

# TRAUM

MARTIN HYDE



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*Martin Hyde*

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# *Traum*

**trauma** |'trɔ:mə| |'traɪmə|

noun (pl. **-mas** or **-mata** |-mətə|)

a deeply distressing or disturbing experience

- emotional shock following a stressful event or a physical injury, which may be associated with physical shock and sometimes leads to long-term neurosis.

- Medicine physical injury.

ORIGIN late 17th cent.: from Greek, literally '*wound*.'

"Traum" (German) – Dream

# PART ONE

## *ONE*

Zaria smiled to herself and looked sideways at her beaming husband. He took a hand from the steering wheel and took hers from its position on her right thigh. He smiled back, keeping his head forward but squeezing her soft hand gently. With a glint in her eyes and a wide smile from ear to ear, she reached her free hand forward and pressed play on the cassette player. The sound of a romantic pop hit faded in and Zaria laughed to herself instantly.

"You remember this song?" She asked her smiling husband. He nodded and turned his head to face her. Their eyes locked for a second, both of them looking deep into the soul of the other and smiling as a newly wed couple would on their first night together on a honeymoon under the stars. Zaria's heartbeat steadily quickened, her emotions swinging like a child's on Christmas Eve.

There was a sudden bump and the front left wheel jerked as the car drifted slowly left onto the gravelled side of the road. There were a few seconds of rattling; as the stones flew up behind the tyre and onto the metallic bodywork of the car, before Darren pulled the car back onto the smooth tarmac road.

"Sorry about that," He laughed awkwardly, a little off edge, having been interrupted in such a deeply intimate moment. Zaria breathed a sigh of relief and nodded quickly, returning a small smile of hesitation that was unseen by her husband.

The small, beat up car drove on down the winding deserted roads, until they reached the top of a large hill and Darren slowed the car to a gradual stop and turned to his wife.

"What's going on?" She asked, startled but amused. Darren simply nodded to the road with his head and unstrapped himself from the seat. He opened the door, its rusty hinges creaking and groaning as he got out. Zaria also unclicked her seatbelt and reached for the door but Darren was already standing with it open, a wide romantic smile spread across his face. He gestured again with his head and Zaria swung her legs out of the car and clambered out. Darren grabbed her hand instantly and walked forward with his excitedly confused wife beside him. The car's radio slowly faded as they walked forward across the bright green and lightly swaying grass.

Zaria opened her mouth again as if to ask what was happening but stepped forward and the large river running the distance of the road beside it came into view. Zaria gasped at its beauty; the blue clear water flowed smoothly down the river, lapping at rocks and logs and

the riverbank as it passed. Darren bent his knees, still holding Zaria's hand so that her arm outstretched to give him slack to squat and he picked up a smooth stone from the gravelled floor. He straightened up and waited for a second in anticipation, rolling the stone over in his hand then reared back with his strong arm and forced the stone forwards as it fell rapidly into the river below.

The two sets of eyes followed the stone animatedly in its short but intense fall directly into the river eighty feet below. It sunk deep into the depths of the river, letting out ripples across the water that even Zaria could see from the hill above. They stood watching the water until there was no trace that the stone had even landed then Darren dropped her hand and walked off down the Cliffside, his feet stumbling down the steep hill.

"Where are you going?" Asked Zaria, almost in offence.

"Don't worry," He said smiling. "Trust me." Then he ran off down the grassed hill and disappeared out of view. Zaria stood awkwardly, her arms hanging at her sides. The sounds of rocks falling down the Cliffside and into the water deep below made her peer over the edge, vertigo kicking in and making her shuffle back. Darren's head bobbed over the side like a boat in water as he slowly descended the hilltop.

Zaria stepped back and fell a few inches onto a large boulder where she sat and folded her hands in her lap. The strong wind blew her hair across her face and into her eyes. She brushed it away with a hand but it blew straight back, so in defeat, Zaria let it be.

A minute or so later, Darren came over the top of the hill, steadied himself and walked towards Zaria. With one arm behind his back, Darren grasped her hand and lifted her to her feet. Darren raised his hand and stroked the hair from her face then brought forward his other hand from behind his back, clutching in his fingers a pink rose. He took Zaria's hand and pressed the flower into her cold fingers. She looked up from the flower into his eyes and her face lit up. She ducked her head and smelt the flower's petals. She smiled with pleasure and looked up at Darren.

"Like the wedding?" Darren smiled and nodded. He'd known even before he pulled over that he would find an orchid of pink roses just like they had ordered for their wedding. He'd known because he'd been here before. Many years ago, Darren had gone for a long walk with his previous partner and they had lay amongst the roses for hours until it had started to rain. Darren hadn't mentioned that the roses Zaria loved so much had been an item of his ex. It wasn't as if he had done something wrong but he doubted Zaria would feel the same way if she found out. Still, he wanted to keep her happy and he was doing so just fine.

"They're beautiful, thanks babe." She leaned in and kissed Darren. He smiled back appreciatively. Darren's heart beat a little faster; from guilt or intimacy he would never know. They stood by the old rock for a few minutes and then returned to the car. The sun shone down, gold and glimmering. The light reflected off Zaria's brown eyes and made her dark hair glisten like ripples on water.

Darren overtook his wife and opened the car door to the sickly yellow VW golf and Zaria smiled to herself, getting in. The seats were hotter than she remembered, burning from the bright sun shining down from the sky. Zaria winced a little and sprung forward. She pulled the straps of her flowery dress further up her shoulders and leaned back against the black

leather. The door on the right opened with a slight creak; she'd been pestering Darren for weeks to get that thing oiled but there was something about the squeaking old car that made her smile.

The seatbelt was hot too, like embers. What was with the bright sun? It didn't even feel that hot. Although Zaria knew she shouldn't think badly of the heat; this kind of temperature was rare of the British countryside. Darren pulled his seatbelt to and started the engine. He released the clutch and pushed the car forward. Braking slowly, Darren reached across his wife and opened the glove box. He pulled out a pair of large shades that he slid onto his face. He nodded his head to Zaria, trying to look cool in a jokey way. She let out a small laugh and beamed, staring sideways into Darren's eyes.

A loud beep blasted from behind them and Zaria covered her ears. A long race car shot passed them on the right side of the road and crossed back into lane, only then releasing the horn. Zaria's face straightened and she raised her eyebrows to her husband, letting out a small breath of relief. He awkwardly looked away and hit the accelerator.

The car's fuzzy stereo system was still playing the cassette; a mix tape Darren had made a few years back for her that she had kept in a draw of her bedroom dresser. The cute Ballard 'somewhere only we know' played through the floor speakers at her feet. They had to have it on loud because the wind blowing across the car nearly drowned it out at the speed they were travelling.

The car shot down the straight hill passed row after row of trees planted, if anything too neatly so they looked fake in formation. Zaria hummed along with the changing music, now 'second chance' by shine down.

"My eyes are open wide. By the way, I made it through the day." Her beautiful, high-pitched voice sent a fluttering sensation through Darren's chest and he sang along with her during the chorus.

Zaria's long brown hair blew vigorously across her face as the wind blew in through the open roof. The car hummed on forward and the couple sang loudly in tune, their voices carried by the wind.

"I'm not angry I'm just saying"-

The car smashed through the wooden fence on the side of the road and slipped from the road on the top of the hill. It tumbled down the hillside, Zaria and Darren spinning in their seats, falling head over toe. The air bags exploded in both their faces, catching Zaria's scream and killing it in her throat. Darren's arms were ripped from the wheel in a selfish instinct as he covered his face.

The car smashed again and again into the hillside, spinning faster and faster until it reached the bottom and the golf hit the river. The car stopped on its side and after a few seconds, tipped and landed on its wheels, the tyres on the right side completely flat and torn open.

Zaria's head smashed backward into the headrest and she coughed, a splutter of blood spilling from the left side of her mouth. Her body ached from the impact but she wasn't hurt. Her eyes closed tight in deep relief then snapped open suddenly and she turned to face Darren's limp body.

"Darren?" His unresponsiveness sent a shiver down her fingers and up her arms to her neck.

“No,” she muttered, streams of tears spilling down her face and she tore her seatbelt off with one gesture. She pulled her sore leg from the crumpled metal that had trapped it and outstretched it awkwardly in front of her.  
Darren’s mouth opened and closed several times meaninglessly.

## TWO

"Zaria?" Darren said weakly. A smile cracked her pursed lips and her shaking body froze. Zaria's hand reached out and ran itself across Darren's smooth face. He pushed the deflated airbag away from him and tried to sit up.

"Are you hurt?" Zaria asked and sighed in relief as Darren shook his head. He pushed the door open, letting a cloud of smoke rise from underneath and climbed out. Darren crossed in front of the car, through the river in which the car had landed, and pulled his wife out of the wreckage. They waded through the waist deep water and climbed up onto the bank. Zaria stumbled and fell to her bum.

"I take it the car's undrivable." Darren laughed and nodded, looking at the smouldering heap of metal. Zaria brushed her hair back with her hand and watched Darren pull his phone out.

"Fuck."

"What?" Zaria asked concerned and leaned over to look at the screen. No signal. Zaria closed her eyes in disbelief as if nothing could possibly get any worse.

"Listen," Said Darren standing and pulling Zaria to her feet. "The hotel isn't too far from here. Maybe an hours walk, shall we make it there and then send someone for the car?" He held her hands at her hip and looked down at her now tired face.

"I guess so."

"Hey, cheer up. We're both fine, that's the important thing and I don't want this to ruin our holiday. Okay?" Zaria smiled weakly, pulling herself together and nodded.

The two of them slowly walked on, across the boggy field until they made it to the stony path. The sunlight was still bright and beaming but the sun had dropped in the sky. How is that possible? Before they had crashed the sun had been a little lower than directly above them and now it was at about forty five degrees; it must be about four o' clock. Had they both passed out during the crash and woken up several hours later or what? Zaria wanted to think about it more but her head throbbed uncomfortably and she leant slightly on her husband, barely lifting her feet from the ground.

After a few minutes of walking, they reached the road and Zaria stopped, leaning on her husband to pull off her high-heeled summer shoes laced in red. The road ran up the hill passed the river and out of sight. Zaria could just make out the point where they had come off; a small part of the fence was broken off on top of the hill.

"We fell from there?" Zaria asked, standing up on both feet and pointing to the horizon. Darren's eyebrows rose in astonishment. They had fallen from the hilltop and rolled down with little less than scratches.

"I guess so," Said Darren taking the shoes from his wife and taking her hand again. "We have to move on." With the scorching heat burning through the soles of Zaria's thin tights, her heavy, aching feet dropping down onto the ground with each step.

"We can't be far now," Zaria moaned to the now close to pitch darkness. There were no street lamps and the road was lit only by small cat eyes embedded in the middle of the road and by the blue moonlight shining over their shoulders and onto the road. Rain dropped from the dark sky in an unenthusiastic drizzle. Zaria had to admit, or she would have if she weren't cold and wet, that the scene did look rather beautiful and picturesque.



Zaria was starting to panic; they had been walking for over two hours (Darren hadn't bothered to check his phone for the time, time wasn't important when your head was filled with so many other worries) and the hope that the two of them buried in their chests was beginning to run dry.

Darren's mouth opened but speech froze in his dry mouth, and he dropped Zaria's hand. His eyes were now wide and transfixed.

"What did y"- Darren's now empty hand came up to snap over Zaria's moving mouth. Her now shocked eyes shot to him in confused outrage but he brought a finger up to his lips and silenced her.

A howl came from the trees, quiet but near. Zaria's eyebrows rose to accompany her wide eyes and she let out a small breath of fear. What was it, a wolf? Did they have wolves up here? She assured herself they didn't. Just as she tried to convince herself that it must've been a fox or owl –it couldn't possibly have been a wolf- the howl came again closer and more distinct.

"Shit," She muttered in high-pitched terror as Darren's hand released her mouth and dropped to his pocket. He pulled out his phone and held it up to the sky. Still no signal. His eyes too showed mild terror but he was trying to stay calm for Zaria. A twig snapped a little above them a twenty or so feet away, making both of them spin around. There were soft padding sounds as Zaria tried to push away the thought that wolves did not travel alone; they travelled in packs.

A soft growling made Darren step forward and push Zaria behind him. A large snarling wolf stood in the mild light, staring directly at Darren. Drool hung from its sharp canines, jutting out from its upper jaw and out over its quivering lower lips like points of knives. Its nose, squashed and wrinkled, sat offensively on the end of its head, pointing at Darren in the same direction as its glaring eyes.

Darren stepped back, Zaria panic stunned, stood behind him shaking with fear.

"It's alright, it's more afraid of you then you are of it," Darren said slowly, more trying to reassure himself than his whimpering wife.

"I really doubt that," moaned Zaria in agonised terror.

"It isn't going to hurt you, don't be afraid." Darren said in a whisper. Zaria barked a small shriek of psychotic laughter.

"That's bullshit!" She whimpered, breathing fast and grasping at the back of Darren's shirt. The wolf's eyes glistened in the moonlight being most of the visible part of the wolf that could actually be seen for its black fur standing out on end was nearly hidden by the dark night sky. Its short fur around its head, tipped with silver, could be just made out in the light from the road's LED cat eyes.

It snarled again, a deep vicious growl from its open mouth, letting saliva spray from its mouth and land on the black road. The rain dripped off its rough coat, making the silver fur on its tips shine against the black fur surrounding it.

What scared Darren most was the waiting, the staring into its eyes trying to hold his ground and anticipating its glare of hatred, praying to God with every thought in his conscious mind (he wasn't really a religious person but when he was desperate enough, he would pray to

anything be it a block of stone or a small bugs shit on a plate) that the wolf, even if it tore him to pieces and washed him down with his own blood, left Zaria alone and let her get to safety.

He hated the waiting, it tore him apart, made shivers pull at the hairs across his back. He hated the sounds of the girl he loved and vowed to himself to protect no matter what, scared like she had never been before, shivering and sobbing quietly in numb horror.

Darren's eyebrows lowered slightly as his brave glare stabbed back at the staring, growling wolf in optimistic courage. Although he was screaming inside with fear, Darren would not let the wolf know. He had to let it know that if he wanted his girl, he would have to tear him into little pieces before he laid one claw on her innocent body.

The wolf stood tall, its legs outstretched to its full height without leaning back on its hind legs, its eyes not looking away, staring fixedly at Darren. Then, without dropping its glare or showing any sign of intimidation, the wolf's front right leg bent and it stepped back slowly, its round button nose and shiny eyes disappearing into the shadows. Darren stared at the darkness for another few seconds either to make sure that its eyes weren't staring at him from the sheet of darkness or to kick himself out of the trance that his fear had put him in.

Darren slowly turned and took Zaria's thin shaking fingers in his hands.

"I told you I wouldn't let it hurt you," He said, his voice weak but recovering. Zaria let out a small 'huh' of relief and pushed her shoulders into her husband for comfort and support but her eyes darted around the darkness over his shoulder, aware that the wolf or more could be anywhere.

"Like you'd be able to do anything if it had wanted to hurt us." Zaria said hoarsely but then after a second "Thank you, I'm sorry I didn't mean that."

"Come on," Said Darren pulling her gently forward to his side but she clung on and shook her head.

"I don't wanna. Please, just hold me." So Darren held her close, his large arms closing around her back and his nose nuzzling into her soft, wet neck. The rain still fell on and around the couple, as they stood together on the side of the road in the dim light from the light sensitive bulbs embedded in the roadside. It was over an hour ago when the darkness had quickly fallen over them like a cloud of night. And the rain had started shortly after the blackness. Now Darren's short hair stuck to his forehead with a mixture of warm sticky sweat and ice cold rain and he shivered from the unanticipated coldness that had come on, replacing the burning heat as quickly as the evening had turned from bright to dark. Was it that Darren was so shaken up from the crash that he hadn't noticed how quickly the day had changed to night or was he going completely insane?

"You okay?" Darren asked his sniffling wife who wiped her teary eyes away with her hand and eventually broke away from him. She nodded, her wet hair bobbing up and down with unnatural enthusiasm and she took her husband's hand at her side, sniffling again.

"Let's get the hell out of here," She muttered walking forward but after being overtaken by Darren, taking care to stay a half step behind him because she felt safer knowing he was in front of her for protection. The thought didn't soothe her but kept her from breaking down in tears on the road where they walked. She knew that Darren would protect her whatever the

cost and although an insignificant part of her felt guilty for relying on him so much, the security pushed her forward through the dark rainy night.

After some ten minutes of constant turning around and scanning the road for movement, Darren stopped and pointed up the road. Zaria, instantly assuming the worst from her pumping instinctive adrenaline boost, looked up quickly with a near skipped heartbeat. But following Darren's arm to the sky, Zaria saw that he was pointing up at distant blue lights illuminating a large building at the far end of the road. Zaria saw with instant recognition that the building was the same one she had sighed with longing at several days ago in the brochure. The image of the blue bulbs lighting up the dark sky matched the picture nearly exactly and Zaria walked forward, quickening her step, wanting to reach it as quickly as possible and leave the horrifying nightmare she had been pitched in far behind.

## THREE

The first thing that hit Zaria was the brightness, too bright for this time of evening. She blinked a little, adjusting to the light and then her eyes closed in relief. The hall was warm and comforting, like you'd imagine a small hotel like this would feel. It smelled oddly like cleaning products but it wasn't off putting.

Darren stepped forward beside his wife who was shaking her wet hair over the front of her head and looking around the nearly deserted entrance hall. The only movement in the room came from an older man, sitting comfortably in an armchair and stroking the head of a large dog who sat upright with its head facing away from the two newly arrived guests. Neither of them showed any sign of anticipation that two new people had entered. The only other movement came from a concierge who stood smartly upright behind the receptionist desk against the far wall. His velvet red waistcoat was sleek and reflected his overall status positively. He stood, both hands absently working on polishing a wine glass in his naturally flexing wrists. His eyes however stayed perfectly still, watching the two with a slightly unnerving curiosity as if they were some strange new breeds of animal, bright and colourful but strangely intriguing nonetheless.

Zaria led Darren an uncertain step forward, her eyes ignoring the concierge, were fixed on the back of the dog's head. As Zaria walked forward across the marble floor tiled with black and white squares crossing the floor in a diagonal grid, her wet, tired feet pounded softly on the hard smooth floor and left a trail of wet dripping water behind her. The dog seemed to sense her stare and turned its head slowly like a hungry predaceous owl. It's dull, pushed back eyes snapped wide at seeing Zaria and it jumped to all fours staring at her silently. Zaria's mind showed her the black wolf from earlier and her heart raced suddenly in her chest but her tired feet kept moving. Then her conscious thought dominated, knocking the paranoia away and she saw clearly that the dog was nothing more than a grumpy blood hound, following her with its interested but not aggressive eyes.

Zaria's eyes closed in relief and she strode forward quickly, her feet and ankles aching with every step. They walked up to the concierge who stood still now, the polished glass perfectly translucent placed on the desk to his right. His eyes now looked up at the taller Darren who waited silently for him to speak.

"Good evening," Said the concierge at last, dropping his hands to straighten his jacket and tie.

"What's brings you to our hotel at such hour in such a state?" He sounded unimpressed, like he was talking down to them with an arrogant patronising tone. He didn't sound angry with them but a hint of disgust was present.

"Well," Zaria said, ignoring the tone- she was way too exhausted to care what some hotel manager thought- and slammed the pair of shoes she had been clutching in her left hand onto the desk. "We have a reservation here. We were planning on arriving slightly earlier but we encountered some... obstacles." She looked round at Darren who smiled reassuringly.

"Yes." The man said looking up at Zaria through his small golden glasses perched elegantly on the end of his nose. "Yes you *are* late." Zaria's eyes shot wide-open, outrage present in her deep pupils.

"What the hell do you mean by that? We've just walked for three bloody hours in the pouring rain. Do you mean to tell us that we cannot check in?" The concierge stared back for a while, as if testing her will and then at last said:

"No. No of course not, I was merely enquiring as to why you were not here on time. Forgive me," He said nodding his head forward courteously. "What did you say your surname was?"

"Martin," Said Zaria after a slight hesitation. The concierge checked his what could only be short list, judging by the few cars in the car park, and nodded.

"Yes. We have a six night reservation for a single bedroom apartment in your name." The concierge turned smoothly on his shiny boot and took a brass key from its hook among several others. From the key to hook ratio, Zaria would say maybe half of the sixteen rooms were occupied. The concierge placed the key neatly on the desk and pushed it towards Zaria.

"The facilities are through the door behind me," He pointed behind his shoulder to a double door. "There is a programmed number on your room's telephone. If you dial 0 it will put you through to either me or another available employee. If there's anything you need don't hesitate to call any time of day." He quickly glanced at the muddy footprints leading up to the point where Darren and Zaria stood.

"Okay?" Life spun around Zaria as if in a drunken daze. She blinked hard, trying to shake off the sudden upturning feeling from deep within her stomach. She looked up at the concierge who was standing behind the desk completely naked, his hair now long and black.

"Okay?" He asked again in a long droning voice, his voice much deeper than a few seconds before. Zaria reached out for her husband but he was gone. Zaria spun around, her arms outstretched desperately and her vision blurred as life was whirled around her. She stopped spinning, facing the naked concierge whose black hair was growing quickly, dropping to his shoulders and lower like some sped up growth development video. The skin around his nose began to melt, turning quickly black then his whole face began to rot, decomposing like burnt flesh. There was a buzzing sound like a fly was stuffed in each of Zaria's ears.

Black liquid began to pour from his wide-open mouth as he slowly mouthed the word "O-kay."

Zaria screamed loudly, her hands coming up to cover her eyes. A hand grabbed her arm and she screamed again lashing out hard with her fist.

"Zar! Zar it's me." Zaria turned, her hands still up in front of her face. Darren again tried to grab her arm and she let him, throwing herself into his outstretched arms. When Zaria was in a tight hug with her husband, he reached out and wiped the blood from his nose with the back of his hand. She had punched him hard, bloodying his nose and she now gently sobbed at his chest.

"I'll er- leave you to it," The concierge said turning and exiting through the double doors. Zaria caught a glimpse of the fully clothed, naturally proportioned concierge as he left through the swinging doors.

"What the hell happened?" Asked Darren, pushing Zaria forward so that she stood at his arms length, his big hands firmly gripping her shoulders and tears streaming from her face. She shook her head wildly, her wet hair flying around her head. She swallowed and sniffled.

"I don't know. I he was... naked and dead." She tried to let the words out but she knew she sounded absolutely bug shit crazy. And then it hit home when she caught Darren's worried frown.

"It's late. Let's go up for some rest. I'm sure you'll feel fine in the morning." And Darren turned and walked quickly towards the stairway, his arm still pointlessly at his side where it had held Zaria's hand. She could tell he was freaked out and to be honest, she would be if she were in his position.

"I'm not crazy." Said Zaria loudly to the entrance hall, her words echoing around the ceiling. Darren turned, looked her in the eye and then walked back down the few stairs he had ascended and to Zaria. Tears fell down her face now but not from terror but from sadness. He thought she was crazy, she knew it.

Darren stroked her hair behind her ear and smiled sympathetically.

"I know," He said smiling and taking her trembling hand. "Come on, let's go upstairs and relax." He led Zaria to the staircase to the left of the receptionist desk and she started to climb. Zaria felt a little bit better but she still knew he was trying to push the thought away rather than confront it. As Zaria turned at the halfway landing, she saw the concierge come in through the double doors. He looked up and Zaria's world seemed to slow. She looked back at the man uncertainly and he smiled widely with a look of satisfied accomplishment. Or was he just smiling politely, her mind had been playing tricks on her all afternoon and all she wanted was to get into bed and relax for the first time. She didn't even want to think about the car lying half in the river some six miles up the road.

Darren slid back the lock cover on the wooden door of room 104 and inserted the brass key. Turning it with ease, the lock clicked and with a push, opened smoothly inward. The room inside was dark, lit only by the moonlight pouring in through the large window, blue and magical. But it sure didn't feel magical, it felt horrifying. Darren felt around for the light switch and clicked it on.

The lights came on one after the other with short delay, rows of small round lights screwed into the ceiling. At seeing the room, Zaria's heart instantly began to decrease in speed; there was something about the room that felt safe and comfortable. Zaria felt as if nothing could harm her in the confines of its walls. A small round table sat in the middle of the room, decorated by a long white tablecloth that hung down to about a foot off the floor. Candles were positioned in the middle of the table next to a bowl of ornamental fruit of all colours and shapes. Zaria's eyes were drawn to a bunch of rich purple grapes hanging from one side of the golden bowl.

Also inside the main room, at the other side of the room was a small kitchenette, which was actually part of the room, separated only by a large surface about stomach high and a walk in area where there was a cooker and sink. On the left, quite alone from the rest of the apartment was a large two-piece sofa facing a small fireplace. Artwork was hung on the two corner walls of the lounge area, one that Zaria recognised as Davinci's Mona Lisa. Zaria was quite knowledgeable on the subject of art but then who didn't know the Mona Lisa at sight.

Two doors were open on the right of the apartment, seemingly joined rooms. Zaria could see a large bathtub that was big enough to be a Jacuzzi, surrounded by white and apricot

alternate tiles, through the first door. Through the second door, the head of a large double bed could be seen, neatly made in a silky chocolate brown sheet.

Darren shut the door behind them and crossed the room to the sofa. He threw himself down and raised his feet up onto the sofa then, quickly realising his shoes were caked in thick mud, pulled them off and laid them neatly at the side of the sofa. Zaria stood blankly in the doorway, not knowing what to do or what to say.

"I'm going to bed," She said at last and stepped towards the bedroom.

"Hun!" Said Darren sitting up and looking across at Zaria with guilt. She stopped and turned to face him. "I'll get the car sorted in the morning okay? While we stay here for the week, we might as well try and relax. Don't you worry about a thing petal." He smiled warmly at her but she didn't return it. It was too late.

Zaria shut the door behind her and sunk down to her knees, bursting out in tears. Why her? Why today, on their special day that they had planned for weeks and was supposed to be their romantic get away week? Her hands came up in front of her face and she sobbed into her palms. Through her teary eyes, Zaria looked around the dark room. The only light in the room was several blinking red LEDs. One across the wall from her, possibly on a television, one lit up the display of an alarm clock sat on the bedside table next to the double bed. The last red light came from the very corner of the room, right up next to the ceiling and this was the one that nearly made Zaria stop crying for a second to stare a little longer at it. A little light shone from underneath the door that she was leaned up against but her back blocked most of it. Apart from that, the room was completely dark. Even the light shining through the closed curtains was not enough to see anything by.

Zaria reached up from the floor and tried to hit the lights but she couldn't reach. Stretching into a kneel, Zaria clicked on the dimmer and turned it so that the chandelier above her lit up the room. A double bed as she had seen before took up most of the room leaving only a bedside table with lamp, alarm clock, telephone and leaflet, a wardrobe beside the bed and a long dresser that took up the wall opposite the bed. A large flat screen television was mounted on a hinge fastened to the wall just above the dresser.

There was a closed door on the right wall, probably leading to the bathroom from under which a tiny beam of light was coming, barely visible. Zaria moaned and stood. Tears fell from her face. She didn't even know why she was crying; if she had seen herself she would have said she had to pull herself together. It was the shock from the crash, yes that was it. If her boss had seen her in this state again he would have told her to shut the fuck up like he had done then and slapped her across the face, following with a 'you're pathetic, now get the hell on with your work before you lose us all our jobs'. Zaria had broken down in tears and ran out of the office and not stopped until she was home. Darren had gone to his house that night despite Zaria's screaming at him not to, had beaten him shitless, screaming questions like how dare he touch his wife especially after what she had been through the last few weeks.

Zaria slid the brass bolt across on the door behind her, locking it shut and threw herself forward onto the bed. She rolled onto her side and brought her legs into her chest in a tight

ball. She lay there, her hair spread across the pillow in a mess. There was a hammer on the bedroom door.

"Zaria babe, open the door please. I'm sorry." Darren stood on the other side of the door, leaning his head against it. When silence followed, Darren's footsteps drifted around the door and after a few seconds, the door to the bathroom opened slowly and Darren stood, a dropped frown on his face. He smiled weakly to Zaria's back and slowly walked forward. Darren reached a hand and laid it gently on Zaria's head. She stopped sobbing and turned suddenly. Darren stood over her, a look of deep guilt on his face.

"I'm sorry," he said again. Zaria sat up and lowered her hands from her face.

"For what?" She said and put her arms around him and sobbed gently into his shoulder. Darren held her head close into his chest and stroked her hair absently with his other hand.

"I'm sorry," It was Zaria who was now apologising.

"Sssshh," Darren said and slowly lowered her onto the bed. They lay on the soft, firm bed in the bright light until they had both fallen asleep.



## FOUR

"No. No I don't want to sign your bloody paperwork. I'm on a- No just listen, please. I'm on a holiday with my wife and we just want to forget about it for a while and relax. Can we please just establish something here for one second- I am paying you to pick up my car, repair it and bring it to me at the hotel at the end of the week? Can you do that for me?"

Zaria's eyes opened with resistance and she looked sideways at the alarm clock. It displayed 11:45 in red 8-bar figures. She had slept a hell of a long time. The door to the main apartment was open and Darren was pacing up and down with his mobile clenched at his ear, speaking in slow annoyed syllables.

Zaria sat up and drew the covers up to her chin. She nuzzled into the soft fabric for a few seconds before wiping her eyes on the duvet and throwing it aside. Darren finished his call and met Zaria's eyes. He smiled and strolled to the doorway. Leaning against it, he stroked his gelled hair back and raised his chin in an eighties high school fashion. Zaria giggled and nodded back to him. Then her smile slowly faded.

"Everything ok?" She asked stroking her rough hair back out of her eyes and looking down. Darren sighed, dropping his hand from his hair and nodded slowly, his lip tucked behind his front tooth momentarily.

"Yeah. They're basically saying they can't fix the car in less than eight days."

"Well that's okay isn't it?" Zaria asked optimistically.

"It wouldn't be so bad but they're going to pick it up later today and then eight days from now... You realise we'll be two days with no place to sleep." Zaria swung her legs off the edge of the bed and kicked them about playfully.

"You sure we can't book another two days here?" Darren shook his head sharply.

"The condition of us staying here was that we're gone by twelve dead on the last day. No way will he compromise." Zaria's cheeks pulled to her ears and she pursed her lips.

"You mind if I go take a shower?" Zaria asked standing and pulling the duvet neatly over the lower half of the pillow. Darren shook his head.

"Go ahead. I'm gonna go talk to the manager about our situation, see if any buses pass through here that we can catch next week. I'll order us some breakfast too yeah?" Zaria nodded but did not speak. She merely stared forward into the open bathroom. Darren raised an unconfident hand in a wave and left the room.

Zaria waited a second, watching the now empty doorway before turning on her heel and striding into the bathroom. She was greeted by warm, under floor heating but oddly, her face burnt with cold. She raised both hands and cupped them over her face. The sudden icy coldness hit her palms with wetness and she dropped them quickly, accompanying the movement with a small yelp. In hesitant, terrified curiosity, Zaria brought her hand in and touched her bare leg. It too was freezing cold as if her skin had been doused with acid, stinging with an uncomfortable strength. Zaria drew her hand back quickly with a wince and hurriedly pulled her top over her head. Walking forward with a panicked stumble, Zaria stepped into the shower and turned on the water. Still in her underwear, the powerful water soaked every inch of her body. The water was instantly cold, ice cold like her skin but after a few seconds of clenching her teeth against the war, the warm water welcomed Zaria.

She shivered deeply, her shoulders shuddering and her knees trembling as the coldness washed away, replaced with agony. She looked around desperately and saw that, with weak surprise, the temperature dial was only set a little higher than 'tepid'. Zaria's face grew red with the pain and she fought against it, trying to reach out and turn the water off but it was over. The pain ended and Zaria stood in the relaxing, falling water and, reaching down with her right hand, noticed the ice cold burning sensation was gone.

Then the sound.

A stumbling and then a hurried movement as if someone had turned and knocked an ornament from a shelf and quickly grabbed it. Then the silence. It wasn't just a silence but a painful ringing in Zaria's ears. The water falling past her naked body seemed to hang in the air for a second and her hands came up quickly to block her ears. A shadow crept up the steamed glass window of the shower. Another creak on the wood outside the corridor and Zaria froze in place. Her eyes widened and she dropped her hands suddenly from her ears and screamed.

There were more hurried footsteps and the concierge burst into the room holding his hand out in front of him and the other pressing a finger to his lips. When Zaria continued to scream his eyes shot to the door and sparked to life with a rage as if he wanted to rush forward and strangle Zaria but then he slowly shut the door and the sound of his footsteps died quickly.

Zaria pushed the water temperature dial off with a sharp swipe and pulled the shower door inward. It folded and she stepped out, soaked in water and walked forward. Her head faced forward, her eyes fixed on the door. Droplets of water fell from her body as the force of gravity doubled. The droplets hit the floor with a power that shattered them like glass ball bearings, quickly creating a trail of semi-puddles as she stepped forward, placing each bare foot flat on the floor in front of the other.

Zaria's arm reached up and outstretched straight in front of her shivering body, reaching for the door. Her fingers opened wide, creating a ball of air in her palm as her hand moved towards the round handle but as her hand moved towards it, the handle moved back just as fast with an unreal smoothness. Zaria gulped deeply and forced her wrist forward, her left foot moving underneath her body to come in front of the other and she realised then that her right foot wasn't coming. She looked down at her right foot and pulled. The foot resisted for a second, elastic stringy skin pulling from the floor where it stuck her foot to the tile.

Zaria's heart slammed against her ribcage and her head lifted barely consciously as her wide eyes caught the view of the room. The wall had moved far back with the door, letting the other walls stretch diagonally to accommodate it, the floor space created by the movement was tiled black and white marble and as Zaria's eyes followed the hypnotic pattern the far walls pushed away as if avoiding her gaze and before she had time to raise her head up, she was standing in a tiled black and white world with no boundaries or barriers. She turned again to face the door and the wall pulled with a stringy skin like that of her foot and broke off from the door, sliding back out of her sight replaced by more tiles.

The only thing in existence was the dark varnished door with its brass round handle waiting in anticipation. Zaria threw her arm forward and grabbed the handle. It burned white hot in

her hand, melting her skin like wax but she turned it and wrenched the door open on its invisible hinges.

A child stood in the space, his light haired head faced downward, tipped on the axel of his neck and his eyes were closed tight, eyelashes flickering with resistance. His head started to vibrate madly and he shook it off quickly, staring forward through his closed eyelids. Then his eyes snapped open and his head launched up to face Zaria. His wide black eyes burned into her and her soul died in the timespan of a click of fingers. She screamed loudly, the vibrations of sound waves reverberating off the inside of her throat and echoing around the paradox of colourless tiles. As her aching jaw was held open with the scream, her hand reached sideways for the door handle, Zaria's eyes fell upon the floor underneath the child's feet; three black tiles in a row, one in the place of a white one that would have perfected the pattern. She froze on the spot for what felt like an eternity, the child's eyes burned into her, sucking the life from her like a black hole and her mouth stood wide open, the dead scream ringing around the emptiness in a buzz. Consequently, black blood dripped from inside her ears melting her skin and cartilage in a hissing smog. The skin peeled away like shards of rust from her fingers. The shavings peeled down her fingers, exposing the dry bone underneath, rotted into blackness.

With a phenomenal amount of willpower that Zaria had never experienced before, she pulled the door shut in the child's face and fell backward.

She landed hard on the tiled blue floor and an ache ran down Zaria's spine. Her eyes burned for a second with the light and she pulled herself to a sitting position. Her heart slowed and she turned, threw up and wiped her mouth. Pushing her tongue around her rough, burnt with sick mouth, Zaria stood, the sopping trousers sticking to her legs and she pulled the door open. The room was deserted, lit by the bright angelic daylight that flooded the room through the tall, gothic style windows stupidly covered over with double glazed glass panes. Zaria turned to the taller main door that led out onto the corridor. It was locked. At the sound of more pattering as water dripped down Zaria's arms and hit the floor, she gulped, turned and walked back into the bathroom.

## FIVE

"Well what are we going to do?" Zaria asked the scarlet carpet, her brown damp hair hanging in front of her face and disguising her absent stare. She spoke in an unconfident mutter but Darren seemed to have not noticed.

"Well. It's not too much of a big deal. Apparently there are no buses that pass regularly. There's one minibus that stops just down the road every Sunday at two, takes some locals into town and then back, we could get a bus from there. But that's over a day after we are supposed to have left." Darren sucked the inside of his cheek and rolled his eyes in thought.

"Two options." He said at last. "One; we get a lift either from a taxi or I call my brother and have us taken home then I'll have the car brought to the house. Or, we find somewhere to stay for a night until the car is returned and then we'll make it home in the repaired car. What do you think?" Darren, at the continued unresponsiveness from Zaria, turned to face her and, at seeing that her posture resembled that of a tired rag doll, back hunched over and head down, reached out and held her head in his hands. He lifted her chin slowly but her gaze was still fixed on the floor.

"Zara? You alright?"

Zaria looked up eventually through strands of damp hair and she caught Darren's concerned look before diverting her stare, which disappeared into nothingness a little in front of the kitchenette.

"Zaria, talk to me. Has something happened?" She stared on, a tear trickling down her soft cheek, pale as albino skin. Darren reached out and wiped the tear away before taking Zaria's trembling hand and holding it close to his chest. He leaned in, his face dropping in hurt.

"Zaria please. Has something happened?"

Her head pulled up as if by a string, strands of damp hair glued across her face untidily. Her eyes stared deep into Darren's, more tears falling from her eyes and her chest sinking and rising slowly.

"I can't do this," She whispered. "I just can't." Darren nodded reassuringly.

"There's something wrong with this place," Zaria said in a low tone. Darren opened his mouth to speak but Zaria cut him off. "I know what you think, you think I'm paranoid and I'm getting ill again. This isn't like before, this place is wrong." Darren sighed as if weighing up her thoughts in his mind.

A creak from the doorway. Darren turned so fast he pulled Zaria forward slightly by the arm. Darren stared hard at the wooden door then his eyes flickered around the room. Again the creak from the doorway and a footstep. Darren dropped Zaria's hand and stood. He walked forward in long strides, his footsteps contrarily silent on the varnished dark oak floor. Darren reached the door and pulled it open. Zaria looked up the second the lock unclicked to see Darren standing alone. Her eyes fell in apparent disappointment.

"Oi!" Zaria looked up again to see Darren pulling a child into the doorway by the collar. "What do you think you're doing?" The child, a small boy of perhaps five or six, cowered below Darren's waist. Darren jerked his head up by his shirt collar, which he clenched in a white knuckled fist.

"Please Sir," The boy whimpered, bringing his hands up to cover his head in a defensive posture.

"Darren!" Zaria shouted. He turned to face her, still holding the fear-stricken child by the neck and they locked glances momentarily. Darren turned back to the child, looked him down for a second and then released him. The child hurried away and in seconds, the footsteps had died.

Darren shut the door angrily and paced back slowly to his chair.

"What the hell Darren?" Zaria asked in outrage, sniffing her nose and wiping the last of her tears away.

"What?" Darren said boldly in a short, clear syllable that said 'don't even think about telling me off for that', falling into the armchair beside Zaria with a thud.

"What do you mean *what*? You just grabbed a kid by the neck." Darren rolled his eyes and lifted his feet onto the coffee table. Anger flushed over Zaria and she stood quickly, her previously pale white face now a burning red. Darren looked up, still with a faint smirk spread across his lips but it quickly faded replaced by a look of guilt but anger that she had exposed it.

"I'm sorry," He muttered. "C'mon, sit down." Zaria stood for a second watching Darren closely and then folded her arms and sat.

"I'm sorry Zaria, I shouldn't have grabbed him. I was only trying to protect you."

"From a child?" Zaria asked sarcastically, looking down at Darren with bitterness. Darren said nothing, staring ahead.

"So, what do you want to do about the car situation?" Darren said at last, still staring past Zaria and at the closed front door.

"I thought you wanted us to forgot about it and enjoy our holiday," Zaria said, adopting a teenage tone, her face bright red. Darren sighed deeply and turned to face Zaria. She quickly dropped her gaze.

"You're certain we cannot stay here, even in a different room for one night?" Zaria said after a good thirty seconds of dead silence and turned to face Darren. Darren shook his head impatiently.

"It's out of the question, to quote the manager. Seems ridiculous if you ask me, terrible customer service. "

"Well, maybe he has his reasons," Zaria said logically. "Besides it's his right to say we can only stay the number of nights we originally booked."

"Oh yeah, cause this place is like Piccadilly fucking station. It's so busy that we can't stay one more day in this shit hole."

Zaria's face burned red, a frown spread across her face as if he had just backhanded her across the face.

"You know sometimes, you're such an insufferable arse hole I wonder why I ever married you."

"What?" Asked Darren in strong, defensive anger, his attempt to hide his consternation failing and resulting in his tone rising.

Zaria growled with an 'uh' sound and shot a squinted burst of hate at Darren.

"This *shit hole*? You chose this place for our special break. Is that all I mean to you now, that you'd happily take me to a *shit hole*? I bet you took your past girlfriend to something as romantic as a dumping yard. But me, I'm just not that good." Darren shook his head slowly, his face burning red. He jumped to his feet and glared at Zaria with a passion. She might as well have smashed his face with a brick. He glared at her for a few seconds with burning hatred, his nose twitching as if he was considering his next words.

"No. This place was fine until you started going all fucking mental on it. Until you came here, the hotel staff used to keep their clothes on at all times. I thought you were better but clearly I was wrong." He spat at Zaria with the false impression of calmness. He could tell he'd hit her hard and it gave him a sick satisfaction that ran deep in his chilled blood. She too stood and the two glared at each other.

"Fuck you, you asshole!" She screamed and swung her arm around to come into contact with Darren's burning red face. Darren screwed his lower face and wrinkled his nose in frustration as an alcoholic anger slipped down his throat with a slight burn. Then it faded and the only sign left was a slight squint that defined his personality in a second. Her voice sunk to an almost psychotic sob. "You know, you're meant to be my man. You're meant to look after me and protect me. When did you stop asking me how I'm feeling?"

"Fine. How was your shower, darling?" He snarled sarcastically, folding his arms and staring deep into the pools of Zaria's eyes.

Zaria stared back with a hatred that she had never felt for anyone so strongly.

"Have it your bloody way," She said plainly and turned like a teenager in a state of unjustified outrage. Darren exploded; his hand reaching for the whisky glass below him and a single gesture saw the glass across the room where it shattered in an explosion beside Zaria's passing body. She turned and murder crossed both their gazes. Zaria stood blankly, her eyes locked on Darren's and her face contorted as tears leaked from her eyes. Zaria felt her heart sink miserable and dead into a pool of dilute water and she quickly left the room.

"Fuck!" Darren yelled and strings pulled his body limply back into the chair and his head slammed into the headrest as he hung his head. His head sunk deep into the hard fabric, his fists gripping the armrests like weapons. Sweat drenched the back of Darren's neck, dripping in thick drops down his collar. Then he closed his eyes overcomingly and shook his head sourly, a wetness in his throat created a shiver in his shoulders but he stood and consciously unclenched his fists, they too were pasted with rough sweat.

"Zaria?" Darren asked the empty room, the sickening fading from his throat. He swallowed and started across the room, his trainers cushioning his pounding footsteps but his eyes were drawn instantly to the painting of the Mona Lisa. A burning smell shrivelled Darren's nostrils and in wild perplexity, he saw that the water coloured lips were stretching diagonally upward until a wide smile. Darren, dumbfounded blinked and shook his head softly.

"Whoa." The concierge thrust his arms forward but they hopelessly crumpled as Darren's head knocked violently into his nose and Darren's chest smacked into the concierge's, knocking him back.

"God!" Darren roared and grabbed the shorter man. The concierge winced and covered his nose in a struggle against pain. "I'm so sorry." The concierge lifted his arms and gently

pushed Darren's hands from his shoulders. Darren awkwardly returned them to his sides, a sheepish discomfort showing on his face. "I'm sorry about that."

"Not to worry, my friend." The concierge replied bitterly, his elasticised lips stretching effortlessly and retaining his slanted constant, unintentionally arrogant smile. Again the man wrinkled his nose and surveyed Darren.

"What can I do for you then?" He asked Darren almost impatiently. Darren frowned and his eyes flickered sideways. His eyebrows rose questioningly as he caught the man's eyes.

"What's that?" The concierge let out, lifting his head. Darren's frown grew stronger.

"You came here. What do you mean what do I want?"

"Did I? Oh, my apologies sir." And the concierge left the room abruptly.

"The..?" Darren mouthed watching the space along the wall that corresponded to the volume of the footsteps. Darren stood in place for a long moment then quickly shook off his confusion and hurried out of the room, letting the lock click in place.

Darren stepped into the empty hallway, shadows of the concierge disappearing down a staircase at the end of the hallway.

The corridor was lit by dim bulbs mounted on rusty brass brackets. The wires leading from the bulbs were easily visible, disappearing into large holes in the wall. Plasterboard could be seen behind the two-penny sized holes behind each bulb and the glass of each bulb was so filthy and clouded with dirt that there was little point having them for they emitted so little light that Darren wondered whether he would be able to see his hand in front of his face if it was dark.

The walls were painted a warm yellow colour although in many places, large patches of peeled paint revealed a murky white behind. On the opposite wall, wooden slats had been nailed along the bottom third of the wall in a feeble attempt to tidy up large strips of unpainted wall but they too were attached as poorly as the lights; the slats of wood were bumpy, neither of the slats in line with the next and many had come unattached, hanging from the topmost nail awkwardly and exposing the poorly hidden hideousness that was the brown (possibly tea, possibly blood) splatter covered by the wood.

Darren walked forward, his white stained sports trainers as out of place as the decor was with itself, and his eyes were drawn momentarily to an upturned bucket of ash lying demandingly by the wall. The bucket was shiny steel, not a spot of rust on it, which was miraculous considering the many spider webs stretching from the wall to its rim. Ash had spilt from the bucket into a heap on the floor, covering the carpet in thick dust, some sinking deep in between the carpet.

Darren stepped down from the hallway, descending the few steps to the halfway landing where his foot caught on something that held his foot momentarily, causing Darren to fall forward and miss the first step. His left foot landed on the second stair and as his body awkwardly followed, pushing weight on his left foot, which bent sideways at the ankle. His back fell forwards over his legs and Darren rolled down the third and fourth steps and onto the floor. His head smashed painfully on the last wooden step and as his feet thumped to the floor, he stopped.

The pain throbbed in Darren's head as dizziness clouded over his eyes in a rush. Darren blinked in the sudden blinding light and raised his hand to his head. His finger came back dripping with wet dark blood. Darren's vision clouded over fully and his head hit the floor for a second time, leaving him lying awkwardly at the bottom of the stairs.



## SIX

Zaria slowed to a walk, panting and her clothes clinging to her with sweat. The sun beaming down was baking hot and despite the earliness of the morning, the sun was directly above her in the sky. She passed the hotel's car park and continued into a field to the left of the road. The faded green grass was long and swaying slightly in the gentle breeze. Zaria lifted her right foot and pushed off her flat shoe. It fell slowly through the air, as if through water, and tumbled to the ground, disappearing in the long grass. She kicked off her second shoe and walked quickly forward through the wet flickering grass. Its tips tickled her bare legs softly, reaching out for her. She walked forward, dropping her hands so that her fingertips brushed the tips of the grass. Her eyes closed in deep satisfaction as she walked on.

A low growl saw Zaria freeze in her tracks. Her eyes snapped open but her neck was suddenly motionless, locked in position with her pupils nearing the edges of her eyes in an attempt to see as far behind her as they could. A heavy gulp dropped in her throat, pulling down at her intestines in a sickening fear. A dense shiver sparked at Zaria's fingertips and her body shook for a second. Zaria heard the low growl again, this time closer and she mustered the energy to turn slowly. There in front of the dull coloured bushes stood a wolf. It stood high on all fours, leaning forward slightly with saliva hanging from its jaws. It outstretched its front paw and Zaria ran. She pumped her legs forward as hard as she had known possible; her arms ached with momentum after only a few seconds. She did not look back. She cleared the first small field in a matter of seconds and bolted the low wooden fence into the second field. She ran hard down hill for a while before her foot caught on a large rock beneath the grass and she tripped. Falling through the air, Zaria had only just enough time to throw her arms out in front of her to break her fall.

She smashed into the dry earth, skidding arms first and making a large dust cloud erupt in her face. She stopped quickly and pulled her legs in, letting out a low-pitched grunt of pain. Then she remembered the wolf and snapped her hand over her mouth. She lay as still and low as she could, listening to the terrifying sounds of footsteps in the distance. How far behind was it?

Zaria's breath came in a rushed cycle, being the loudest sound as she fought to stay silent. She closed her eyes in discontent and tried to steady her breathing. Behind her a twig snapped and Zaria furiously turned, backing off a few steps, her hands and feet desperately moving underneath her like a crab. Another large footstep and Zaria whimpered pathetically.

A hand reached down into the grass and found Zaria's. The hand pulled her up with a strong force to her feet. Zaria stood bare foot, her dress caked with dirt and her knees cut and grazed, to face an old man frowning up at Zaria. The man stood, a little hunched over, with a pipe in one hand that still emitted a thin wisp of smoke from the hole. His hand was rough but with a firm grip and he only let go of Zaria's hand after a few seconds.

"Thanks," Zaria muttered with a small smile before turning and scanning the area but no trace of a wolf showed in the empty space.

"What you playing at lying on the floor all the way down here?" He asked in a hoarse croak before coughing chestily. Zaria reached up and wiped dirt from her face.

"I was running and tripped," Zaria said eventually, realising the words coming from her mouth sounded unearthly and distant.

"Well you better get back to the prison, your husband's hurt." The mention of her husband sent all other thoughts out of her head. Her face flushed white and her scared expression suddenly burned with concern.

"Darren? What happened?" The man gestured for her to follow him and began walking towards the gate.

"Prison?" Zaria asked the man's back but he continued walking, showing no sign that he had noticed her speak.

Zaria hurried to catch up with the man, her bare feet scuffing on the hard ground.

"What happened to Darren?" The man turned sideways and smiled widely, his lips spreading across his face then he walked on, smiling to himself.

"Hey, I'm fucking talking to you!"

The man stopped dead and spun around, his eyes suddenly fiery and dangerous. Zaria took a step back in surprise.

"You have a long way to go woman." He spoke in a deep monster-like voice and after a snarl he shuffled away as quickly as his old legs permit him.

## *SEVEN*

"Darren baby, what happened?" Darren lay on his back on the pale green sofa in the hotel entrance hall. His feet hung over the edge of the armrest and his head was propped up by a number of pillows. He held a frozen steak to his head and his sight was weary. He spoke in an incomprehensible slur from which Zaria could only recognise the word 'stairs'. Zaria turned to face the room and looked each of its three occupants in the eyes. Each looked down at the floor. The older man that had brought her, the concierge and another man that Zaria had not seen before all stood awkwardly, eyes closely watching Zaria.

"Would someone just tell me what the hell happened?" Silence. Zaria waited for a few seconds then marched over to the reception desk and threw her hands down onto its wood so that the room echoed with its thud.

"What. Happened?" She said slowly and commandingly. The concierge merely smiled politely and gestured to Darren.

"An accident Madam." Zaria stood snarling for a second before returning to Darren's side.

"Can you walk honey?" Darren coughed weakly then nodded. He turned his body so that his feet lay flat on the floor then tried to stand. He swayed for a second then took a step forward. Zaria put an arm around him and helped him forward. Zaria took one last look at the three men and helped Darren up the stairs.

"What happened Darren Hun? I was so worried about you."

"I don't remember," He said slowly through deep breaths, he still clutched the steak to his head that dripped fresh blood down his temple. "I'm... I'm real sorry about before."

Zaria smiled and stroked his sweat soaked fringe back onto his head. "Don't worry about it."

"He stole it from me!" Screamed the third man in the room, the one Zaria had not seen before. She turned, Darren's arm still tight around her shoulders, to see the man slam his fist down on the concierge's desk. Zaria watched for a second as the concierge tried to calm the man, before turning back to the difficult task of pulling Darren's body up the stairs.

A few minutes later, Zaria dropped Darren onto the sofa of their living room and collapsed beside him, panting.

"You get some rest yeah?" Zaria said stroking Darren's head and getting up. Darren reached up and grabbed Zaria by the wrist. She stopped and turned slowly to face him. His eyes were wide with fear and sweat drenched his face and neck.

"Stay with me. Please." Zaria hesitated for a second and then took his hand with both of hers and held it to her chest as she knelt beside him.

"Of course, anything." Darren dropped his head back and closed his eyes. In minutes he was dead silent, his breath slow and gentle.

At around 8pm, Zaria slowly prized Darren's grip from her hand and rest it down beside his still body. She got up and felt her way to the dark bedroom. Reaching out, Zaria hit the light. It flickered quickly and cut out. A figure stood about 4 feet tall beside the bed. A coldness ricocheted down Zaria's spine, sending a shiver to her shoulders. Zaria gulped and took a step forward, reaching her hand out in front of her. A light flicked on, making Zaria jump and she faced a chest high lamp that had been put beside the bed. A note taped to it read 'Lights are out temporarily, this will replace for now sorry for any inconvenience.' In scrawled handwriting. Zaria spun on her toe, scanning the room for movement but the room was empty.

Her heartbeat slowing, Zaria looked down to see that her foot was on a button attached by a wire from the lamp to the mains. She took her foot off and looked around the room once more before clicking the light off and crawling into bed.

## *EIGHT*

The gentle sobbing of a distressed child pulled Zaria from a light sleep. A sickly, sinking feeling dropped her stomach as she winced, winking her left eye sourly. She threw the duvet off her foetal body position and swung her legs out of the bed. The room was pitch black save for thick, blue rays of light beaming in through the window and casting a tessellating diamond pattern onto the wall opposite. Another shadow moved in front of the first, blocking parts of it with the fluttering shadow of a crow.

The shadow came to rest as the crow landed neatly on the exterior window ledge, turning its head from side to side as it watched the room carefully with its beady eyes. After a few seconds, its eyes locked on Zaria, watching her intensely as she slowly stood. Zaria stood for a while, watching the bird until after a minute, it slipped through the window as a shadow and disappeared under the door. Zaria stared in dumbfounded awe at the line of light where the bird had disappeared. For a second, the light was solid but then black shadows flickered and the crow fluttered about in terror. The shadows showed the bird's wings ripped off one by one by a small, four-fingered hand. Then a second hand took the bird's neck in its thumb and forefinger and snapped the crow's neck before throwing it to the ground. Blood trickled under the door as Zaria watched and found her hand closing around the warm doorknob.

The door burst open in a flash of light, flying from its hinges and smashing a way behind Zaria. White light blinded Zaria temporarily and after her eyes adjusted, she found herself standing in the doorway of a child's bedroom but the room had no walls, instead an infinite pattern of black and white chequered squares as far as the eye could see.

A muffled sob turned Zaria's head to a racecar style bed in the middle of the infinite chessboard and among the covers, a child lay face down sniffing into the pillow and singing quietly to itself incomprehensibly. The child slowly turned so that its back was to Zaria and it brought up its hand in front of its face. Zaria bewitched and staring in drastic disbelief, saw as the child rolled the crow's head around in its fingers. Zaria stepped forward slowly and as she put her foot down, a soft padding sound echoed around the world. The child stopped dead, acknowledging Zaria's presence and the head rolled from its fingers off the bed and it fell through the floor, falling faster and faster through the gridded chessboard until it disappeared. The child now stared fixedly into space, deliberately staying dead still, even its breathing was slow and controlled. The child inhaled slowly through its nose and spoke in a hoarse, demonic tone.

"You weren't nice to me"

Zaria's eyes closed passionately, the pain of memories leaking into her soul, melting it. A tear slipped from her eyelid and rolled down her face.

"You weren't *good* to me."

Her face smudged with tears, Zaria stepped forward and rolled the child over then stepped back and shrieked. The child had no face but pale skin covering where its face would have

been. Then the laughter. The piercing, shrill laughter echoed around the nothingness. A child's laughter.

Zaria screamed and jolted upright to face Darren, dripping in sweat and holding her firmly by the shoulders.

"You okay?" His eyes were deep with meaningfulness and concern.

"I had another nightmare."

"I know. I did too" Zaria straightened up, her gaze readjusting to surprise. "I believe you"

"Tell me about it, your dream," said Zaria, pushing the covers away from her.

"It wasn't quite a dream, I mean it felt real, so real. I was--"

Zaria cut him off mid sentence. "Was he there?" Darren stopped, staring down at his feet. He looked up at Zaria and nodded. She let out a breath and looked around the floor absently, stroking her hair away. Darren sat down on the bed and put his head in his hands.

"How are you feeling?" Zaria asked after a while.

"Fine, my head still throbs but I'll be alright."

"You remember anything about what happened?" Darren shook his head and opened his mouth to speak then stopped and his eyes widened.

"I remember."

\*

Darren blinked, bright light blinding him momentarily for a second before his eyes had a chance to adjust. He pulled at his wrists, tied behind his back but wire cut into them and he winced. He looked around him desperately. He was in one of the hotel rooms, at the end of the corridor Darren assumed as the open door showed a view of the stairway that Darren had tripped on. At this, Darren turned quickly to see two men in the room. A figure hung from the ceiling by a noose, rotting flesh sticking to bones and a stain of blood spread across the floor underneath the corpse.

"What the fuck is going on?" Darren asked from his position against the far wall, his legs pulled into his chest. The first of the men walked forward and grabbed Darren's hair in a fist. He forced his head back and slammed it into the wall.

"Why are you here?" The man asked in an arrogant snarl.

"What? I'm here with my wife for a holiday. What are you talking about?" The man sneered then threw back his head and barked out a hoarse laugh.

"You don't know do you?" The man turned to face the other man in the room who Darren recognised as the manager of the hotel. The first man suddenly fell silent.

"Know what?" Asked Darren. The manager pushed passed the first man, reaching into his pocket and taking out a long syringe. "What are you doing?!" The manager stabbed the needle into Darren's arm and injected the liquid into his blood.

"God save us," He said before lifting Darren and carrying him down the stairs. The next thing Darren knew, he was lying on the entrance hall sofa and Zaria was running towards him from the doorway. His head throbbed with pain and his mind stabbed as he tried desperately to remember what had just happened.

\*

"Really? What happened?" Asked Zaria.

"I..." As Darren tried to say the words, he couldn't and the thought was pushed from his head. "I don't remember."

Zaria's eyes sunk and she sighed. "Well, whatever happened, this place isn't right. We can't stay here."

"No." Said Darren. "We'll leave first thing tomorrow. I'll book a taxi right now, shall we go get some breakfast?" Zaria nodded.

The two of them got up to go but then Zaria stopped.

"You okay?" Asked Darren, reaching out a hand and holding Zaria. She nodded.

"Tell you what, you go down and get us some breakfast. I'll get changed and meet you there in just a minute." Darren waited for a second then nodded. He leaned over and kissed her.

"Sure. I'll see you in a bit." He smiled and left.

Zaria turned to the room as soon as Darren had left. She looked over to where the crow had sat by the window in her dream. She walked over to the window and looked out at the morning sun. Then a group of voices caught her attention. She looked down to see three men walking hurriedly along the wall of the building, talking in heated whispers.

"You keep your nose out of it," Zaria heard one of them say before they rounded the corner and disappeared from sight. Zaria stood for a second, watching the point from which they had disappeared and then turned and left the hotel room.

Walking down the corridor, Zaria stopped in front of an open door to one of the rooms. The room was perfectly square and empty; the walls were painted a boring white and the floor an even more boring grey. In the middle of the room sat its only occupant, a small round glass

table and on it, a black rotary dial telephone. The earpiece, attached by a coiled wire was off the telephone mount and hung over the edge of the table. There were fuzzing, crackling noises coming from the ear piece and as Zaria stepped into the room and walked closer, she realised there was a voice on the other end. Zaria took the phone and held it to her ear.

"Hello?" Zaria asked. There was no response just constant static and crackling from the receiver.

"Is somebody there?" Again there was no response. Then a muffled voice sounded and Zaria made out the words 'accident' and 'nothing'.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Zaria asked. More fuzzing and then the word 'Zaria' made Zaria freeze in place. "Who is this?" She asked angrily. Then silence, even the fuzzing and crackling died off. Zaria slammed the phone down and turned to leave but came face to face with a tall, bearded man. The man did not step back despite Zaria nearly running into him. He watched her closely as she edged past the man and hurried down the corridor.

When Zaria stepped into the dining hall and strode through the small hall to the table in the corner at which Darren was sat, faces turned in time until all twelve or so people in the room were staring at Zaria.

"What? You all got something to say?" Zaria said loudly to the room. One man seated at the far end of the room stood and tried to move forward towards Zaria but another man beside him threw out an arm and held him back. Zaria ignored it and continued to Darren.

"What is up with people here?" Darren seemed to have not heard, he was staring down at his mobile phone screen with disbelief. "What's up Darren?"

He looked up after a while and showed her his screen. "No signal at all. I had full last night." Darren got up and left the room. Zaria scanned the room to see that most men in the room were not staring at her but several were watching her from the corners of their eyes. Darren returned several minutes later still holding the mobile phone.

"Any luck?" Zaria asked as Darren slammed the phone down on the table and sat down.

"The phone lines are down, I can't even make a call with the landline. We're stuck here until the phones come back."

"How long will that take?"

"Hours." Said Darren and Zaria looked up hopefully. "Or days. I don't care, we're getting out of here one way or another first thing tomorrow."



## NINE

The garden behind the hotel was a subtly beautiful one. Despite no proper upkeep, the overgrown hedges complimented the path in a more natural way that gave it a certain magic. The path that ran in a large figure of eight was made of small stones all cemented together so long ago that moss grew in between each rock and there was not a single patch of the stone's original colour. Park benches were positioned at intervals around the hedge where an indent in the shape of half a square gave the benches a small area beside the path. In the middle of both the circles of the figure of eight were large water fountains each in the shape of a lion's head, pouring water from its large open mouth mid roar into a large stone bowl.

The hedges were planted either side of the stone path with breaks at the top of the eight where one entered, a break at the bottom where you would exit and a large break in the middle of the eight, where both lines (in this case two as the hedge is on either side of the path) cross. So once you had walked round one side of the first circle and you had reached the water features, you could see all of the inside of the garden and its beauty. Flowers blossomed indefinitely, wild and free. The garden was one of the main attractions of this remote area and many came solely to visit the garden and stayed clear of the hotel. *Visa versa* most that stayed in the hotel never stepped foot in the garden. In fact, the beauty of the garden had been one of the main reasons Darren had chosen to take Zaria to this hotel. Although the hotel resembled nothing of Darren's memories of his previous visit, the garden was just as it had been all those years ago.

Zaria stood at the entrance to the garden, Darren's hand held tightly in hers and the smell of fresh wilderness strong in the air. Zaria looked left and then right and turned to Darren.

"It's a hedge?" Zaria said unsurely. Darren smiled and gestured to the left path.

"I'll meet you in the middle," Darren said dropping her hand and heading down the right path in a child-like jog of excitement. A maze? Zaria thought, watching Darren round the corner with a wide grin on his face, like a child. Zaria sighed and followed the path left. She walked for no less than a minute when a high-pitched giggle made her stop dead. She turned quickly and scanned the hedge as far as she could see.

After a few seconds of suspicious tension, Zaria turned back to see a small boy in dark blue chequered pyjamas. He stood at the end of the path, at the figure of eight's first curve on the left side. He stood bare foot on the stone path and a low, sucking sound locked Zaria's eyes to the child's head. Short blonde hair covered the back of his head and in his right hand he held a small tattered brown teddy bear by the arm so it hung like a rag doll, lifeless. The boy's head turned like an owl, as if his neck had been snapped and his head could turn infinitely. It turned a full 180 degrees until it's eyes burned into Zaria and the boy's mouth opened slightly. Then he giggled and ran off around the corner of the path, disappearing out of view beyond the hedge. Zaria walked forward quickly, in long strides. The laughter still resounded through the garden, creepily innocent and playful. As Zaria broke into a jog, she

could see the back of his head bobbing along the hedge as he ran. The child ran faster and Zaria lost sight of him.

“No! Wait.” Zaria shouted after the boy, breaking into a full sprint. “Come back, please.” She begged. Then, in the distance was no more hedge instead Zaria began to see overgrown lawn at the end of the path, covered with flowers of all kinds and colours. Eventually, she reached the middle and stood at the side of the left path. On her right was a large stone water feature in the shape of a lion but from its mouth poured not water but dark red blood. The blood dropped endlessly into the overflowing bowl under the lion’s head and dripped onto the grass below. Surrounding the feature was a sporadic of flowers and plants. On Zaria’s left was an exact symmetry; the second water feature also spilling dark blood onto the garden’s beauty. The flowers turned black instantly, their colours dying solemnly. The tulips proud necks held high began to droop as their colours too died.

The laughter sounded again and there was movement behind the stone lion to Zaria’s left that made Zaria wheel round. Again the laughter sounded, louder now. Zaria walked towards the lion until she stood in front of it, blood dripping onto her feet. Then something caught Zaria’s eye and she looked down into the dark red blood. Refracted in the ripples of the liquid, a shape could be made out at the bottom of the bowl. Zaria reached into the thick, concentrated blood and her hand found something soft and heavy. She pulled her hand out to see she was holding the child’s teddy, completely saturated with blood and stained brown.

A hand reached out and touched Zaria on the shoulder. She let out a gasp and turned to face Darren.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” He said cheerfully, gesturing to the garden. Zaria frowned and looked down at the teddy she was holding. But it was not a teddy, instead a large rock dripping with fresh water. Zaria looked past Darren to the other stone lion that now poured clear water from its mouth.

“I saw him again,” Zaria said.

“What?” Darren cried concernedly. “Here?” Zaria nodded then burst into tears instantly. Darren reached out and brought her head into his shoulder, holding her. Zaria sniffled into his shoulder for a long minute before stepping back. “We need to leave.” Darren nodded.

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## TEN

Darren sat upright in a beach bed beside the indoor pool, a map book in his lap and a drink on a table beside him.

"What you doing?" Asked Zaria, leaning over from a bed next to his. Darren sighed and passed the map over.

"I'm looking for the best way to the nearest town but it looks like we would be walking approximately fourteen miles."

"Well let's do that then," said Zaria and when Darren continued to stare in doubt added "we'll probably find someone who'll give us a lift after a few hours anyway."

"Alright fine but I want us to be in a hotel by nightfall, I don't want any damn wolves around so we leave promptly at six yeah? You might as well enjoy the rest of the day, I'll book us a table for tonight and we'll have a nice meal."

"Sounds good, and don't worry about me. I'm fine, I really appreciate this and... and I'm sorry about what I said earlier." Darren pulled Zaria's head towards him and kissed her quickly on the forehead.

"Don't you worry about it."

"How's your head?" Zaria asked.

"It doesn't really hurt much but there's a huge bruise."

"I'm gonna go for a swim," said Zaria, getting up and looking round at the odd excess of green in the pool. "I'll just go get my things and be back in a sec. You wanna come in?" Darren shook his head.

"Nah, you're alright. I have to plan out our route for tomorrow. You have a nice swim." Zaria nodded and left the pool. The pool, along with two small changing rooms was situated at the back of the hotel through a door to the left off the main entrance hall. Zaria hadn't seen anyone come or go since they had settled down an hour ago nor had she seen anyone walk passed to the 'chill out room' that was home to a large television and several table games.

Zaria exited the pool and followed the long corridor to the entrance hall. When Zaria entered the entrance hall, she found three men drinking a green acidic coloured drink and playing poker on the reception desk. As Zaria walked passed, one whistled and nudged the man next to him. Zaria shook her head to herself in disbelief but as she was ascending the staircase, the same man yelled "Oi! You can't go up there." Zaria ignored him and continued walking. The man continued yelling but it quickly died to silence.

Zaria followed the corridor until she reached her room. She took out a key from her pocket and turned it in the lock. The lock clicked but the door would not budge, as if something extremely heavy was holding it shut. Zaria pushed harder but there was no give. Then she stopped at the sound of voices. Voices from within the apartment. Zaria turned the handle

again and pushed with her shoulder. The door opened cleanly and Zaria fell forward onto the floor with the momentum.

She looked up at the room from her sprawled position on the floor but found that the room was empty. At first Zaria sighed in relief and got to her feet, trying to shake off the feeling that something wasn't quite right. Then she looked around once more and saw that the largest window covering a good third of the far wall was smashed and the curtain that had been covering it was blowing effortlessly into the room by the wind.

Zaria walked forward unsurely and peered out. What she saw made her almost puke. A large pool of blood on the floor outside the window surrounded a limp body. The body's head was caved open and the brains were scattered across the floor. Horror overwhelmed Zaria but she then realised that the person could not have jumped from that window; the window that Zaria was staring out of was on the third floor, easy enough to seriously hurt yourself had you jumped out but not nearly enough to splat you like an egg. Zaria peered out the window and looked up at the building above her.

A noise made Zaria pull her head out and turn quickly. She was just fast enough to see a figure dart out of the apartment's front door and slam the door behind them. Zaria ran forward and wrenched the door open to see the concierge standing in her face. She stepped back as he took a step into the room.

"Are you deaf Madam?" Zaria squinted in disbelief at the short man.

"I'm sorry?"

"Your ears, do they work?"

"Why yes they d-"

"Then why" the concierge interrupted harshly. "Did you take it upon yourself to enter this room despite one of my colleagues specifically telling you not to." Zaria spluttered for a second searching for words and then she rounded on the man.

"I don't know who the hell you think you are but this is my flat and I will do what the hell I please until I leave tomorrow morning." The concierge suddenly dropped his anger and now panic seemed to glimmer in his voice.

"Oh no you cannot leave so early. You have to stay until I say you can go."

"Oh really?" Zaria asked angrily.

"All I meant, Madam." He took a long breath. "Is why waste good money you have spent on the room, why not enjoy the luxuries we have in place for you and your... husband."

"Luxuries? Like a fucking body outside my window?" Zaria half screamed.

"Body? I know not of what you speak. There is no body." Zaria threw her arm at the window, pointing at the shattered glass, held loosely in its frame.

"A rock madam, another of our customers threw a rock at the window. I'm sorry for the inconvenience and obviously they have been charged for the repair but that is why I asked you to stay out of the room, so I can have the window repaired." Zaria raised her eyebrows in absolute discontent.

"A rock?" She reached out and grabbed the concierge's arm by the sleeve and marched him over to the window. The concierge was so taken aback by Zaria's dominance that he made little attempt to protest.

"Look!" Zaria said clearly, pointing to the window.

"It is a broken window," Said the concierge almost in hysteria.

"Look!" Zaria said again, turning to look out of the window. But no trace of anything at all unusual was present. Zaria turned to face the concierge who looked strangely at Zaria like she was some rotten food found unexpectedly. She looked back out of the window and gulped.

"I'm sorry. I'll just get, I'll just get some things and let you repair it." The concierge nodded slowly, exposing his wrinkled, folded neck as he did. Zaria hurried away and into her bedroom. She shut the door and leaned heavily against it. She waited for a second, closing her eyes in disbelief. She listened carefully to the soft sounds of the man's footsteps. Then they stopped and a creak indicated that he stood directly on the other side of the door. Zaria stepped forward, turning to look at the closed door. She shivered and quickly grabbed her things and left.

"Alright?" Darren asked as Zaria hurried into the pool and sat down beside him, panting and staring blankly ahead.

"I don't know. I just don't feel right." She said.

"Forget it. Have a swim and we'll have dinner tonight, sleep and then we're out of here." Zaria looked up suddenly, her eyes drawn from its gaze to see a young woman watching Zaria closely as she walked passed the doorway. She disappeared from sight and Zaria turned to Darren.

"Yeah. Sure."

Zaria changed into her swimming costume and strode over to the pool. She looked down at it with mild disgust before dipping the toes of her right foot into it. Surprisingly, the water was reasonably warm and Zaria dropped her foot into the reassuring water before stepping over the edge for a second and falling in mid air to sink deep into the water. Eyes closed tightly, Zaria felt the exact moment of impact as she hit the water.

She plunged deep into the pool's depths, deeper than she had anticipated. She then waited for the point where her feet would hit the bottom of the pool but that point did not come.

Everything became a black blur and Zaria started to panic as, after a few seconds, she realised she was not floating up. She kicked with her legs and found nothing but water. Desperately, Zaria opened her eyes to find herself surrounded by red, wine-coloured blood. It suffocated her, the pressure pushing in on Zaria from all sides. She blinked heavily and looked around desperately, turning in the dense blood as if in a slow motion film.

Looking down, Zaria barely kept her mouth closed to prevent sick spewing from her stomach. Bodies littered the bottom of the pool, scattered limbs and heads, dead but not decomposing. Zaria looked down at her feet and tugged. Hands grabbed at her feet, pulled at them in an attempt to drag Zaria down into the depths of death from which she cannot escape. Zaria opened her mouth to scream but water filled her mouth and she spluttered. Instead claustrophobia consumed her, making her squirm and wriggle in distressed agony. She pushed up with all her strength and mind, pulled away from the stringy flesh that held her captive. Zaria reached up and felt her hand protrude from the thick blood into ice cold air and after the peak of her force, Zaria felt herself falling and her hand sinking again into depths of the thick pool.

A hand reached in and grasped hers; she held on tight and was pulled firmly out of the water. Zaria lay spluttering and coughing on her back before at last she opened her eyes to see Darren. Water surrounded her on the tiled floor and Darren knelt at her side.

“Okay?” He said. Zaria looked over at the pool and its again green water. She laid her head back against the hard floor and nodded her chin.

## *ELEVEN*

Zaria opened the door and looked across the room to the large bed. A purple dress lay flat on the made bed. The dress was layered, embroidered with sparkling sequins along the seams. Zaria's face lit up with life as she reached out and let her fingers run the length of the dress. It was soft as silk and light as dust in her hands. The dress glistened in the early evening light, beaming through the window.

Zaria let go of the dress, letting it fall so that she held it only by the sleeves. It came down to half way between her knees and ankles. She strode to the bathroom and observed herself in the mirror, holding it up to herself. She looked a wreck; victim to insomnia and lack of appetite but her body nonetheless was as beautiful as ever. Her skin, scarred and battered was soft and gentle. Her fingers shook by her sides but as they touched the dress it gave her a comfort. She stripped to her skin and put the dress on. It fit her perfectly. She stepped out of the bedroom to find Darren turn in astonishment.

"You look amazing," Said Darren as Zaria pirouetted in her dress, her long brown hair falling over her shoulders.

"Thank you." Said Zaria. She waited for a second as if awaiting more but Darren merely stood in awe.

"Shall we go," He said after a pause. Zaria nodded, her hair bouncing enthusiastically. They left the apartment and walked down the corridor to the main entrance. Darren reached his hand out and held Zaria's. She looked sideways at him and smiled.

"You do truly look stunning," Darren said. He on the other hand did not. He had the same clothes on since the day they had come that were in all honesty, filthy. He had not brought their cases from the car and their necessities were very limited. He had only just enough for a shower.

They entered the entrance hall and Darren led Zaria up to the reception desk. Darren walked forward and cleared his throat. The concierge, who had been looking down at his feet, lifted his head and surveyed Darren.

"What can I do for you, my good sir?" Zaria looked sceptically at the concierge and then at Darren.

"I've booked a table. At the restaurant." The concierge nodded enthusiastically.

"Ah yes, of course." He said, putting down a notepad and walking round to the front of the desk. "Follow me."

He led the two of them through a door and into the dining area where they had eaten all their meals the last few days but it no longer was designed as a cafeteria but instead was entirely done up for a romantic meal. A single table sat in the middle of the large room under a large dimly lit chandelier and candles flickered on a white tablecloth. Sparkling clean plates and cutlery were laid on top of two white serviettes. A couple of waiters in suits stood

a few feet back from the table. They stood upright and patient, awaiting the couple's arrival. Zaria grabbed Darren's hand and gasped.

"Oh my Gosh," She muttered. Darren stepped forward and pulled one of the chairs from underneath the table, gesturing for Zaria to take a seat. Darren then walked around the table and sat down opposite her. It was then that he saw the menus placed on the table and handed one to Zaria. Darren opened it and surveyed the choices with anticipation. Darren felt breath on his neck and looked up. A waiter was standing beside him. Darren lifted his head questioningly.

"Would you like some wine Monsieur?" Darren frowned for a second, wandering what was with the sudden French title but then looked over at Zaria who nodded.

"Erm yes, do you have the list?" The waiter whipped out a second menu from a small bag at his waist and handed one to Zaria.

"Thank you." She said. She surveyed it for a minute before showing it to Darren and pointing to one.

"Do you want this one?" Darren laughed.

"Which ever one you want," Darren said. "Ok we'll have the... that one," He said pointing to a difficultly spelt French wine. "How old is it?"

"Ninety nine Monsieur." Darren nodded.

The waiter disappeared into the kitchen and Darren turned to Zaria. They looked awkwardly at each other and then Zaria laughed.

"This is incredible." She picked up the menu and scanned it for an appetising meal. "I think I'll go for the fried calamari."

The door to the kitchen opened and the waiter walked towards them, holding a bottle in both gloved hands. The closer he got to Zaria, the uneasier she felt. By the time he had reached the table, Zaria was shuffling her feet in discomfort.

"Who shall be the one to taste it?" His voice was low, muffled as if he spoke from through a wall and a buzzing now occupied Zaria's hearing. The waiter looked to Darren and then at Zaria. Zaria let out a small gasp, not enough to notify either of them. The man's eyes were black and dead, sunken in his head. He offered the bottle to Zaria and it was then that she noticed the eyeballs floating in the bottle and the liquid in the bottle was not wine but blood.

Zaria blinked. "Err, sure." She muttered weakly. She let out a sigh of relief and met Darren's reassuring eye. The waiter uncorked the bottle and poured a shallow serving into her glass. He then offered it to her. Zaria took it and sipped the wine. It did taste rather like blood, salty in her mouth but strongly bitter. "Yes, yes, it's...very nice." The waiter nodded, did a half bow and then poured more in Zaria glass and then filled Darren's. He then backed off a good distance.



"Shall we go?" Darren asked Zaria, over an hour later. She nodded and stood. Darren took her hand and they walked up to the room together. Inside, the couple stood looking into each other's eyes and then Darren leaned in and kissed her. She kissed him back and a minute later, the two found themselves falling into bed. Darren fell back onto the cushions with her.

"You really did look amazing in that dress." Darren said, looking over at her ten minutes later.

"Thank you hun," Zaria said smiling.

"I mean... you look better without but."

"Shut up!" Laughed Zaria and smacked him playfully. "Where'd you get it anyway? I thought we didn't bring anything from the car."

"Get what?" Darren asked, suddenly serious.

"The dress," Zaria urged impatiently. Darren sat up suddenly.

"I didn't give you the dress."

"I thought you laid it on the bed for me?" She asked and Darren shook his head slowly.

Zaria's stared blankly for a second and then her eyes grew suddenly wide and she too sat up. She gulped and looked down at it in the darkness. It lay untidily on the floor. Sinful.

Zaria fell back onto the bed and thought hard. It disturbed her to think it but she felt very strongly that she knew who had put it there. Her eyes closed mechanically and she was soon in a deep sleep.

## *TWELVE*

Zaria jolted from sleep, sweat clinging to her body. She lay still, staring up at the dark ceiling. Several minutes passed and then she heard it. A soft thud on the wall. Zaria blinked and a shiver slid down her back. Again, a thud, this time followed by two more in short succession. Zaria sat up and nudged Darren awake.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Darren said sleepily and then continued snoring. Again the sequence of three thuds repeated after a regular interval of silence. It terrified Zaria to notice that the thuds were moving along the wall, moving towards the door. The thuds continued and now a muffled singing was present.

A child's singing, of perhaps a nursery rhyme. Then the thuds stopped. The regular interval of twelve seconds of silence was cut off. A low creak behind the door and in the moonlight from the window, Zaria saw the handle slowly turn. She merely stared, unable to move and she clasped her hand over her mouth to prevent a small scream.

The door clicked and slowly swung open. A child stood there, familiarly terrifying and holding a now headless teddy bear at its side. It stood, half in darkness, staring directly at Zaria until it giggled. It laughed a small 'a-huh-huh' and then ran off behind the door.

Zaria leaped out of bed; throwing the duvet off her naked body and jumping onto the floor in front of the bed. She ran out of the room to find the repetitive black and white chessboard world that haunted her nightmares. Zaria looked around, the pattern playing with her mind until she spotted the child, running off down a corridor to the left.

Zaria sprinted after the child, its laughter echoed around the corridor and then died. Zaria ran, her legs seamlessly pumping on the non-existent floor. She looked left and right at each door along the corridor until she stopped dead at one that lay open. Zaria stepped into the room to see the bedroom of the child.

The boy lay in its racecar bed, back to Zaria. An eerie silence made Zaria's heart pump fast and strong. She reached over and rolled the child over. The child was dead, and long since. Blood stained the sheet in a large puddle and the child's body was rotting. Its eyeballs were gone and deep in the corpse's sockets was rotting flesh and black, burned skin. An unmistakable wrench filled Zaria's nostrils and she turned and threw up. She took the child's rotting corpse in her arms and screamed.

Zaria woke, heart pounding and her eyes wide with vivid terror. She sat up to see a flickering light underneath the door to the living room. Zaria stood, naked and dripping in sweat. She crossed the room quickly and opened the door. Across the room, the large television flickered with static, fuzzing vision. A crackling sound was also emitting from the television. Zaria's eyes were fixed on the screen as she walked towards it. She reached out her hand in the darkness and switched it off. She turned towards the kitchenette to get a drink but the screen flicked back on, this time showing a news report. The headline scrolling along the

bottom banner read 'Recently discharged from a mental institute, Zaria Martin, 32 drives her and her husband off a cliff in an attempt to end both their lives'. The report showed a clip of a tow arm pulling the wreck of a yellow car from a river.

"Darren?" Whimpered Zaria, unable to contain her trepidation. "Darren!" She screamed loudly and sprinted to the bedroom. She snapped the light on and turned to the bed but it lay empty. "Darren!"

# PART TWO

## *Prologue- Six years ago...*

"So I said to him 'you can't just keep doing that or I'll have to-"

Darren peered round the doorway and stopped mid-sentence. He wore a dark suit and was in the process of taking off a striped red and blue tie. A briefcase stood upright at his foot. "You alright Zar?"

Zaria stood blankly, not that she was ignoring Darren but she seemed to be in a totally different world, oblivious to life. She stood staring down at her feet, something small and long held loosely in her right hand. She let it fall to the floor and after a few seconds, turned to Darren.

"I'm pregnant," She said plainly.

"You're what?" Asked Darren, his face bubbling and contorting. His face burned instantly red with shock, his eyes widened in the space of a second and a rage showed on his face but his face faded to blank as quickly as it had come over. He smiled a wide grin from ear to ear and ran forward, arms outstretched. He took Zaria by the hips and lifted her into the air, spinning her around in a wide circle. He put her back on her feet gently and touched her stomach with the flat of his hand.

"Perhaps shouldn't have done that huh? Are you positive?" He added and Zaria nodded.

"You okay?" She nodded again.

"Hey, don't worry. I've got a good job, we have a nice home with a spare room and we'll have to decorate it for the baby?" Zaria continued to stare blankly.

"What's the matter? Aren't you thrilled?" Zaria tilted her head and met his eyes for the first time.

"I just don't know if it's meant to be." Darren shook his head and laughed.

"Don't be silly."

"It's just that I can't conceive, I'd always thought it was God's punishment for my childhood." She continued, seemingly to have ignored Darren. He put out his arms and held her by the shoulders firmly.

"Don't be ridiculous," He said slowly. "That wasn't your fault and you know it. C'mon, you should be happy, this is amazing. It's a miracle."

Zaria shrugged and a faint smile appeared on her face. Her face too was now turning red as a tear slipped down her face. Then she wiped it away with the back of her hand and Darren saw that she was smiling with relief, as if a huge load had just been lifted from her shoulders and she was free.

"It's all gonna be just fine. I promise."

## ONE

"Aaron, Aaron can you stop doing that, mummy needs to get some things for daddy's work."

Zaria stood in the furthest aisle of a stationary shop. In her left hand she held a green shopping basket, loaded with various boxes of pens and pencils, a hole-punch and boxes of staples. At her right side, a child hung to her leg, blonde haired and strong in body and mind. At nearly three years old, the boy was quite a character. "Toyshop Mummy, I want toyshop now!"

"Well you'll have to wait until I've finished shopping, then maybe we can go and see what you want for your birthday next month."

"No I want toyshop now!" The child persisted. Zaria sighed and dragged her leg forward against the weight of the child. "Come. On."

"I. Want. Toyshop, NOW."

"No!" Zaria said sharply and supposedly calmly yet a rage was brewing inside of her. Her face was creased and bags lined her eyes. Her whole body ached from head to toe and she was holding onto sanity by a hair.

"Bitch," Muttered the child turning away. Zaria dropped the basket and struck Aaron across the side of the face. The boy stopped dead, gobsmacked, and his eyes glared at Zaria with desperation. The boy's cheek burned, bright red, anger glaring in the child's face before his face contorted and he burst into tears.

"Just... go away." Zaria said, turning and dropping another box of pens into the basket. Aaron gulped and with effort, stopped crying. Raised voices were now speaking louder than usual, presumably because the people didn't want to confront Zaria but would make damn well sure that she heard what they had to say.

Zaria's anger rose ever higher and she turned to see faces in her direction, all muttering in outraged astonishment. Zaria turned back, anger rushing over her. She followed the aisle, moving away from the faces and added some stacks of paper to her now full and weighed down basket.

"Now, that's better Aaron. Mummy's sorry she shouted at you but-" Zaria turned to face Aaron but found herself instead staring across the aisle at another shelf housing various printer ink cartridges.

"Aaron?" She asked. Zaria dropped the basket and hurried down the aisle to where she had slapped him. Several mothers were still watching Zaria as if she were a wild animal, dangerous and unpredictable. But there was no sign of Aaron. Zaria followed the middle aisle, looking both directions down the parallel aisles. "Aaron?" She said desperately to the shop and more faces turned.

"Where are you?" Zaria reached the exit where two ladies sat behind a checkout desk.

"Excuse me," Zaria said hurriedly to the younger of the women. "Have you seen my son, he was in here just a minute ago, small lad, blonde hair." The woman shook her head.

"Sorry, I haven't seen him, would you like me to call around and make an announcement." Zaria spun round on her foot, scanning the whole shop.

"No, no, there's no time. I need to find him now." Zaria ran out of the shop and looked across the road desperately moving her head to see past the constant stream of cars. She sprinted uphill past the line of shops, peering in each and shouting for Aaron. Passers by stopped momentarily to watch her, some tried to speak to her but she ran on in her panic.

"No!" She screamed, dropping to her knees in the middle of the pavement. "Aaron, where the hell are you?" She sobbed. "My baby."

There was a scream from across the street and Zaria wheeled round instantly. A screech of tyres sounded and several horns. Zaria let out a gasp and stood. She ran over to where the cars had stopped. Aaron stood in front of the first stopped car, tears streaming down his face. He ran across the road and onto the other side. Zaria followed, running out in front of the cars that had now started moving again. One jolted to a stop, blaring its horn in her face. Zaria ignored it and ran across the road.

Aaron sat on a wooden bench, knees pulled into his chest, sobbing intensely.

"Hey." Said Zaria reaching him and hanging her head in relief. "Oh my God, I thought I'd lost you." Aaron stopped crying and looked up at Zaria.

"I'm sorry Mummy." Zaria sat down beside him and pulled him into a hug.

"Oh, my baby. I'm just glad you're okay. That car nearly killed you." Zaria put a comforting arm around her son and let her own tears fall onto his blonde hair. "Oh God I love you son."

"You okay baby?" Darren asked Zaria. They sat on the dark brown sofa of the living room. Darren lay flat on the sofa and Zaria snuggled into him. Her head was nuzzled into Darren's shoulder. Little Aaron lay fast asleep in the nursery next door.

"I just felt so strange." Zaria said, talking more to the room than to Darren. "I felt like, God I feel evil just saying this."

"Go on." Said Darren. "It's okay."

"I felt like he was supposed to die. Does that sound strange?"

"What do you mean?" Asked Darren sitting up a little and moving Zaria in position.

"I panicked like mad when I lost him but when I heard the cars and I thought he was dead, I felt..." Darren watched her closely and rubbed her arm with his hand. "I felt strangely relieved. Like it was all right that he was dead. It's terrible I know."

"Don't burden yourself with it," Said Darren. "It's just a mother's natural way of coping with trauma."

"I hope so," She said and hugged Darren.

"I just love you both so much."



## TWO

"Hey Darren?" Darren rolled over and sighed impatiently but then gulped regretfully.

"Yeah?"

"Can I talk to you?" Zaria asked seriously. Darren sat up and switched on the bedside lamp to his left. Zaria sat cross-legged on the bed; her eyes wide open in wake and her face a fixed look of concern. She wore a long white t-shirt, several sizes too big, that hung down to her knees where her bare legs were crossed. Her hair was frizzy and greasy and despite her wake, bags were rounded under her eyes.

"What's up?"

Zaria gulped and waited a moment before speaking.

"I was just thinking about Aaron. You remember what I told you a few weeks back, when he ran off?" Darren nodded slowly, looking up at Zaria with a slight increase in heartbeat. There was a certain seriousness in her tone that could not be mistaken, especially by someone so close to her. Darren nudged the pillows behind him and straightened up, taking Zaria's hand.

"Since then, I don't feel right around him. I feel a sickness deep inside that I can't explain." Darren just stared at her, watching her lips move as if she was alien. But his eyes showed meaningful sympathy, a true love that ran deeper than blood. "He feels dead to me, like when I look at him, I feel nothing, an emptiness. He doesn't feel mine. It's like I look at him, but I don't see him. Do you know what I mean?" Darren watched Zaria for a second and then pulled her into an embrace, which she reluctantly gave into. After a few seconds of uncertainty, Zaria dropped her head into Darren's shoulder and sobbed instantly.

"Don't worry about it, really. It's just post-traumatic stress. He means the world to you and one day he will know that. You'll come around. Listen honey, you're absolutely knackered. I think a really good nights sleep would do you well. I'll take Aaron for a little drive when he wakes up, maybe take him to the lake for a wander, let you get some sleep. Yeah?" Darren felt Zaria's head nod on his shoulder as a small patch of tears was seeping through his clean t-shirt.

They lay in the same position for a long while, even after Darren eventually reached over and turned the bedside lamp off. Darren's gentle breathing turned to a low snore and after lying in his limp arms for over an hour, Zaria gently wriggled out of his hold and sat up. She looked round at the small alarm clock to see that it had just passed two in the morning. Zaria looked around at Darren's sleeping body again and left the room. She past Aaron's bedroom on the way to the kitchen and stopped in front of the door. His name was spelled out wonkily in wooden letters and Zaria smiled to herself, remembering the many times she had reminded Darren to straighten them since they had been stuck there hurriedly when Aaron was born.

Zaria reached out slowly and opened the door, letting a stream of light beam across the floor and light up the right side of the sleeping child's face. She crept in, not taking her eyes off Aaron. He lay on his side, his chest moving in and out behind the blue covers as he breathed softly. Tucked neatly under his left arm, a small brown teddy with one button eye missing. The child shuffled in its sleep and Zaria, shaking out of her thoughts, stepped back and exited the room quickly, leaving the door half open.

She wandered into the kitchen where she was taken aback by the systematic, automatic lights snapping on. Zaria sighed with embarrassment; how many times had she come into the kitchen at night and after all that time, still not got used to the automatic lights?

Blue LED's neatly lit up the modern kitchen cupboards fixed all around the room, leaving a nicely illuminated kitchen table under a large chandelier. Zaria flicked the kettle on and, after realising it was unplugged, jammed the plug into the wall socket, noticing again the duct tape covering the cracked plastic. A creak of wood made Zaria turn suddenly. She watched the doorway for a second before turning back to the now bubbling kettle. She popped a teabag in a mug and began pouring the steaming water. Another creak, much closer. Zaria turned to face Aaron standing in the doorway, rubbing his eyes, the small teddy hanging by its arm at his ankles.

Zaria jumped, splashing boiling water onto her wrist that held the mug and she winced, jolting back and dropping the kettle. The kettle landed sideways, knocking the mug off the surface to smash on the floor and send a miniature tsunami on the floor towards Aaron. Aaron's face bubbled for a second before he started crying and ran off.

"Shit," muttered Zaria, knocking on the cold tap with her wrist and throwing her hand under it as the searing pain washed over Zaria's skin like a corrosive acid. It was over a minute before Zaria noticed the small stabbing effect present across her bare feet. She looked down to see her legs dripping with blood from various cuts up her ankles and thighs.

Zaria switched the water off and, ignoring the boiling water dripping down the side of the cupboard, tiptoed through the array of broken pottery and into the bathroom. She grabbed a clean white towel from the bathroom cupboard, soaked it quickly in the sink and slapped it on her bare legs. The feeling rushed back with painful repercussions, like needles stabbing into her feet and legs but Zaria tried to ignore the pain and held the towel tightly to her legs.

After over a minute, she slowly peeled back the wet towel to see it stained crimson, saturated with blood. The cuts on her legs were clean and small but after seconds, quickly dripped out more blood. Zaria folded the towel and pressed it hard to her legs again. Her hand, fortunately, was only lightly scolded and was a very brief pain.

An awkward silence pressed in on Zaria and she felt an urge to make some sort of noise just to break the silence. It was then that she remembered Aaron, sobbing as he ran from the kitchen. The sounds of crying had long since died and Zaria fought away the panic and decided she would go and check on him when her legs had stopped bleeding.

Another two minutes or so passed and Zaria gave into her motherly concerns and got to her feet. She winced from the not overpowering but sudden increase in pain. She limped across the hallway to Aaron's room. The bed was empty; the duvet folded back neatly and the pillow lying on the floor beside. Zaria flicked on the light and looked around the small room. No sign of the child.

Zaria sighed and followed the hallway back to the kitchen. As she walked a gentle crackling and hissing sound grew louder and louder and when the smell of burning filled her nostrils, Zaria broke into a stumbling run, muttering

"No, no, no, no, noooo." She sprinted forward and gasped as she stepped onto the threshold of a blazing, flame engulfed kitchen. Sparks spat from the wall socket that the kettle mount was attached to. Flames licked the wall-mounted cupboards, the table and four chairs burned furiously, black smoke rising to the ceiling. A muffled alarm was ringing but from above not from Zaria's apartment.

Zaria stepped back from the pressing heat and threw her wet towel forward where it landed on the burning stove but slipped off to the floor.

"Darren!" Screamed Zaria after a moment of perplexed shock that rooted her to the spot. Zaria ran back to Aaron's room as the flames crept into the hallway. She peered in quickly, saw that he was not there and ran on, towards the bedroom. Zaria threw herself onto the bed on top of Darren and thumped him hard in the back. He rolled over instantly and glared at Zaria with a shocked fear. His eyes were wide and red; he was clearly dazed from the thick smoke that circled the apartment.

"What the?" Darren looked around, bedazzled as a crashing sound and a dark cloud of smoke exploding from the hallway made Zaria turn too. "What the hell is happening?" Muffled screams echoed around the apartment from below and above alike.

"The kitchen's on fire!" Darren jumped out of bed wearing only boxers and a t-shirt. "And I can't find Aaron." Darren stopped and turned to Zaria. He looked at her for a second and then took a deep breath.

"You find Aaron, I'll get us the hell out of here. Now!" Zaria ran back into the corridor and Darren to the window. The street was full of fleeing ants from the burning apartment complex. Sirens drew ever closer in the dark street and screams filled the otherwise quiet night. Darren ran into the hallway towards the door and tried the handle. The door was locked from the inside. Darren looked along the wall to the key chains and scurried around for the door key. After twenty seconds, Darren gave up and reared back for a kick. His foot smashed into the door, just to the right of the door handle. The cheap, thin door gave in and after another kick, was eligible for opening. Once the door swung inward, Darren ran out into the corridor and pulled a fire extinguisher from the wall. Darren reached the sound of small screams in the apartment hallway. Zaria was attempting to confront the flames that covered the entrance to Aaron's room.

"What's up?" Darren said grabbing Zaria by the shoulders.

"It's Aaron. He's in there." Darren looked in past the flames and whirling black smoke to see Aaron half emerged from under the racecar bed under which he lay. Despite the clouding smoke, the look of terror on Aaron's face was unmistakable. Zaria took a half step back and then plunged herself into the flames. Darren reached out to grab her but could not hold on to her for the heat of the fire was unbearable. "Zaria, no!"

Zaria embraced the heat and burning pain of the flames as she pushed into Aaron's room. The flames stopped four feet or so in front of the child's bed but Zaria had longer to push forward. The pain melted her skin like a white-hot sheet of metal was held over her entirety. She felt the palms of her hands sticky and burning with soreness. Zaria let out a scream before being grabbed around the middle from behind and pulled back through the flames. She screamed and hit out behind her but a handkerchief was held over her mouth. Zaria held her breath and waited for the moment where she would inhale deeply and be relieved of the suffocating pressing. But the moment never came, her lungs held on, waiting. Zaria's insides throbbed as her pain disappeared and her consciousness let go.

Zaria opened her eyes and at first she could see nothing, blurred coloured light that dug at her eyes. Zaria blinked. She was lying in the back of an ambulance, staring up at a bright light on the ceiling of the ambulance. Even as her vision adjusted, her ears rang with a muffled buzzing. Then she heard the screams, the hurried shouts and the crackling of the fire blazing high above her. Zaria sat up, rubbed her head and jumped out of the back of the ambulance.

The street was under utter pandemonium. People were running across the street, shouting and screaming. Fire engines were cluttering the street, ineffectively combating the growing fire that was consuming the towering apartment complex. Hoses rained down on the flames that engulfed the building but they did nothing to kill them and as Zaria ran forward through the crowds and sighted Darren standing by two police officers with his hands raised and his mouth wide open mid-shout, an explosion from the building made the whole street jump. What little glass still sat in its frame shattered out onto the street and more black smoke filled the sky. It suddenly hit Zaria that Aaron was not with Darren and despite Darren's furious attempts to convince the uniformed men, no one was entering the building.

"Noooo!" Screamed Zaria, pushing through the crowd toward the building. Police held crowds back already but Zaria pushed through and ran straight at the building.

"Zaria!" Darren's voice behind her. She kept running at the building towards the stone steps that led up to the entrance. She had nearly made it when a pair of hands grabbed her around the stomach and pulled her back.

"I'm sorry," said Darren pulling her back. Zaria resisted, hitting back at him. Darren lifted her so that he was walking backward holding her around the waist. Zaria kicked furiously as another explosion made the street shake. Darren put Zaria down on her feet but she persisted to pull away from him. Her balled fists slammed again and again into his shoulders and chest

but Darren seemed to have not cared, he too stared up at the enflamed building as the shadows of the fire flickered in his eyes.

Darren pulled the resisting Zaria in to his chest and held her tightly. She hit out at him repeatedly.

"Please Darren. I have to. He's still in there, my son. LET ME GO!!" Zaria was hysterical but after a few seconds gave in and threw herself onto Darren's shoulder, her distressed sobs barely heard by the traumatised street.

Darren watched the comforting flames, still stood in his boxers and a plain white t-shirt that was now burned in many places and covered in dark ashes. Darren's face was also burned in places although was mostly covered in cuts and condensed smoke. His eyes were meaningful, it looked as if he should cry but his straight face told otherwise. Cold as stone was his expression but despite the intruding light from the fire lighting up his face, the pain could be seen in his eyes.

Over an hour passed and they still stood there in front of the smouldering building, most of the flames had been controlled and fire fighters were emerging from the building.

A hand hit Darren on the shoulder and he turned emptily to see a fire fighter standing boldly but exhausted.

"I'm sorry," He said. "We did everything we could." At these words, Zaria turned her head and looked up at the man, hope dying from her eyes. The fire fighter now looked at Zaria.

"I thought you might want to have this." He raised his hand, clenched in it a small teddy with an eye missing. He handed it to Zaria and backed off. Tears dripped down her face and she pushed the teddy into her face.

"And the body?" Darren asked the fire fighter who frowned and looked down.

"There is none." The man nodded sympathetically and left.

## THREE

Darren looked up at the clock from behind his desk. He thought it strange that in times of trauma, the duller most simplest tasks seem yet more dull yet give you something to focus your mind on, to make you feel as though you've accomplished something no matter how basic it may be. But Darren felt quite the opposite, he felt as though he had achieved nothing, as though he was losing hold on reality and as he sat with his eyes fixed on the ticking hand of the clock, he wandered whether life would ever feel complete again.

A mug slammed down on the desk beside Darren making him straighten up so quickly that his head rushed in a blur.

"Go home." Darren turned and quickly pulled a pile of papers towards him.

"I'm sorry, I was just a little dazed for a second. I'll stay late and finish." A hand slammed down on the pile of papers stopping Darren and the man pulled the papers into an arm. "I need this job," Darren said looking up at his boss with embarrassment.

"Go home. I want you to have the rest of this week off and next week on full pay. You've been through a lot." Darren closed his eyes in relief.

"Thank you." Darren grabbed his bag and left immediately.

After the fire that had burned and damaged most of their apartment, Zaria's mother decided to move temporarily to their holiday home in the country with her husband. Zaria and Darren stayed in their now empty home, just outside of the city so that both of them could still get to work. It was estimated to take nine months to renovate but by the way Zaria was coping recently, Darren doubted she would want to move back.

Darren reached the house and pulled over in their new yellow VW golf. Zaria, who worked just around the corner conveniently, would not be back for another few hours. Darren let himself in and threw himself down on the sofa. Paperwork was sat in a pile on the table that Darren purposely ignored. A gentle sobbing could be heard from upstairs. Darren squinted, a look of confusion present on his face. Again Darren heard the crying.

Darren stood and peered his head round the banister so he was looking up the stairs.

"Love, is that you?" There was a fumbling sound as things fell to the floor. Darren ascended the stairs and tried the bedroom. It was then apparent that the sobs were coming from the ensuite bathroom. Darren passed the bed where the battered teddy lay. Zaria had rarely been seen without it. She couldn't sleep without it and often lay awake crying and holding the teddy in her arms as if it were Aaron.

She couldn't cope.

Darren walked forward and pushed the door open.

"Shit. Zaria," He called out, rushing forward. Zaria was sat on the closed toilet seat with a razor blade held in her hand and blood covering her arms and the floor below her.

"What the fuck Zar?" She looked up at him and burst into deeper tears. Darren pulled long strips of toilet paper from the roll and pressed it to her arms. He carefully took the razor blade from her trembling fingers and threw it across the room out of reach.

"I can't do it Darren. I just can't"

"It's okay," He pulled Zaria into a hug. He held her for a moment, her desperate sobs being the only sound in the large and eerily quiet house.

"What's happened Zar?" She sniffled for a second and then wiped her tears away with the back of her dripping bloody hands.

"It was my boss," She said after a while. Darren's face raged suddenly and he moved to get up but Zaria put a hand on his shoulder. Darren, at seeing the still masses of blood, pressed more toilet paper to her arms. "He shouted at me, said I was useless and pathetic." Her words were clouded with a constant stream of tears and whimpering. "And he, he..." Zaria trailed off into more tears and Darren pulled her closer.

"It's okay, what did he do?"

"He, he slapped me." Darren let go of her and stood. "No!" Yelled Zaria, getting up too and hanging on Darren's arm. Darren shook her off lightly and jumped onto the chair beside the bedroom's desk. He reached up onto the wardrobe and lifted down a long wooden baseball bat. He looked it over for a second, his lip quivering, and then jumped down and crossed the room to leave.

"Darren, please." He stopped and turned to face Zaria on the floor in the entrance to the bathroom. He walked back to her and pressed the teddy that had been lying on the bed into her arms.

"I love you," Said Darren. "Everything's gonna be alright."

"Don't be f-fucking stupid!" Screamed Zaria in desperation. Darren smiled reassuringly and hurried out of the room. He grabbed the car keys from the kitchen table and his mobile as he left the house. He revved up the yellow VW and drove across town to Zaria's workplace.

Darren pulled up in the back of the company car park, watching two women leave the main entrance. From his car, he had a perfect view of the rest of the car park and of the entrance to the building. Darren gripped the baseball bat that lay on the passenger's seat beside him with a firm hand then released his grip and reached down and retrieved his mobile, all the time not taking his eyes off the building's entrance.

"Hello, my name's Darren, Darren Martin. I would like to organise counselling sessions for my wife Zaria... Alright." Darren waited, watching the building with eagle eyes until the woman spoke on the other end of the line. "Erm, home sessions would be more ideal if that's alright. Yeah, yeah Friday's brilliant." A tall, brown haired man left the building, swinging a briefcase at his side and crossed the car park to a silver Audi and Darren saw the headlights light up as the car started.

"Yeah okay, I'm going to have to ring you back. Thanks a lot." Darren hung up and started his own engine. As the Audi turned out of the parking space and out onto the road, Darren pressed the accelerator and followed the man.

Twelve minutes on the road and Darren watched the Audi a few cars in front turn off to the right. Darren followed down a street of big houses with large front gardens and most of them large iron gates. Darren tailed behind a good distance as to not be noticed. The Audi turned left into a driveway and disappeared behind a hedge. Darren pulled up to the road two houses back and killed the engine. Darren looked around the street, grabbed the baseball bat and got out. He hurried down the pavement and peered around the corner of the hedge, the baseball bat hung loosely in his right hand. The man was locking his car and walking across the drive to his front door. Darren ran, head down, towards the car and ducked behind it. When Darren heard the lock click open, he ran forward on his toes as quietly as possible. The man didn't have enough time to even turn his head. Darren reached in front of the man and pulled the baseball bat into his throat. He held the baseball bat at both ends so that the man's neck was being pulled back by the bat.

Darren pushed his knee into the man's back and pushed him forward into the open house. He kicked the front door shut behind him and pushed the struggling man forward towards the kitchen. Darren released him and shoved him hard into the kitchen, holding the bat at his side.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" Growled the man, turning and facing Darren who stood a couple of inches below the man's height. Darren snarled and spat at the floor that separated the two of them.

"You know my wife, Zaria?" The man stopped dead. He reached behind him and drew a kitchen knife from a block behind him then ran forward at Darren and lunged the knife at his face. Darren ducked the slash and brought the baseball bat forward into the man's stomach. He dropped the knife instantly and fell back. Darren brought the bat down again vertically so that the handle of the bat slammed into the man's ribs.

Darren snatched up the knife and squatted down, thrusting his knee into Zaria's boss's stomach until he coughed a mouthful of blood down his front. Darren held the baseball bat across the man's neck again, restricting his breathing, and held the knife above him.

"How about I take one of your fucking eyes out you cunt? Hmmm, would you deserve that?" The man spluttered and raised his hands in defence. Darren loosened his neck but held tightly. "You know she lost her child last month? Yeah I bet you didn't know that cause' you don't give a shit. You think you can push people around because you're a big man and they're too scared to stand up for themselves."

"I'm sorry, I'm fucking sorry okay?" The man cried hysterically. "It won't happen again." Darren smiled so arrogantly that it made him sick inside.



“Damn fucking right it won’t cause’ I will know about it, I can guarantee you that. You mention this to Zaria at all, you even look at her wrongly and I’ll be back.” Darren leaned in and whispered in the whimpering man’s ear. “And maybe next time I won’t be so forgiving.” Darren stood, surveyed the man for a second then threw the knife to the floor. It clattered to a stop well out of the man’s reach. Then Darren raised the baseball bat and brought it down hard on the man’s face. He screamed and keeled over on his side, his hands coming up instinctively to hold his nose. Darren left the man in agony, a look of satisfaction gleaming in his eyes.

## *FOUR*

Two weeks later, Darren was welcomed back to his workplace. His head had just about cleared, although the pain would never heal, he could at least try to get back on with normal life. The problem was Zaria; she was determined to keep working and living life as she would normally. But every few days or so Darren would come in and see her holding the teddy in her arms, singing to it or telling it a story. When Darren had come in from work last night and found Zaria sat at the table with the Teddy in her arms and a small bowl of porridge that she was pretending to spoon feed it, he had decided she needed serious help.

"Good morning Mrs. Martin," Said the councillor as Zaria knocked and opened the door to the second room. "Take a seat please."

Zaria sat down on a low soft cushioned chair and surveyed the room. The room was decorated like a typical office; plain walls and a large wooden desk in the middle of the room. She had entered the room off a large room with stacks of chairs positioned in the corners of the room. She figured it was a room where group circles took place but she really didn't like circles. Besides, there was nothing wrong with her; she just needed a little moral support every now and then. But something struck Zaria as out of place in the bright office. As she looked around the room once more she realised it was the paintings; cheery artwork framed around the walls, one of a cat playing with a ball of string, another of a calm beach scene. But they didn't calm Zaria; they struck her as falsely pretentious. Zaria looked up to see the lady was watching her closely. Zaria raised her eyebrows and the women looked away.

"My name is Jennie," She said smiling politely, although Zaria saw straight through it; it was a much-practised expression that had been pasted on her empty face to give an impression of comfort. But behind the falseness, Zaria felt a warmth about her aura, something deeper than what could be seen.

"Zaria," She added, looking away awkwardly. Jennie smiled again at Zaria and glanced at her laptop screen. Then she, perhaps in reckoning, closed the laptop and folded her hands.

"Now I've heard from your husband that you've been through a tough time lately however it would be much more useful for both of us if I heard it from you." Zaria looked down at the floor. Her cardigan sleeves covered her scars but Zaria knew exactly where they were positioned. She gulped and opened her mouth.

"I don't know where to start," She said awkwardly, her fingers finding a loose thread on her sleeve and moving it between each of Zaria's fingers.

"Start wherever you want, may I suggest with your son and your husband, what was your relationship like with them before the fire?" Jennie's sternness struck Zaria as uncanny, there was no hesitation in using certain words that Zaria would have stuttered with.

"Well," Zaria said, looking up at the councillor who smiled at Zaria, urging her to continue. "When I found out I was pregnant, everything was suddenly so real, Darren was straight in

there with the husband role. It threw me off, I didn't feel ready, I was still living in a teen romance but he was fully prepared for being a father." Zaria's eyes tipped back to the floor and her constant fiddling with her sleeve persisted.

"But I was thrown right into it, I had no option. I loved Aaron, my son that is; I loved him more than any mother possibly could. When he died, it destroyed me, I felt so responsible and not just as all mother's would if their child died, it genuinely was my fault."

"How was it your fault?" Jennie asked.

"The night of the fire, he startled me in the night, I shouted at him to go away and he hid under his bed. When the fire started, I couldn't find him. I didn't think to look under his bed, in the panic," Tears were now clouding her words but Zaria continued. "I still hear his screams in my sleep, his frightened face from under the bed. I tried to rescue him but Darren-" Zaria stopped.

"What happened?" Asked Jennie.

"He knocked me out and dragged me out of the building. I could have saved him, he was so close." Jennie's false smile folded a little, showing the genuine empathy that she tried so hard to cut out.

"Do you blame Darren for it?" Zaria waited for a long moment.

"Yes."

"Do you understand that his interests were only in trying to save his family and had he found the opportunity to save your son he would have?"

Zaria shook her head slowly. "He never loved him." Jennie's eyebrows rose significantly.

"How do you know?" Zaria's finger moved faster, entwining the thread over and over.

"He could never love Aaron like I did."

"But Zaria," said the councillor, adopting the voice of reasoning. "There is a difference between not loving someone and not showing it as a mother does. He was in a hard situation and his instincts took over, I am sure that he knew he could not save both of you." Zaria's eyes were red and sore already and her face shone with ache.

Zaria said nothing and so Jennie prompted her on. "How did you cope after?" Zaria received the impression that the councillor was not offering words of comfort but in only persuading Zaria to open up.

"I was fine. Well, at first. I felt strangely relieved, like a load off my chest but then I crumbled." Jennie watched Zaria's face. Zaria's eyes were fixed on one spot, her hair hanging over her face but Zaria made no effort to push it back.

"I couldn't sleep, couldn't eat. I couldn't even drink my sorrow away. It was like a parasite that I couldn't shake off, my pain became a part of me and a couple of weeks ago..." Zaria

stopped her finger motion for an instant to tug her sleeve up to her elbow exposing her scars. "The pain embraced me, welcomed me. It felt like it was the only way. So right." Zaria pondered on her words for a second in the silence and noticed how psychotic they must have sounded.

Jennie was too staring blankly at the wall. She couldn't meet Zaria's eyes, a sickness deep inside her that she held back. She shook her head after a second, returning to earth.

"Alright, erm, I think that'll do for today." Zaria nodded, a shred of disappointment seeping through to her expression. "Here's my mobile number," Said Jennie scribbling a phone number onto a post-it and handing it across the desk to Zaria who folded it into her bag and stood.

"If you need anything between our weekly sessions, just give me a call night or day." Jennie smiled and gestured to the door. So routine, Zaria thought, but it gave her a sense of reassurance as she turned her back and left the room.

## *FIVE*

"You have a good time yeah?" Darren said smiling and offering his arms to Zaria.

"Oh thank you!" Zaria screamed ecstatically, jumping up to Darren and throwing her arms around him. Darren kissed her on the neck and held her tightly until she let go.

"See you in two yeah?" Zaria nodded and hurried off into the salon. Darren's smile quickly faded as Zaria disappeared from view. He pushed his hair back from his forehead, staring into emptiness. Then he nodded to himself, pulled his hood up over his face and strode away from the shop.

"What can I get you mate?" The bartender asked, polishing a glass with a tea towel as he wandered over to where Darren sat on a stool. Darren shook his head in thought.

"Glass of your strongest whisky please." The bartender nodded understandingly.

He lay the glass down in front of Darren a minute later.

"Cheers," Darren muttered and took a deep swig.

"You alright?" The bartender asked, leaning forward onto the surface and watching the quiet pub.

"I dunno," Darren said wrinkling his face and taking another gulp of whisky. "My wife, she's not coping."

"From what?"

Darren sighed. "Our son died and she's losing it."

"Ahhh," the bartender said making Darren look up. "I knew a lass who lost her child at birth, went completely bonkers."

"Yeah?" Darren asked unsurely.

"Oh yeah, she went completely off the rails man, bug shit crazy, topped herself in the end. Crazy bitch." Darren reached up and grabbed the man by the shirt with both hands; he leaned in, snarling viciously like an animal.

"You really think this is helping me you fuck?"

Darren felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see a large man in a suit.

"Give it a rest yeah? I don't want to have to throw you out." Darren waited a second then let the man go.

"I didn't mean nothing by it," The bartender said as the other man left.

"I'm sorry," said Darren. "I shouldn't have snapped."

"Another?" Asked the bartender in reconciliation. Darren nodded, sliding his empty whisky glass across the bar.

It was a half hour later when a scream from outside made several faces turn. A woman ran across the open door to the pub and fell to her knees, screaming. Darren stood instantly, grabbing his leather jacket from the back of his stool. He was the first one to her.

"What happened?"

"My baby!" Screamed the woman. "My little girl, she's gone." Darren turned instantly to the salon across the road. His heart pounded as he realised.

A few feet away, outside the next shop was an empty pram.

"Stay here!" Said Darren getting up and hurrying towards the salon.

"Get my girl back, please," sobbed the mother.

"Don't worry," Darren called over his shoulder as he ran across the street and into the Salon.

"My wife Zaria," Darren said to the receptionist as soon as he entered, taking her a little off guard. "Is she here?"

"The crying brunette?" Darren thought for a fragment of a second.

"Yeah."

"She just ran out, got all touchy with the beautician for some reason." Darren sighed, he should have known this would happen but thought at least he could give her a couple of hours of relaxation.

"Do you know where she went?" Darren asked and the woman shook her head slowly and muttered a 'sorry' as Darren flung the door open and sprinted back down the street, looking wildly around him.

This was it. Zaria had lost it completely. As Darren ran back to the desperate and sobbing mother, his hopelessness took over and he hung his head in shame.

"I am so sorry." The woman looked up at him, her eyes flooded with tears, all hope drawing away. It was then that Darren heard shouts and looked up. Across the street a stone bridge connected the two parts of the town. A large crowd was gathered on the left side of the wide bridge. Darren squinted to see closer and took a step forward, now ignoring the woman at his feet. More people were rushing across the street to the bridge and Darren sprinted forward ahead of all of them until he reached the outside of the group.

Darren ducked his head and pushed forward through the group. Voices of conflict passed him as he made it to the middle. On the wall of the bridge, Zaria stood holding a crying baby. Two people were carefully trying to ease Zaria away from the edge but she held her head high, watching the water lap the rocks below.

"Zaria!" She barely turned her head to acknowledge his presence.

"Do you think the impact will kill me or the suffocation?" Zaria asked plainly and tugged her arm back from one man who was pulling her back. She swayed on her feet and Darren reached up and grabbed her elbow.

"What are you doing baby?" Darren asked desperately.

"I have to be with Aaron."

"He's gone Zar, that's not Aaron." It was as if that was the first time she had noticed the screaming infant in her arms. Zaria looked down at the child and turned on her foot, passing the baby down to Darren. Without thinking, Darren took the baby quickly as Zaria leaned forward.

"No!" Darren reached a hand and held on to the back of Zaria's dress but it was pulled out of his grasp by her weight. Darren's heart let go as he watched hands thrown out to grab Zaria's leaning body. One man, who had been trying to pull her down, grabbed her around the waist and pulled. Zaria, who at this point had her eyes closed tight, fought against the many hands that pulled at her leaning body. After a few seconds, Zaria was pulled back over the edge and onto the bridge floor. There was a yell and the mother pushed through the crowd and tore the child from Darren's arms. She took a last look at Darren and hurried off into the crowd.

"So, do you want to tell me about what happened the other day?" Jennie asked Zaria from behind the desk. Zaria instantly resumed her continuous fiddling of her sleeve. Her fingers turned over and over, her head down.

"I was ready to end it all, I should've died." Jennie sighed and reached a hand out across the table and laid it on top of Zaria's.

"What are you doing?!" Zaria let out, withdrawing her hand quickly. Jennie had always been so professional with her, never let any emotion confuse her job but Zaria had always felt her empathy. Zaria had felt comfortable with Jennie, she felt that she could say things to her she couldn't to her own husband, like a diary that she could pour herself into.

"I'm sorry, you startled me." The door to the office had opened slightly and two men waited outside. Jennie nodded to them and they shut the door.

"So what were you feeling that made you want to hurt yourself? Hmmm?"

"Well, Darren took me to have a little alone time, getting my hair and nails down and that. But when I looking out the window I saw a happy mother with her baby and I just took it, right out of its pushchair. I can't believe I would put a mother through that." Zaria's words were cold, she had long since stopped crying when she opened up. "I took the child to the bridge and prepared myself to jump."

"After all this time, is that still what you wish for?" Jennie asked, making eye contact with Zaria for the first time. Zaria thought for a long moment.

"No. It's not what I want." Jennie nodded.

"Then Zaria, why did you take the child and attempt to kill yourself, was it a cry for attention, did you feel like you needed to be noticed?"

"No," Zaria said shaking her head. "That's not it, it was just a sudden urge, my emotions were all tangled up and I was confused." Jennie nodded again.

"Is there anything else you want to talk about while your here?" Jennie asked and Zaria shook her head at the floor then looked up at Jennie and reached over the table to hug her. Jennie let out a small 'uh' noise of surprise.

"Thank you," Zaria said and it was clear that she meant it.



## *SIX*

"You ready for this?" Darren asked Zaria as she stared up at the apartment complex that had taken her son a little over a year ago. Zaria took a deep breath and nodded. Darren reached out and took her hand then together they walked slowly towards the entrance. Zaria's grip on his hand was loose and Darren turned to look her over and realised for the first time that she had lost a lot of weight. She looked weak, as if she might break down at any second.

"Are you alright?" Darren asked in concern but Zaria merely nodded again, offering no other reply. "I worry about you."

They reached the door and Darren took his old key from his pocket and opened the door. Taking a step into the building, Darren saw that the entrance hall had been redecorated, most likely as had the rest of the building. Darren had asked specifically, as Zaria had wanted, that their apartment be left as it was. The elevator was completely new, a huge improvement on the rusted, graffitied lift that had fit in so well with the rest of the building. But now there was a sense of elegance about it, inviting the two of them like an old friend. Neat mahogany banisters stretched past the wooden fronted elevator and up a magnificent staircase, following red carpet.

"You sure we've got the right building?" Darren asked Zaria at his right. She smiled and pressed to call the lift.

It was four days since the torn couple had moved back and Darren was routinely beginning to worry about Zaria. She was so skinny, rarely eating a full meal and often puking afterwards. She would wake up at night and wander into the room where Aaron had slept and in the end, where he had turned to dust. She would sit cross legged on the floor and stare blankly at the wall. The times of weeping and remorse were gone; all that remained was a memory, a memory buried deep in guilt and fear.

"Zaria?" Zaria turned her head slightly without looking round at Darren, it was more of a twitch, an acknowledgement. The room was dark and empty not merely physically but in emotion and aura like an absence of happiness, a suffocating cage of buried secrets, asphyxia closing in on them. Darren stood for a second, watching her body language and then reached his hand up to turn on the light.

"Don't." Zaria said plainly. Then after a pause. "I like to think he's here with me." Darren stared blankly into the stinging darkness then crossed the room and sat beside her on the floor. He took her hand from her knee and held it in his. Her hand felt dead, her grip was weak and frail, lifeless.

"But baby, he's not. He's gone." Zaria ripped her hand from Darren's with an unpredicted strength and pressed her finger firmly to her lips.

"Sssshhhhhh," She said aggressively.

"I think it's time we decorate the room. What do you think?" No reaction whatsoever. "I thought we could do it up as a guest room, maybe your mum could come and stay for a bit." Zaria made no reaction again, only her heavy breathing deluded the silence. Darren got up and left Zaria staring blankly into the darkness, tears not even present in her eyes.

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Darren pushed forcefully and the bed slid away from the wall. He climbed up on the chair and drew the roller paint brush across the last wall. A sticky baby blue clung to the wall in strips behind the brush. Darren had footsteps and turned. Zaria stood in the doorway, her arms hung loosely and her feet shuffled. She looked as lifeless as ever and nothing portrayed this more than her absent stare and deprivation of emotion. As Darren watched her with a sickness, an anger deep from within, he realised for the first time that she disgusted him. He felt a black sinking in his stomach just looking at her. Her lack of displeasure did not surprise him. A normal mother would weep as the last traces of her son's existence were obliterated. She had taken to carrying Aaron's one eyed teddy wherever she went, swaying in one arm much like it had in his. The current whereabouts of the teddy were unknown to Darren but he was grateful for if he had seen it he would have smouldered it from existence. Zaria slowly shuffled past the doorway and out of view. A look of contemptuous hate and disgust spread across Darren's face, he continued painting.

## SEVEN

"I'm sorry to say this Dan, I know you've got a lot of shit going on but if you can't get it done, I'll get someone else to do your job."

Darren stared angrily at his feet. "I am trying," He said angrily. "I just need more time."

"Well you've had two weeks, I want it done by tomorrow evening or someone else gets your job." Darren stood and glared at his boss with daggers. He had never been so full of hate.

"Fuck your job," He said and forcefully tipped the mug of coffee on the desk on its side so that the contents flooded across the desk and onto the paperwork. Darren took that cue to leave in a hurry.

He found himself leaning against a wall at the back of the office by the car park. An attractive woman in her thirties exited the building and took position by Darren. She took out a box of cigarettes and took one. Darren reached out a hand in question. "Can I?" He asked. He recognised the woman slightly but didn't know her name.

"Hmmm? Oh, sure." She offered the box to Darren who took a cigarette and pressed it between his lips. She lit it for him and then her own.

"You smoke?" She asked uncertainly.

Darren sighed. "I do now."

He had been standing in the cold for around ten minutes, watching the rain fall around him with no connection whatsoever. He felt his phone vibrate madly in his pocket and reached down for it. 'Zaria calling...' Darren closed his eyes in supposed pain. He answered the call and held it to his ear.

"Yeah?"

"I can't do it Darren." Then silence. A muffled sniffing. Was she crying?

"What's happened Zar?" He let the cigarette fall from his fingers and smoke on the ground.

"Nothing I just can't live like this anymore. I want to see him again, I want to be with our boy." Darren let the silence intrude too long. "I'm gonna end it now." Darren was speechless. His lips gaped, searching for words but no words were formed.

"Don't be ridiculous," He said after a long moment. "I know it's hard but we'll get through it."

"Don't. Don't make this harder for yourself Darren, it's happening whatever you do. You won't be fast enough to save me."

"Zaria? Zar? FUCK!" Darren yelled as a fuzzing feedback took over. He threw his phone onto the road where it shattered as he sprinted across the car park into the path of a moving car. It

stopped abruptly and blared its horn but he was already reaching his car. In six seconds, his foot was flattening on the pedal and his audi, skidded out of the car park and onto the road.

He reached the steps of his apartment complex and fumbled for his keys in his pocket. In pulling them out, he dropped them to the ground and as he bent to retrieve them, the door opened behind him.

"Hey Darren, haven't seen you for-" Darren pushed past the man with a force that nearly knocked him over.

"Call an Ambulance." Darren said hitting the lift button three times with his finger. "Call a fucking ambulance!" He spat at him.

"But-"

"NOW!" Darren abandoned the lift and rounded the corner and up the stairs. It took him thirty four seconds to reach the top floor. He sprinted through the double doors, across the hallway and threw himself at the locked door. He knocked the door clean out of its frame and collapsed on the door on the inside of the flat. He scrambled to his feet and looked around the flat, he sprinted to the bedroom, the balcony, and it was in Aaron's room that he found Zaria hanging from the ceiling, a noose cutting into her neck.

"Nooooo!" Darren screamed running forward and taking her weight. He lifted her up with one arm and struggled to undo the noose from her neck with his other hand. He collapsed with Zaria on the floor and rolled her over. She lay numb and motionless. There were noises and the man from the entrance came into sight with another older woman.

"Oh shit," He muttered looking at the chair lying on its side, the chair Darren had used two days ago to paint the room. The teddy lay at the foot of the chair that had presumably fallen from her grasp.

"The ambulance is coming, is she...gone?" Darren pressed his ear to Zaria's mouth and felt her pulse via her neck. Her neck was swollen severely, a burning red colour, where the rope had cut into her. "She isn't breathing," Darren said blankly, no element of panic or concern in his voice. Darren only received blank stares in return.

Darren shook his head, throwing tears from his face with the movement. He grabbed Zaria's limp body and pulled her into his chest. He placed his head on hers and sobbed.

"You're gonna be alright. I'm gonna get you help I promise, we're gonna make you better."

## *EIGHT*

Darren sat in a private waiting room of St. Anne's general hospital, staring blankly at the rain falling from the grey sky. He clenched a steaming mug of black coffee in both hands, the heat burning his hands but he cared not. It had been over two hours since Zaria and Darren had arrived in the back of an ambulance and Zaria rushed off. It also been, Darren thought consulting his watch, one hour and forty minutes since he had seen Zaria although he had received regular updates from the nurses.

Darren took a large swig of coffee that slipped down his throat, burning his tongue like acid. He took a seat by the window for less than a minute before getting to his feet again and pacing back and forth across the small room. He was only interrupted by the door to his right opening after a knock. A female nurse entered smiling one of the polite, hopeful smiles that displayed an empathy that made Darren want to punch the woman.

She shut the door quietly and turned to Darren. She stared at him for a second before he raised his eyebrows.

"Well?"

"When she was brought in, she was in a critical state but she's just about stabilised. She still needs support breathing.

Darren's face lit up. "So that's good right?" The nurse's look that followed his question sunk his heart into abyss.

"It's still too early to tell, it's very possible that your wife will suffer some serious brain damage. She may develop schizophrenia, strong depression and paranoia. But like I said, its too early to tell.

"Is she conscious? Can I see her?" The nurse frowned, unprofessionally Darren thought. Wasn't it their job to give false hope.

"She's sleeping at the moment and it's probably best to let her sleep. She has woken up but hasn't said anything since you last saw her. I'll come and find you in an hour or so." Darren nodded thanks as she turned to leave.

"Oh, Zaria's councillor is here but if you aren't ready to talk-

"No it's fine, I'll see her."

The nurse nodded and left the room, a woman Darren recognised as Jenny entered. She smiled cautiously at Darren and gestured to the sofa.

"Can I?" Darren nodded.

"How's she doing?" Jenny asked. Darren sighed.

"Short term, I think good. Long term- no clue at all."

"Did she say anything at your sessions recently, any sign of manic depression or suicidal thoughts?"

"No more than usual. She seemed to be getting better, well better at dealing with her situation. She still is torn by your son's death of course but it seems her depression was getting better. I decreased her medication just last week. Has anything happened between you that might have triggered this?"

"You saying this is my fault?" Darren asked, not looking at her.

"No, not at all. I'm just struggling to understand why she might suddenly wish to take her own life."

Darren suddenly made eye contact, anger flickering between them, more from his part but a little on hers.

"You tell me, you're the fucking psychiatrist. She's mental anyone can tell that, she's completely lost it and you were supposed to be helping her deal with it."

"Well, you're her husband, maybe if you'd had a little confidence in her and asked her how she felt once in a while, she might not have taken to a noose."

Darren pushed his hand down in the air, letting the mug of coffee fall from his hand with a strong force that shattered it, sending coffee all up Jenny's legs and shoes. Darren looked away and slowly strode to the door. He opened it and stood to the side. He stood, holding the door open, staring at his feet. He didn't look up until Jenny had disappeared from sight.

Another two hours had passed and Darren hadn't been visited by any nurses or doctors. He threw open the door and crossed the hallway to the ward's reception desk.

"How can help you Sir?"

"Can you find out how my wife's doing, I haven't heard anything for over two hours."

"Name?"

"Zaria Martin."

"Alright, if you could just take a seat, I'll find out immediately." After a couple of minutes, the receptionist called Darren over.

"She's awake and would like to see you. The doctor's coming down to see you now."

Darren was greeted by a tall man with a bristly ginger beard.

"I'm optimistic that she will make a full recovery," The doctor said as they walked. "But I would strongly recommend some serious help. Like a specialist hospital where they can deal with her mental condition." Darren nodded in agreement.

"I can help you find one if you'd like. I have strong connections with a specialist hospital in the next city, Mary Rose's."

"Thanks, I'd appreciate that."

They rounded a corner and the doctor stopped outside a door. He looked calmly at Darren and opened the door. Zaria lay, frail and fragile on the bed, one hand holding a breathing mask which, every few seconds, she would press to her mouth and inhale. Her other hand hung awkwardly off the side of the bed and by her side in a chair sat Jenny. She didn't look at Darren but continued muttering to Zaria until Darren cleared his throat and Zaria slowly turned her head.

"Can we have a minute," He said to Jenny who seemed not to have heard for a few seconds but then stood and retreated from the room. Darren took the now empty chair by her side and took her free hand in his. He kissed her head and stroked her sweaty forehead.

"How you feeling?" Zaria stared emptily at the ceiling for a few seconds and then tried to speak but only managed a weak cough.

"Alright," She said trying to force a smile but instead letting tears slip from her eyes. "I'm so sorry Dan."

"Hey, don't worry. I'm gonna get you help, we're gonna make you better and then you know what? I'm gonna take you on a nice holiday, the honeymoon we never had."

"I don't want to go, you're gonna put me in a nut house aren't you?" She looked up at Darren with genuine fear in her eyes.

"Hey, it's not like that. It's just like a little hotel but there are people to look after you and check you're on the right medication. I'll come and stay with you at first and then come visit everyday. I Promise."

She nodded although he could tell she wasn't convinced.

"The doctor says you're gonna be all better soon, okay? We'll put this all behind us.

"Darren?" She asked weakly.

"What's up hun, what do you want?"

"Where's Aaron?" She asked curiously, looking around the room.

## *NINE*

It was a Monday, and a dull one at that, when Zaria was finally discharged from St. Anne's general. Darren took her bag and taking her hand, lead her out into the car park where a taxi was waiting on the curb. Zaria walked slowly across the carp park, rain slapping the back of her jumper and seeping through to her skin. A car screeched to a halt and sounded its horn at Zaria as she crossed in front of a car and got in the back left door of the taxi. She watched the rain drip down the windows for the entire journey, not saying a word to Darren but thinking of the time when as a child, she would paint with watercolours with her mother. She must've been about eight or nine and her mother would put the painting equipment into a sand coloured canvas bag and walk for an hour or so to a lake just out of town. She would set up her paints on a wooden stand and try to copy what her mother was painting on her canvas. She remembered the attic where they kept all the paintings, Hidden away from the world, not known by any but Zaria and her mother.

Zaria pushed her head through the loft door and climbed into the loft area. There must've been around forty paintings, all covered with white protective sheets. Zaria took one off and stood, admiring the painting of a small canal boat at dusk. She pulled another off, and another taking a good minute or so to recollect the moment her mother had painted them.

Then Zaria pulled one off to the left but the canvas was not covered with oil paintings of nature, this was just a large splatter of blood, gleaming in the loft's single bulb, hanging from the ceiling. Zaria took a step back in bemusement and fell backwards onto more canvases, the covers falling off and revealing more blood, dripping onto the wooden floorboards. She scrambled backwards away from the canvases but her attention was now drawn to a muffled knocking coming from the opposite end of the attic. The knocking grew louder and more intense as Zaria stood and slowly walked towards the source of the noise, which she soon discovered to be a large chest against the far wall. She passed canvases on either side, leading her to the chest as an escape. The canvases furthest behind her began to expose themselves, the covers falling off in sequence, revealing the pictures closer and closer to her, like lights snapping off, closing in on her. The blood dripped from the paintings, making a river that ran towards her across the wooden floor, staining it crimson. She broke into a run, the knocking reaching a loud thumping as if something was trying to get out of the chest.

Zaria reached it and flung the lid open to find it empty. She felt a pulling on her dress and turned. Aaron stood behind her smiling cheekily.

"Come here, come to Mummy," Zaria said, getting to one knee and reaching for Aaron but he shook his head and ran across the trail of blood like a red carpet. "Don't go there Mummy, don't go there," Aaron said in a sing-song, playful voice as he ran of. Zaria sped after him but the blood ignited like oil, burning into a blaze instantly. Zaria ran through the flames, burning her flesh until it stunk of melting. She could hear Aaron screaming in agony, louder and louder in her head until she wanted to escape from her own mind. Suddenly the floor collapsed under the flames and she was falling. She reached for Aaron who was falling beside her but he slipped through her fingers and was gone.



"Zar?" Zaria looked round to find that they had stopped and Darren was shaking her gently. "We're here." Zaria got out of the taxi and found her place at Darren's side. She felt like a child, afraid and uncertain. She felt . . . vulnerable. The taxi rattled out of sight, leaving them facing a large, menacing iron gate, at least twelve feet high. Coils of razor wire topped the gate the entire way round just to add icing to the cake. Darren walked up to the gate and pressed the button, there was a beep, a crackle and then a voice spoke.

"Please state your purpose."

"I'm accompanying Zaria Martin who I'm sure you're expecting." Darren said, looked around unsurely but then;

"That's fine, come straight through to reception." There was another beep, a metallic clicking sound and then the gate swung slightly open. Darren opened it fully and helped Zaria through. He shut the gate behind them and they started down the path towards the huge building. There was a long gravelled path leading up to the building painted a sickly yellow colour. Roses and tulips were growing neatly in pots placed the same distance either side of the path. Bushes were trimmed identically so that there was an exact symmetry that gave Zaria the shivers. It was almost too nice, as if it was hiding something evil inside. They walked through the open front door and across the deserted entrance hall to a small reception desk.

"Zaria Martin," Zaria said stepping in front of Darren and addressing the receptionist.

"Ah yes. Nurse. Andrews will be here in just a second to give you a tour, show you to your room and introduce you to some people. If you could just take a seat, he'll be here any moment." Zaria took a seat in an armchair and Darren on the sofa next to her. The entrance hall was tall and looming and something just didn't feel right about it.

A minute later a tall man with short, carefully styled hair and a camp voice with a slight French influence arrived through a set of double doors and came over to the two of them.

"Hey guys, I'm Nurse Andrews, but you can just call me Simon. I'm gonna be your personal Nurse while you stay here, you know check your taking your meds and help you with anything you need. Now I would usually assign you a psychiatrist who you would have sessions with twice a week but apparently you've expressed a great interest in having your personal psychiatrist who is familiar with your condition. Sooo, I've managed to move a couple of things around and she will be coming in twice a week to talk to you."

Zaria noticed Darren's questioning and disapproving glance but she dismissed it with a small smile, she knew he didn't like her councillor but it wasn't he that was ill.

"Shall I take you on the grand tour then? This way please, oh let me take your bag for you please Madam." The nurse who wore faded lime green scrubs, Zaria guessed, in an attempt to appear more professional although his tone of voice gave quite the opposite opinion.

"So all our conv- patients are free to wander around the grounds or the entrance. We have several general rooms for relaxing, there is a canteen which serves drinks and snacks all day until ten but meals are at seven to eight, eleven to twelve and six to eight. If you look through the doors on the left, it's lunchtime at the moment and I would give you a note of caution from my personal experience, we don't have any 'dangerous' patients so to speak

but these people don't think the same way that rational people do. A lot of them suffer from severe paranoia and can be unpredictable, so just be careful."

Before Zaria had a chance to comment, the nurse whisked them away back to the entrance hall and up the staircase to the apartments.

"Your room is at the back, second from the end, on the left. You have a bathroom, small kitchen area and telephone call. Dialling zero takes you straight to reception." If you want to settle down, the sofa in the main area pulls out into a bed for your fella."

Zaria and Darren found the room where they would be staying. Darren went to the toilet and when he came out, found Zaria rummaging through her bag.

"Alright?" Darren asked but soon saw what she had been after. Zaria held Aaron's teddy close to her chest which she was rocking back and fourth.

## TEN

Almost as soon as Zaria had moved to the hospital, the nightmares started. She was sprinting through a dark forest after the echoing sounds of Aaron's laughter. Children sat in the branches of the high trees, pointing and laughing at Zaria as she tore past them. Every minute or so, Zaria would stop in a clearing and look around desperately and spot Aaron in the distance, he would giggle and run on. After a minute of flat out running, Zaria emerged from the trees into a completely different world. She was in a black and white tiled world. The pattern went on forever and everywhere she looked was the same pattern. Rain fell thick from above her. It splattered onto her clothes, drawing all the colour from them. The rain stained everything black and Zaria watched with fixed horror until the sound of shrill terror filled her ears, echoing infinitely around her false world. It was the scream of a terrified Aaron. Zaria spun round and round, the world spinning around her.

"Mummy?" Zaria froze, seeing that Aaron stood fifteen feet in front of her. Darren stood behind him, his arm around his chest. Darren's expression was as lifeless as the place itself, no hint of anger or sadness or regret. Aaron stared deeply at Zaria, a look of desperation, a plea for help. Then Darren's arm closed around Aaron's neck and Aaron's face grew red with panic.

"No!" Zaria ran forward but with every step she took, she was further away from them. She found herself drifting back so that Aaron's scared face was far from view. She found herself again in the forest clearing, children sat on branches all around her in a circle, pointing and laughing. They, in unison, began to throw rocks at her from small wicker baskets hung on the end of branches. They glanced off Zaria's upper body as she fell to the floor, her arms above her head and tears clinging to her eyes.

She woke in a jolt, a face close to hers. As her eyes adjusted, she saw it was her Nurse, Andrews. He had a look of concern but there was something else buried in his eyes. Was it satisfaction?

Zaria sat up and screwed up her face. She looked around the room to find herself in a sweat or possibly piss soaked bed with this Nurse bent over in her face.

"Where's Darren?" She asked. The man's expression dropped to that of genuine concern, a sign that his supposed concern before had been otherwise.

"We, erm, suggested that he leave you in our care for the time being. He will visit tomorrow afternoon. " Zaria's head hurt. She peeled the soaked sheets from her legs and stood.

"Where's my boy?" The Nurse frowned questioningly. Zaria looked around the room and spotted the one-eyed teddy lying roughly on the floor near the doorway. Andrews noticed where Zaria was looking and picked up the teddy. He held it up to Zaria who snatched it out of his grip instantly and began cradling it in her arms.

"My baby, my baby," She muttered. Nurse Andrews just stared at her, watching her like a strange new animal.

"Anyway Miss. Mar- *Zaria*, you've slept through breakfast but we thought, as it's your first day, we'd leave you to it but I'm sure if you come with me now we can get you a late bite."

Zaria nodded, her head buried in the teddy's fur.

"Well if you get yourself dressed now, I'll take you down." Zaria seemed to have not heard. "If you get dressed now," He persisted heavily. Zaria rested the teddy gently down on her pillow and stood. She stood, waiting for the Nurse to leave but he merely waited patiently at the foot of the bed. The two of them stood awkwardly, more on Zaria's part, for over a minute before Zaria slowly took off her trousers and top and stood nearly naked, the Nurse still waiting patiently, his eyes casually wandering over her. Zaria turned, her self confidence failing her, and changed into her day clothes, nothing spectacular. Andrews nodded and opened the door, indicating that Zaria should leave before him. Zaria hesitated then snatched up the teddy from the bed and walked through the door passed him.

"Couldn't I put on some make up?" Zaria asked quietly, not looking at the Nurse.

"I don't think that would be appropriate," He said bluntly.

"Well, I'll be super quick?" Zaria asked, making eye contact at last. There was a clear impatience on Andrews' face.

"Miss Martin, shall I make this clear?" He snapped. "There is no one that will take a second look at you in this place, no one will appreciate your false beauty."

Zaria stared in bewilderment, as if he had just slapped her across the face.

"Shall we go then?" He said smiling genuinely.

No one so much as looked at Zaria as she passed in the hallway and even when she sat down to eat in the cafeteria, the only person looking at her was a scrawny male sitting in the corner, his legs up on the table and a finger so far up his nostril, his eye twitched oddly. So she ate in absolute silence, pondering on the harsh truth of what Nurse Andrews had said. When she had finished, the Nurse escorted her to one of the small rooms on the ground floor where she found Jenny waiting at a desk.

"I'll see you at lunch time then. Don't be late this time," Andrews said and left them.

Zaria hurried forward and threw her arms around Jenny who pulled her into an embrace. They stood holding each other for a moment before Zaria burst into tears. She dropped the teddy to the ground and began to moan into Jenny's shoulder.

Jenny said nothing, letting Zaria pour her emotion into her. After a while, they parted and Zaria sunk into a chair beside Jenny. She then panicked, realising she wasn't holding the teddy, which Jenny passed to her.

"So what's with the bear anyway?" Jenny asked. Zaria looked up in near outrage.

"My poor thing, my baby," She muttered rocking the teddy.

"So it represents your son, you need it to remind you of him. Give you something to hold, to touch?" Zaria said nothing. They sat in silence for a while until Jenny said:

"So, how are you liking it here? Darren's gonna come visit tomorrow, that'll be good right?" Zaria shrugged at both but kept her attention on the teddy in her arms. Jenny watched her carefully then said, " anyway, I don't wanna dig too deep on our first session. But don't worry, people are nice here, they keep themselves to themselves, you'll be out of here before you know it. "

## *ELEVEN*

Zaria sat in bed, staring out of the window blankly, her arms around her knees rocking slowly back and forth. She held the teddy's arm in her hand. There was a knock at the door and Zaria was suddenly alert.

"Yeah?" She asked. A young female nurse came in and threw Zaria a quick smile.

"Your husband is here." She said.

Zaria's lips formed a smile and she hurried out of the room with the nurse.

"Just in there," The nurse said pointing to the open door on the left, before disappearing through another door. Zaria walked forward, exaggerating her smile but stopped by the doorway.

"Yeah, I think she just needs something to hold on to. " Darren's voice. "She could never cope with losses, but this isn't like her. I've given her so much comfort and support but it doesn't seem to have any effect on her at all. I think what she really needs is a reality check, someone to show her what's real and what needs to be left behind. But hey, you're the professional. What do you suggest?"

There was another voice which Zaria recognised as Nurse Andrews, although he talked very differently to Darren than he had to her.

"I totally agree, we have patients that have been in the state she's in now and have been there for years because they cannot let go of little things. They eat up their grief and depression, they live on it like a parasite. There's no medication or comfort that can move them on from that stage, it just takes a strong person to say 'right I can't live like this forever, as much as it will hurt, I need to move on. Zaria's case is by no means unique, is simple abc post-traumatic stress except she's going round and round in a circle every day re-living that trauma because she can't let go. Sometimes it seems like she's getting better, she tries to break out of it but it crashes down on her harder than ever. She needs you to help her but it's her choice to make, she needs to pull through or she's going to remain stuck in trauma for ever. So if it will help her, and it seems as if she cannot make that decision, you should make it for her. If we take away the one thing she is hanging onto, it might be enough to pull her back into sanity."

"Yeah, sure. Give her a few days and if she doesn't make any improvement, take it from her. Just do what you can and help her."

Zaria felt as if Darren had reached into her chest with an iron fist, ripped out her heart and left her to rot on the side. An anger filled through her veins, her hands clenching into fists, itching to punch at anything she could reach of Darren, to smash his fucking face in. How could he betray her like that, he was the enemy.

With difficulty, Zaria pushed her anger away, forced a smile and walked into the office.

Darren turned and seeing Zaria, pulled her into a hug.

"Hey baby, how you doing?"

Zaria nodded and smiled weakly.

"I'm only here for a few hours, I'm needed at work but we'll hang out and watch some telly or something?"

Zaria nodded. "I just need the Ladies first," Zaria said, pushing Darren away.

"You want me to come?" Zaria shook her head and stepped back into the corridor. She walked fast, straight past the toilets and walked into the grounds. She found a tree and gripped it with both hands, throwing the teddy onto the ground in anger. She threw her head forward hard against the tree. A hard soreness flushed over her forehead and Zaria screwed her face with the pain but then threw her head forward for another. Zaria did this again and again until her vision began to blur and she collapsed face down in wet mud beside Aaron's one-eyed teddy, which was the last thing she saw before she lost consciousness.

## TWELVE

Zaria's head ached. She put down her fork and surveyed the food on her plate with disgust. The cutlery was all plastic, even the plates and cups. Like the kids sets you'd get in case you dropped them. Zaria figured it was for safety, true there were some pretty fucked up patients in the hospital, but she wasn't like them, she was alright in the head. Wasn't she?

"Now your husband was telling me about this. He said you had an eating problem, probably due to your depression. But come on you have to eat."

Zaria gripped the teddy harder under the table. She shook her head hard.

"Miss Martin, pick up your fork and eat," He persisted harshly. Zaria shook her head slowly and arrogantly, her top lip curling. Nurse Andrews picked up the plastic fork and stabbed it hard into a small potato and pushed it toward her. Zaria pushed it away hard, knocking the fork out of his hand. He bent down to pick it up, rage filling his eyes. Zaria pulled the teddy into her chest and laid her head on it.

"It's that Bear isn't it? He said, his hint of French accent coming through. "Give it to me. Miss Martin, give it to me now." Zaria pushed him away, holding the teddy close to her. The Nurse snarled and reached for it. He tried to rip the teddy from her arms as Zaria reached for some sort of weapon but found nothing.

"Don't take it. Please, don't-take-my-boy. Don't take him you son of a bitch!" Zaria moaned.

"Oh don't be so fucking pathetic, it's a toy, it's not your son. Your son is dead!" The Nurse tore the bear from her arms and backed off. Zaria looked hurt, it shone in her face. She looked around the nearly empty canteen, people minding their own business and she decided at that moment she would not let him win. Zaria stepped forward and threw a punch hard at the Nurse's face. His head snapped sideways where he spat a ball of phlegmy blood onto the floor. Arrogantly, he slowly turned back to face Zaria and struck her hard across the face. She fell back from the force and hit the table. Zaria jumped on the man, sinking her teeth deep into the side of his neck. She bit down hard, tasting blood in her mouth. She dug her nails into his eyes and ripped the teddy from him. She took one look at him, weak and falling to the floor, she looked at the heads now turned towards her and then she ran. She ran hard up the stairs into her room where she threw herself onto her bed and wept.

The nurses that came for her two minutes later were calm and gentle. She noticed the colt.<sup>45</sup> holstered at the male's waist.

"If you would come with us please."

"Where?" Zaria asked, the teddy held at her neck, and a victimised look of self-pity in her red eyes.



"We're just gonna take you to a time out room, your husband's coming now but we just need you to calm down and understand what you did."

"Can I take my baby?" Zaria asked holding out the teddy. The nurses looked at each other then one said; "Sure."

The courteous nurses escorted Zaria to a time out cell where she fell to the floor, sobbing and clutching at her teddy.

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"Why are you so hard on her then?" Voices registered in Zaria's mind after a few seconds of wake.

"Because I think she has what it takes to pull through, I really do. I seen so many weak like her but not with her determination. I pushed her too hard, I'm sorry." It was the voice of Andrews. Zaria looked up from the floor to see Darren on the other side of the bars, two more nurses were listening silently. Andrews opened the cell and Darren went in. He picked Zaria up and hugged her closely, letting a tear slip from his eye.

"Baby, what were you thinking?" He asked. Zaria was sniffing now as well.

"I'm sorry, I'm really sorry. He was trying to take Aaron."

"Baby, I know it's hard but this, this isn't Aaron. Aaron was a cute, cheeky little boy who would always go to his mum whenever he wanted a drink, and she loved him to pieces and I know that she feels guilty, she feels like she's left him and he's all alone somewhere In need of his mother but he's safe now. And you will see him again, we will all be together some day but not yet. Now you have to try and move on, try and make some good out of all the bad that's happened. So what do you say?" He ran his fingers through her hair and slowly held the teddy whilst she gripped it hard. She resisted at first when he tried to pull it away from her but slowly released her grip. Zaria watched it in his hands as he handed it to one of the nurses before collapsing into Darren's chest, sobbing.

## *THIRTEEN*

Eight months later...

Darren pulled into the parking spot outside the hospital and killed the engine. He took in a deep breath and braced himself before getting out and straightening his jacket. Zaria was due to be discharged this morning and by request, Darren had agreed to take Zaria for a week away to the country. Just the two of them, a quiet holiday, the honeymoon they never had. So as Darren crossed the grounds towards the hospital, leaving his beat up yellow VW behind him.

On agreement that every two weeks Zaria would have an appointment with her psychiatrist, she could go a new free woman. She was given medication for the week that they were away that she should take daily and off they went into the bright mid-day sun.

# PART THREE

## *ONE*

"Darren?" Zaria screamed, spinning around the room wildly. She collapsed on the bed, her heart pounding and her body incapable of handling any more shock. She managed to walk back to the main area and was about to leave the room when she heard voices and froze. She listened carefully, hoping one was Darren's but discovered neither was just in time. She crossed the room in a few strides and hid herself behind the sofa just as the door opened.

"We need to keep Darren away from her, he can't find out," The concierge was saying. Zaria listened to the footsteps and the creak of the bedroom door open.

"She's gone!" The other man yelled.

"What?" The concierge let out in terror, running forward. "Shit. Shit,shit,shit. You have your gun?" There was a pause.

"I do."

"Give it to me," The concierge said and Zaria heard the sound of a magazine sliding from the pistol and then clicking back in place. "I want you to find every one you can and get a search going, I'm going to check the tapes."

"Got it." Zaria heard footsteps as the man crossed the room.

"Oh and Gregg?" The concierge said.

"Yeah?"

"If you need to, don't hesitate to shoot the bitch."

After a few seconds, both men left the room and Zaria heard the door shut.

"Fuck!" Zaria said to herself. They had Darren, she knew it. She needed to find him and get the two of them out of there. Tapes? That meant they had security cameras set up and so they would find her in an instance. And what about the bloodstains in the rooms across the corridor? These people were dangerous and Zaria would not let them take her.

Zaria went back into the bedroom and stripped the sheets from the bed. She tied them together with the duvet cover and tied the end around the window latch, opening the window and exposing the dark, cold night. Rain fell from the black sky, it quickly soaked

Zaria's bedclothes as she slid down her makeshift rope and landed outside by the wall. Zaria pulled the sheets down and stashed them in a nearby bush. It was so dark that she had to feel along the wall with her hand. She came to the end of the wall and felt around the corner then stopped dead. Female voices; two or three. Zaria couldn't make out anything they were saying but peered in the door to her left. It was the back door of the hotel's kitchen. There was no one in the kitchen but there was movement in the cafeteria. Zaria ducked down and moved into the kitchen. She entered the room, took a box of cook's matches and a large kitchen knife, then crept to the storage cupboard. There were still voices of women cleaning in the cafeteria. Zaria found what she was after; a large canister of vegetable oil. She poured it all over the contents of the cupboard and threw a match on top. By the time the oil ignited, Zaria was gone like a ghost.

(Add the smoke alarm going off and voices hurriedly moving and how Zaria runs when she hears people coming outside)

## TWO

Zaria found herself sprinting down the path, leaving the hotel behind her. She noticed a wetness dripping down her legs and arms and looked down to see that she had cut herself badly on something. The pain erupted instantly, stinging like acid but she kept running, ignoring the burning pain, until she stumbled upon a field of long grass. She slipped and fell face first in a soggy ditch. Zaria moaned and rolled over. The rain was pattering on her face, her clothes were soaked to her skin and dirt was infesting the cuts on her thighs and arms. Zaria struggled to her feet and ran on through the fields until she stopped, psychically unable to continue. She fell to her hands and knees and pressed her face to the wet mud. Thunder rumbled in the sky and Zaria looked up to see a figure in the distance.

Zaria crawled on all fours across the boggy field until she could almost make out the figure in the distance. Then in the blink of an eye, it was gone. Zaria pulled herself to her feet and stumbled forward, moving faster and reaching her arms out in front of her. She splashed through the boggy field and as she reached the end, she saw the figure next to a path that lead up a hill. Zaria saw via the moonlight that the figure had long hair, and a long dress or cloak that came down to its ankles. Zaria looked up at the illuminative moon; it was full and shining beautifully silver. Zaria looked back at the figure to see that it had disappeared again.

“No wait!” Zaria yelled out to the darkness but the powerful winds made it impossible that the figure would’ve heard her even if it would have heard her from such a distance. Zaria broke into a stumbling run, more than once falling into a deep puddle of mud and lying there for a few seconds, her bones aching and pleading for her to stop and just lie there to die but she pulled herself up and ran on, propelled by some unknown motivation. Zaria must’ve been half way down the third field, less than a minute from the foot of the hill, when she heard it. The distant, but not too distant, howl. It stopped Zaria dead, like she had been stabbed from behind, straight through the heart. She spun around, confront by the ever present darkness. It was mocking her, an omniscient being, patronising but too cowardly to show itself. It closed in on Zaria like an inevitability, closed in from every angle as she spun around helplessly for an answer.

Sweat drenched Zaria, a lining of fear, dark unforgettable fear that redefines a person. Again she heard the howl but it was not alone, the howl echoed around the open world, howls from the distance, on every compass point; some that sounded like they were lifetimes away and one or two that could be in the next field. The united call was made insignificant. A low growl from behind Zaria, she had no idea how far but before her mind had time to register it, her legs were already moving. She ran, faster than she thought possible, with an unearthly energy that was not hers. Her legs sunk deep into the marshland, on fire, burning with an impossible rage. Her whole body shook violently, her blood boiling and trembling with every step. She could hear the wolf behind her, she could *feel* it. Feel it, closing in on her, feel the hunger in its eyes. The the wolf’s paws scratching at the ground as it shot across the earth dug at Zaria’s neck, the hairs jutting out like needles, instead stabbing into her neck so deep that the pain was insignificant.

After not long, the pain, the ache was gone. It was the stage where frostbite turned to warmth and death was an embrace. It seemed as if all time was relative and everything that drew breath was focusing on this one event. Zaria's mind was completely detached from her furiously pumping legs, her veins stiff and explosive. She hadn't turned round once to look, it wasn't that she was too afraid, or even that she was afraid it would slow her down. She was not even aware of what she was running from by the time she was scrambling up the hillside. She reached up with hands so tense they should have been wrapped around a human throat, and grabbed at a rock to pull herself up. Her legs dragged across other sunken rocks in the hill and the first feeling that Zaria was reunited with was pain, flowing back into her bloodstream like an icy river. She threw her head back and screamed. The open cuts, still shining with fresh blood were cut open again with a teeth gritting agony that made Zaria embrace it, dare it to top the pain that she was already feeling. Her facial expression was indescribable. It was what some would describe as hell. No burning afterlife but the reality of being in so much pain that it turned into a momentary addiction.

She let out an overwhelming breath, she was born again into a world of unescapable and ever present despair. She pulled herself up onto the hilltop and let go of everything that mattered in life. Her body smashed into the rocky ground as her legs gave way. She felt her head collide with a rock and her body jolt from the impact. Then she felt the blood slithering down her head and trickle into a pool at her ear.

Zaria's eyes rolled back into her head, pleading with her spirit to let go of life. But something stopped her and Zaria's desperation was of irritation that she was still conscious. As Zaria embraced the imminent presence of death, she felt a rough, wetness drag pull across her face and it took her a second to realise the feeling was physical and not in her mind. She pulled back into reality, as if emerging out of water like a newborn baby. She opened her eyes with a mechanical resistance and confronted the deep green eyes of the wolf. She noticed for the first time, in this new light, how beautiful the wolf was. Its fur was so soft, framing its eyes which gave out their own light, competing with the moonlight behind it. It stared right at Zaria, emotionless. There was no anger, hate or pity in its eyes only curiosity. Zaria blinked and the wolf copied subconsciously so that the two made a connection.

Zaria heard a footstep and craned her neck from the ground to see the figure that she had been following. It stood in the entrance to a cave, set back in the hillside. The figure looked at Zaria for a second then slowly turned and disappeared into the cave's darkness. The wolf moved its head round to accompany the rest of its body and it too began to follow the figure into the cave. Zaria pulled herself up, feeling the ache of every bone in her body and got to her feet. She followed the wolf that padded slowly forwards and stopped at the cave entrance. It looked at Zaria and disappeared into the darkness. Zaria followed, ducking her head slightly under the roof of the cave.

She walked blindly into the blackness, her hands in front of her. She took deep, slow breaths, trying to reassure her shaking body. After Zaria started to wonder how deep the cave was, a light appeared in the distance and using it as a guide, Zaria walked towards it, minding

the walls of the cavern. As the light grew bigger and bigger, Zaria saw for the first time the appearance of the figure. It was a woman, who wore a hide hood and long fur cloak and in her hand loosely held a short staff from a yew tree. She sat on a leather bedroll in the narrowest part of the cave. In the corner behind her were a few essentials like a rusty pan and strung up dead rabbits. A small fire blazed in front of her, by which Zaria could not make out her face and with a start, Zaria suddenly realised one significant detail. There must've been eight wolves surrounding the woman. Zaria was horrified by how she had not previously noticed. They lay against the walls and around the fire. One with its head in the woman's lap and another, which Zaria had followed into the cave, sat up attentively, watching the chemistry between Zaria and the woman, as if waiting for one of them to speak.

The woman gestured for Zaria to take a seat next to the fire. Zaria hesitated, looking again at the wolves, none of which were looking at her, and took a seat on the rough ground. Her body ached so bad like it had been shocked and beaten repeatedly for weeks on end. Zaria stared at the flames flickering in the wind blowing all through the cave but the secluded corner had a very calming, peacefulness about it but as Zaria sat cross legged, her nightgown completely soaked with mud, her skin ice cold and stinging with pain, she wondered what this was all for. Why had she been dealt such tests by the world? What had she done to deserve it? And the only answer she could come up with was for leaving Aaron alone. A tear rolled down Zaria's face for the first time in a long time. She felt so alive ironically so close to death.

Zaria returned to the room and looked around the fire where she sat. She surveyed the woman again and for the first time they made eye contact. Zaria frowned unsurely. The woman leaned forward so Zaria could see her face by the firelight and pulled back her hood. Zaria stared in bewilderment.

"Mother?"

## THREE

Zaria's mouth fell open in horror. She got to her feet and backed off, a flush of ice pouring across her body.

"You can't be here. You just can't." Her eyes were wide with petrification, staring right at the woman as she stood and took a step towards Zaria.

"I'm dead. I must be." Zaria held up the kitchen knife and drew it across her wrist. She closed her eyes tight, feeling the blood drip down her hand and fall to the floor. She opened her eyes, still seeing the world as it was. She held the knife up to her neck.

"No. Stop." Her mother said. She stepped forward and grasped Zaria's wrist. "Don't be stupid." Zaria lowered her hand and stared again at her mother.

"Sit down and I'll explain everything," She said. Zaria thought for a second then let her mother help her to a sitting position.

"Here," She said, taking a fur blanket and wrapping Zaria in it before taking a seat herself.

"How did you come to be here?" Zaria asked, staring into the flames. There was a silence and then; "I cannot allow myself to linger on the insignificant. All that matters is I'm here now when you most need me. One day you will understand. But there are much more important things at stake. You have something that you need to do."

Zaria looked round at the many wolves that lay around her mother. "And these," Zaria said gesturing to the animals. "They're yours?"

"They do not belong to anybody. They are as free as you or I. But I sent them to your aid when you most needed them." Zaria thought in puzzlement. "There is something dark here. Something that means to hurt you. You must do what is necessary."

"The first night," Said Zaria in thought. "What were you protecting me from then?" Her mother thought for a moment, contemplating her words.

"From yourself my dear daughter. Now do not ask more for I cannot tell you. Some things are better unknown. One day you will understand." Zaria's mouth remained open wide in astonishment. Zaria's mother suddenly stood and reached a hand down for Zaria to take.

"Come. I must show you something."

Zaria's mother grabbed her yew walking stick, grabbed a stick from the fire as a torch and passed Zaria on her way out of the cave. Zaria gripped the knife tightly and followed.

She followed the light of the flaming torch that her mother held. Not once did she turn around to look at Zaria but kept walking for what must've been over half an hour. Zaria came up onto the very hilltop to face a red sunrise like seeping blood into the sky. Zaria looked down from the northern edge of the cliff and stumbled back with vertigo. Had they walked for that long? She could barely see the ground in the early morning light. Zaria



caught up with her mother who was standing, waiting twenty feet from the edge of the cliff. She half-smiled at Zaria and spoke.

"My Dear, do you know what must be done?" Zaria peered over the edge and shuddered. She nodded and took a step towards the edge. Her mother's old but strong hand grabbed hold of her shoulder.

"Not yet. Your time will come."

"Then what must I do?" Zaria asked in a tone of annoyance. She had been ready to end it, embraced death so many times but still it was not her time.

"Are you not forgetting someone? You have to find your husband, the father of your son and you must both join your son in eternal salvation. Is this not what you want?"

Zaria nodded, a tear falling from her eye. Zaria's mother stepped sideways, letting into view a large lone tree, leaning very much to the left. The sunrise backdropped the tree so that it formed a silhouette, an almost romantic view, and under the tree lay a small boy. Zaria walked slowly forward as if in a trance. She reached the tree which sat four feet from the cliff peak, so that on three sides, Zaria was surrounded by an edge which would send her to her demise.

She reached down and rolled over the child to face Aaron. He looked for the first time since his death, normal. He didn't smile but looked upon Zaria for comfort. Zaria pulled him into her arms and held him, looking out onto the rising sun. She stroked his fair hair with her hand, holding a knife at the floor in her other. She held him for what felt like hours until eventually she fell asleep on the edge of the cliff, under the tree with her son in her arms.

When Zaria opened her eyes the next morning, it was fully light. She felt the comfort of the shape in her arms and looked down. She held a dead wolf child at her chest and a crow was perched on the floor beside it, pecking at its guts. Zaria yelped and threw the corpse away. The crow, startled flapped away in a frenzy. She felt around her body and felt the soreness of her arms and legs, felt the dampness of her nighty that clung to her skin. She lay in a shallow puddle in a field and in the distance the looming shape of the hotel was in view. Zaria, with much effort, pulled herself to her feet and started walking towards the hotel, only one thing playing on her mind. She squeezed the knife in her hand for comfort and told herself it would be over soon.

## *FOUR*

Zaria lay in a bush, watching the entrance to the hotel. She clenched the knife hard in her hand and after another two minutes, held it behind her back as she made a run for the door. Zaria flattened herself against the wall and peered inside the entrance hall. It was deserted except for two men standing talking near the stairway. Zaria ducked her head and walked into the hall, the kitchen knife pressed against her leg. The men stepped sideways but watched her closely as Zaria walked quickly up the stairs. One took a step after her and tried to say something but Zaria broke into a jog, reaching the top of the stairs.

"Hey!" The man said running after Zaria. "You're her aren't you."

Zaria sprinted down the corridor and tried a door on her left. It was locked. She kept running, the man reaching the top of the stairs behind her. She tried a door to her left and it opened inwards. She flattened herself against the wall behind the door and looked around. She was in a laundry cupboard, towels and bedsheets piled up on wooden shelves around the room and at the back behind a box of laundry were many blinking lights of green and red.

The door flung open and the man ran in, past Zaria. He looked around the room and then turned to face Zaria. She reached a hand out and covered his mouth, plunging the knife into his lower stomach. She felt it go deep and saw the blood drip to the floor and pulled the knife out with a small scream of superiority. She stabbed him again and again and at last, his body fell to the floor with a small thud. Zaria kicked the door shut behind her and slid down the wall. She stared at the blood all around her and shook with a sickness beyond her knowing.

After a while of sitting on the floor, fighting her own demons, she stood and slowly peeled the wet nighty from her cold, hurt body. She reached up and pulled some spare gowns from the shelves. Then half intrigued, half intentional, she pulled back the box to see a large cabinet screwed to the wall with a spaghetti of wires and lights and caged by a metal box with thick glass panel. Zaria leaned in to look. Labels showed the purpose of each set of wires and Zaria smiled as she realised. She could take out their communications; their were wires leading to the landlines, internet and, Zaria smiled, the cctv.

Zaria snatched up the knife from the floor and smashed the handle into the glass front. It took the impact mostly, leaving ripples of impact. She reared back and hit the glass a second and third time. It took her two minutes to shatter the glass fully. She reached in and hacked at the wires with the knife. Sparks spat wildly as she destroyed the whole thing. Zaria took one last look at the body covered in fresh blood with her torn nightgown thrown on top like trash, and left.

Zaria shut the door carefully and tried the door across the corridor. It was locked and she tried the next one up to the same response. Zaria was just turning to leave when the door opened behind her and a hand pulled her inside.

She found herself in a room similar to hers, kitchenette in the corner and two rooms leading off. She was facing an old woman, grey hair and wrinkles who stared deeply at Zaria. Zaria stared back in confusion.

"Why are you helping me?" Asked Zaria. The woman rolled up her sleeves and shoved her arms in Zaria's face. She had cuts across her wrists but was showing Zaria the countless needle holes covering her arms.

"This is what they've done to me. I used to be like you, hopeful but now I know I can't fight them. Look at me rotting in here too cowardly to do anything. But you go, you get the hell out of here." The woman stopped talking at the sound of footsteps in the corridor. There were shouts and a scream and more hurried footsteps. Zaria looked around to see the woman smiling at Zaria widely with a mix of admiration and horror. She reached a bony finger up to her lips that looked like an aged root of an oak tree. The woman gestured to the keyhole that Zaria knelt forward to look through.

There were several men in the corridor surrounding the door to the cupboard where the body was. Most of them had guns.

Zaria jumped as a heavy fist hit the door three times.

"Miss Coulson, open the fucking door!" Zaria scurried back behind the door as the woman nodded to her and opened the door.

"Hello Sir, how can I help you?"

"Have you seen a younger woman around here?"

"HmMMM let me think," She said rolling her eyes.

"Don't fuck with me, now isn't the time. Have you seen her or not?"

"Seen who?" The door shut hard as the man left.

"Thank you," Zaria mouthed in gratitude and returned to the keyhole.

Zaria's eyes widened in astonishment.

Darren was being led down the corridor by two men with guns.

Zaria opened her mouth to yell but the woman covered her mouth with her rough hand. She shook her head calmly.

The woman took Zaria's hand and pulled her across the room. She bent down and rummaged through her drawer. She came out with a cap that she handed to Zaria. Zaria frowned in confusion but the woman took the knife from Zaria's hand and attacked her head. She pulled at Zaria's hair with it until her hair resembled a thorn bush. Zaria pulled the cap on and took the knife back from the woman.

"Now, how can I help you?" She asked.

"Well I need to get my husband and I can't get near him."

"You need to get into the room."

"The room?" Zaria's face lit up. The woman nodded.

"It just says 'Private.' There are four locks on it and I can't help you getting into it but I can make a distraction for you."

"What's in the room?" Zaria asked, unable to contain herself.

"Everything. All the drugs they use in the food to brainwash us, guns, secrets you could never imagine."

"How do I get there?"

"It's the room behind the desk in the main entrance."

So Zaria waited for the corridor to clear and headed discretely for the entrance hall.

## *FIVE*

Zaria sat in the corner of the canteen, watching the few hotel residences sitting in the canteen. Zaria kept her head down, trying to watch for the concierge without anyone noticing her. One man entered the room and looked around. Zaria looked away quickly and sunk in her chair, praying to stay hidden. The man crossed the room to get some food. A few minutes later, Zaria looked up as the concierge entered the room, looked around and then backed out. Zaria stood and followed him. She made sure to be always out of sight at any time but she held her knife tightly under her gown.

Zaria followed the concierge into the entrance hall where she waited, out of sight. He looked around then walked behind the desk and started opening the door with keys at his belt. Zaria ducked her head and moved quietly to the desk where she crouched, watching him. He opened the last lock and looked around quickly again. He turned the handle and Zaria heard it click. She ran forward and grabbed hold of his hair. She slammed his head forward into the wall and felt his weight collapse onto the floor. Zaria pulled him into the room and shut the door.

Zaria straightened up and surveyed the room. The room was taken up partly by a large desk that had random piles of paperwork and a large computer monitor in the middle. Zaria sat down in a chair at the desk and looked at the monitor. A video file was open on the desktop, a still from the news report Zaria had seen just last night. She hit play and watched it again, filling herself with anxiety and terror. Had he forged it or what, why was he watching it on a computer? Zaria searched through the draws in the desk, throwing aside insignificant office equipment until she reached down to pull the bottom drawer open but it was locked firmly.

"Aha," Zaria muttered smiling. She kicked the chair bag and pulled the concierge onto it, ripping strips of material from her gown to make a binding, which she tied around his arms and legs. She then searched his pockets and belt to find the necessary key, which in the end she found around his neck. Zaria opened the draw and her face fell blank. Inside was a Glock .34 handgun in a leather holster. Beside it were two extra magazines of ammunition. There was also another set of keys in the draw labelled 'med cub', and a syringe with several bottles of liquid marked 'Flunitrazepam.' There was a tiny ribbon at the back of the drawer that Zaria pulled upward, exposing a hidden compartment containing only one thing; a small brown one-eyed teddy bear.

Zaria reached down and took the bear. She let out a small 'huh' of astonishment. She pressed the teddy to her face and kissed it. Then turned to face the unconscious Concierge with a vicious snarl. She lay the knife down and snatched up the Glock. She pressed the cold metal against the Concierge's head feeling the power roll through her fingers. She swung her arm back and smashed the gun's butt into his head. A deep cut appeared instantly but the blood didn't appear for a few seconds. She reared back and hit again. The concierge burst into consciousness, pulling his head back and staring around the room for desperate answers. His eyes fell upon Zaria and he pulled hard against his restraints.

"You! You're a psychotic bitch, get away from me- HELP!" He screamed. "He-" Zaria hit him again with the Glock this time in the mouth. He swallowed hard and let out a deep breath. Zaria thrust the teddy into his face.

"Where the fuck did you get this?"

The concierge chuckled to himself, softly at first but which broke into a sneer.

"Go to hell."

"Tell me or I swear to God-"

"You're crazy, fucking crazy," He laughed. Zaria snarled and smashed him with the pistol again.

"And what the fuck are these," Zaria asked, holding up a bottle from the bottom drawer. "Flunitrazepam," She managed to pronounce.

"It's a sedative."

"Really?"

"Yes, it's-"

"Well, if it's a sedative, you won't mind me-" Zaria placed it down on the desk and picked up the syringe. She pushed the needle into the bottle's top and extracted a full 10ml sample of the substance. She stabbed it into the concierge's arm and injected it into his bloodstream. He screamed a little then began to laugh which slowly died and he lost consciousness.

Zaria grabbed the teddy in one hand and tucked the Glock into her gown before leaving the room. She crossed the entrance hall without looking to see if there was anyone in the room. A hand grabbed Zaria's shoulder and she turned, drawing the pistol and pointing it at a tall, dark haired man.

"Zaria. What the fuck have you done? What have you done?" The man's eyes fell upon the teddy in her hand. "What the hell is this? You shouldn't have this." The man reached down and grabbed the teddy. He tried to pull it away from her but Zaria shut her eyes tight and squeezed the trigger of the glock. It went off in her hand, the bullet disappearing into the man's stomach with a loud bang. He reached down and his hand covered the wound. Blood spread across his white shirt and he fell backwards. There were screams in the doorway as several people saw what had happened and Zaria backed off towards the stairway. She watched the huge portrait on the wall as she stepped. The small boat, lopsided on a rough ocean during a storm began to tilt from side to side. The water dripped down the wall, a dark blue paint dripped from the painting. It splattered onto the floor, forming a puddle and then more colours started to drip. Soon the walls' colour was falling to the floor in puddles that Zaria splashed through as she backed onto the staircase and turned to run.

She ran across the corridor's black and white checked floor, the colours melting and infusing together.

## SIX

Zaria reached her bedroom and flung herself inside, fitting a chair under the door handle to block it. In the room too, paint was dripping from the walls and ceilings, it fell on her face and slid down, black paint dripping like rain. Her eyes fell upon the painting of the Mona Lisa, black paint dripping from its eyes as if she was crying. Zaria waded through the now ankle deep paint into the middle of the room where she looked around desperately for an escape. She was just thinking how she could jump out of the window when a low thud hit into the door.

"Zaria Martin, open the door now." She stayed silent, listening only to the pattering of paint on the flooding floor. Another thud and the door smashed inwards, several police officers standing in the doorway, holding guns up at her. The concierge also stood behind them, looking very dazed and disoriented. There were also several other women and a man behind them. Zaria was already holding her gun at them by the time any of them had a chance to do anything.

"Drop the gun now or we will shoot."

"Don't!" The concierge yelled. "Just let me talk to her." He turned to Zaria and pushed past the officers. Paint was lapping off his face too, making him look old and frail.

"Zaria, please."

"What have you done to Darren. You bring him to me right fucking now!" The concierge exchanged glances with another male and looked back at Zaria.

"Miss Martin, your husband's dead. You shot him." Zaria felt a needle push gently all the way through her heart, she shivered deeply at the realisation. "He tried to take the teddy off you and you shot him."

"No, you drugged me. Get me out of this place now or I'll kill every fucking one of you."

"Zaria, you're here because you need to be. You're very sick!"

"All we wanted was to go on a nice week away and then we crashed and wound up here and then--"

"Zaria, you don't understand. You didn't just crash. You crashed the car, don't you remember, you grabbed hold of the steering wheel and tried to kill yourself and Darren. You're lucky to be alive. But they brought you straight back here and you were in a coma until last night when you woke up and ran off."

"I don't believe you, you're fucking crazy!"

"Look at the cuts on your wrists and thighs, they're from climbing over the fence last night. You cut yourself on the barbed wire."

"Zar, he's right." A woman's voice. Zaria looked round and noticed for the first time that Jenny stood beside another Nurse whom she recognised from the hospital. "You're sick and I'm so sorry about Darren but we can still help you."

"No! None of you can help me," She said, raising the gun to her own head.

"Don't let her," The concierge or Nurse Andrews yelled, his camp, dramatic voice seeping through. The police officers took aim on Zaria's shoulder. Zaria noticed on the concierge's neck was a large purple scar from when she had bitten him over a year ago.

"I had one thing to do here and it's done. Now I'm gonna go see my boy who needs me." She closed her eyes tight and a gunshot went off, cracking the air and making every person in the room jump.

Zaria opened her eyes against a force and at first could see nothing, only darkness. But then as her eyes adjusted, she could make out a black and white pattern beneath her. She looked up and saw that all she could see around her was that same pattern. Her eyes grew wide with panic and she opened her mouth to scream but noticed a figure in the distance, a short figure. It walked closer and closer to her until the small boy stood over Zaria's body.

Aaron reached down and took Zaria's hand. As his face came into view, the black tiles began to fall. Being pushed away by a blinding white light from behind. It grew brighter and brighter and at last she was in only a white world, angelic almost. Aaron pulled Zaria to her feet and pulled her forwards. She noticed, looking at her arm pulled in front of her, that all her cuts and bruises were gone; her arms were a pale skin colour, new. As Aaron led Zaria forwards, she began to see more shapes in the distance. It became clear; Darren sat, a smile pitched on his face, on a wooden swing seat. He stood and walked towards Aaron and Zaria, all three of them beaming with joy. Zaria felt the world pulling at her and she felt herself floating away into the distance.

End

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