amanda, as Joe’s name popped up on her phone with an incoming call, ‘Hello.’

‘Hi mum, I’ve got some missed calls from you. Is everything alright?’

‘Well, no, not really, Joe. I’ve been trying you all morning, and Chris, and Lourell.’

‘Lourell?’

‘Yes, your assistant, Lourell, the one you stole from me. But her phone is dead. I’ve got Amarjit and Kelly here who say they can’t leave the village, and then they tell me about what you announced this morning. What’s going on?’

Joe’s breathing became audibly heavy down the receiver of the phone, as he prepared to get himself momentarily out of explaining everything then and there. ‘I’ll come back to the village, just give me a couple of days. I promise, I’ll fill you in on all of it, all of you.’

He could hear Kelly shout something in the background out of frustration, but his mother agreed to his request.

The next morning, Joe's routine was completely gone. No longer did he wake to the sound of pounding on his door and pissing in a cup, instead, he took the first of his three daily doses of Ataluren, to finally help ease the pain in a way that over-the-counter drugs couldn't do for his condition. He woke slowly, and eased himself into the day ahead, which revolved around him officially getting the power that he had placed upon himself, the power that he needed to drive his vision forward.

The meeting was at nine o'clock, and Joe was eager to get it over with – so much so that he disregarded any thought of the inevitable fallout from the Dominion meeting. However, seeing the grieving faces of Chris and Lizzie at Charles' lawyer's office had made him snap back to reality, and realise the severity of the situation. This was all because of actions that he had taken, because of the lives that he had ended, and that same guilt that he felt yesterday morning had returned.

'Is this everybody?' asked Joe, who was expecting more of the faces he had become accustomed to from the Dominion address book.

'This is everybody, prime minister. Please, take a seat,' replied Crispin, Charles' lawyer of twenty years, whose calming presence and deep voice melted any lingering nervousness away from Joe. He was large in stature, with muscles that were defined even through his pale grey suit that helped complement his aura, which put everyone at ease. He was a man who Joe could tell was meticulous, from the precision of his thin goatee to the cleanness of his fade that blended into his short, but prominent, wavy afro hair.

Chris gave Joe a simple nod, in keeping with the drab mood that filled the room, but Lizzie didn't acknowledge him as her face was buried in her hands, sobbing at the loss of her grandfather. Seeing her like this had reminded him of the times that she would be vulnerable with him about the troubles in her marriage when the two of them were intimate, which

seemed like such a distant and unbelievable memory to Joe now. But here they were years later, with the man who Joe thought was his dad now her lover, and Joe being the man who killed her grandfather, a thought that he could also hardly fathom. As Crispin prepared all of the documents ready to disseminate, Joe felt a craving for something to take the edge off what was about to go down. But his urges would need to wait, as Crispin first read out Charles' Will.

First came the possessions, most of which had great value, then the estates, of which there were many, and finally the inheritance that he had left behind – all of which were appointed to Chris as the main benefactor. All three of them looked up in disbelief at the news, before Lizzie stood up and turned her tears of sadness into those of rage. Chris and Joe had known that Charles had taken Lizzie out of the will, but they had no idea that he had put Chris there instead.

'You've got to be joking! Surely that's a mistake!' exclaimed Lizzie, who was visibly raging.

'I can only read what's in front of me, Lizzie.' said Crispin, attempting to defuse the moment, but what he would say next would tip push her past breaking point. *'There is something here for you, though.'*

Her ears pricked up and the ranting momentarily stopped, as he continued, *'To my nearest living relative – that's you Lizzie – I leave you with my remains following my cremation.'*

With a temper that Joe only knew too well, Lizzie proceeded to kick and scream her way around the office upon hearing the insulting statement, throwing Crispin's laptop into the wall and ripping up whatever documents she could get her hands on. Crispin then hit the panic button, and two burly men came in, almost as though they were waiting for this to happen, and they took her away. After some brief tidying and restoring of the peace, Crispin

was then able to deliver the final part of Charles' post-death wishes, which came in the form of a mysterious letter, that read: *'In the event of my death, I, Charles Edward Watson, Earl of Tyne and Wear, hand over absolute control of the governing group known as Dominion to Joeseeph William Blue, of 51 Oxington Lane. I wish for the group to continue the efforts that were founded by my father, under the leadership and vision of Joe, in the hopes of making this a world where perfect exists.'*

With those words, Joe now officially had the power that he had always wanted, the power to determine the way the world would look, and the way that people would behave. A concerned Chris, suddenly realising that Joe now owned him, held out his hand to congratulate him. As Joe met his hand and shook it, Lizzie came back in the room, seeing Joe smiling she asked, 'Why are you so happy?'

To which Joe, who had waited for this moment since she destroyed his initial prototype, replied, 'I'm your new boss.' He then handed her the letter, which bore Charles' signature, and watched as she broke down in tears once more.

With a determined look and watery eyes, she looked at Joe and angrily said, 'You did this – you were the last one to see him!'

Joe then beckoned the security to take her away again, before telling Chris, 'Take care of her – just like Charles took care of Lourell. And spread the word to the others about who is in charge now.'

Chapter 44

Following the confirmation that he now had control over Dominion, Joe was feeling on top of the world – a world that he was in prime position to now influence in the way that he always imagined. With his confidence higher than it had been in many years – ever since he was first dating Harriet, he decided that he would make her a proposal. Seeing her again in his life was the serendipity that he needed to know that she was the one for him after all, and he didn't want to waste any more time in getting her back. So, he instructed his assistant to bring her to his residence in Chequers, away from London and the attention that they would receive there.

Without the fear of Charles keeping a watchful eye on his every move or being constantly worried about slipping up in case his secrets were brought to light, Joe began to think about what *he* wanted now. His mission of vengeance was over, but his mission of achieving perfection was only just beginning, and in his mind, he couldn't achieve perfection without love. Living a life without love was what he feared now, having been so desperate for it in the past, so it wasn't death nor exposure that scared him, it was not having somebody that he could share his vision with, so he had to do everything in his newly gained powers to get Harriet by his side, which started with coercing her into visiting him.

Before she entered the extraordinary sixteenth-century country manor, Harriet was checked for devices that could be used to record anything and told to leave them at the lobby,

which she saw as appropriate given the circumstances. She was escorted through the lobby and into the lounge area, where Joe was waiting for her. Not dressed in a suit, instead opting for a red polo shirt, beige chinos and navy-blue boat shoes, he still looked every bit the part that he seemed destined to play. But Harriet was there playing a part too, and so she came dressed in the very same outfit that she wore on their first date.

Portraits of prime ministers past adorned the walls of Chequers, each one with a different look of superiority, and it was a look that Joe now wore with pride. As he did his Green Party badge, which was the first thing that Harriet noticed before they hugged.

‘Aren’t those badges usually a symbol for secret societies?’ she asked, as Joe quickly replied, ‘That one’s back at Downing Street. This one represents my party, which I need to show off on days where I wear opposition colours.’

Their embrace was much shorter than the one they shared the day before, though both had gripped just as tightly for this one. ‘Thank you for coming at short notice,’ said Joe.

‘Well, the prime minister’s knock is a different knock,’ Harriet replied, with words that stuck with Joe.

When the pleasantries had slowed, and dinner had been served for them on the lavishly long dining table, Joe asked the difficult question. ‘Would you have come if I wasn’t prime minister?’

Harriet thought about her answer for a moment, then said with certainty, ‘Yes. I always wanted to see you again, but I got the impression that you didn’t want to see me.’

‘Is that why you got the job then? To come and see me?’

‘No, I got the job because I deserved it. Seeing you was a bonus.’

Those words were Joe’s validation that bringing her here was the right idea, so he went straight to the point this time, ‘I want you back. Not as a friend, not as a reporter, but as partner. I have everything that I could ever dream of, except for you. I know that’s a lot to

take in, but I'm done with wasting time. I also know that I don't have the same boyish good looks as when we met, but I'm still that same person, deep down.'

Kirsty took a moment to absorb Joe's words, which were exactly what she was hoping to hear, she replied, 'You really hurt me last time, and it took a long time to get over you. But seeing your face everywhere and now here we are, it kind of feels like fate. Plus, I still like your face.'

A grin began to form on Joe's weathered face, cocky and assured just like it used to be. But before he got carried away, he added, 'I'm serious, I want you with me, but this can't be a slow burner – it has to be all or nothing. And that means leaving your job.'

Taking her time once more and mulling over the Barolo that accompanied their truffled tjarin pasta, she then told him exactly what he wanted to hear, as she had been instructed. 'If that's what it takes, then I'll do it. It took years to find you again, I'm not letting you go this time.'

Joe then took her left hand and got out a ring from his pocket. Harriet was taken aback by this, but Joe placed the ring on the tip of her wedding finger, and asked, 'So, you'll marry me then?'

Stuck in a world of confusion, Harriet knew she couldn't back out now, so with forced enthusiasm, she replied, 'Of course I will!'



The two spent the night together, reunited in unreciprocated passion in the grandest of rooms. When they woke the next morning, Joe already had the day planned for them, as he wanted to take Harriet with him when he went back to Oxington.

'Don't worry about clothes, toiletries, all of that stuff, we can get that on the way,' he told her, not giving her a say in the matter.

‘I’ll need to tell work though,’

‘Good point – grab your phone and tell them that you won’t be coming back. Then we’ll head off.’

In the same clothes as she had arrived in, walking past the same staff who had greeted and served her yesterday, Harriet got to her phone and saw several texts from ‘Boss’, and she replied, *I’m in. Now let’s take him down. I’m going back to Oxington with him today so will update when I can.*

After making the necessary stops for Harriet to top-up on what she needed, they arrived in Oxington in the early afternoon. Although still chilly, the sun was shining, the sky was clear, and the guards were waiting to check who was in the car before they let them into the village. This was the last thing that Harriet expected to see – Joe barricading his beloved home and his loved ones, but she knew that she was dealing with a vastly different man compared to the one that she first met. After the story about Joe and the village went national, Harriet went back to the village to see if it had lost its essence and uniqueness from the attention it received, but it hadn’t, and it still hadn’t in the few years since she was last there, it was just Joe who had changed.

They made their way up to Joe’s mum’s house, an ageing yet timeless farmhouse that exuded charm and immediately felt welcoming. But there was nothing welcoming about the reception that Joe received. Expecting only to meet Joe’s mum, Harriet was surprised to see two other women waiting for him – one of them in particular looked as though she was ready to fight.

‘*Who do you think you are?!*’ she shouted, as Joe got out of the car first, thanks to his driver opening the door for him.

‘Can we go inside please, Kelly, I’ve got somebody with me,’ he diplomatically replied. That name rang a bell to Harriet as she racked her brain for a moment, and then she remembered the girl that Joe had told her he was once in love with – Kelly.

This was the first time that either Amanda, Amarjit or Kelly had seen Joe since he became prime minister, so Amanda thought it would be a nice idea to welcome her son home properly and greet him as somebody in his position would normally be greeted. Kelly however saw it as a quicker way to give Joe a piece of her mind.

‘I don’t care who you’ve got in there. Don’t you tell me what to do!’ she told him, as Harriet observed from the back of the car still.

Joe’s security guard had made his way out from the front of the car to insert himself between Joe and the animated Kelly, as Joe replied, ‘If you want me to talk then we’ll have to go inside, and you’ll have to calm down. So, what’s it going to be?’

Kelly backed off and headed towards the back door of the house to the kitchen, where Joe got round to introducing his guest, ‘Everyone, I’d like you to meet my new fiancé.’

‘Fiancé? Joe, why didn’t you tell me about this?’ asked a distraught Amanda.

‘I’m sorry, mum, it was all spur of the moment.’

‘Wait, I recognise you – weren’t you the reporter from the *Echo*, all them years ago at the school.’

‘That’s me. Nice to see you again, Mrs Blue.’

‘But, how? When? And is that mum’s old engagement ring?!’ A shocked Amanda pressed.

‘I’ll tell you all about it soon, Mum; first I need to discuss the goings on around here.’

‘About bloody time,’ quipped Kelly, as everybody prepared themselves for what Joe had to say for himself.

With the same confidence flowing through him as when he delivered his dramatic speech yesterday, he told the women of his life, ‘I used to think there was no such thing as perfect, until lately. All the work that I’ve been doing has been leading up to this, and I want you all to know that everything I do is for the good of this planet. You four are the most important people in my life, and, as you’ve seen, things will soon be changing. So, I need to keep all of you safe until those changes are made – especially after what happened to mum, that’s why I put the guards and the borders up.’

‘But you can’t force us to stay here,’ insisted Kelly.

‘Well, actually, I can. You see, I have the authority to do that now, but I want to give you a choice, just like everybody else has – you can stay here and watch as my vision unfolds for the good of the planet and humanity, and you will have everything that you could possibly ever want. Or you can leave, and I won’t be able to help you anymore. And once you leave, you can never come back.’

The room was stunned into silence, but it was Amarjit, who had not spoken until now, who responded first. ‘I want to leave. This isn’t the place that I fell in love with, and you’re not who I thought you were. What you’re doing is unsafe, Joe.’

‘OK, I’m sorry you feel that way Amarjit, but I understand.’ Said an unflustered Joe, before asking, ‘And what about you, Kelly?’

Without hesitation she responded, ‘She’s right, you’re not who you used to be, you’re a monster – look at you. All you’ve done is use us to get what you want, but no more. It’s not science anymore – it’s just delusion! I’m going too.’

Now feeling dejected, Joe looked up at his mum for reassurance, acting like the little boy that was still hidden inside him. She took his hand and told him, ‘Everything they said is true.’

Joe's look turned to worry as she continued, 'You have changed, not since you started doing this job, long before that. I noticed it, but I was too scared to say in fear of losing the one person I love, but truth be told I lost you a long time ago. I thought I might be able to help you, but I don't even know who you are these days – you're certainly not my baby boy. I can't just stand by and watch as you ruin yours and other people's lives, that's why I've stopped watching.'

Joe took his hand away from his mother in disgust at what she was telling him, she was the one person who he thought he could count on for support, but she too could see that he was going too far. Now it was up to Harriet to pick up the pieces, so, in her new role as Joe's fiancé, she took the hand that he had held with his mother and interlocked hers to it as a symbol of defiance, with the ring that Joe had taken from his grandmother's body on full display. She looked him in the eyes and told him, 'It's just you and me now. Let's go and change the world, together.'

So, hand in hand with the only woman left in his life, Joe left Oxington for the very last time.

Chapter 45

It had been seven years since Joe left Oxington, seven years since the introduction of the redevelopment of Britain, and seven years since the Mary Project moved on to humans. During that time Joe had won a rigged re-election, got married, and, as a result, he had almost achieved his perfect vision. Under his control, Dominion had remained an unknown entity to the masses, quietly working in the background so that the horror stories of the new villages never saw the light of day. Instead, they instructed the media to print only the stories of successes, as had been done during the trial, giving those who were next in line for their move to a village optimism, which would be short lived. He had also been living with the rapid decline of his body courtesy of Werner's syndrome, which had now rendered his muscles almost obsolete and giving him the face of an elderly man.

For Harriet, the last seven years had meant living with and eventually caring for a husband who she didn't love, a man that she had been trying so hopelessly to catch out but had failed. At every fork in the road Joe seemed to always choose the right path, which meant that Harriet didn't have the story that she needed to bring Joe to justice. Her fight for the cause had seen her trapped in the life that she sacrificed herself for, and with Joe getting so close to death, she feared she may never get the opportunity to stop what he had started. The two of them got married a few months after leaving Oxington, in a behind-closed-doors

ceremony attended only by the vicar, Joe's assistant, and Crispin, Joe's lawyer. After ostracising himself from his family, Joe quickly made sure that no outside interference got in the way of their marriage, so he stopped Harriet from interacting with her family and friends. She was left a lonely, desperate woman, with trust the only thing that she had gained from Joe over the past seven years with him.

But Joe's health was bad, so much so that he had given up all appearances and relied on the use of Artificial Intelligence to provide faked pictures of him for public image. His body was slowly shutting down and deteriorating, which meant his reliance on Harriet had increased, especially of late; she attended some government meetings and took notes on his behalf so that he could be briefed on just the essentials without being seen, but his body had become so weary that the time had come for him to introduce her to the other side of his job. So, one morning at their home in Downing Street, after she had got him dressed and fed, Joe sat Harriet down to explain the way the world was really run. He weakly took her by the hand and prepared her for what he hoped he would never have to say, but the disease in his life and the power he possessed had left him with no choice, having stopped himself from trusting anybody else other than his wife after his mother had turned her back on him.

‘My love, there are some other things that I will need your help with.’

Harriet shuddered inside whenever Joe called her ‘his love,’ but still she replied, ‘Yes, of course. You know I would do anything for you.’

He believed her too, having spent the last seven years by his side despite his intense paranoia, heavy drug use, the isolation away from her family, and his own degradation, where she never stopped her efforts towards him.

‘I know you would, and that’s why what I’m about to tell you is very important.’ Her contempt for him had overshadowed any hope that she still had of finding something to expose him with, but still she listened with apparent enthusiasm.

‘My disease is catching up with me, each day I can do less and less, and I rely on you more and more. That’s why I *need* you to help me to finish what I set out to achieve all those years ago.’

Suddenly, Harriet felt a glimmer of hope, one that she thought might never come, so she fully immersed herself in the conversation and asked, ‘Whatever you need me to do, I’ll do it. Through sickness and health, remember?’

‘I knew you would understand. But this, it’s different. I need to explain something to you, and it won’t be easy – but you must know that it has all been for the good of the planet, though it may seem difficult to believe.’

‘It’s OK, I know your heart has always been in the right place. Why do you think I married you?’

Joe attempted to grip Harriet’s hand tighter, but the muscles in his hands were too weak, still he tried though, before looking her in the eyes and telling her, ‘I started all of this with good intentions, but some of those may have been misplaced along the way. You see, it turns out that Oxington – and me included – were all part of a social experiment held by a secret society of world influencers. And I am now the head of that society, which is known as Dominion.’

This was it, the breakthrough that Harriet had been waiting so long for had finally arrived. She did all she could to hide the excitement on her face, biting up on her jaw and nodding along with interest – because the word that she had been told to listen out for – was dominion.

‘Their aim has been to build a new global society that could withstand the test of time and survive by itself, which started with Oxington, and has led to where we are today. The Mary Project – that was a result of the innovative advantages that Oxington – and I, were given. And since we started moving people into the villages across Britain, they have found

cures for three forms of cancer, reversed blindness, made buildings from materials that generate energy, and of course, the emission levels across the country have plummeted. People are living longer, they are healthier than ever, and everybody in the villages have the same opportunities as everyone else. We're nearly there my love, but the Mary Project is vital to it all, so that's why I had to make some hard, but very necessary decisions before people were allowed in the villages.'

The mood in the air had shifted, as had the expression on Joe's face. He took his gaze away from his seemingly unaware wife and looked straight into the eyes of emptiness that had now consumed him.

'What do you mean – allowed? I thought that everybody who wanted to enter was allowed in? Isn't that what you wanted?' asked Harriet, who was now completely under the spell of Joe's voice.

He hesitated in his response, struggling to let the words out under the pressure of the weight of his actions, but eventually he replied, 'It was, at first. But I discovered something about the implants when they are used on humans, when I was experimenting on myself. It didn't work on me, and so I tried it on some immigrants when we were doing the trial in the North East, and it only worked on a few of them. I ran test after test until I found a link with fertility – the cows that we were testing on were all fertile, which is why we had such success, but it turns out that the implant only works on fertile beings. Which is why –'

Joe stopped himself there, unable to bring himself to utter the words that made the measurements he put in place feel real. Whilst shutting himself away from the world as much as he could, he avoided the reality of the scale of the catastrophe that he was responsible for. But now, in his most vulnerable state, he knew that he had to own his decisions. As Harriet waited with nervous anticipation, sensing that Joe was on the cusp of revealing something huge to her, she did all she could to prise the words out of his mouth, by reassuring him

softly, as he liked. All of her efforts and patience had led to this very moment, but no amount of time or diligence could have prepared her for what Joe was about to say, as he took a deep, laboured breath, and revealed, ‘Which is why we had to kill anybody who doesn’t react to the implants.’

Harriet couldn’t hide her shock at Joe’s revelation, pulling her hands away from his and creating a space between them. This was the news that she came back into his life for, but upon hearing what he had been capable of whilst they had been married, she felt implicated in his actions. He added, ‘There was no other way – without the implants the villages would only do so much on their own,’

‘So why didn’t you tweak them? Make them better – do anything that meant you didn’t have to kill innocent people?!’

‘I had no time; you don’t know the pressure I was under, and then when I took charge of Dominion, I needed to make a statement.’

‘I’d say murder is quite the statement.’

Joe took the insult on board, before adding, ‘Saving this planet is about actions, and yes, they have been extreme, but the results speak for themselves, and we couldn’t risk this being exposed. But now this is about the bigger picture, and ultimately, we need the right people on this planet for it to survive.’

‘So why weren’t you killed then? If it didn’t work on you, then aren’t you the wrong type of person for this planet?’

His wife’s comments had stung Joe, and he knew deep down that she was right, so he told her regretfully, ‘This disease is my death sentence. But what we are doing is the only way that we as a species will survive more than a hundred more years, it’s just accelerated natural selection.’

‘It sounds more like accelerated genocide!’

Harriet's demeanour had changed as she went into defence mode, firing back at Joe about his divulgence and his weak justification – unlike the past seven years where she didn't contribute anything other than cooperation. But she needed to get back to that place before it was too late, and Joe stopped trusting her thanks to her words. So, after taking some time to compose herself, she walked back over to Joe and asked with intrigue, 'What do you need me for?'

She had got him back onside, giving him the opening he needed to explain himself further, as he replied.

'I need you to do as you have been doing for my political work, but this time for Dominion. I need updates from the group about how much is left to do before we complete the work. I just need notes, and your guidance, and then help putting together my thoughts and what I need to do next. Because I want you to take over from me when I die – you're the only one I trust and I know that once you see what we're trying to do, and who we're doing it with, then just like me, you'll want to see this through. But I must know – are you with me, my love?'

Grappling with the biggest decision she ever had to make, Harriet knew that she had to expose this man and his whole organisation now more than ever. So, with a burning determination inside, she held back her instincts and told him, 'Yes, I'm with you, my love.'

Chapter 46

Harriet sat quietly beside Joe, next to him on his custom-made office chair that was designed to keep him stable and upright due to his poor health – though his pride and stubbornness refused to allow him to be seen as anything else but independent, which is why he refused assisted health care. He was still the prime minister of Great Britain, and he was the leader of the most powerful and influential organisation on the planet, and despite his fading physical presence, he still carried the authority of a giant. As the virtual meeting started, Harriet began by listing the attendees as they joined, and she was astonished at those who were there. Joe had told her that these were elite members of society, but when she saw so many familiar faces, people that she thought were decent and trustworthy figures in the world, her perception of the world she thought she knew changed then and there.

Joe was greeted by all of these pillars of society, people known and often worshipped around the world, and they were all there to answer to this man from a village that Harriet hadn't even heard of ten years ago. The meeting was held to provide Joe with a status update at a key milestone moment in the redevelopment of Britain, as they entered the final phase. A document was shared on the screen by a man called Chris Adams, who Joe had mentioned a few times in passing over the course of their marriage. He started off by stating, 'This

meeting won't be recorded, for obvious reasons,' which drew laughter from the talking heads on the screen.

The document was titled *Making Planet Earth Perfect*, that started with progress on the redevelopment, which had only London left to complete. The next page listed the main areas of concern on the map, with the South and Scotland the most reluctant to accept the terms of the new villages. The document then listed the highlights, then the issues faced, as well as images of the residents in their new villages, all of them the same sickly shade, an irony which wasn't lost on Joe as he once aimed to remove that very same look from people. Their skin looked thicker and brighter than any white person who Harriet had ever seen before, with it looking far different to how it did on the animals. Then some before and after images showed the effectiveness of the visible changes brought on by the implant, from the skin colour changes, to the blue eyes, and finally how striking the red X mark was on the arms of the residents, where it had been inserted similarly to a contraceptive implant – this at least had been what Joe had set out to achieve.

As it neared its conclusion, a page titled 'Population Changes' appeared, which seemed to show the population in the country at the start of the work, and what it was now. At the start the population was 64.1 million – it now stood at 60.6 million, meaning that over three million people had been killed in that time. It was already by far the largest genocide on British soil and the largest seen since the world wars, and the figure would only grow as the redevelopment plans moved to London. The figures were then broken down into categories – men, women, and finally, children.

Harriet felt sick at what she had seen on the screen; in no way did she imagine Joe – or anybody, would commit murder on helpless children. She had to hold back and swallow the vomit that had risen into her mouth, trying not to make a sound, which Joe had noticed and put his laptop on mute whilst she composed herself. The final page of the document then

showed the plans for the rest of the world, with estimated future death tolls of approximately 318 million people who wouldn't be suitable for the Mary Project.

When Joe had said how the infertile were being killed, she had no idea about the scaled involved, only that it would be a lot. But now, seeing the numbers in front of her, she knew that she was now in the presence of the most evil group of people that had ever lived. She was racked with guilt just to witness them all, as they so professionally discussed these heinous crimes as though they were just another day at the office, with Chris even casually adding that he would distribute a copy of the document to everybody after the meeting. As soon as it had ended, though, Harriet launched herself at Joe, wrapping her hands around his puny neck as he clamoured for resistance.

'How could you do this!?' she screamed at him, 'How!? 300 million people, all because of your fragile ego!' She had every intention of squeezing out the fragments of life left in him then and there, but instead, she picked up the red-faced child of a man who was too weak to respond, and she tied him to his chair, taping his mouth in the process. She then looked through his laptop to find the document that Chris had shared, and she forwarded it to her email address. Once received, she located the phone that she had kept throughout her time with Joe and called 'Boss' on her phone. It had been so long since they had communicated that she wasn't sure if they would answer, but they did.

'Gillian, we need to meet right away. I've got it – everything that will take these vile scumbags down for good.'

Harriet had secretly been working with former Prime Minister Gillian Parkinson throughout her time with Joe, in an attempt to expose both him and Dominion. Gillian had been placed as the chief executive officer of *Teleworld Media* by Dominion after their rebrand, putting her in charge of the output of the entire conglomerate. Her main task was ensuring the narrative of the model villages was met, and also acting as the final layer of

security between the truth. When Joe came to power, she used her knowledge of him and his past to track down Harriet, where she told her about what she wanted to do, and how she needed her. Gillian got Harriet a job at the newspaper, planted her in the right places at the right times, and let her manipulate Joe using her experiences with him to do so. They formulated a plan to get as close to Joe as possible, by any means necessary, just to find enough evidence to make the story undeniable, knowing that Joe would be the weak link they needed to eventually expose Dominion.

The two of them met at a discreet location away from the capital, having not seen each other in seven years, and as soon as Harriet saw Gillian she broke down into tears on the floor. Seeing her again had made it all worthwhile, knowing that she still had somebody who would get to these people.

‘I didn’t think we’d ever do it,’ cried an emotionally exhausted Harriet.

‘But you did, my dear girl, you did! But first, I must see what it is that you’ve got on them, to make sure that it’s enough.’

After Harriet had handed Gillian her phone to see the document that had been shared during the Dominion meeting, it didn’t take long for the horrors of what Joe and Dominion had done to sink in with Gillian, as she saw the pictures of the people, the death toll, and the plan to make this global.

‘I also took this.’ Harriet handed Gillian Joe’s master keycard for access to all the villages.

‘You’ll go down in history for this, you brave, brave soul,’ replied Gillian, before she hugged the woman who had given up her life for this risk. She then asked, ‘But how did you get that and get out without him knowing?’

‘Does it matter? I did what I had to do, don’t worry about him. I need it to find my parents, so we have to take it and find them,’ insisted Harriet.

‘We really don’t have time, dear. We have to get this document out there as soon as possible.’

‘Seven years, seven long years, Gillian. Do you have any idea what I have put up with over that time just to bring this to you? I’m going to find my parents, and if you want the last seven years to be worthwhile then you’ll come with me too.’

Anguished and uncertain, Gillian mulled briefly before realising the pain that Harriet must have suffered over that time in letting go of her loved ones. She too had lost somebody dear – her son – to suicide, over the guilt of the death of a young woman he had caused from drink driving years prior. It was what Dominion held over her; however, when her son took his own life she kept it from ever being disclosed, knowing that if the noose they held around her neck was loosened, she would become disposable to them, and may not get the chance to ever expose them. Her son’s death was the catalyst to contacting Harriet, and so without her, the time that she had spent unable to grieve properly would be in vain if she did not have the payoff that Harriet was able to help her so nearly achieve. She needed this, so, with her son’s memory in her heart, she trusted Harriet’s words and agreed to drive them to go and give Harriet the closure that she needed.

They were on their way to Helton – which had been turned into a model village – much like its neighbouring blueprint Oxington. On the journey Harriet read through the detail of the *Making Planet Earth Perfect* document that was skipped over during the meeting. In it she found more and more atrocities that were occurring each day at the villages, which included a list of ‘Consequences’ as they were called. It stated that:

- *Only residents who display all successful implant signals (cream skin colour, blue eyes, and red x on the inner left bicep) will be permitted to live in a model village.*

- *Any resident who does not display all successful implant signals in the six weeks following their implant will be subjected to a second implant (known as “junking”), which will be pre-soaked in sarin.*
- *To mitigate the lower male population, all fertile men shall produce a sample of their semen once a month, where it will be frozen and used to artificially inseminate fertile women in the event of future population concerns.*
- *If a resident loses their successful implant signals and have not produced a child, they are deemed a risk to the village, and shall be subjected to junking.*
- *Miscarriages are to be viewed as a sign of infertility and the bearer shall be subjected to junking.*
- *Any residents that have been subjected to junking, must fall under the village protocols regarding death and body disposal, and names shall be scribed onto the bordering walls.*
- *Any resident who bears a child either before entering a model village or whilst in a model village, shall be granted immunity from all consequences.*

Her only hope was the final consequence, which would make her parents immune from them, but when they arrived, she had no clue where to start looking for them due to all the changes. It was no longer the place she grew up in and loved, now stripped of its history and integrity, she didn't recognise anywhere anymore. She couldn't recognise the people either, as almost all of them looked the same and dressed in the same few basic shades, with only those who gained immunity appearing tonally alone as they were before. Animals too resembled the humans in their colouring in this terrifying vision that Joe had concocted. As they went round, they took pictures for further evidence of the nightmares that people were now forced

to live in, and the world that everybody else on the planet would soon be living in if Dominion weren't stopped.

Harriet passed by the matching strangers on the narrow pavements and showed pictures of her parents to anybody who would listen, but those who did hadn't seen them. She searched in anguish for a familiar face or a familiar voice, but nothing and nobody was what she knew. Her last hope was the guard on patrol, who searched the directory of names on the database, but her parents were never registered, meaning they refused to enter.

There was hope for her still, but Gillian interjected, 'We will find them, my dear, if they are out there, but Joe needs to be stopped now. I just need you to be patient one last time, then I promise this will all be over.'

With the fight in her fading, and mere dregs of hope and luck left, Harriet eventually agreed, 'Fine, I guess ... But what's the plan now?'

'We get these pictures printed in every paper in the world, and all over the internet – I have contacts overseas and beyond. We also send this document to the UN, and we give Joe and Dominion the public trial that they deserve. They can try all they want to block it, but with evidence like this, it will be insurmountable. Their biggest fear is exposure, but we're going to parade the bastards around the streets naked when we're finished with them.'

Harriet looked forlornly upon Gillian's optimism as she told her of Joe's condition, fearing that they wouldn't get to him in time, 'How quickly can you do it? He's dying Gillian.'

Confused, she replied, 'But I saw the picture of him just last week at the opening of a new village?'

'It's faked, has been for a long time. He's nothing like what you remember of him anymore.'

‘We had better get to work then so that he can watch as his perfect vision crumbles before him ...’

Over the next twenty-four hours, pictures of the ‘vanilla death villages’ as they were described as in papers and online in countries across the world began to surface. A global ceasefire was declared by the UN as international forces came together to find those responsible for the catastrophe in Britain.

The easiest to find was its leader, Joe Blue, who was still tied to the very same chair that Harriet had left him in. But to her and the regular world’s dismay, Joe had died before he could be held accountable for his actions. His muscles had completely shut down and his heart stopped pumping blood around his body shortly after Harriet left him. He died alone and in severe pain.

After the residents of all of the villages were freed, worldwide efforts were made to reverse the effects of the Mary Project implant on them, but nothing was able to be done to change anybody back to how they looked before. Many took to tattoos to cover large portions of their skin, others embraced it, but none of them would be able to forget it. Those who did not want to stay in the villages were offered refuge abroad until Britain was once again rebuilt.

Gillian was reinstated as prime minister of Great Britain once more, having been pardoned for the role that she played in Dominion’s prominence, thanks to her brave efforts to expose them. A statue was erected of her in her signature power suit, and it sat at the site of the previous Buckingham Palace, which had been knocked down in light of the royal family's deep, historic affiliation with Dominion.

Harriet was reunited with her father, who managed to survive the move from place to place as more villages were built, eventually ending up in London, where he saw his

daughter's valiant efforts on the news. Her mother, though, had died before she could see her again, catching pneumonia and not surviving. Harriet and her father now live and travel in a camper van, moving regularly from place to place still.

Amanda insisted that she wouldn't leave Oxington, and thanks to the efforts of the locals, they came together to keep her there, as Joe spared her. She changed her name to Amanda Whitmore, in honour of her mother, and to forget about her son and father. She still lives in the village, and now takes charge of the weekly meetings, to ensure that nothing there ever changes again.

Neither Kelly nor Amarjit were seen or heard of after leaving Oxington.

As for the planet, its existence depends on the actions of those that occupy it. But it remains to be seen if it will make it even another hundred years, or whether a global genocide is the only way of it surviving any further than that.

End

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