

When this world becomes too much to bear...

Don't Die for Me

A British soldier is blamed for a war crime he did not commit.

Now he has one chance to prove his
innocence before it's too late.



Ken Donald

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For Jane

The nightmare took hold for the thousandth time. Little Azita smiled up at him, clutching the tiny teddy bear he had given her. Emily's teddy bear. She held it as if it were the most precious thing in the world. It had been meant for his daughter, once she was well enough to leave the incubator, but it wasn't to be. He had watched her take her last breath, three precious weeks after she was born.

If only the nightmare could have ended then, but it never did. Suddenly Azita was screaming. A scream that cut into his heart. If it had not been a dream, he would have closed his eyes to the horror of what was about to unfold - but he could not. And so he continued to stare, and watched her limbless torso, curled up in agony - her eyes pleading with him to make the pain go away. He looked down at his gun, knowing it offered the answer to her prayers. But he was impotent, unable to act. If she'd been a dog, he would have fired without a second thought. But she was a beautiful little girl, and this world let beautiful little girls suffer.

And, through the screams, Azita's father cursed him - the man's spittle striking his face.

"This is your fault. You have done this!"

The father spoke in his native Afghan tongue, and for once the dreamer wished he had not tried to learn the language.

He cried, begging for the screaming to stop.

Only then did the nightmare go away, and he was sitting up in bed, tears streaming down his face, clutching a sweat-soaked sheet. His wife Trudi, who no longer loved the man with whom she shared a bed, turned on to her side, pulling back the duvet which had been torn from her body.

So the dreamer climbed out of bed and headed towards the kitchen - to drink beer and to forget.

But he never forgot. How could he, when the nightmare was etched into his very soul?

Chapter 1

As Jim Balham reached for a beer, his hand froze in mid-air. He left the bottle of lager on the shelf and straightened up, idly closing the refrigerator door. He had made a decision. Today would be the day when the torture ended. He returned to the bedroom and donned his walking gear, not really caring if he disturbed Trudi, before making his way to the garage, where he retrieved his rucksack, loaded with the items he would need for the task he was about to perform.

It was six a.m., and as he made his way through the village to the path that led up to the forest, he met no one. Ranton was deserted. It was always deserted. That was why he had chosen it as a place to live. Since returning from his second tour of Afghanistan, he could not exist with the noise and bustle of the city. Trudi hated the place. But then again, Trudi seemed to hate everything lately. Especially him.

It took him thirty minutes to reach the spot in the wood that he had chosen months before to serve his purpose. He placed his rucksack on the forest floor and opened it. It contained two items – an exceptionally sharp knife with a rubber-coated handle, thus ensuring the user could always maintain a firm grip, and a length of rope, fashioned into a noose. He had previously searched on his laptop to find the correct way to create the deadly apparatus, and it had been one of the few times in the last month that he'd actually smiled. You can find out everything on the Internet to make life easier, he'd thought – even how to end it all.

And now he had a dilemma. What method should he choose? Knife or noose? He opted for the noose. Hopefully it would be a cleaner death. He tied it to the sturdy, overhanging branch he had chosen for the job, and dragged a fallen log on which he would climb, to give him sufficient

height to be able to wrap the rope around his neck. So, everything was prepared. He would just sit down for a few moments and have one final cigarette. A condemned man's last request, he thought. This time he didn't smile.

As he drew the smoke into his lungs, he let his mind wander. But it always returned to its default setting – memories of the time he returned to Afghanistan . . .

Naturally, Trudi didn't want him to go back for a second tour. It had only been three months since they'd lost the baby. But, if he was completely honest, he couldn't get back into the thick of the fight quickly enough. He'd wallowed in self-pity long enough, and he needed the adrenaline and the danger to help him forget. To help numb the pain.

"What about me? What the fuck am I supposed to do while you go off playing war?"

He knew that Trudi was trying to goad him, to belittle the path he had chosen. He couldn't blame her. She hated the army. She'd got pregnant because that was what he'd wanted, and, as soon as everything had gone wrong, he was deserting her. She had a right to hate him, and the army.

Unfortunately, this time Afghanistan had changed. The people seemed to resent his presence. Except for Azita. When they patrolled her village, she had taken a shine to him, and she smiled and hugged his leg. She was such a joyful little thing, she somehow raised his spirits, and he instinctively searched his pocket for the small teddy bear he always carried with him, as a reminder of the daughter he'd lost. Azita accepted it with squeals of delight, and she ran off to show her mother. The woman simply scowled at him, and a leaden feeling returned to the pit of his stomach.

The patrol returned to the village several times over the next few weeks, and Azita was always there, giggling and clutching the little bear - her new treasured possession.

Whenever he saw her, he removed his helmet and smiled at her, ignoring the frowns of the other villagers. But he didn't care what they thought of him. Azita's joyful, innocent smile was the only thing keeping him sane.

* * *

On the day the nightmare was born, the officer in charge of Balham's patrol, Lieutenant Morton, said he had spotted Taliban fighters in a compound on the other side of the valley, and he decided to call in an air strike. Balham was given the task of finding the compound's grid reference on his map.

Balham told the lieutenant the co-ordinates for the strike, and handed him a scrap of paper with them written down, just to make sure there was no mistake. Morton made his way to a corner of the camp, where he could use his radio without being interrupted. Balham followed so that he could listen in, but the lieutenant turned to face him.

"Sergeant, go and make yourself useful. Get the men ready. We'll be launching the mopping-up operation as soon as the air strike has done its job."

Balham hesitated, and the lieutenant simply stared at him, waiting for his command to be obeyed. Balham had little choice but to join the rest of the men, waiting, sweat running down their faces, as it trickled from underneath their helmets.

A few moments later they looked up at the sound of an Apache helicopter approaching. Some of the men cheered it on, only to be castigated by the lieutenant. They watched as the chopper flew overhead, preparing to unleash its deadly cargo.

And that was when the unthinkable happened. As the men looked on in horror, helpless to intervene, the gunship proceeded to blow the hell out of the village. 'Friendly fire'

was the colourful euphemism the army employed whenever it killed its own men. In this instance, no words could disguise the ghastly mistake that had been made, as the sound of screams emanated from the ruins of the village, and its inhabitants became the next victims of war.

Despite the cries from his lieutenant, Balham ran towards the mayhem, unable to believe what he was witnessing. He headed for Azita's family home, fearing the worst. When he got there, he found Azita's mangled body, and her tear-filled eyes stared back at his, pleading. The scene became distorted, as his own tears clouded his vision.

Someone was screaming in his ear, and he turned to see Azita's father, cursing him, convinced that he was responsible for delivering death to his family.

He ran. He ran to summon yet another helicopter - this time to bring healing, rather than death. Or had he fled because he had reached the limit of his courage? Had he run from Azita's screams?

As he looked down, and climbed over the debris that had once been Azita's home, he spotted the pink teddy bear. But now, in the rubble, it appeared grotesque. Instinctively, he picked it up, and felt blood ooze from its soft interior. Azita's blood. He dropped it, disgusted. And he ran from a world that was too much to bear.

But Azita's piercing screams of agony still rang in his ears.

Chapter 2

When he returned to join the rest of the men, he was in a daze, and the words of the lieutenant, cursing him for being a bloody fool, seemed to belong to another world. The lieutenant stared at him, chewing gum.

Without thinking, Balham lunged forward and grabbed him, yelling within inches of his face.

“You gave them the wrong fucking co-ordinates. Why didn’t you use the ones I gave you, you fucking idiot?”

And with that, Balham punched Morton on the jaw.

Some of the men grabbed Balham and pulled him away. The lieutenant rubbed his jaw as he spoke.

“I issued the co-ordinates you gave me, Sergeant. You’ve fucked up big-time. Striking an officer is a court-martial offence. Compton, get the fucking idiot out of here. Take him back to base and hand him over to the MPs. Let them deal with him.”

The corporal hesitated.

“Do it – now! Unless you want to end up behind bars too!”

Compton did as he was ordered, giving Balham apologetic looks. At first Balham thought about resisting, but he realised that would only make things worse. So he allowed himself to be led away, deciding that he’d make sure the officer paid for his incompetence back at base.

* * *

An hour later, the two men reached their destination.

“You’ve really done it this time, Sarge. Of all the people to punch out,” said Compton.

“He deserved it.”

“That’s not the point. Don’t you know who his father is, for Christ’s sake?”

“Yeah, I know who he is.”

“Well, that’s what I’m saying. He’s one of the Whitehall mob who sent us here in the fucking first place.”

“Do you think I don’t know that? It doesn’t change the fact that the lieutenant screwed up.”

“Okay,” said Compton. “But whose side do you think the brass will take when it comes down to the wire?”

“The lieutenant’s a fuck-up.”

“Hey, Sarge, you won’t get an argument from me. But what I say doesn’t count for shit. I reckon you’re fucked.”

“That’s why I need you to help me.”

The corporal stared, a worried look on his face.

“What do you have in mind?” he asked.

“My helmet-cam. I left it switched on. Hopefully it recorded everything.”

“Yeah. Including you slugging the lieutenant.”

“I know. But it’ll prove I gave him the right co-ordinates.”

“I’ll tell the brass I heard you give the right numbers,” offered Compton.

“I appreciate the thought, mate, but you were out of earshot. I’m not going to drag you down with me. I shouldn’t have hit the bastard, and if they want to throw the book at me ... well, let them. But I want them to know what really happened. I’m not taking the fall for that idiot’s mistake.”

“So, what do you want from me?” asked Compton.

“Just make sure the major gets the film,” said Balham, passing his camera to Compton.

“On one condition,” said Compton.

“What’s that?”

“I get to see the lieutenant’s face when he realises you’ve fucked him up good and proper.”

* * *

“What the hell were you thinking, Sergeant?”

The major sat behind his desk in the command tent, while Balham stood, facing him.

“I just saw red, sir. Because of his mistake, innocent Afghans were killed.”

“Are you sure they were innocent?”

“Well, sir, I’m pretty sure the little four-year-old girl with her arms and legs blown off wasn’t working for the Taliban, if that’s what you mean.”

“Don’t be facetious, Sergeant. You’re not helping yourself here.”

“Sir, the bottom line is that because of the lieutenant’s mistake, we killed innocent villagers.”

“It’s worse than that. A damn journalist was among the casualties. Bloody idiot had no right being there,” said the major, shaking his head.

“Worse? Why is that worse? Because he was British and the media will be breathing down your neck?”

“I’ll ignore that comment, Sergeant, because you’re clearly under strain.”

The major stared at Balham, as if he were waiting for an apology. When he didn’t get one, he sat back and folded his arms, pressing his lips tightly together in frustration. Finally, he broke the silence.

“The point is that a mistake was made, resulting in a terrible tragedy. Unfortunately, in times of war and conflict, these things happen all too often.”

“This ‘tragedy’ could have been avoided.”

“Yes, so you say.”

“It’s all on my helmet-cam, sir. It will prove that I’m telling the truth.”

“We’ll see soon enough.”

Before Balham could respond, the major was making his way to the entrance of his tent and shouting through the opening.

“Jenkins, have you sorted out that bloody film yet?”

“Just coming, sir.”

Private Jenkins entered the tent, carrying a laptop, which he placed on the major’s desk.

The screen showed a still image, and figures at the bottom indicated the time and date that the footage was taken. Jenkins reached over to the laptop, his hand hovering above the keyboard.

“Sir?”

“Go ahead, Jenkins,” said the major impatiently.

The shaky images were hard to watch, clearly having been taken when Balham was running from one area of the camp to another, checking on his men. Eventually the footage settled down, and the face of Lieutenant Morton could be seen, staring directly into the camera.

The three men heard Balham’s voice, calling out the all-important numbers.

Balham’s heart began to pound in his chest, as adrenaline flooded his body. The major and Private Jenkins slowly turned to face him, looks of disbelief displayed on their faces.

The map on the major’s desk confirmed it. Balham had called out the co-ordinates of the village. And now Azita was dead.

* * *

Balham shook his head, as if the act would purge the memory from his mind. It was time. Time to end the pain. He stood on the log he had set under the rope, and placed his neck through the noose, before tightening it. And, without any hesitation, he kicked the log away.

Chapter 3

Katie Williams had lived in the village since she was a little girl. Her mother had been proud of her shy, intelligent daughter, and she had looked forward to the day when her pretty offspring would go to university. But, for her mother, killed by a cancer that the doctors had assured her was curable, that day never came.

Unlike her mother, her father did not take an interest in his daughter's dream of a life in academia. And when, at sixteen, she fell pregnant, her father wanted to be rid of her.

She couldn't believe she'd been so stupid. She hadn't really wanted to have sex with the young boy in the village, and didn't know why she had let him seduce her – it just sort of happened.

So, pressured by her father, the youngsters got married in the village church, and they rented a small cottage nearby - to live happily ever after. Two weeks later she miscarried. And now, in the blink of an eye, she was twenty-six years old – and university still remained a dream.

Much to her husband's annoyance, she had set her alarm clock for five a.m., and had left the house to meet the sunshine of the early morning. The peace it offered meant that it was her favourite part of the day. Once she had dressed and packed a few things in her rucksack, she made her way to the small stone barn in the village that she rented from one of the local farmers. As always, when she inserted her key into the padlock, she couldn't help but smile at the thought of what awaited her.

Inside, a whole wall was stacked from floor to ceiling with books. Books on everything – from science and philosophy, to romantic fiction and the classics. She might not have had the opportunity to further her education, but it

hadn't stopped her thirst for knowledge. This little corner of a stone barn had become her university.

And her chosen course was physics – quantum physics, to be precise. To prove her worth, she had deliberately allowed herself to be drawn to this most complex of subjects. She reached for a large hardback volume called 'Other Worlds', which she had begun reading a week before. She found it fascinating. According to the author, an infinite number of parallel universes existed, side by side. When she'd read this, she couldn't help thinking that the possibilities were endless. She often fantasised about 'jumping' to her own perfect universe, where she wouldn't have to live in fear.

It took her forty minutes to reach her favourite spot in the woods, where she would lay out her blanket and begin to read, losing herself in another world.

And then she heard it.

A sound that did not belong to the forest.

A cry.

Instinctively, she headed in the direction from where she thought it had originated, until she came to a clearing she had never known existed. In the centre was a rather splendid tree, with a light, coffee-coloured bark. But something wasn't right. Something didn't belong.

Adrenaline pumped into her system, causing her heart to pound, because now she recognised the object in question.

It was impossible, but there it was.

A body ... a man, hanging from a branch of the splendid tree, suspended by his neck.

Was it a dead body? A corpse?

But then the corpse cried out.

* * *

For those first few seconds she couldn't move - paralysed by fear. She had always thought it was just a manner of speech, but now she knew it was based upon a truth. She willed herself to move, and approached the nightmare that had intruded into her life.

She forced herself to look at the man's face, and she took a step back and gasped, bringing her hands up to her face. She recognised him. Jim Balham ... from the village. The ex-soldier. The incredibly good-looking man. The hunk. The thought had come unbidden, and she felt ashamed for allowing it to surface. The man groaned.

Katie gasped for a second time, and looked about her, desperate to find a way to save him. Leaning against the tree was a rucksack, and she ran towards it, before tearing it open.

It contained a knife. A long, vicious-looking knife. It was as if it had been put there, just for this moment. It was exactly what she needed. It would cut the rope with ease. But how was she to reach that high? And then she saw the log. Her second prayer was answered.

She knelt and pushed it closer to the ex-soldier's feet. She climbed up, but still had to stretch to reach the rope. And she began to cut.

It took longer than she had thought it would and, as her arms started to ache with the strain, she began to cry with frustration. And then the rope snapped.

Balham crashed to the forest floor and his head struck the log on which she was standing. She cursed the fact that she hadn't thought of what would happen when the rope finally gave way. But there hadn't been time. Perhaps she was already too late.

She checked for a pulse, but could feel nothing. She put her face close to his, hoping to feel his breath on her skin, just as she had wanted to do when he was alive. She felt the shame return and was disgusted with herself.

She sat back, unsure what to do, and looked into the trees, as if they would provide an answer. Should she try and revive him? But she wasn't trained. Perhaps she'd make things worse. Then again, how could things be worse?

And then she remembered her phone. What was wrong with her? She knew she was on high ground and she could get a signal. Why hadn't she called for help already?

She took the phone out of its case and switched it on. It felt slippery in her hand, and she realised she was sweating. With fear? With excitement?

She began to dial. Nine, nine ...

The ex-soldier's body lurched and took in a long, deep breath of air.

Katie cried out.

Balham looked at her with his piercing blue eyes, and grabbed her wrist in a vice-like grip.

Chapter 4

When he had first realised that death was approaching, his relief had been tempered by an overwhelming sense of sadness. What a way for it all to end. If his life was going to end at all, he had assumed it would be on the battlefield, in a foreign land. But, instead of being felled by an enemy's bullet, he had been slain by a memory, and his body had dangled pathetically, within walking distance of his own home.

The rope had not snapped his neck, as he had planned, but had slowly strangled him. He took one last look at the trees, but his vision was starting to fade. He closed his eyes, wondering what death would feel like. He was not a religious man, and he assumed that it would simply be nothingness. There would be no happiness, no joy. But, mercifully, there would be no pain. The universe had happily existed for millions of years before his birth, and it would do so after his death. The brief interlude of his life and consciousness would soon be over. For the world, nothing would have changed.

But then there was the light. A light so bright, he was forced to shield his eyes and look away.

When he turned back, he found himself on a beach. The most beautiful beach he had ever seen. The sound of the waves, gently lapping on the golden sand, was hypnotic. But there was another sound – the sound of children playing and laughing.

Two little girls were making sandcastles, totally absorbed in their task. And then he recognised her.

Azita turned and smiled, before running towards him. Her friend, now aware of his presence, did the same.

“Daddy, you came to see me! I have missed you so much!”

Balham did not question what he was seeing. The little girl with Azita was Emily, of that he had no doubt. His child had been taken from him, but now she was alive and well, and he hugged and kissed her, tears falling down his cheeks.

And he kissed Azita too. She was unharmed and happy. Here, on this beautiful beach, there were no bombs or bullets to kill and maim little children. Emily and Azita were safe. Here they were sisters, and he was their father.

But then the blinding light returned, and the two little girls began to fade before his eyes.

“Come back again, daddy!” said Emily.

His daughter and Azita were still laughing and giggling, as they waved him goodbye.

“Come back with the nice lady, daddy! Please come back with the nice lady!”

Balham ached. He could not bear to lose his precious girls again. He must tell them before he was torn away. He must say the words.

“I love you!”

Chapter 5

Katie screamed when the dead man had grabbed her by the wrist. But when she saw him smiling, she forced herself to calm down. She had simply made a mistake. His pulse must have just been weak. Thank God he was alive. And then he spoke.

“I love you.”

Katie let out a nervous laugh, unsure how to respond. The poor man must be delirious, she thought. He thinks I’m his wife.

“Lie still and rest. I’m going to call for help.”

She tried to step away, but he maintained his grip on her arm.

“I’ve lost them. I’m alone again. Please, don’t leave me. Don’t leave me alone”

His voice had come out as a hoarse whisper, and she found it hard to return his intense stare. It was as if he could see into her soul.

“I’m not going to leave you. I’m just going to call for help.”

With some difficulty, she tore herself away from his grasp and dialled 999. She told the woman who answered that she needed an ambulance for a man who had fallen and sustained an injury to his head. She decided to make no mention of the rope or the attempted suicide.

Katie described the clearing where they could be found, in the middle of Ranton Forest. The woman on the phone explained that, due to the nature of the terrain where the ‘accident’ had happened, she would probably have to call in an air ambulance. The helicopter would land at the nearest suitable location and the paramedics would get to them as soon as possible.

During the call, Katie had noticed Balham examining the rope and the knife, lying on the forest floor a few feet

away. He was speaking as soon as she had placed her phone into her pocket.

“I tried to kill myself, didn’t I?”

Katie nodded, fearful of how he might react when he became aware of his situation.

“Was I dead when you found me?”

The absurdity of the question caused her to pause. People can’t come back from the dead, can they? She remembered how she had tried to feel for a pulse without success.

“I think I got here just in time,” she said. “I hope I did the right thing.”

It was a silly thing to say, she decided. Saving a life was always the right thing to do. But she also knew how desperate the poor man must have been to want to end it all. Would he resent her for ruining his plans? But then he said something strange.

“I know you, from the village. Are you her, Katie? Are you the nice lady? They’re waiting for us.”

Katie decided the experience must have been too traumatic for the poor man. He was delirious and confused. She had to keep him calm.

“They’re sending an air ambulance, so they shouldn’t be long,” she said, just for something to say.

Balham brought his hand up to his neck and massaged it.

“I think I’m going to be all right, thanks to you. It’s just ...”

He paused, a confused look on his face. He lay back and stared up at the sky.

“What?” asked Katie gently.

“It’s just that I feel strange.” He paused, as he ran his hand through his close-cropped hair. “I feel different.”

“In what way?”

Katie thought it would be a good idea to keep him talking. Somewhere she’d heard that was the right thing to

do when someone had a head injury. Besides, she couldn't help herself – she was curious.

“I know this will sound kind of weird ... but things feel different now.”

“That's not surprising, after what you've been through.”

“I know they're safe now, Katie. That is all that matters. And now I'm safe, thanks to you. Are you the nice lady, Katie?”

Katie was trying to think how to respond, when her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a helicopter circling overhead, clearly looking for a place to land. It took several minutes before the ambulance disappeared below the treetops, and the roar of the engine subsided. A few moments later, they could hear people making their way through the forest towards them.

Balham reached out and gently held Katie's hand.

“Katie, if they say it's okay, will you come with me?”

She forced herself to return his gaze, and his eyes were almost pleading. She was surprised. Whenever she had seen him in the village, he had seemed so tough and independent, as if nothing could touch him. His vulnerability only made her attraction to him more intense.

When the paramedics arrived, they immediately spotted the rope and the knife, and they gave one another a knowing look. One was a tall, thin man. The other a young woman. Once they realised Balham was conscious, the man fired a series of questions, trying to gauge the seriousness of his injuries. Eventually, he made a decision.

“Okay, Mr Balham, we're going to fit you with a neck-brace, just in case. If there's been any internal damage, the last thing we want to do is make things worse.”

“Fine,” said Balham. “Can Katie come with us?”

The younger paramedic turned to Katie.

“Are you family?”

Before Katie could answer, Balham spoke again.

“She’s my wife.”

Unseen by the paramedics, Balham gave Katie a wink.

Her heart pounded, just as it did whenever her husband decided to hit her.

But this time, instead of fear, the throbbing in her chest heralded a profound sense of joy.

Chapter 6

As the helicopter made its way to the nearest hospital, over the border in England, Katie tried to make sense of what had happened. Naturally, she had been shocked by Balham's claim, but she hadn't denied it. She told herself she'd not said anything because she hadn't wanted to cause Balham any further distress. Besides, there was no harm done. He'd wanted her to remain with him, and it would have been heartless to refuse. She decided that, once she was alone with the paramedics, she would explain that he'd simply become confused.

So, why did she feel guilty? Was it because, when he'd said the words, she had felt a surge of excitement. Was it because part of her, deep down, wanted it to be true? It was ridiculous. She didn't even know the man. Not really.

Before she could torture herself any more, the helicopter began to descend, and a large 'H', painted within the car park of the hospital, loomed before them.

Balham was whisked away by the paramedics, and Katie ran on behind, feeling like a fraud.

In the Accident & Emergency ward, doctors pulled a curtain across the entrance to the cubicle where Balham had been taken, to give them some privacy.

Katie tried to listen to what was being said, but the doctor's voice was low and muffled by the curtain. She thought she heard the words 'MRI-scan', but could not be sure. After about ten minutes, Balham was taken to another part of the hospital. She approached the doctor to find out what was happening.

"Is he going to be okay?"

"I think he is going to be all right, Mrs Balham."

Before Katie could correct him, the doctor was continuing.

“Mr Balham has sustained some injuries to his neck, but they appear to be mostly superficial – bruises and the like. I ... er ... understand these were caused by a rope?”

Katie assumed the doctor was attempting to be tactful, and she simply nodded.

“In any event, the damage caused should heal, given time. We have sent Mr Balham for an MRI-scan of his neck and head, to be on the safe side. He appears to be quite lucid, so I’m sure there isn’t a problem.”

“Thank you, Doctor, but I’m afraid there’s been a mistake. I’m not his wife.”

The doctor looked perplexed, and peered at her over the rim of his spectacles.

“That is most odd. Mr Balham said you were. Do you mind me asking what your connection is with the patient?”

“I’m a friend ... well, just an acquaintance really.”

“I see. Hopefully he’s just temporarily confused. This sometimes happens after a traumatic incident.”

“I see.”

The doctor paused, as if he were unsure whether to ask his next question.

“From what the paramedics have told me, am I to understand that Mr Balham’s injuries are the result of a failed suicide attempt?”

“Yes.”

“Evidently it was a hanging. How did he survive?”

“I think I found him just in time. I managed to cut the rope. At first, I thought I was too late and he was dead. But suddenly he seemed to come round.”

“Well, it sounds like you saved his life, and I would suggest you’ve had quite a traumatic experience yourself. I’m afraid I’ve got to continue my rounds, but would you like me to arrange for someone to have a look at you?”

“No, I’m fine, thank you.”

“If you’re sure.”

The doctor patted her arm and walked over to one of the nurses, saying something in a hushed voice. Katie noticed the nurse immediately glanced over in her direction, giving her what she imagined was a suspicious look.

Once the doctor had left, the nurse approached her.

"I understand you're not Mr Balham's wife, after all." She made it sound like an accusation.

"No."

"Would you happen to know who *is* Mr Balham's next of kin?"

"His wife's name is Trudi. They both rent Rosemary Cottage in Ranton."

The nurse looked Katie up and down, before continuing.

"Would you know where we might be able to contact her?"

"I think she's a hairdresser ... in Kingsley."

"Okay, we'll try there."

And with that, the nurse walked off.

Finally alone, Katie tried to decide what to do. She was tempted to leave and make her way home, but she couldn't help feeling that she would be deserting Balham. In a strange way, having saved his life, she felt as though she ought to see it through, and make sure he was going to make a full recovery before she left him. At least that was what she told herself.

So she bought herself a coffee and sat and waited. It was another hour before they brought Balham back into the ward and, despite his protestations, he was directed to lie down.

Katie watched as Balham's eyes scanned the ward ... looking for her? When he spotted her, he beckoned her over and she made her way to his bed.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

“Fine, thanks to you. I’m so sorry to have put you through all this. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.”

Balham tried to sit up, but the nurse gave him a disapproving look and he thought better of it. She stood close by and continued to eavesdrop on their conversation.

“I’m afraid I made a bit of a fool of myself, calling you my wife. The doctor says I must have been disorientated.”

Balham gave her another wink.

Katie found herself blushing. Suddenly, she was angry with herself for behaving like a lovesick schoolgirl.

She was about to reply, when she noticed Balham was looking over her shoulder. She turned and saw that he had another visitor.

Trudi Balham had arrived.

Chapter 7

When Trudi Balham had moved to Ranton, at her husband's behest, the people of the village had quickly taken note. Even to a casual observer, it was clear that she did not fit in.

In spite of the fact that the women of the village tended to wear loose-fitting jeans, tweed skirts and the like, Trudi saw no reason to adopt the dress-code of her new neighbours.

Consequently, on her rare visits to the local shop, she would invariably be found wearing an extremely short skirt and impractical high-heeled shoes, which showed off her shapely, tanned legs to good effect. So much so, that the blame for old farmer Jenner's visit to the hospital was firmly put down to Trudi's appearance outside the village pub, where the unfortunate pensioner had been smoking his pipe. His heartbeat hadn't settled down since.

If such sartorial misdemeanours were not enough to upset the residents, her surly manner was more than equal to the task. She had resented being dragged to the middle of nowhere, and she was not afraid to vent her feelings upon the local populace.

And so, when Katie witnessed the sudden appearance of Mrs Balham in the emergency ward, the woman's reputation had preceded her, and Katie was not looking forward to their meeting.

With that in mind, Katie stepped away from Balham's bed, so that Trudi could stand next to her husband. Trudi gave her a withering look.

"You found my husband trying to kill himself?"

Trudi asked the question as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Katie struggled to find her voice, but finally replied.

"Yes."

“Well, he’s okay now, so you can go.”

Katie took a sharp intake of breath, as Trudi’s words seemed to cut into her. When she hesitated, Trudi simply raised her perfectly manicured eyebrows, as if she were wondering why Katie was still there.

Trudi made a dismissive gesture with her hand, shooing Katie away. There was no acknowledgement of Katie’s part in saving her husband’s life. Not a word of thanks. Katie wanted to scream at the woman for her ingratitude.

Instead, the painfully shy Katie did what she always did in such circumstances.

She simply turned and walked away, aching inside.

Chapter 8

It had been several days since the failed suicide attempt of James Balham, and it was the talk of the village. Katie had tried to avoid the gossip of the locals, but, working in the shop, it was hard not to overhear what was said.

“Who could blame him for trying to top himself, married to that cow?”

“I heard it was something to do with what happened to the poor man over in Afghanistan. The boys see some terrible sights over there, you know.”

Some of the more forthright villagers asked her about the incident outright.

“What was it like? I heard he tried to hang himself. It must have been a shock to find him dangling there. It’s lucky you happened to be in the forest, so early in the morning.”

And so it went on. Day after day.

But at least she could retreat to the sanctuary of her books and, as soon as her shift finished, she headed to her personal library in the stone barn. As she had done so many times before, she reached for the key in her handbag.

“I never got the chance to thank you.”

Katie cried out and dropped the key on to the ground. The warm voice, inches away, had startled her. She turned to see Balham standing there, and wondered how he had managed to walk up to her without making a sound.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. I just wanted to thank you properly for saving my life. Words don’t seem enough, but I wanted to say it anyway.”

Balham bent down, reached for the key, and passed it to her. She took it from him, and for a brief second their fingers touched. It was as if an electric shock had shot through her entire body.

He smiled a warm, beautiful smile, and she looked down at the ground, unable to meet his gaze. She found his very presence overpowering. His rugged good looks and muscular physique made her feel inadequate. Somehow, she managed to smile in return. Balham took it as a sign to continue.

"I hate to intrude, but I was hoping I might speak with you. There's something I want to tell you."

Katie's heart began to pound again, and part of her felt like running away. But another part, a bigger part, wanted him to stay. Then she would be able to lose herself in his beautiful blue eyes. Suddenly she realised she hadn't responded, and he was talking again.

"I've always wondered what this stone barn was used for. Does it belong to you?"

"I rent it ... for storage."

"Oh."

There was an awkward silence, and Katie found herself speaking without really thinking.

"I just keep my books in here. Would you like to see?"

How stupid could she be? As if he would be interested. But, before she had finished admonishing herself, he was taking her up on her offer.

"I'd love to."

She unlocked the door and led him inside. The two of them stood before the book-lined wall.

"Wow, you've got quite a collection here. I can see why you need the barn."

"I'd keep them at home, but Sean doesn't like me filling the house with books."

She had surprised herself again. She had never told anybody that before. For some reason, it seemed only natural to be honest with the man with the blue eyes.

"That's a shame. Sean ... he's your husband, isn't he?"

“Yes. He’s the woodcutter. He rents the big barn on the outskirts of the village.”

“I think I’ve bought some logs from him for our stove.”

It looked as though he was going to say something else, but had thought better of it. Katie decided to change the subject.

“You said you needed to talk to me about something.”

“Yes. I wanted to catch up with you the other day, when I got back from the hospital, but I needed time to pluck up the courage.”

Katie almost laughed. The thought that a man like Balham would have to find the courage to talk to *her* seemed ridiculous. Instead she asked another question.

“How are you? Have you recovered?”

“Yes, thanks to you. Physically, anyway,” he added. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s just that ever since you saved me I’ve felt ... different.”

“Different? In what way?”

“It’s hard to say ... calmer somehow.”

“Do you mind me asking, why did you ...?”

Katie stopped herself, wondering if she had gone too far.

“You mean, why did I try to kill myself?”

She nodded.

“It’s not something I’m proud of. I was carrying a lot of baggage from my time in Afghanistan ... horror, blame, guilt. I tried not to think about it and I coped for a while. But then the nightmares started and it got so I didn’t dare fall asleep. And I drank too much. I’m sorry ... I must sound like a mess.”

“No ... no, not at all.”

Instinctively she reached for his arm. It felt as hard as granite. He smiled, but she quickly pulled her hand away.

“Anyway. I wanted to explain. Sort of apologise for what I did. What I put you through.”

“There’s no need,” she said quickly.

“And for what I said,” he added.

“What you said?”

“I believe I said, ‘I love you’.”

Katie found herself blushing again, and she brushed a strand of her wispy blonde hair from her forehead, before she dared to look him in the eye.

The turn in the conversation was totally unexpected, and Katie didn’t know what to say. Fortunately, Balham pressed on.

“Something weird happened when I was hanging by my neck.”

At first the words shocked her, spoken in the cold light of day, in spite of the fact that she had witnessed his attempted suicide for herself. He took a breath before continuing.

“I’m not religious and I don’t believe in life after death, but while I hung there, suffocating, I had a sort of dream. That’s why I called out those words.”

“What kind of dream?”

“You’ll think I’m crazy, but I was on a beach, with my daughter, and I was overcome by a sense of utter happiness. That’s the only way I can describe it.”

Katie stood there, trying to take it all in.

“I hope I’m not freaking you out. But it happened, and I felt you were the only one I could talk to about it.”

“No ... I’m not freaked out. I’m glad you did ... come to talk to me about it, that is.”

He smiled and turned his gaze towards the mountain of books.

“Do you think any of these might provide the answer to what happened?”

“They might. I’ll have to look.”

“I’ve never been much of a reader, I’m afraid. I left school at sixteen to join the army. But I want to change all that.”

He turned to face her.

“Katie?”

This time she managed to return his gaze. Damn it. Why did he have to be so handsome?

“Yes?”

“Could you lend me one of your books? I’d like to read whatever you recommend.”

She brought a finger up to her lips, as if she were lost in thought. Finally, she reached for a book that caught her eye.

“How about this?” she said.

He took the book from her and examined the cover, before reading the title out loud.

“Other Worlds.”

Chapter 9

It was a relief for Trudi to finally be back in the city. For one thing, people passing you in the street didn't find the need to say hello, or become mortally offended when you didn't reply. City people minded their own fucking business. For another, there were plenty of young, virile men, willing to give her the attention she deserved. Perhaps she might even take one of them up on their offer and make their day.

As promised, the hotel was five star in every way - and why not? Morton could afford it. Besides, considering what he was getting out of their 'arrangement', it was the least she deserved.

"What went wrong?"

Morton did his best to portray an air of superiority, but was failing for a number of reasons. For one thing, the sight of Trudi's black mini-dress, clinging to her curvy body, had already given him an erection. For another, Trudi was the sort of person it was impossible to intimidate, as her next words proved.

"What went wrong? Fuck you."

Trudi walked to the end of the room, the colour of her tanned legs contrasting with her white stiletto shoes, as she checked her hair in the mirror. Morton resisted the temptation to shuffle in his seat in order to ease the discomfort in his trousers.

"Okay, a poor choice of words. But the fact remains that the bastard's still alive, isn't he?"

"He wouldn't be if that stupid bitch in the village had minded her own business. I mean, what the hell was she doing in the woods at that time of the morning?"

"So, he was definitely going through with it then?"

"Yes!"

Trudi turned to Morton and gave him a look that froze his blood. But he couldn't let the matter drop. It was too important.

"Maybe he'll try again."

"Maybe, but I wouldn't count on it."

"Why not?"

"Because he's changed."

"What do you mean 'changed'? In what way?"

"I don't know, I can't explain. But he seems calmer somehow. Besides, I've hardly seen him since he came out of the hospital."

"What about at night ... in bed?"

Morton gave her a knowing look.

"He sleeps on the sofa downstairs. I can't remember the last time he fucked me."

"Jesus ... the poor bastard really has lost it, hasn't he? Is he still having the nightmares?"

"I don't think so. Like I said ... he's changed."

"So, what do we do?"

"Don't worry, I'll keep working on him. He just needs to be reminded what a fuck-up he is. Maybe I'll persuade him to show me the film. He loves torturing himself with it."

"You really are a bitch of a wife, aren't you?"

"Remember, I'll soon be *your* bitch of a wife, and a very wealthy woman."

"And what do I get in return?"

"Don't you remember our deal? I help get my husband out of the way, and you can forget all about that business in Afghanistan coming back to haunt you."

"And what else?"

Morton's smile turned into a leer, as Trudi walked towards him. She lifted the hem of her dress to reveal a tight pair of white pants, which she pulled to one side.

"You get this."

Unable to contain himself a moment longer, Morton stood up and unzipped his trousers, savouring the blessed relief.

* * *

The morning sun streamed through the trees, as they made their way to the clearing where Katie said she liked to sit and read. When Balham had asked if he could join her, she hadn't known what to say. She had been totally surprised by his request and had felt a mixture of emotions. But most of all she had felt excited, and she found herself saying 'yes' without a second thought.

"Were you reading the other day when you ... when you found me?"

"Yes."

Katie's innate shyness was threatening to overwhelm her and she didn't know what to say. Luckily, Balham seemed happy to be the one doing most of the talking.

"It's a beautiful spot up here, isn't it? So quiet and peaceful. I suppose that's why I chose it ... you know, to do what I planned to do."

Katie still didn't know how to respond, but fortunately they had arrived at the clearing, and this gave her the chance to reveal the contents of her bag.

"I always bring this blanket with me to help get comfortable."

"A good idea. Would it be okay if I shared the blanket with you, while I start my new book?"

Katie couldn't understand why Balham wanted to sit with her, but she knew, in her heart, that she wanted him to stay. She laid out the blanket and placed her rucksack against a tree, to act as a back-rest. Balham simply lay on his side and opened his book. As he began to read, he realised it was full of complex scientific ideas. The author

wrote about other universes, and infinite possibilities. When he had been near to death, had he glimpsed one of those universes? Was that why Katie had chosen this book – to help him understand what had happened to him? He couldn't help thinking the idea was way too far-fetched. No, what he experienced must have just been a dream. But then, why had it felt so real?

Katie tried to read, but couldn't concentrate, and she found herself constantly glancing in Balham's direction. The third time she did it, he happened to look up and he smiled. She blushed and pretended to turn her attention back to her book. But it was no good, she thought - she had to find out what was going on.

"Why are you here with me?"

At first, he didn't respond and she thought he looked hurt. Had her words appeared harsh? She quickly tried to explain what she meant.

"I didn't mean I don't want you here. It's just ... we hardly know each other."

Balham frowned, as if he were genuinely searching for an answer to her question.

"That's just it ... I feel like I do know you, Katie. You're a shy, clever young woman but, most of all, you're a kind person. I like being with you. But I don't want to be a nuisance. Just say the word and I'll go and read somewhere else, and leave you in peace."

"No ... it's okay. You can stay."

Had she replied too quickly? Had she looked too keen? She was a married woman. And he was a married man, come to that. His next words made her wonder if he had read her thoughts.

"I just hope we can become friends, Katie. I love being in your company. Really, I'd like to just talk ... get to know you better. But I didn't want to intrude on your reading."

Katie knew she wouldn't be able to concentrate on her book while he was there. Besides, she only read to escape reality. But now she no longer wanted to escape.

"Jim?"

He smiled when she said his name.

"Yes?"

"Would you like to go for a walk in the forest while we talk?"

"I can't think of anything in the world I'd rather do."

* * *

He always enjoyed the second time more. When she had straddled him the first time, he had looked up to see her firm breasts, bouncing rhythmically to her movements, and he had lasted less than a minute. His heart had been beating to such an alarming degree, that he'd feared he might have a heart attack. Part of him regretted that he hadn't. It would have been a hell of a way to go.

But now the sex was less frenetic, and he was on top, looking down at Trudi's pretty face. Her lips were pouting, as they always were, and her eyelids were heavy. She looked totally relaxed ... almost bored. Perversely, this only made him want her more, and he yearned to climax. But he was determined that this time he would make it last, and he took his time, drinking in every moment.

Despite his best efforts, it was over all too soon, and he rolled over on to his back, gasping for breath. Without missing a beat, Trudi reached over to the bedside table and helped herself to a cigarette.

"There's no smoking in the room."

Trudi looked across at Morton, covered in sweat, exhausted from having had sex with another man's wife. She gave him a look, as if to say, 'you're kidding me'.

“He keeps watching that damn film over and over again.”

Trudi had resumed the conversation they were having before the sex, as if the act had been an unwelcome interruption. It took Morton several moments before he could process what she was saying.

“You mean the one from Afghanistan. From his helmet-cam?”

“No. The Wizard of Oz. Of course I mean the one from Afghanistan. Christ, I thought you had to have brains to be an officer in the army.”

Jesus, thought Morton, how the hell had Balham avoided topping himself for so long, married to this? More to the point, why hadn't he strangled the bitch years ago. If she thought she was going to marry him for his family's money, she could think again. Of course, he wasn't going to tell *her* that - not while she was doing her best to send her husband to an early grave, and him too, what with the way she let him fuck her brains out.

Morton simply decided to ignore the insult and resumed the conversation.

“I don't know why the army ever let him get his hands on a copy. It was evidence. He was lucky to end up with just a dishonourable discharge. If it had been up to me, he would have been court-martialled and ended up in a cell.”

“I expect the fact that he had all the medals for bravery and you had fuck-all, helped sway their decision.”

God, she knew how to go for the jugular, thought Morton. He bit his lip and counted to ten, resisting the temptation to punch her in the face.

“Anyway, he can look at the damn film all he wants. It won't change a thing.”

“If you say so.”

Morton looked at her with a quizzical expression on his face.

“Remind me. Why did you marry him?”

“You mean apart from the fact he’s gorgeous-looking and the best fuck I’ve ever had?”

As she said the words, she looked down at Morton’s limp appendage, a smirk on her face. Instinctively, Morton covered his body with the bedsheet. He was angry with himself for letting her get to him. It was supposed to be him using *her*, for God’s sake.

“Yes,” was all he said.

“I was eighteen then. That was all I wanted. Now I want more. A lot more. And I’m not going to get it, married to a fucking soldier-boy. But all that’s going to change soon.”

“No, it’s not. Not if he’s all better now.”

For the first time Trudi frowned, and Morton took pleasure from the fact that he had finally got to *her*, too.

“Well, we’ll just have to make sure he doesn’t get too comfortable, won’t we? I’ll keep playing the part of the uncaring wife and reminding him what a mess he’s made of everything. The trouble is, he’s pushing me away and I hardly see him. I haven’t got a clue what’s turned him around.”

“We’ll just have to find out.”

“How?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got just the man to help us.”

Chapter 10

“Have you always lived in the village?”

This time Katie forced herself to look Balham in the eye and, somehow, she could tell it wasn't just small talk. He was genuinely interested in her answer.

“Since I was three. How about you? I mean ... where did you live before moving here?”

“Oh, all over the place. I had to go where the army sent me. Trudi hated it.”

Balham noticed Katie's face drop at the mention of his wife, and he quickly tried to change the subject.

“When I got back from Afghanistan, I couldn't stand the noise of the city. I needed somewhere with peace and quiet ... where life was slow.”

“Well, you certainly picked the right place,” replied Katie, and she offered a nervous smile.

“How long have you been married?” he asked.

“Ten years. We married very young.”

Balham noticed she instantly stopped smiling as soon as she'd uttered the words.

“I got pregnant,” she added, almost as an afterthought.

Katie looked down at the blanket and turned slightly away, as if she were ashamed. Balham was determined to put her at ease.

“These things happen. A boy or a girl?”

“I didn't want to know. We lost the baby before it was born.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry, Katie.”

“It was a long time ago.”

Balham became quiet, so Katie decided to ask him about something he'd said before.

“When you were telling me about your dream, you mentioned a daughter.”

"We had a little girl. She was born two months premature. Poor sweetheart didn't make it."

"I'm sorry. That must have been terrible."

"It was for a while. It was probably harder on Trudi, because I ran away and signed up for another tour."

"She's very pretty."

"Who is?"

Katie laughed.

"Trudi."

"Yes ... yes, she is."

"And sexy."

Balham grinned, finding her observation amusing. She thought she needed to explain.

"Not that I would know, but I've heard the men in the village talking ... you know. She's caused quite a stir."

"I bet she has. Trudi causes quite a stir wherever she goes."

"Was that why you married her?" asked Katie, suddenly growing in confidence.

"You mean because she was sexy?"

"And attractive."

"Pretty much, yes. You know what young lads are like. I let my ... I let other parts of my anatomy rule my brain."

"There must have been more to it than that."

Katie worried that she was getting too personal, but Balham seemed happy to talk.

"I suppose there was. We used to have fun ... until we lost Emily."

"Emily?"

"That was the name we gave to our daughter."

"Oh, of course."

A robin began to sing in the tree above them, and they both looked up, letting it fill the gap in the conversation. Eventually Katie spoke.

"Jim, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

“Katie.” Balham waited until she looked in his direction before he continued. “You can ask me anything.”

Katie still hesitated, but eventually spoke up.

“You said you tried to commit suicide because of the ‘baggage’ you carried, from your time in Afghanistan. But I had a sense that there was something more to it than that. What happened out there?”

For the first time, Balham lost his playful smile and she worried that she had spoilt the moment. He seemed to be taking care to think before he formulated his answer. She was anxious about what he might say, but nothing could have prepared her for the answer he gave.

“I killed an innocent little girl.”

Chapter 11

Compton was pissed off. He thought about the money Morton had running through his fingers, and all he was worth was this shitty caravan. And to think of what he'd done for the prick, back in Afghanistan. He'd saved the ungrateful bastard's precious neck.

Clearly, even Morton wasn't too impressed with the new accommodation, as Compton watched his employer search for a seat that hadn't been inflicted with an unidentifiable stain.

"Why couldn't you have rented me a nice cottage in the village, instead of this shit hole?" said Compton, unwilling to hide his displeasure.

"That wouldn't have been very smart. There are only a couple of hundred locals, tops. You'd bump into Balham sooner or later, and the game would be up."

"Maybe. In the meantime, I've got to make do, pissing and shitting in a bucket," said Compton, pointing to the broken toilet.

"I'll make sure the farmer gets it fixed."

"Gee, thanks."

"Look, Compton, stop your whining. Just remember why you're here. Get the job done, and you'll be out of here in a couple of days. Remember, you're being well paid."

"*You* remember, I saved your arse when I altered that film before taking it to the major."

"And you were more than rewarded for your loyalty. How are you enjoying living in the house I paid for, by the way?"

Compton smiled for the first time since they'd arrived at the caravan site.

"It's fine. Of course, it's nothing compared to the pile you'll inherit when daddy finally pops his clogs."

“Yeah, well, that looks like a long way off, unfortunately. The grizzly old bastard insists on staying alive. So, don’t get greedy. Just remember, you’d go down too if what we did came out. The best thing for both of us is if Balham does the honourable thing and blows his brains out.”

“Why don’t you let me take care of it, and just make it look like suicide? I’m sure you could find some way to show your appreciation. I could do with a nice retirement fund. It’d save us a lot of trouble.”

“I told you, I’m not a fucking murderer.”

“You’re living in cloud cuckoo land, Morton. What do you call bombing an innocent village? Over eighty people were killed because you sent that Apache on a little detour. What does the death of a has-been sergeant matter? Nobody will give a shit. Especially his fucking bitch of a wife.”

“What I did in Afghanistan was different. People get killed in a war zone. It just goes with the territory.”

“Yeah, Morton. You just keep telling yourself that, if it helps you sleep at night.”

“I didn’t do it for me, for Christ’s sake. I did it for my father!”

Morton was yelling and Compton worried that he might have gone too far. He hadn’t realised the man was so close to the edge. He decided to change tack and diffuse the situation. After all, Morton was his meal ticket.

“I suppose he didn’t leave you much choice. Either you covered his arse, or he was going to cut you off without a penny.”

“Exactly,” replied Morton, as he paced up and down within the confines of the caravan.

“At least it took care of that journalist, poking his nose in where it didn’t belong.”

“Look, that’s all history. Let’s just concentrate on the here and now.”

This time Compton agreed without complaint.

“Sure, boss. What’s the plan?”

“Okay,” said Morton, sighing deeply before taking a seat in the corner of the caravan. “First, we need to find out why Balham hasn’t pulled the pin and ended it all.”

“From what I heard, didn’t some interfering bitch spoil his plans.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t explain why he’s suddenly had a change of heart.”

“Perhaps he’s just lost his nerve.”

“Maybe, in which case we’ll have to think of something to push him over the edge.”

“What about his wife? I thought she was doing her best to make his life a misery. Are you still banging her, by the way?”

“None of your business.”

“A thousand apologies,” said Compton, doing his best to keep things light.

“Anyway, he seems to be avoiding her, so there’s not a lot she can do.”

“Pity. So, what’s he doing with his time, if he’s not fucking his wife or putting his head in a noose?”

“That’s what we need to find out. The first thing I want you to do is see what he’s up to. But for Christ’s sake, don’t let him see you. If he does, he’ll soon put two and two together.”

“That’s it? Just watch him?”

“Yeah, for starters. But don’t do anything stupid like putting a bullet in the back of his head. Report back to me when you find out how the land lies.”

“Why don’t I snatch his copy of the film?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve already thought of that. Trudi’s handling it, just as soon as she can find the damn thing.”

“Doesn’t she know where it is?”

“She’s caught him watching it dozens of times, but she doesn’t know where he keeps it hidden.”

“I don’t like the sound of that. I mean, we made a good job of altering it, considering the circumstances, but if he starts coming out of his guilt-trip, he might begin to smell a rat.”

“I know. That’s why we need to keep a lid on things. Contain the situation.”

“What if we can’t?” asked Compton, and the question seemed to hang in the air.

“Then you might have to earn your pension after all.”

“It would be a pleasure.”

“Don’t get too cocky, Compton. You’re forgetting one thing.”

“What?”

“Balham’s one of the toughest sons-of-bitches I’ve ever met. If you messed it up, he’d tear you to pieces.”

Compton shrugged off the warning as if Morton was blowing hot air. But, as he turned away to pour the two of them a drink in celebration of their new plan, a worried frown appeared across his face.

Chapter 12

When Balham saw the frightened look on Katie's face, he realised he had handled things badly. He had let his feelings of guilt win out once again and, wallowing in self-pity, he had expressed himself poorly. He quickly tried to rectify his mistake.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. Perhaps I should explain."

He hesitated and Katie simply stood there, waiting. Balham was torn. He had no wish to drag up painful memories in front of someone he hoped to get to know better, but he wanted to be honest.

"I made a mistake."

Katie could see Balham was struggling, and she did her best to encourage him.

"What kind of mistake?"

"I called in an air strike on the wrong village. A lot of innocent people died."

As Katie looked into his eyes, she could almost feel his pain. She searched for the right words.

"It's not fair, what we do."

Balham looked at her enquiringly, unsure what she meant. She went on to explain.

"We send young men to these terrible places to face danger, and we expect them to make life-and-death decisions every single day. It's too much responsibility for such young shoulders."

It was then that he knew he had been right about Katie. She was a kind and thoughtful person, whose shyness masked her inner beauty. After having to endure Trudi's harsh words day after day, he could have almost wept with relief. But even if tears had been possible, he didn't want to break down in front of her. Nevertheless, he decided to take a risk and continued to tell her everything.

“A little girl in the village befriended me. She was so sweet - so happy and carefree. Just the sight of her took me out of the nightmare world I found myself in - for a few precious moments at least. I gave her a little teddy bear I’d bought for Emily.”

Balham stared into the distance, apparently lost in thought. Although Katie feared that she knew the answer, she asked the question anyway.

“What happened to her?”

“The air strike I called in decimated the village. When I headed in to investigate the damage, I found her, writhing on the ground in agony.”

Katie gave a gasp and brought her hands up to her mouth, in a vain effort to hide her shock.

“Oh, my God, how terrible.”

Katie could still see that Balham was struggling with his emotions, and she desperately wanted to find the words to comfort him. Of course, there were no words. But she tried anyway.

“It was a mistake, Jim. A *tragic* mistake, but it was still a mistake.”

“I know, Katie, but somehow it doesn’t help. The funny thing is, I was so convinced that I’d given the lieutenant the right co-ordinates.”

“How do you know you didn’t?”

“My mistake was captured on film.”

Chapter 13

Katie had wanted to know more about the film Balham had spoken of, but just then they heard footsteps approaching, following the forest trail from above, and she instinctively began to gather her things.

Balham helped her and, for a brief moment, their hands touched. He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze, and Katie felt a warm glow.

"You're not ashamed to be seen with me, are you?" he asked.

Katie said she wasn't, but she began to make her way towards the village, looking behind her as she went, just to make sure no one was following. Balham fell in step beside her.

"We were just talking," said Balham, trying to reassure her.

"I know. It's just that I don't think Sean would understand. He might get the wrong idea."

Balham couldn't help thinking that she looked frightened, and he noticed that she had quickened her pace.

Once back on the high street, they said their goodbyes, and Balham watched Katie head off in the direction of the barn, where her husband cut logs from dawn to dusk. He couldn't help thinking what a cute walk she had - her slim legs taking quick steps, her head bowed, as she looked down at the pavement.

Katie could hear the sound of the circular saw working as she approached the barn, interspersed with thuds, as logs fell into a metal container below. She didn't know how Sean stood it, cutting huge tree trunks all day long. Maybe that was what had addled his brain over the years.

Sean had never been what you would call a sociable man, even when they first got married, but, as time had gone on, he had only got worse. He hated people, full stop.

And the less contact he had to have with the rest of humanity, the better it suited him.

The other villagers had long given up trying to engage him in conversation, and he was never invited to social gatherings. Even when he brought a trailer of logs to their homes, any verbal exchanges were limited to grunts and curses.

He didn't hear Katie enter the barn, the saw masking the sound of her footsteps. She gently touched his arm and he turned, crying out.

"What the fuck?"

Katie recoiled, taking several steps back. Sean began to yell.

"How many times have I fucking told you? *Never* come up behind me like that when I'm cutting logs. I could have cut my fucking hand off."

Katie would have almost welcomed such an outcome. At least then he might stop using her as a punching bag, she thought.

"I'm sorry, Sean. I wasn't thinking."

"No, you never are. What do you want, anyway?"

"I only came by to see what you wanted me to pick up from the shop for tea tonight."

"Jesus, can't you go into town and get something from the supermarket. I'm sick of the same old shit. That's why I'm starting to get a gut," he said, rubbing the front of his stomach, hanging over his belt.

Katie thought the word 'starting' was a little optimistic, but wisely said nothing.

"I'll go to town at the weekend. So, what do you want?"

"I don't care. *Surprise* me," he said sarcastically.

She walked away without saying goodbye, and the sawing had resumed before she'd reached the doors of the barn. The thought of sitting down for a meal with Sean in a few hours' time filled her with dread. As she made her way

to the shop to start her next shift, she gently rubbed her fingers together.

And she remembered the feeling of excitement that had shot through her body, when Jim had held them in his strong, warm hand.

Chapter 14

Trudi had searched her husband's study from top to bottom, and hadn't found what she was looking for. She'd opened the DVD player but it was empty, and had checked all the drawers in his desk. She'd even gone through his entire CD collection, in case he'd replaced one of his albums with the film.

Of course, she hadn't been able to resist sifting through the paperwork he kept on a wooden shelf in the corner of the room. As she'd expected, it was mostly to do with his job as a 'security consultant', down in Cardiff.

She almost laughed – 'security consultant'? He was a glorified bouncer, working for a chain of nightclubs, desperately trying to spruce up their image by stopping local drug dealers using their establishments to conduct business. He'd chosen the job because it only involved him working at weekends, leaving him free to waste his time walking in the countryside or sit, listening to his music in his room.

She couldn't help but notice a police report, and a request for him to assist them with their enquiries. Attached to the report was a newspaper clipping that Balham had neatly cut out, reporting the hospitalisation of three known ex-convicts who were suspected of working in the drugs trade. In spite of herself, Trudi couldn't help but smile. She knew full well that Balham was more than capable of dispatching three thugs without breaking into a sweat.

As she sat down in her tiny see-through nightie, she tried to think of where else the film could be. The doorbell rang, intruding on her thoughts, and she went to the front door. Standing under the porch, sheltering from the rain, was a delivery driver from the supermarket in town. Damn, thought Trudi, I forgot I ordered online this week.

"Put it in the kitchen."

The young lad in the doorway was so taken aback by the sight of Trudi's near-naked body, that he failed to notice she hadn't offered a single 'please' or 'thank you', and he did as instructed. Trudi returned to the study without another word.

"Where did he put the damn thing?" she said to an empty room.

A few minutes later, the young lad called her from the kitchen. He needed her signature, which was just as well. He didn't want to leave before he had another chance to look at Trudi's unbelievable body.

Chapter 15

The next day, the shop had received little in the way of custom, and the few elderly villagers who had popped in, supposedly to buy a pint of milk or a loaf of bread, had really only visited for a chat and a little company. Mrs Freeman happened to be loitering at the end of Katie's shift, when Balham entered the shop.

Despite being in her seventies, Mrs Freeman still found herself admiring the tall, handsome newcomer to the village over the top of her spectacles. She was quick to spot the beaming smile the young man offered Katie, standing behind the counter. What's more, Katie was reciprocating. Now, she thought, this was something to tell her next-door neighbour, Martha. But she decided she needed to know more. With that in mind, she returned to the fruit and vegetable stand, pretending to peruse the produce.

"Hi, Katie, have you been rushed off your feet?" asked Balham.

"Hardly," said Katie, looking in Mrs Freeman's direction. "In fact, I was about to close up."

"Oh, great. I was hoping I might be able to ask you for a favour."

"A favour?"

"It won't take long, I promise. I just wanted to show you something."

Mrs Freeman's excitement was growing. Now she had a treasure trove of information about which she and Martha could speculate.

"Okay, I'll just finish up here. Mrs Freeman, is there anything else I can help you with?"

Mrs Freeman hesitated, wondering how she could become privy to further details, but eventually conceded when Katie went to the door, as if preparing to lock up the

shop for the day. Reluctantly, she shuffled out in search of Martha.

“I hope I’m not intruding,” said Balham.

“Not at all. In fact, you probably saved me from having to hear about Mrs Freeman’s bunions for another hour.”

Balham noticed Katie had a habit of tucking her blonde hair behind her ear as she spoke. He liked the way she did that.

“What did you want to show me?” she asked, unable to hide her curiosity.

“I was wondering if you’d mind taking a look at that film I was telling you about.”

“The one from Afghanistan?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if you’d like. Why do you want to show it me?”

Katie immediately regretted her question. She was just curious, but she worried that it sounded as if she couldn’t be bothered. She began to feel even worse, when Balham appeared to struggle to find the right words.

“I don’t know how to explain, really. I’ve never shown anyone the film since I left the army. It’s just that I’m so confused. I feel like I’m missing something, and a fresh pair of eyes might help give me a new perspective.”

Katie didn’t reply, unsure what to say. Finally, Balham smiled once again.

“Besides, you saved my life. If I can’t trust you, who can I trust?”

“What about your wife?”

Balham frowned.

“She wouldn’t be interested.”

A silence filled the shop, as Katie hesitated once again. Eventually she said:

“Where is the film?”

“Right here,” said Balham, tapping his jacket pocket.

“Okay, shall we go to your cottage?”

“Ah. That might not be a good idea. Trudi’s there. I was hoping we might be able to go to yours.”

Balham couldn’t help noticing a look of fear appear across Katie’s pretty face.

“No ... no, I can’t take you there,” said Katie, giving no further explanation.

There was another awkward silence, and then Katie suddenly had an idea.

“We could go to my sister’s. She’ll be at work, but my nephew should be home.”

“Your nephew?”

“Yes. Ricky spends his life on his computer, when he isn’t chasing girls. He’s always editing films and putting them up on YouTube. He might be just the pair of eyes you’re looking for.”

Balham thought for a moment and nodded.

“He sounds perfect.”

“He would be, if he wasn’t such a horny teenager.”

“Don’t fret, he’ll get over it. Besides, I was one once.”

Balham offered Katie a cheeky grin.

She laughed.

It was the first time she had laughed in a long time.

Chapter 16

Ricky recognised the athletic ex-soldier even before his Aunt Kate had introduced him. The teenager had thought about joining the army himself. Girls always liked a man in uniform. But then he decided he wouldn't have the courage to face bombs and bullets – not to mention those mines they kept talking about on the news. He couldn't imagine how the soldiers coped, coming home with a leg missing – or worse.

“Hi, Ricky.”

Ricky suddenly realised that Balham was offering his hand. He shook it, and the ex-soldier smiled. It was a firm grip, but the young lad had the feeling that Balham could have crushed the bones in his hand to dust if he'd wanted to.

“Hi. You're married to that sexy woman who always wears short skirts, aren't you?”

“Ricky!” cried Katie, admonishing her nephew.

“It's okay, Katie. I could see how she might turn the head of a hot-blooded teenager. Just a word of warning, Ricky. I wouldn't try flirting with her. She'd eat you alive.”

“It would be worth it ... if she weren't married, of course,” Ricky added, not wishing to get off on the wrong foot.

“Don't sweat it.”

Ricky felt good. Balham was treating him like a grown-up. A man of the world. He might even ask the ex-soldier for some tips on how to bag a wife like Trudi. Katie interrupted his daydream.

“Ricky, we need you to look at a piece of film for us.”

“What kind of film?”

“It came off my helmet-cam, back from when I was in Afghanistan,” explained Balham.

“Cool.”

With that, Ricky led them up to his bedroom. Unlike the character cottage that Balham rented, the house had been built in the 1970's. Apparently the teenager had opted for the largest bedroom, and a whole wall was given over to computers and film editing equipment. The other side of the room sported a huge poster of a topless model Balham didn't recognise. When he looked at Katie, she simply shrugged.

"Okay, where's the film?" asked Ricky, not wasting any time.

Balham handed him a flash-drive, and Ricky quickly fired up his PC. It possessed one of the largest screens the soldier had ever seen.

"What's the file called?"

"Azita," replied Balham, and Ricky hesitated, as if he were going to ask why, but thought better of it. Instead, he clicked on the file.

The shaky footage erupted on the large screen, and Katie and Balham had to stand back in order to view it properly. Ricky remained seated, clearly used to viewing things up close. When the aunt and nephew gave him an enquiring look, Balham assured them that the images would settle down in a few moments.

Eventually the picture stopped shaking, and Balham's voice could be heard, yelling the co-ordinates for the air strike to Lieutenant Morton. The camera followed Morton as he prepared to radio the co-ordinates in, and recorded the moment when the lieutenant ordered Balham to join the rest of the men.

Moments later, the sound of an Apache helicopter could be heard approaching, and the camera pointed up at the sky, tracking the deadly machine's flight path. Fire seemed to rain down, as the helicopter released one of its missiles, and its target erupted in a ball of flame.

"Fucking ace!" cried Ricky, turning to smile at Balham.

This time the ex-soldier did not reciprocate, and he gently placed his hand on the young lad's shoulder.

"Innocent people died in that explosion, Ricky. Men, women and children. Including a little four-year-old girl called Azita."

Ricky and Katie shared a look. The mystery of the filename was suddenly solved.

"But ... but you were the one who gave the officer the co-ordinates," stammered Ricky.

"I know, Ricky, I know. And I've had to live with that, every day of my life."

Suddenly it all became clear to the boy sitting in the sanctuary of his bedroom. Like everyone else in the village, he knew about the soldier's suicide attempt, and his aunt's intervention. Now, he was all too aware of why the tough man standing before him had wanted to end it all.

"Why are you showing us this?" he asked.

"To be honest, I don't really know. I've watched it dozens of times and spotted nothing new. But, like I said to Katie, ever since she cut me down from that tree, I've started seeing things differently. A little voice in my head has got me questioning the film all over again."

Ricky gulped, as he listened to Balham's graphic description of his suicide attempt. He looked at Katie, who had placed a comforting hand on Balham's shoulder. The ex-soldier continued to explain.

"The more I've gone over things in my mind, the more convinced I've become that I gave the correct co-ordinates."

"But the film says otherwise," said Ricky without thinking.

"Believe me, I know that, Ricky. I just wanted someone else to look at it. At the very least, it will help me know if I'm going mad."

“Could anyone have tampered with the film?” said Ricky, raising the question Balham had never dared to ask.

“That’s just it. I don’t see how. I gave it to a mate of mine, who passed it straight on to the major.”

“Do you trust this mate of yours?”

“With my life,” replied Balham. “All you’ve got out there are your mates. You rely on them to cover your back.”

“But if you gave the correct co-ordinates, then that officer must have radioed in the wrong ones, or the men in the helicopter screwed up.”

Balham looked at the teenager with respect. He’d got to the heart of the matter within minutes.

“The flight crew didn’t mess up. The records prove that.”

“So, this officer ... what was his name?”

“Morton.”

“So this Morton is the only one who’d have anything to gain by altering the film.”

“Correct. But I don’t see how he could have managed it.”

The room fell silent, as if the three of them were digesting what had been said. Balham looked at Katie and she nodded, giving him the encouragement to continue. He turned to face Ricky before asking his next question.

“Ricky, do you think you could analyse the film and work out if it *has* been tampered with?”

Ricky, full of the unbridled confidence only the young possess, was tempted to say ‘yes’ right away, but stopped himself. After having seen the film, he knew how much the answer meant to the man standing before him. Eventually he replied.

“I’ve got some pretty neat software, and there’s my editing equipment, of course. If you leave the film with me, all I can say is I’ll give it my best shot.”

“That’s all I can ask for, Ricky. Thank you.”

Secretly, Ricky was excited to be given such an important assignment. Somehow it made him feel special. Wait until he told the girls at college what he was up to – they couldn’t help but be impressed.

“It’s my pleasure, Jim,” said Ricky, a big grin plastered across his face.

* * *

As they made their way out, Katie’s sister arrived home from work. Her jaw dropped, as she watched Katie walking down the stairs, followed by the athletic and handsome newcomer to the village.

“What’s going on?” she asked, caught by surprise.

“We just popped over to talk with Ricky. I hope that was okay, Laura?”

“Yes, anytime,” replied Laura, looking Balham up and down. Instinctively, she turned to the hallway mirror to check her hair.

“Nice to meet you, Laura,” said the ex-soldier, holding out his hand.

Katie’s sister took it, letting out a nervous laugh. Balham squeezed past Katie, while Laura pulled her sister aside to whisper in her ear.

“My God, he’s fucking gorgeous.”

“Why, Laura,” said Katie with a mischievous grin, “you’re a happily-married woman.”

“I know,” said Laura, as she glanced at Balham’s taut buttocks, straining through his jeans. “It’s a bugger, isn’t it?”

Chapter 17

“Have you got any plans for this afternoon?” asked Balham, as he and Katie walked through the village.

Katie thought of her empty cottage, where she would sit alone, until Sean finally decided he’d had enough of cutting up logs and returned home, demanding his dinner on the table.

“What did you have in mind?” she asked, her confidence growing every day she spent in Balham’s company.

“It’s a beautiful day. How about we grab a couple of your books, some food and a bottle of wine, and head to the clearing for a nice picnic.”

Balham’s smile and enthusiasm were infectious, and Katie knew she couldn’t find a reason to say no.

“Sounds great.”

By the time they had made it to the clearing, Katie was out of breath, but Balham hadn’t even broken into a sweat. He was wearing a khaki sweatshirt, and she admired his tanned, muscular arms, as he carefully laid down his rucksack.

When he opened it, she saw it contained bread and a variety of cheeses, together with the promised bottle of wine. There were even some strawberries. She quickly realised he must have been planning to spend time with her all along. Just the thought gave her a warm glow.

“This is the life, isn’t it?” said Balham cheerily. “Food, wine, peace and quiet, the warmth of the sun on your face. And good company, of course.”

As he spoke, Balham poured a large glass of red wine and passed it to Katie.

“Am I good company?” asked Katie. “I’ve always thought I’m quiet and boring.”

“Well, I disagree. I don’t want to sound cheesy, but when I first met you, I felt like I’d known you my whole

life. Like I said, I can tell you're a kind and caring person. I've met enough selfish bastards to know what I'm talking about. Since you saved me, I've realised life's too short to give people like that the time of day."

"It's not cheesy. In fact, it's nice to be with someone who says how they feel. And I know exactly what you mean about selfish people."

Katie quickly took a large sip of wine, frightened that she might have said too much. But it was as if Balham had read her mind when she heard his next words.

"Are you and Sean happy?"

Katie looked thoughtful, but Balham waited patiently until she replied.

"You've been really honest with me, Jim, so I suppose I ought to try and do the same for you. No, we're not happy. Far from it, in fact."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Katie. I know how it feels."

"You mean you and Trudi?" she asked, as she finished her glass of wine. Not having eaten, it was going straight to her head, and any inhibitions she'd had were gradually receding.

"Yes. We've grown apart over the years, especially since I came back from Afghanistan. She didn't want to move here to the village, you know."

"I think everyone in the village knows that by now. She's certainly not trying to fit in with the community."

Balham let out a humourless laugh.

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

"At least she doesn't knock you around."

As soon as she'd said the words, Katie regretted it. It was the wine talking, she decided.

"Does he hurt you, Katie?" asked Balham, suddenly sitting up, concern etched across his face.

“Nothing terrible. He’s just slapped me a couple of times, when he’s lost his temper,” she lied, trying to play down what she had accidentally revealed.

“It’s still not right, Katie. Why on earth are you still with him?”

“I don’t know. Habit, I suppose. Besides, I hardly have a penny to my name. I don’t know where I’d go.”

“I know it’s not my place, Katie, but if you ever need help ... you know, with a place to stay where he can’t find you, you only have to ask.”

“I appreciate it, Jim, thanks. But it’s not that bad, really.”

Balham was watching her intently, and he realised she was trying her best to put on a brave face. He decided to drop the subject and poured them both some more wine.

Katie was pleased with the way Balham had reacted. Being a man of action, she had thought he might come over all macho and tough, threatening to put Sean in the hospital. Instead he had handled her revelation with sensitivity, and had only wanted to offer a helping hand. She was growing fonder of him all the time.

“Katie, are you hungry?”

“Not really. I think I’m enjoying the wine too much,” she said, giggling.

Balham was smiling again, but then his brow creased. Somehow, she could tell it was for effect, and he was being light-hearted.

“Katie, could I ask you for a really big favour?”

“Of course.”

“Could I come over there and put my arm around you?”

She hesitated, and Balham held up his hand to show that his fingers were crossed.

“Yes, that would be lovely.”

Balham slowly walked towards her and sat down, leaning against the tree. Katie tentatively shuffled towards

him and rested her head against his broad, muscular chest. He gently placed his strong arm around her and stroked her hair. She felt him reach over to hold her hand, and they both lay there together, neither feeling the need to speak.

Katie had never felt so warm and safe.

* * *

In the distance, hidden within the foliage of the surrounding trees, Compton watched the two lovebirds, a smirk appearing across his face. Slowly, he made his way down to the village, careful not to make a sound as he followed the well-worn path.

Once he knew he had put enough distance between himself and the couple, he reached for a cigarette and lit up.

“How sweet,” he said, thinking out loud. “I wonder what their partners would make of it all?”

Chapter 18

Balham knew he needed to handle the situation carefully. When Katie had told him that her husband sometimes harmed her, he had been shocked, but he had not wanted to overreact and cause her more distress. Yet, at the same time, he cared for her and, above all else, he wanted to protect her.

So, when they'd said goodbye and Katie had made her way home, he resolved to think of a way of getting the message across to Sean that harming Katie was not a good idea. He headed towards the woodcutter's barn, where he knew her husband would be busy working until dusk.

As usual, Sean hadn't heard anyone approach, and when he spotted the muscular figure standing a few feet away, he couldn't be sure how long the man had been standing there. He stopped sawing and stood up straight. He recognised the man as the soldier in the village who had tried to kill himself, until his wife had interfered.

He'd told Katie that she'd had no business getting involved. If the man wanted to end it all, that was his problem. Besides, he was probably a psycho or something. It was best to leave well alone.

He watched as the man just stood there, not saying anything. Perhaps the stupid bastard *had* got a screw loose. Eventually, he thought he'd better say something.

"Can I help you?"

"Yeah. I'd like to buy some logs."

"Do you need them delivered? It'll cost you extra."

"No. My Land Rover's right outside."

"Eighty quid for a trailer-load," said Sean, pointing to a pile of freshly-cut logs in the corner of the barn. "Cash up front."

Balham reached into the pocket of his jeans and handed him four, crisp £20 notes.

Sean grunted and continued sawing logs, while Balham made quick work of loading his purchase into his car. A few minutes later he returned, and Sean was forced to stop sawing, in order to see what the man wanted.

“Do you like this job?” asked Balham.

Fuck me, thought Sean. Another twat who can’t mind his own fucking business.

“Look, can’t you see I’m busy. You’ve got your logs. So, bugger off.”

Sean decided to employ his favourite trick for discouraging unwanted visitors. He reached for a large axe he always kept close at hand and rested it on his shoulder, grimacing.

Without fail, people would always scurry away, finally getting the message. But not this time. The man just stood there, his piercing blue eyes boring right into him. Sean found that his mouth had suddenly gone dry, and he had to swallow. Balham continued in the same conversational tone.

“It’s just that there’s a vacancy for a woodcutter come up back in Kent, where I used to live. I was thinking of applying.”

“Look, I couldn’t care less. I’m busy.”

Balham ignored him and pressed on.

“The woodcutter I’d be replacing ended up with a nasty injury. It’s an interesting story.”

Was this fucking bloke retarded, wondered Sean? When’s he going to get the message? I don’t give a shit. Before he could think of something to say, the man was carrying on with his story.

“He used to knock his wife about, apparently, from what I’ve heard. Anyway, turns out his wife had a guardian angel who was looking out for her.”

Sean started to get a nasty feeling in the pit of his stomach, and simply stood there, unable to do anything but listen to the man until he'd finished.

"To cut a long story short, the woodcutter hit his wife one too many times and this guardian angel found out."

Balham paused, as if he were waiting for Sean to ask him what happened next. But the woodcutter just stood there, open-mouthed, so he finished his story.

"Anyway, the guardian angel visited the woodcutter at his barn. In fact, the man was standing by his circular saw, just like you."

Sean hefted the axe in his large hands, suddenly feeling very vulnerable. He often tended to be slow on the uptake, but it was gradually dawning on him that, somehow, this man was threatening him.

"Mister, are you looking for fucking trouble?" asked Sean, rubbing his hand up and down the handle of the axe.

"Me? No," said Balham, holding his hands out, palms up. "I'm just telling you what happened to this woodcutter."

"Okay, tell me and then you can fuck off."

"No problem," said Balham, taking a step back.

The submissive gesture made Sean grow in confidence and he grinned.

"Go on, then."

"Well, there's not much more to tell. The guardian angel simply put the woodcutter into his circular saw, and cut off his cock and balls," said Balham, returning the grin.

"Well, I'd like to see some bugger try that with me," cried Sean, approaching Balham, twisting the axe in his hands.

"Hey, there's no need to get violent. It's just a story," said Balham, stepping away.

Sean was on a high. These soldier-boys thought they were tough, but they were all show. Stand up to them and they back down like all the rest.

“Okay, so you’ve told your story, so now you can fucking clear ...”

Sean had raised the axe in the air, menacingly. It was the moment Balham had been waiting for. The axe was top-heavy, and the action had thrown Sean slightly off-balance. In one swift motion, Balham grabbed the axe, wrenched it out of the man’s grip, and threw it across the barn so that it stuck in the large wooden door, creating a hole where the wood had splintered.

In the few seconds it had taken, Sean hadn’t even had time to react, and by the time he came to his senses, Balham was already making his way out. He pointed to the damage caused by the axe.

“I think your door needs fixing. Have a nice day.”

Sean heard the Land Rover start up and pull away, but he made his way outside, just to make sure. He stood there, trying to catch his breath, and found that his knees were shaking.

Chapter 19

Reluctantly, Katie had been forced to end the perfect afternoon she'd spent with Balham. She expected Sean home in just over an hour. Unfortunately, that didn't give her enough time to drive into town and buy some things for their evening meal. As she served up the chicken stew, later that evening, she waited for Sean's reaction.

But, contrary to what she had expected, Sean didn't even seem to notice and, apart from the grunts and groans he usually greeted her with, his thoughts appeared to be elsewhere. However, she knew better than to ask him what was on his mind.

Little did she know that Sean was still trying to make sense of the strange encounter he'd had with the ex-soldier. Although the man had simply passed on an anecdote, Sean knew full well he'd been threatened. The wife-beater in Kent was supposed to be him, and the message was clear – hit your wife again and you'll pay.

How dare that bastard threaten him? Next time he'd get his shotgun and blow the fucker's head off for trespassing. Anyway, what business was it of his how he treated his wife? Which made him wonder. Was that bastard giving his wife one behind his back?

He looked across to see Katie quietly eating. He could swear he'd smelt alcohol on her breath when he'd arrived home. What was she doing drinking in the day? That wasn't like her. She is ... she's fucking that bastard!

When Katie looked up from her meal, she caught Sean scowling in her direction. What had she done now? She quickly took a last mouthful of stew, and headed to the kitchen sink to start the dishes. She knew better than to stay too close to her husband when he was in one of his moods.

She turned at the sound of cutlery crashing against Sean's plate. He got up, shoving the half-finished meal into

the centre of the table, before retreating to his workshop in the garden. Katie breathed a sigh of relief.

As she washed the dishes, she took the opportunity to look up at the forest in the hills, where she had nestled in Balham's strong arms. When she caught sight of her reflection in the kitchen window, she was surprised by what she saw.

It was the contented, blissful smile of a woman deeply in love.

Chapter 20

Compton cursed when the phone rang, just when he'd finally managed to get the gas-ring in the caravan to light. He'd bought a few eggs off the local farmer, and he was looking forward to getting some food inside him.

Compton looked at the screen on his phone and saw that it was Morton.

"Bollocks."

He switched off the gas and watched the precious flame disappear.

"Yeah, what do you want?"

"You fucking know what I want. What have you found out?"

"It's only been a couple of days."

"So?"

"So, I've only just got started."

"I'm not interested in your excuses, Compton. What have you come up with so far?"

Compton sighed and took a deep breath. Once an officer, always an officer, he thought.

"Well, to start with, he's fucking some cute little blonde from the village."

"Is he?" said Morton, and Compton could hear the man breathing, as he digested this latest piece of information. "How did you find out?"

"I caught them in the woods."

"You caught them fucking?"

"No, but they were getting pretty friendly, by the looks of things. They've got to be fucking."

"Do you know anything about the little blonde?"

"Apparently, she's the one who saved his life."

Compton heard Morton take a sharp intake of breath before responding.

“Well, now it all makes sense. This local scrubber comes along and finds Balham hanging from a tree, saves his life, and our old comrade-in-arms slips her his cock by way of thanks.”

“You have a wonderful way with words, Morton.”

“Is she single?” asked Morton, ignoring Compton’s comment.

“No, she’s married to some moron who cuts wood all day long. Miserable bastard, from what I’ve heard.”

“Fuck me, it keeps getting better and better. He sounds like the sort who wouldn’t take too kindly to Balham shagging his missus up against a tree.”

“Do you have something in mind?”

“Damn right I do. We need to get Balham back on track - fucking up his life and wanting to end it all. Or, better yet, we need to get someone else to do our dirty work for us.”

“Do I take it you want me to tell this woodcutter that Balham’s cuckolding him?”

“Cuckolding? Fuck me, Compton, where did you learn that? You’re not as thick as you look. You never struck me as the sort to read Shakespeare.”

“Fuck you, Morton.”

“Just make sure you tell this yokel that his wife’s playing around.”

“I’ll tell him in a couple of days.”

“Why wait?”

“I’m going to see if Balham and this blonde go up into the woods again.”

“I’m not paying you, just so you can get your rocks off, you pervert.”

Compton sighed again, doing his best to maintain his composure.

“When I followed them the last time, it looked like it was something they’d done before. I just want to see if it’s a regular thing. That way, I might be able to arrange for this

woodcutter to catch them in the act. He's more likely to blow a gasket if he actually sees them at it."

"Good move. There's nothing like a man watching his wife being shafted from behind to make the old blood boil."

"You paint a vivid picture, Morton, but you're forgetting one thing."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"Balham's just as likely to send this woodcutter six feet under as the other way around, even if he's caught with his trousers round his ankles."

"Yeah, but don't you see, it doesn't matter? Either way he's in the shit. One way he ends up on the mortuary slab, and the other he ends up in prison. Mission accomplished."

"Okay, it sounds like a plan. In the meantime, what are *you* going to do?"

"What am *I* going to do? I'm going to handle things at the other end and tell Trudi what her darling husband is up to."

"She's not going to care. She's already given up on Balham and, besides, she's doing the dirty deed with you - so it's just tit for tat."

"Obviously you don't know Trudi like I do. Once I paint her a pretty picture of what her spouse has been doing behind her back, she'll probably cut his pecker off while he's asleep. Hey, this could all work out great. If she ends up in the clink too, we'll be killing two birds with one stone."

"You're all heart, Morton. I thought she was planning on marrying you when this was all over, and becoming the Lady of the manor."

"She can plan all she wants. I don't want the crazy bitch hanging around when I'm in the clear and dear pater finally croaks. Once I get my hands on my inheritance, I'll have more pussy than I know what to do with."

“And you’ll be able to show your gratitude to those who stuck by you in your hour of need,” Compton reminded him.

“Of course, mate. That’s guaranteed.”

Once the conversation had ended, and Morton’s words were ringing in his ears, Compton turned his attention to the cheap gas stove that his ‘mate’ had provided for him.

“Yeah, sure.”

Compton tapped the zipped pocket in his shirt, and felt the comforting bulge of his keys. Attached to the key ring was a flash-drive capable of storing sixteen gigabyte’s worth of data. It was heart-warming to know that if daddy’s little rich boy decided to double-cross him, he had some insurance.

Chapter 21

Katie realised she'd been glancing at the door to the shop every few minutes for her entire shift. Her body tingled with excitement, and she wanted to see Balham so much, it almost hurt. Alarmingly, she suddenly realised that she didn't even have his phone number. If, for some reason, he decided not to visit her, and she didn't bump into him in the village, her only way of contacting him would be to turn up at his house. She shuddered at the thought of having the door answered by the intimidating Trudi.

But, as the second hand of the clock on the shop wall approached one o'clock, Balham came through the door, just like he'd done before. This time they were alone, and Katie's face lit up with a beaming smile as Balham approached. He leant across the counter and kissed her on the lips, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Hungry?" he said, pointing to the rucksack he'd left on the floor by the open door.

"Famished," she replied, but then she remembered the phone call she'd had first thing that morning. "Oh, Ricky called me. He said he wants to talk to you about the film."

The light-heartedness seemed to leave Balham's face instantly, as he was reminded of a different world. A world of bloodshed and death.

"When can we see him?"

"He usually doesn't get back from college till four. We can go to my sister's place then."

Balham's face suddenly brightened.

"Great. The sun's out again. That gives us time for a long lunch. Are you still up for it?"

"I'll get my things."

Katie was almost light-headed, as they made their way up to the clearing in the forest. She felt like a schoolgirl, giddy with excitement. Balham watched her, and wondered

how he had managed to cross paths with someone so kind and pure.

It suddenly seemed almost miraculous. He had found her, just when he was at the lowest point in his life, determined to end it all. And because of that fateful moment in the forest, he now had glimpses of a happiness that was almost beyond description, if only his old life would finally let go. But that wasn't going to happen, until he knew the truth.

"Are you trying to get me drunk again?" asked Katie, laughing.

Balham had brought another bottle of wine, and he'd wasted no time retrieving two glasses from his rucksack, before pouring some for both of them.

"Would I do a thing like that?" said Balham, doing his best to look wide-eyed and innocent.

"I don't suppose you need alcohol to get a woman. I expect they always throw themselves at you."

"Not that I've noticed. Besides, there's only one woman I want throwing herself at me."

"You mean like this," said Katie, walking over to him, and giving him a passionate kiss on the lips.

She was shocked at her own behaviour, but she was pleased she had done it. He tasted of wine, and she'd been surprised by the gentleness with which he held her face in his hands.

"Jim, can I ask you something?"

"Of course you can, Katie. You can ask me anything."

"Why are we here?"

"Well, I'm here because I want to be with you."

"It's just that ..."

Katie was unsure whether to continue, but Balham waited patiently, smiling.

"I mean, you're not just giving me all this attention because you feel you owe me something, are you? You know ... for saving your life?"

"Is that what you think?"

"Sometimes. It's just that I've never met a man like you before. In fact, I've never 'met' many men at all."

"Well, I can only tell you how I feel, Katie. And right now, I feel like the luckiest man in the world to be spending time with you."

She smiled.

"I know, I'm sounding cheesy again," said Balham.

"No, it's the loveliest thing anyone has ever said to me."

"And I mean it. I've been through too much to waste any more time. I've always tried to act tough and not express my feelings. I'm determined to change all that."

"I'm glad. And I'm glad it's me you want to share them with."

"Come here," said Balham, taking her hand.

She stepped in close to him, and she could feel his warm breath on her cheek. He slipped one of his strong arms around her waist, and pulled her body against his. She had been used to Sean's soft 'beer-belly' pressing against her in their few intimate moments, but Balham was different. Every muscle in his body felt hard against her touch.

When he eased her on to the blanket and lay above her, kissing her neck, she didn't resist. The thought that they were going to make love, in the forest, sent a thrill through her whole body. She had never wanted a man so badly.

* * *

You sly bastard, thought Compton, as he watched the couple explore one another's bodies. He was tempted to stay and see how it played out, but decided to make himself scarce. He'd wait at the bottom of the hill, and follow them

when they returned to the village, just to make sure 'lover-boy' wasn't planning on causing any trouble.

And tomorrow, he had an appointment with the woodcutter.

Chapter 22

When Ricky answered the door, and saw his Aunt Kate standing there, he couldn't help thinking she looked different somehow. Her hair was tousled, and she seemed to have a 'glow' that he hadn't noticed before. He'd always thought of his aunt as stressed and downtrodden, but now she looked younger and carefree.

Katie had asked Balham to follow on a few minutes behind her, so as not to give the locals even more to gossip about. When Ricky saw the ex-soldier making his way up the driveway, he believed he had the answer to his aunt's sudden transformation.

"Hi, Ricky," said Balham, "I hear you've got some news about the film."

"Yeah, why don't you both come up to my room, and I'll show you what I've got."

As they sat around Ricky's computer, Balham couldn't help smiling. The young lad held a clipboard, upon which was attached a sheet of paper with numbered items. Whether they were questions or the results of Ricky's investigation he couldn't tell, but he found it both amusing and gratifying that the teenager had taken the task so seriously.

"There was something I meant to ask you the last time you were here," said Ricky, looking at Balham.

"Ask away," said Balham amiably.

"The sound of your voice, giving the officer the co-ordinates for the air strike."

"What about it?"

"You must have thought it sounded like you, or you would have been suspicious right from the start."

"That's right. Trust me, I didn't want to believe it was me telling them to blow the hell out of the village. But, as far as I can tell, it certainly sounds like me."

“The thing is,” said Ricky, tapping his pen against his clipboard, “we’re not used to hearing the sound of our own voices.”

“Are you saying it’s not my voice,” said Balham.

“No, I can’t say that.”

Balham did his best to hide his disappointment, but Ricky was keen to explain further.

“I ran a piece of software that analyses voice patterns, and before you leave I’ll take a recording of your voice and see if there’s a match.”

“Okay.”

“But don’t get too hopeful that anything will come of it. You see, the part where you speak is so short. There’s not a lot to go on. And besides, you’re yelling numbers. If someone with a similar accent as you did the same, it would be very difficult to tell the two voices apart.”

“The question is, would this voice pattern be enough to prove Jim didn’t call out the wrong numbers?” said Katie, touching Balham gently on the arm.

Ricky noticed the gesture but said nothing.

“I did some checking online, and voice analysis is sometimes used as evidence in a court of law, but unless there’s a clear result, it isn’t usually relied on.”

Balham sighed.

“Well, at least you tried, Ricky. So, thank you, anyway.”

The ex-soldier began to reach for his jacket, when Ricky’s next words stopped him in his tracks.

“Hold on. I didn’t say I couldn’t prove the film’s a phony.”

Balham eased back into his chair, and Ricky noticed his aunt grab him by the hand and give it a squeeze.

“Can you? Can you prove it’s been tampered with?” she asked.

Ricky grinned from ear to ear, and leaned back in his swivel chair, swinging from side to side.

“Yes.”

“But how?”

“Whoever altered it must have been in a hurry, because they slipped up.”

Balham was leaning forward in his chair, all ears.

“Go on.”

Ricky turned in his chair and pressed a key on his computer. The footage, showing Lieutenant Morton receiving the co-ordinates from Balham, appeared on the large screen.

“Take a look at the bottom,” said Ricky. “Here, where the counter is telling you how much time has elapsed.”

Balham shook his head, as if he were dismissing the idea even before Ricky explained what he had in mind.

“I’ve watched this footage dozens of times. The clock was one of the first things I checked. It flows smoothly, so I can’t see how the film could have been cut.”

“Believe me, there are ways of getting around that. Let me show you this part, just after you’ve passed on the co-ordinates,” said Ricky, ignoring Balham’s reservations.

Katie and Balham leaned towards the screen, looking carefully at the film. It showed Morton listening, as Balham called out the co-ordinates. Ricky looked at Balham, as if he expected a reaction.

“I’m sorry, Ricky. Perhaps I’m being a bit slow. What am I supposed to be seeing?”

Ricky couldn’t resist a smug smile.

“It’s what you’re *not* seeing that’s important,” he said cryptically.

“What do you mean?”

“I used some software that I downloaded off the Internet. It measures how many frames per minute are appearing on the screen. At this point here,” said Ricky, pointing at the frozen picture, “the footage slows down. It’s almost imperceptible with the naked eye.”

“Let me see the clip again,” said Balham.

Ricky hit a few keys on the computer and the footage replayed. He continued to explain.

“You see here, where the officer seems to be listening to the co-ordinates, just before he gives you the order to join the men. That’s been stretched out to cover something that’s been removed. That way, the second counter at the bottom of the screen continues to run smoothly. If they’d known what they were doing, they could have simply edited the timecode. Whoever altered the film was definitely an amateur.”

“So, you’re saying something else must have happened in those few seconds. Something that’s been deleted from the film?”

“Exactly. Can you think back - figure out what it was that happened?”

Balham rubbed his face with his hands, as if he were trying to clear his head.

“I can’t believe I missed this. I must have gone over those few moments in my mind a hundred times.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Jim. You were in a war zone. How can you be expected to remember every tiny detail of what happened?” said Katie. “Ricky and I will go downstairs and make a drink. It’ll give you a few minutes alone to gather your thoughts. How does that sound?”

It was as if Katie could read his mind.

“That would be great,” said Balham, trying to look more optimistic than he felt.

Once he was alone, he tried using a relaxation technique one of the shrinks had taught him during his second tour of duty. He took several deep breaths, and exhaled fully, until his heart rate had slowed considerably. Then he closed his eyes, and tried to picture those fateful few moments, in a country half a world away.

But, as the minutes ticked by, his heart-rate began to surge once again, as his inability to recall the details of that terrible day left him frustrated. He had spent the last few desperate months doing his best to forget what had happened, and now he was expected to remember everything with crystal clarity.

All too soon, Katie and Ricky returned with the promised mugs of tea, and they looked at him expectantly.

"I'm sorry, I've had no luck. My mind's a blank."

Balham slapped his head in frustration, and Katie reached over and touched his arm once again.

"You just need time, Jim. You can't be expected to remember every detail. It'll come to you in the end, I'm sure."

Balham offered a half-hearted smile in recognition of the kind gesture, and he noticed Ricky playing with the edges of the paper, attached to his clipboard. Suddenly, he got up and paced around the room, his right hand rubbing his forehead.

"Hold on ... hold on," he said, and he clicked his fingers as he pointed to Ricky's scribbled notes. "Now I remember."

"What?" asked Ricky, unable to contain himself.

"I handed Morton a scrap of paper with the co-ordinates written down. I just never thought about it before. I did it automatically."

Suddenly Balham slumped back down in his chair, and the excitement he had momentarily felt had clearly deserted him.

"What's wrong?" asked Katie.

"The trouble is, I don't see how it helps. If I did give Morton the correct co-ordinates on that paper, he will have just got rid of it."

"Probably," said Ricky, "but what about the film?"

“Would the numbers have shown up on that?” asked Katie.

“They could have,” replied Ricky. “Jim would probably have passed them over face up, and because his camera was pointed in that direction, the paper would have been in shot for at least a few seconds.”

“But surely that wouldn’t be enough,” said Balham.

“You’d be surprised,” said Ricky. “There’s software out there with the ability to enhance even the blurriest images. Besides, it would only need to show a part of the number to prove the discrepancy. That would show it was the lieutenant who made the mistake, not Jim.”

Ricky sat back, smiling. ‘Discrepancy’. He liked that word.

“Well done, Ricky,” said Katie, I’m really proud of you.”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t help much. Without the original film, it doesn’t prove anything.”

“No, you’re wrong, Ricky. It proves a hell of a lot,” said Balham. “For one thing, you’ve shown that the film was tampered with. That’s enough for me. Why would someone mess with it if there were nothing to hide?”

“That’s right,” said Katie, unable to believe she’d lost sight of the important point.

Balham took the teenager’s hand and shook it warmly.

“Ricky, words can’t begin to describe how grateful I am for what you’ve done. You’ve lifted a gigantic weight off my shoulders. Between the two of you, you and Katie have given me a second chance.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Ricky, clearly caught up in the moment.

“For the past few months I’ve been wallowing in guilt and self-pity but, thanks to you, that’s all behind me. So now I can concentrate on what’s important.”

“What do you mean?” asked Katie.

“Even if it takes the rest of my life, I’m going to clear my name, and the bastards responsible for killing all those people are going to pay.”

Chapter 23

Compton couldn't believe his luck when he followed Balham and his new lady-friend to her sister's home. It was directly over the road from the village pub, and it was open for business. Not only that, he noticed there was a table free by one of the large windows facing the street, where he could sit and enjoy a pint while he waited.

Before entering the establishment for his well-earned beverage, he hid in the porch, hoping to get a look at whoever answered the door to the lovebirds. He noted it was a youth, who looked like he was in his late teens or thereabouts. Once the three of them had disappeared into the house, he purchased his welcome pint of lager.

He happened to be on his third, when the couple finally emerged, a little over an hour later. But he was feeling comfortable and, on a whim, he decided not to follow Balham and his girlfriend. Instead, he remained where he was and continued to watch the house. Besides, the village streets were always quiet, even at this time of the day, and he constantly ran the risk of being spotted by Balham. And that, he reminded himself, wouldn't be good.

He was draining his glass, and just considering investing in a whisky chaser, when the teenager headed out on to the street and walked over to the bus stop. Compton remembered that it was a Friday, and he assumed the lad was heading into town to meet his friends. No self-respecting teenager stayed in the village on a Friday night – not if they had any kind of life.

On instinct, Compton left the pub and joined the boy at the bus stop. He hadn't had time to formulate a plan, but he wanted to find out what Balham's unexpected visit to the house had been all about.

“It’s pretty dead here, isn’t it? Is it always like this?” asked Compton, trying to start a conversation by demonstrating that he was a kindred spirit.

“Yeah, pretty much,” said Ricky nervously, not used to seeing strangers in the village.

Compton did his best to put the lad at ease.

“I’m staying at the caravan site with my wife and kids. The ball and chain has sent me off to get some things from the supermarket in town, and I stopped off for a pint in the pub. The trouble is, one pint turned into three and now I’m over the limit. So I’ve got to catch the bus.”

Ricky laughed, and Compton felt confident enough to press on while the going was good.

“I hope you don’t think I’m being nosey, but didn’t I see you talking with a mate of mine outside your house?”

“A mate?”

“Yeah, Jim Balham. I was in the army with him.”

Compton knew he was taking a risk if it got back to Balham but, somehow, he had the feeling he was working against the clock.

“You were in the army with Jim? In Afghanistan?”

“Yeah.”

“God, that’s a hell of a coincidence, isn’t it? What are the chances of both of you turning up at the same time in a small village like this?”

Compton realised the kid was smarter than he looked, and decided he had to tread carefully.

“Not really. He was the one who recommended the place to me, if I ever wanted to take the folks away from the city for a bit of peace and quiet.”

“Well, you certainly get that here,” said Ricky, waving his hand at the deserted high street. “Does he know you’re here?”

“No, I didn’t want to bother him. I know he’s had problems since he left the army, and I wanted to respect his personal space.”

“Yeah, well, his problems might be over.”

Compton’s heart-rate climbed, but he did his best to appear nonchalant.

“Really? I thought those bastards at the top had screwed him royally.”

“You know all about it then?” asked Ricky.

Compton couldn’t tell if the lad was being cagey or not, but he had to find out what was happening, and he decided to throw caution to the wind.

“Yeah, if I remember right, the brass blamed him for bombing a village and they had a film to prove it.”

“Yeah, except the film was a fake.”

“Jesus,” said Compton, and his look of surprise and shock was genuine. “How does he know?”

“He gave the film to me and I worked it out,” said Ricky, unable to hide his satisfaction at having performed a job well done.

“Bloody hell, that’s brilliant news. He’ll be able to clear his name.”

“That’s the plan.”

“Here, let me shake your hand,” said Compton.

“What’s your name?” asked Ricky.

“Corporal Smith,” he said, and he gave a huge sigh. “Sod it. This bus is taking ages. I think I’m going to risk it and drive in. I’d offer you a lift, but I’ve got some other errands to run.”

“That’s okay,” said Ricky, relieved that he wouldn’t have to make conversation all the way into town.

Compton waved goodbye and quickly made his way along the footpath, leading to the forest clearing. Once he’d made sure the loving couple were getting reacquainted, he would head for the woodcutter’s barn.

It was time to get the show on the road.

Chapter 24

After his disagreeable encounter with Balham, Sean had decided to reposition his circular saw so that now, as he cut his logs for the ungrateful bastards in the village, he had a clear view of the barn door. He wasn't going to let any fucker catch him by surprise again. He'd be ready next time, and it was comforting to have his shotgun, fully loaded, leaning against his work-bench within easy reach.

As soon as the stranger entered his barn, he stopped his work, and subtly edged closer to his bench. The man looked well built, like his previous intruder. If he had to guess, he would have said it was another soldier-boy. For Christ's sake, why the hell were they suddenly coming out of the woodwork and making his life a misery? To make matters worse, this one had a particularly shifty appearance.

"Hello ... Sean, is it?"

"Who's asking?"

"My name's Frank. Frank Smith," said Compton.

"Unless you're here to buy some logs, I'm not interested."

"Dial down the attitude, mate. I'm here to do you a favour."

"I don't need any favours. Now, if you're not buying, clear off."

Compton held up his hands in mock-surrender.

"Okay, mate, if that's what you want, I'll go."

He made to leave, while Sean watched his every move. Suddenly he stopped and turned back to face the woodcutter.

"I just thought you'd be interested, that's all."

"Interested in what?" asked Sean, unable to hide his curiosity.

“In finding out who’s slipping his cock into your wife’s pussy while you’re pissing about with lumps of dead wood.”

Sean took a step back, as if the words had literally punched him in the face.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” yelled Sean, trying to intimidate the man standing in his barn, but his voice was shaking.

“I’m talking about your wife, dipshit. She’s fucking a guy in the woods, as we speak,” said Compton, making a show of looking at his watch.

“You’re talking bollocks,” said Sean, trying to exude a confidence he didn’t feel.

“Suit yourself.”

Compton quickly exited through the door, leaving the woodcutter to his thoughts. He was pleased with the way the encounter had gone and was confident that the betrayed husband would take the bait, but he waited on the corner of the lane, just to make sure.

A few minutes later, the ex-soldier lit a cigarette and smiled, as he blew a satisfying bloom of smoke into the fresh country air.

Sean had left his barn and was heading in the direction of the forest – his shotgun in his hand.

Chapter 25

Katie was almost ashamed at how eager she was to reach the clearing in the forest. But since she and Jim had spent over an hour at her sister's, talking with Ricky, they would have less time to spend together before she had to head for home. Home? That was hardly what she would call the small cottage she shared with Sean. Home should be somewhere she felt safe and loved, like she did in Jim's arms.

The eagerness of the young lovers explained why neither of them had spotted Compton, when he'd approached their hiding place, prior to heading for Sean's barn.

Katie noticed that Jim had brought his rucksack again, and when they arrived at their 'love nest', he reached inside.

"Don't be alarmed," he said, and he brought out a large knife.

Despite his warning, for a moment she felt a pang of fear in the pit of her stomach. Perhaps Jim *was* some sort of psycho, as some of the more unkind villagers had suggested.

But even before she'd had time to finish the thought, he was cutting small branches, and laying them down, under the tree, where she was in the habit of placing her blanket.

"So we can be a little more comfortable," he explained, when he saw her looking at him with a puzzled expression on her face.

She gave an inward sigh and admonished herself for being so silly. But then she remembered why the sight of the knife had troubled her. It was the same one she had used, all those weeks ago, to cut Balham down from the tree, where he'd chosen to hang himself.

That tree, she reminded herself, was barely a few minutes away from where they were now, and it suddenly struck her how strange that was - places of such extreme sadness and happiness, a few hundred feet apart.

“How about we skip the food, and go straight to the wine?” said Katie, once Balham had finished making their makeshift bed.

“I like your thinking,” said Balham, and he couldn’t help feeling they made a perfect team.

In many ways, ever since his failed suicide attempt, he felt like they’d both been reborn. Katie’s confidence was growing day by day, and he had never seen her happier. And, as for him – not only had he been given a second chance at life, but the awful burden of guilt that had slowly eaten away at him had gone. He now had a mission, and once he’d cleared his name and brought the right people to justice, he and Katie could start afresh and make a new life together.

The softness of the branches, beneath the blanket, felt good. Jim rolled Katie on to her back and kissed her. She dropped her glass of wine and heard the liquid trickle away into the dirt. She didn’t care. All that mattered was feeling Jim’s hard body next to her.

Suddenly, Jim stopped kissing her, and he looked back, into the forest.

* * *

Sean forced himself to stop his headlong rush into the woods. He had not expected to come upon them so soon. He hid behind a large tree and tried to catch his breath. He was panting wildly and, when he’d inadvertently stepped on a fallen branch, causing it to snap, he thought he saw the man look in his direction.

He waited for several minutes, until his breathing had eased, but his heart was still pounding in his chest. There was nothing he could do to stop that – not while his wife was cheating on him. When he got hold of her, he'd teach the fucking bitch a lesson she'd never forget.

"What's wrong?" asked Katie.

"Probably nothing. I just thought I heard someone coming, that's all."

"It must be your secret military training kicking in," said Katie, giving him a cheeky smile.

"Yeah, something like that," he said, laughing.

"What else did they teach you in the army?" she asked, reaching her hand around his neck, and pulling his lips towards hers.

"How to stalk your prey," he said, grabbing her buttocks and pulling her closer.

"Don't bother stalking, you've already caught me," she whispered, kissing his lips and letting his tongue explore her mouth.

* * *

Sean peered through the branches of the tree. He could have screamed with rage. She was all over him, the fucking slut. He watched, as she rolled the man on to his back and stroked his hair. When he saw the man's face, he thought his heart would explode. It was just as he'd thought. The bastard messing with his wife was the fucker who'd threatened him a couple of days before.

He picked up his shotgun and checked that it was loaded. He snapped the gun shut as quietly as he could, and felt in his pocket for extra ammunition. Shit! In his hurry to find them, he'd forgotten to bring any. Still, two cartridges would be enough. One for each of the treacherous bastards.

He took a deep breath, and prepared to leave the cover of the tree.

Balham had heard the click of the gun closing, and he recognised the sound of metal on metal. He instantly pulled himself out of Katie's grasp and crouched, looking in the direction from where the sound had come. Katie was about to ask him what was happening, but he pressed his finger to his lips, indicating that she should remain silent.

A large part of him knew he was probably making a fool of himself, and he could well be jumping at shadows. This was Wales, not Afghanistan. But instinct and training were too much a part of him to be ignored. When he discovered there was nothing to worry about, then he would relax.

No doubt Katie would taunt him for overreacting, but he would worry about that later. His instructor in the army had drummed it into him - it was better to feel foolish and live to fight another day, than to have your brains blown out for ignoring the warning voice in your head.

He slowly made his way towards the large tree, from where he was certain he had heard the sound. He had almost reached it, when Sean emerged, pointing his shotgun straight at his chest.

Chapter 26

When he left the safety of the tree, Sean had been planning to find a better vantage point, from where he could butcher the lovers before they knew what had hit them. So, when he stood there, to find Balham running in his direction, he was taken totally by surprise. He fired his shotgun before properly taking aim, but he decided he must have been lucky, because Balham hit the ground.

It was only when the ex-soldier rolled over and sprang up, leaping at him, that he realised he'd missed. Before he knew what was happening, Balham had grabbed hold of the barrel of the gun and twisted it out of his hand, just as he'd done with the axe, back at the barn.

Balham struck Sean across the jaw with the butt of the gun, sending him sprawling into the undergrowth. Before the woodcutter had time to react, the ex-soldier was leaping on top of him, pinning his arms to the ground with his knees. With incredible strength, Balham turned his victim over, and brought his arms behind him. Jamming his knee into Sean's back, he reached down to undo the belt of his jeans, preparing to tie the man's hands together.

And that was when something hit him on the back of the head like a sledgehammer. There was a blinding light, and everything turned black.

* * *

Compton couldn't believe how the idiot had managed to miss Balham at such close range. To make matters worse, his old mate was getting the better of the overweight woodcutter. He decided he had to act, and fast.

He picked up a large rock and, while Balham was concentrating on pinning the struggling woodcutter to the ground, he ran over and smashed it as hard as he could on

the back of his old comrade's head. Balham collapsed on top of his victim, and Sean was forced to wriggle out from under his unconscious assailant.

The woodcutter sat there, open-mouthed.

"The bugger's still alive. He must have a skull made of titanium. Here, finish him off," said Compton in a loud whisper, handing Sean the rock. "I'll get rid of the gun."

As Sean watched the man disappear with his shotgun, his head was spinning. He was totally confused. It had all happened so quickly, he even began to wonder if he'd dreamt it. But then Balham stirred, and he was brought back to reality. He stood and raised his hand, preparing to bring the rock down on to Balham's bleeding head.

* * *

Katie had been lying on the blanket when she heard the shot. And for several terrifying seconds, she had remained motionless, paralysed with fear. She was unable to see what was happening because her view was blocked by ferns and low-lying branches.

Eventually she snapped out of her trance, and she got up, ready to make her way to where the sound had come from. She was scared out of her mind, but she had to know what had happened to Jim. Almost without thinking, she looked down at his rucksack, and grabbed his knife before heading off.

Barely more than a minute later, she saw a figure standing next to a large tree, his hand raised, holding something large and irregular in shape. She looked down, and there was Jim lying face down, blood seeping from the back of his head. She screamed.

"Sean! No!"

Her husband turned, his face contorted with rage.

“You fucking bitch,” he screamed, and he ran towards her, the rock still in his hand.

Instinctively, she stepped backwards and tripped, falling on to her back. Sean leapt after her, clearly intent on smashing the rock into her face as he did so. Without time to think, she lifted her hand to keep him away.

Too late, Sean saw the vicious, long blade, pointing straight at him. His momentum continued to carry him forward, and before he had time to drop the rock and stop his fall, he landed on the knife.

Katie crawled away, as Sean yelled out in pain and lay on his back, the blade still in his gut. She looked around her, convinced that help would soon arrive. But none came. All she could see were the blood-soaked bodies of Jim and her husband.

She stared through the swaying branches of the trees, up at the sky.

And she screamed.

Chapter 27

It wasn't long before Katie realised that hysteria would solve nothing. She was way too far from the village for anyone to hear. Besides, she needed to help Jim - that was if Sean hadn't killed him. Oh, please God, she thought, let him be all right.

As she made her way to Jim's prone body, Sean reached out and tried to grab her by the leg, but the effort caused him to cry out in pain, and he fell back, clutching the handle of the knife, still protruding from his stomach.

When she bent down to gently press her fingers against Jim's neck, hoping to find a pulse, he groaned and mumbled something she couldn't catch. She quickly ran back to the clearing, where she had left her bag, and reached inside for her phone.

She couldn't help but feel a surreal sense of *déjà vu*, as she dialled 999. It was difficult to believe that she was in the forest again, determined to save Jim's life for a second time. It was also not lost on her that it was Jim, and not Sean, she was desperate to save.

For the second time within a few weeks, an air ambulance was forced to land on the hilltop, close to the forest above the village of Ranton. When Katie explained that one of the men had been stabbed, the operator automatically informed the police.

Two officers used a forest track, not usually open to the public, and were able to reach the scene around the same time as the paramedics. Although Sean and Balham were badly injured, it was decided that one of the policemen would accompany the victims as a precaution. The other officer remained with Katie, and explained that he would have to keep an eye on the scene until his other colleagues arrived.

"I need to know if Jim is all right," said Katie, when it finally sank in that she wasn't going to the hospital.

"Would Jim be your husband, Mrs Williams? The one with the knife wound?"

Katie hesitated before answering, suddenly realising what a precarious position she was in.

"No."

The police officer stared at her, giving her a disapproving look.

* * *

The detective, standing next to Katie in the hospital corridor, was tall and wiry. His neatly groomed hair and spectacles matched his serious demeanour. He was holding a small notebook in his hand, a pencil at the ready.

"Are you sure it was a gunshot that you heard, Mrs Williams?"

"Yes ... I'm sure it was."

"But am I right in saying you didn't actually see a gun?"

"No, but it must be there."

"Well, you see, Mrs Williams, that's just it. Our men have searched everywhere and they can't find it."

"So, what are you saying? That I'm lying?"

"No, Mrs Williams, I'm just explaining the situation. I deal in facts. And the fact is that there is no sign of a gun, and no one was shot. On the other hand, your husband has been stabbed with a knife. And, of course, there's the nasty head injury that the other gentleman received."

"How is he?"

"Who? Your husband, or Mr Balham?"

The detective gave her a look that told her it was intended as a pointed question.

"Both of them," said Katie, but for some reason she couldn't look the policeman in the eye.

“Well, all we know for the moment is that they are still alive, and being treated for their injuries.”

Katie gave a huge sigh, clearly relieved.

“Mrs Williams?”

The detective waited for her to look up before he continued.

“I need to know who stabbed your husband with the knife?”

She hesitated and looked away, but the detective persisted.

“Mrs Williams?”

Katie took a deep breath before she replied.

“I stabbed him.”

Chapter 28

Morton was worried that Trudi might make a scene. In an effort to put her in a good mood, he had driven to Ranton and picked her up. She always liked to be seen in his Aston Martin.

In fact, she'd arranged to meet him outside the pub, during the lunch hour, where some of the villagers were bound to spot her, climbing into a car that cost more than the houses they lived in. Minutes later, they were parked in a lay-by, overlooking a pretty valley, with the Cambrian Mountains in the distance. Morton got right to the point of his visit.

"Have you had a call from the hospital or the police in the last few hours?"

Morton's question immediately got her undivided attention.

"No. Why? Should I have?"

"I thought it might be a distinct possibility."

"I turned my phone off, while had a long, hot soak in the bath. Now, stop pissing around and tell me what this is all about."

Morton hesitated, and an image of Trudi's hot, naked body invaded his consciousness. She gave him a look that said he'd better spit it out.

"Your husband's having an affair."

There was a pause, and then, to Morton's surprise, Trudi gave a short laugh.

"Is that a polite way of saying he's fucking someone else?"

Trudi wasn't screaming and kicking the interior of his car, which he took as a good sign. So he continued.

"Yes, a woman in the village."

"Let me guess. It wouldn't happen to be the little blonde bitch who saved his life, would it?"

“How did you know?”

“Lucky guess.”

Morton reminded himself that Trudi’s outward appearance didn’t hide the fact that she was a savvy and intelligent woman. A lethal combination, as any man would quickly find out if they chose to cross her. Morton decided to press on while she was being so understanding.

“Anyway, her husband found out and he caught them in the act.”

“You’re kidding me!” said Trudi, smiling.

Morton could sense her feeling of excitement, as she asked her next question.

“Did he kill him?”

Morton wasn’t sure if she was talking about Williams killing Balham, or the other way around.

“Apparently, Williams shot him, but he missed.”

“Fuck!”

That was one thing about Trudi, thought Morton - she always wears her heart on her sleeve.

“He might not have been shot, but at least he got cracked over the head with a rock,” he explained.

“How did some fucking yokel manage to do that? Jim must *really* be off his game.”

Morton smirked. Despite the antagonism she felt towards her husband, she was acutely aware of his abilities, and found it hard to believe that he’d been outclassed by a civilian.

“Luckily Compton was on hand to do the honours.”

“Is Jim going to make it?” she asked, almost as an afterthought.

“Apparently it’s touch and go.”

“So, it could still all work out for the best.”

Morton knew she meant that hopefully he would die.

“Yes. But it might not.”

"I don't see what the problem is. Even if he makes it, we're just back to square one. Hopefully the whole thing will be enough to finally send him over the edge, and he'll pop off to the forest with his noose."

Morton stared at her, still unable to believe her callousness. There was no love lost between him and Balham, and he wouldn't exactly be shedding tears at his funeral, but she was his wife, for Christ's sake.

"Unfortunately, there's been a ... development," he said cryptically.

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, you know that film you couldn't find..."

"Don't you dare start giving me grief about that, you bastard. I looked everywhere."

Morton cursed himself for his faux pas. He had to keep reminding himself to tread on eggshells when dealing with the mad bitch.

"I know you did, darling. I wasn't saying it as a criticism."

Trudi smiled and reached over to rub her hand up and down his crotch. He found himself stirring under her touch. Suddenly her hands reached down and squeezed his balls, making him cry out.

"Just spit out what you've come here to tell me before I lose my patience. And don't ever call me darling like that again, or I'll rip these right off," said Trudi, giving his testicles a tug to emphasise her point.

"Okay, okay. Calm down, for Christ's sake. That's no way to treat your fiancé," said Morton, secretly thinking he wouldn't marry the crazy witch for all the tea in China.

The thought of having to tell her the wedding was off, once everything was sorted out, filled him with dread. But he decided he would cross that particular bridge when he came to it. For now, he did his best to explain the current situation.

“Apparently, Balham took the film to his girlfriend’s nephew, and somehow he’s figured out it’s a fake.”

“Shit!”

Trudi was clearly taken aback, but at least she had relinquished Morton’s family jewels, much to his relief.

“What’s he going to do?”

Morton thought that should be obvious, but decided it was best to be tactful.

“He’s going to try and clear his name.”

Trudi was quiet for a moment, and Morton watched her. He could almost read her mind. She was thinking about her promised fortune slipping through her fingers. Finally, she spoke.

“What are you going to do?”

“You mean, what are *we* going to do?”

“Okay, what are *we* going to do?” said Trudi, unwilling to play games anymore.

“My father has some influential contacts in the police force.”

“And?” asked Trudi, eager to hurry things along.

“Apparently, this Katie was the one who stabbed her husband.”

Trudi raised her eyebrows to show her surprise, but she said nothing and let Morton continue.

“Anyway, at the moment things don’t look too rosy for her. She might even end up on charges, if she can’t prove it was self-defence. Poor little thing can’t handle it. My sources tell me she’s worrying herself into an early grave.”

“So, how does that help us?” said Trudi, inwardly cursing Morton for taking so long to get to the point.

“I hate to hurt your feelings, Trudi, but Balham seems to be extremely fond of this Katie woman.”

Trudi’s blank expression indicated to Morton that she didn’t care about this latest revelation.

“Get to the fucking point!”

“Okay. So, he cares for her, and the last thing he wants is to see her suffer because of him. Especially if there’s a chance that she could end up in prison.”

“Keep talking,” said Trudi.

“We need to convince him that if he gives up this ridiculous idea of trying to clear his name, then the case against his girlfriend will magically disappear.”

“Can you and your father deliver on that?”

“It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“So, why are you telling me?”

“We’ve got to convince Balham to make the right decision.”

“How are you going to do that?” asked Trudi, already suspecting that she knew the answer to her question.

“We’re going to need someone to deliver the message.”

Morton smiled as he put forward his latest proposal.

“Who better to persuade him to do the right thing, than his loving and dutiful wife?”

Chapter 29

The English hospital had received two new patients from over the border, and, for the well-trained medical staff, it was a successful day. The first man appeared to have had a lucky escape. He'd received a nasty fracture to his skull but, apart from a little swelling, there seemed to be no permanent brain damage, and he had regained consciousness even before he'd been delivered to the hospital.

The second man was also fortunate. The knife wound turned out to be not as deep as first thought, and no damage had been caused to any internal organs. Consequently, it was just a matter of limiting the chance of infection and monitoring for any excessive internal bleeding. For the time being, the patient appeared to be stable.

Not that Sean felt particularly lucky just then. His wife was cheating on him, and he'd tried to kill her and failed. The police would probably have him up on charges. Bloody wonderful.

In fact, the police had made sure he was in a private room, and they had stationed an officer at the door, until the sequence of events that had led to his stabbing was established - just in case he turned out to be a danger to the public.

When Compton had spotted the policeman, guarding Sean Williams' door, he had been frustrated. If Morton's plan were to work, he needed to speak with the useless idiot. But Compton prided himself on his resourcefulness, and his ability to improvise.

He'd left the hospital and headed for the nearest mobile phone shop, where he'd bought a pay-as-you-go phone and set it up so that it was ready to go. Once he'd returned to the hospital, he spent the next ten minutes, wandering

around the hospital, looking for a suitable candidate to assist him in his plan.

The man he chose was a young hospital porter, barely out of his teens. Compton managed to approach him in the grounds of the hospital, where he found the young lad taking an unscheduled break to smoke a cigarette.

“Having a tough day?” said Compton amiably.

The young porter had noticed the man in the smart suit approach him, and at first he’d been worried that it might be one of the bloody hospital administrators, with nothing better to do than to cause him grief. Relieved that he hadn’t been caught out having a sneaky fag, he happily joined in with the light-hearted chat.

“Tell me about it. I don’t get a moment’s peace in this bloody place.”

“I know what you mean. My boss is making a nuisance of himself too. He’s a rich bastard. More money than sense. He’s always giving me problems to solve.”

“Sounds interesting. What kind of problems?” asked the porter, happy for any distraction that helped the day pass by more quickly.

“When he told me what he wanted me to do, I thought he was winding me up. Apparently, his nephew’s been stabbed and he’s recovering here,” said Compton, pointing to the hospital. “And he wants to find out if he’s all right.”

“So, why doesn’t he come down here and see for himself?”

“Exactly. Can’t be that bothered, can he? Then I found out why he’s got me doing his dirty work for him.”

“Why?” asked the young porter, intrigued.

“The police won’t let anybody in to see him. Christ knows why. *He* was the one who got knifed.”

“Oh yeah, I know the patient you’re talking about. The bloke on the third floor. There’s a copper standing outside his door.”

“Yeah. Well, my boss told me to buy this,” said Compton, pulling out the newly-purchased phone from his jacket pocket. “He wants me to give it to his nephew so he can speak to him, but I can’t get in.”

“Yeah, I can see your problem.”

“I don’t suppose you could give it to him for me, could you?”

“I’d like to help, mate, but I don’t think my bosses would like it if I got caught.”

“No problem, mate, I understand. The old man will just have to stuff his two grand up his arse.”

“Two grand?”

Compton was pleased with the undisguised excitement plastered across the young lad’s face.

“Yeah. Like I said, the old codger’s got more money than sense. He’s offered me a two grand bonus if I get the phone to his nephew. Tell you what. I’d split it with you if you could help me out.”

The young porter’s face lit up.

“You’d actually give me a thousand quid, just for handing this bloke a phone?”

“Yeah. And when he’s finished, you can even keep the phone.”

Compton took out his wallet and thumbed through a stack of £20 notes. The lad’s eyes looked as if they were going to come out of their sockets.

“Mate. You’ve just hired yourself a delivery boy.”

Chapter 30

Compton joined the porter on the third floor of the hospital, just around the corner from the door to Sean Williams' room.

"Okay, so you know what to do?" asked Compton, just to make sure they were on the same page.

"No problem," said the young lad, touching the wad of cash in the back pocket of his trousers, just to make sure his unexpected windfall wasn't a figment of his imagination.

"Okay. As soon as I see you enter the room, I'll call my boss."

The porter headed off, carrying the toolbox he'd decided would make an excellent prop.

The police officer recognised the young lad, having noticed him wandering around the previous day, talking and joking with various members of staff. So, when the youth said he needed to repair the bed in Williams' room, the constable only gave his ID a passing glance.

When the porter entered the room, he found Sean lying on his back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

"Here, mate, I've got a present for you. From your uncle," said the porter, passing Sean the phone.

Sean took it without thinking.

"What the hell are you on about?"

He was about to tell the lunatic to clear off, when the phone rang. The porter nodded and raised his eyebrows, indicating that Sean should answer the call. Intrigued, he did as instructed."

"Williams?"

"Who is this?"

"Your guardian angel."

"What ...?"

"Look, we haven't got much time. I'm the one who saved you from getting your arse kicked by Balham, and I

hid your gun. So, if you don't want it to suddenly turn up, just listen."

Sean didn't protest and Compton continued.

"We're on the same side. If you don't cock this up, you'll come out of it smelling like a bed of roses. All you've got to do is keep quiet and not say anything to the police until we tell you the time is right."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

The young porter wasn't happy with how long the call was taking. He fidgeted with his toolbox, eager to be away.

"You've been stabbed, for Christ's sake. Just pretend to be sicker than you are and make them believe you're too ill to talk. You just need to buy us a couple of days. This way your wife and her stud will take the fall, and you'll get off scot-free. What's more, you'll receive a nice, thick wad of cash from my employer by way of thanks."

"But ..."

"Just do it, Williams. Now, hand the phone back to the lad."

Sean did as he was told, much to the relief of the porter, who was desperate to get out of the room.

Once Sean was left to his thoughts, he tried to make sense of what had just happened. In the end, he realised he didn't have much choice but to do as he'd been told. Besides, he felt like shit. Just lying in bed, not talking to anyone, was what he'd planned to do anyway.

The porter made his way around the corner of the corridor, intending to thank the stranger who'd fattened his wallet with more cash than he could have saved in a year.

But the man was gone.

Chapter 31

Balham had also been given a room of his own, watched over by the very same constable who had been tricked by the porter. By placing the ex-soldier further down, on the other side of the corridor, the policeman was able to keep an eye on the comings and goings of both rooms. The hard-pressed local constabulary were thereby able to save on precious manpower. This time the officer just nodded, as Inspector Bradshaw escorted Katie in to see Balham.

Katie had pictured herself rushing into Jim's arms, not caring how it would look to the detective who accompanied her. But when the door opened, Balham was lying on his side, facing away from the door. The back of his head had been shaved, and a plaster covered a large portion of his skull. Katie walked around the bed to face him, and when he opened his eyes and saw her, he propped himself up on his arm.

"Katie, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me. How are you?"

"Apart from a blinding headache that just won't quit, I think I'll survive."

"That's good, Mr Balham, because I need to talk to you."

Balham hadn't spotted the man, standing quietly at the end of the bed. He also noticed that Katie had suddenly become extremely agitated.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Detective Inspector Bradshaw."

"What do you need to talk to me about?" he asked.

"Don't be naïve, Mr Balham. An incident has occurred resulting in the serious injury of two people."

"Two people?"

"Yes. You and Mr Williams."

"Williams? I hardly touched him."

“He was stabbed, Mr Balham. Stabbed with a knife that apparently belongs to you.”

Balham glanced over at Katie, and he realised she was looking more nervous by the minute. He hated to see her suffer and wanted to help her. He needed to find out what had happened.

“What about the other man?”

“Other man?” asked Bradshaw, a confused look on his face.

“Yes. The man who hit me on the back of the head.”

Bradshaw turned to Katie.

“Did you see this ‘other’ man, Mrs Williams?”

“No ... but I was too far away. And the trees probably got in the way.”

Balham noticed that she had responded too quickly, clearly eager to support his version of events. He was sure the detective had spotted it too.

“Mr Balham. Why don’t you tell us what happened, in your own words, and maybe we can clear this up?”

Bradshaw waited while Balham sat up, careful not to let his injury touch the frame of the bed. He rubbed his temple, in an effort to clear his head before he spoke.

“Katie and I were chatting, taking a break from our walk in the woods, when I heard a noise and I went to investigate.”

“Why? Were you expecting trouble?” asked Bradshaw.

“No, I was just curious.”

Bradshaw gave him a sceptical look, but let him continue.

“Anyway, I was heading in the general direction of the noise, and Katie’s husband emerged from behind a tree, with a shotgun in his hand, and he tried to shoot me.”

Bradshaw’s face gave nothing away, but he took note of this new piece of information. It fitted in with the gunshot Mrs Williams had said she’d heard. Of course the couple

could have concocted the story between them, but he personally doubted it. Balham was unconscious when the paramedics arrived.

“Go on, Mr Balham.”

“I dived on to the ground, and luckily he missed. Then I ran at him and pinned him to the ground.”

“Very courageous of you, Mr Balham. I understand you were a soldier.”

“Yes. I served in Afghanistan.”

“Sorry to interrupt. Please go on.”

“Well, I was trying to fasten his hands behind his back, so he couldn’t hurt anyone ... you know, sort of make a citizen’s arrest, when someone came up behind me and hit me on the back of the head. That’s the last thing I remember, pretty much.”

“Why do you think Mr Williams tried to shoot you, Mr Balham?”

“Now who’s being naïve, Inspector? Katie and I have become close. Apparently he’s a very volatile man. I expect he saw us together and, in a fit of jealousy, tried to kill me. And Katie too, for all I know.”

“The only problem is, we only have your word that he tried to shoot you.”

“Well, you have his gun. Check it and you’ll see it was fired.”

“That’s just it. We can’t find any gun, and we’ve made a thorough search, believe me.”

Balham rubbed his temple again. His headache was getting worse. Bradshaw mistook it as a sign that the ex-soldier was stalling for time.

“The other man must have taken it,” he finally offered.

“The other man?”

“Yes, the one who hit me from behind.”

“Ah, yes, this man who nobody actually saw.”

“It sounds like you don’t believe I’m telling the truth.”

“Like I said to Mrs Williams, all I’m trying to do for the moment is ascertain the facts. Unfortunately, I’m hearing conflicting stories. You see, you’re saying that another man hit you from behind, but Mrs Williams has stated that she found her husband standing over you, preparing to strike you with a rock.”

“He was going to kill you, Jim. When I screamed, he came after me. He lunged at me with the rock, and somehow landed on the knife,” said Katie.

“Which brings us to another point, Mrs Williams. You’ve just said that you were some distance away when this struggle between your husband and Mr Balham occurred. You also stated, in our previous conversation, that you found the knife in Mr Balham’s rucksack. So, I must assume you picked up this knife and carried it with you.”

“Yes,” said Katie, and Balham noticed her looking at the floor, shaking. He wanted to take her in his arms and protect her, but he felt helpless.

“Why did you feel it necessary to take a knife with you?”

“I told you, I heard a shot. I was frightened.”

“So, we come back to this gun which has disappeared, apparently taken by someone who neither of you can identify.”

“It’s the truth! Why won’t you believe us?”

Katie’s voice had risen, and Balham could tell she was on the verge of panic. Bradshaw ignored her.

“This knife of yours, Mr Balham - it’s a rather lethal-looking bit of kit. Why did you feel it necessary to take it into the woods when you and Mrs Williams decided to go for a little chat?”

“I always carry it with me in my rucksack when I go walking. It’s a hangover from my army days, I suppose.”

“I’m sure.”

“Inspector Bradshaw. Are we under suspicion of some wrongdoing?”

“You’re being naïve again, Mr Balham. A man was stabbed, and you were knocked unconscious. We are required to investigate the matter to the best of our ability. You and Mrs Williams were clearly having some kind of affair and this must be taken into account.”

“Have you questioned Katie’s husband yet?” asked Balham.

“We will when he’s recovered sufficiently from his injuries, don’t you worry. Perhaps he can shed some light on the identity of this ‘other’ man you have told us about.”

Bradshaw made his way to the door.

“Mrs Williams, when you’re ready,” said the detective, as he held open the door.

“Can’t I stay with Jim?”

“Not while our investigation is still underway, I’m afraid.”

She leant over and kissed Balham on the forehead, and he squeezed her hand in response. As she was led away by Inspector Bradshaw, she looked back at the man on the bed. The man she now knew she loved more than anything in the world.

As Balham watched her leave, he couldn’t help thinking that she looked like a lost little girl.

The woman he loved was terrified.

And it broke his heart.

Chapter 32

Balham couldn't believe his life was falling apart all over again – just when he thought things were turning around. After months of guilt and shame, he had finally been given the opportunity to clear his name, and to prove that he hadn't been responsible for the death of Azita and the other villagers. A second chance, after he had so nearly ended it all. A second life. As if that weren't enough, he had found a woman with whom he wanted to share that new life. The woman who had saved him at the eleventh hour.

And now, because Katie had chosen to help him, she was living in fear. And she had a right to be fearful. Clearly the police weren't prepared to accept their story at face value. The bottom line was that she was a married woman who had been having an affair, and she had stabbed her husband, using her lover's knife. No wonder the police were suspicious.

And then there was this other man who had disappeared into thin air, presumably with the gun. Who the hell was he? Even Balham had to admit their story looked shaky, to say the least. Of course, Katie's husband still had to be questioned but, somehow, he didn't hold out much hope that Sean's version of events would place them in a favourable light. What a fucking mess.

Balham's head began to pound, and he had to lie back on the bed. He breathed deeply, trying to calm down, but then something happened that caused his blood pressure to soar once again.

His wife had come to pay him a visit.

Chapter 33

“Oh shit.”

Balham had uttered the words under his breath, but Trudi’s hearing was clearly better than he’d remembered.

“Is that any way to greet your wife, when she’s travelled miles to see how you are? You know I hate hospitals – they’re full of fucking sick people.”

Balham almost laughed. You had to hand it to Trudi, he thought. She might be an absolute bitch, but at least she didn’t try to hide the fact.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if some of the old men with bad tickers aren’t a whole lot sicker, if they caught sight of you. Jesus, Trudi, don’t you ever cover up?”

As usual, Trudi was wearing a miniskirt and high heels. Her low-cut top accentuated her tanned cleavage.

“You never know who you might meet. Maybe I’ll bag a rich doctor who knows his way around a woman’s body. It could be just what I need – especially as you’ve lost interest in me. How’s your girlfriend, by the way?”

At first Balham was lost for words. How the devil had she found out about Katie? Suddenly he felt foolish. How did he expect to keep it a secret from her in a village the size of Ranton, where everybody knew everybody else’s business? Besides, she’d probably spoken to the police and they’d told her what had happened in the forest.

“If you mean Katie, she’s not too good. But before you start throwing accusations around, remember I haven’t pried into your weekly visits to the city with your ‘friends’. Things haven’t been right between us since we lost Emily. It’s ridiculous to pretend we’re a happily married couple. So, blaming one another doesn’t solve a thing.”

“Okay, Jim. As always, you’re right. So, let’s stop pretending.”

“Agreed,” said Balham, but the smile on Trudi’s face told him she had something up her sleeve, and that their conversation was about to take a turn for the worse. He was soon proved right.

“Talking of your friend Katie, I’ve been chatting with some of the young policemen on the case and they’ve been ever so helpful. One of them even popped round to the cottage for a chat. He couldn’t do enough for me.”

“I bet he couldn’t. If you’ve got a point to make, I wish you’d get on with it.”

Trudi’s smile only broadened, which set alarm bells ringing in Balham’s head. The bitch was enjoying herself. He decided to bite his tongue and let her get it over with.

“Okay, my cherub, if that’s what you want. Your little whore’s going to be charged with manslaughter. Maybe even murder.”

Balham’s complexion turned red, whether from fear or anger, Trudi couldn’t tell. Either way, she was pleased with his reaction.

“You’re full of shit.”

“If you say so,” replied Trudi, but her relaxed confidence worried him. What if she were telling the truth?

“Whatever she’s charged with,” she went on, “my policeman-friend tells me she’s not handling the pressure too well, poor dear. She’s such a shy, fragile little thing. If things carry on the way they are, they’re likely to finish her off for good. Apparently, the whole mess will take months to clear up. I don’t know if you love this poor girl. If you do, how can you put her through all this?”

“Believe me, if I could stop her suffering I would. But it’s out of my hands.”

Trudi took a step towards the bed and stroked her husband’s hair, before leaning forward to kiss him on the forehead. When she’d finished, he stared at her, wondering

what to expect. Whatever it was, it wasn't the words she uttered next.

“That’s where you’re wrong, sweetheart. Her life is most certainly in your hands.”

Chapter 34

Inspector Bradshaw was losing his patience. The doctor had assured him that Sean Williams should have recovered sufficiently to be questioned, but the knife victim wasn't saying a thing.

"Mr Williams, can you at least tell me if you were alone when you went into the forest and found Mr Balham and your wife together?"

Sean was lying flat on his bed, rocking his head from side to side, mumbling.

"Confused ... my head ... it's all a blur."

"Did you have your shotgun with you?"

"Where am I?" Sean croaked.

Bradshaw wasn't convinced by the man's performance. He'd seen enough knife victims to know that this was *definitely* an act.

"Okay, Mr Williams, have it your way. You're only going to make things worse for yourself. I'm going to speak with the doctor now, and when he tells me there's nothing wrong with you, it's only going to make me wonder what your motives are for not co-operating."

Sean finally looked the detective in the eye, but still said nothing. Bradshaw grunted and left the room. Once outside, he spoke to the constable on the door.

"Keep an eye on this sneaky bastard. I don't trust him an inch."

"Yes, sir."

"Are you certain he hasn't had any visitors?"

"Nobody's entered the room, apart from the hospital staff, of course."

"You checked them all out?"

"Yes, sir."

Bradshaw sighed, and headed to the nurses' station so that he could ask to see the doctor in charge of Sean's case.

“Apparently Mr Williams is too ill to talk, but I think he’s faking,” Bradshaw explained, when the doctor finally arrived.

“I’m inclined to agree with you, Inspector. The patient has shown no signs of a head injury until now. I suppose I’ll have to arrange for an MRI-scan, just to make sure there are no problems.”

“I’d appreciate it if you could expedite matters, Doctor. I need to get a statement from this man as soon as possible.”

“I quite understand. Leave it with me. I should be able to let you know the results before the end of the day.”

“Here’s my card, Doctor. It has my number on it. I’d appreciate it if you’d call me as soon as you know anything.”

“Certainly, Inspector.”

Bradshaw was in a bad mood, and it didn’t improve when he finally got back to the station. Waiting to greet him was Chief Inspector Carter.

“How’s it going, Mike?”

Bradshaw knew that his boss was talking about the case. The man wasn’t one for social chitchat. He only ever talked shop.

“It’s all still up in the air at the moment, sir. One of the witnesses is feigning illness and not talking, and the other two have come up with a version of events that’s a little hard to swallow.”

“I know you’re busy, Mike, but if you wouldn’t mind, I’d like a few words with you. Pop into my office.”

Bradshaw followed Carter down the corridor to his boss’s domain. His heart gave a little flutter. He hated being called into ‘the office’. He always feared the worst. As soon as they were seated, the chief inspector got straight to the point.

"I know you want to get this right, Mike. Let's face it, we don't get many juicy cases like this around here. Just don't get carried away."

Bradshaw couldn't hide his confusion and frowned.

"I'm not sure I follow you, sir."

"All I'm saying is, we might end up with nothing but a domestic dispute that got a little out of hand. Let's not make a mountain out of a molehill."

Bradshaw was almost at a loss for words. He had no idea what the man sitting opposite him was driving at.

"I'm not sure what you mean, sir. It's still only the first stage of the investigation. I haven't even got all the facts in, let alone charged anybody."

"I understand that, Mike. I'm just preparing you for the fact that it might all turn out to be no big deal."

Inside, Bradshaw was angry. What the hell was his boss up to? It was as if he wanted everything swept under the carpet before he'd even got started. He was just doing his job, for Christ's sake. A nasty suspicion began to take centre stage in his mind.

"Where's all this coming from, sir? Are we receiving pressure from above or something?"

The chief inspector's lips pressed together, as if he were controlling his emotions. Bradshaw noticed that his neck, just above the collar, had suddenly turned red.

"Let me get one thing straight, Inspector Bradshaw. I'm my own man. I'm not one of these commanders who lets shit roll downhill on to those below him."

So, he was suddenly 'Inspector Bradshaw', was he? The friendly 'Mike' had clearly fallen by the wayside. Evidently he was being put in his place. Before he could think of a suitable response, Carter was speaking again.

"But I have to keep an eye on the bigger picture. This is the holiday season, Inspector. The longer a case like this drags on, the more it costs local businesses that depend on

tourism. Naturally, everyone hopes the matter can be resolved as quickly as possible.”

Bradshaw stood up to leave.

“I’d better get on with it then, sir. Hopefully we can sort this ‘matter’ out by teatime.”

As Bradshaw made his way out of the office, Carter watched his back. Was the man being insolent? He decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. He was a good detective and produced results which, in turn, always made Carter look good too.

But he couldn’t help thinking the detective was too clever for his own good. It hadn’t taken him long to figure out that Carter was getting pressured by his own boss. He couldn’t help wondering what Bradshaw would have thought if he’d known the truth was even worse. Apparently, if the rumours were to be believed, this time the ‘shit’ was coming from way on high, all the way up to the grey suits who hired and fired men like him.

Carter was a desk man now – not a detective. But even he couldn’t help wondering why a government minister would concern himself with a simple stabbing in a Welsh forest.

Chapter 35

“Stop being melodramatic, Trudi, it doesn’t suit you. What do you mean, Katie’s life is in my hands?”

“You can make the whole mess you’ve created go away, if that’s what you want. No charges. No investigation. And your precious Katie’s as free as a bird.”

Balham looked at his wife as if she’d gone mad.

“What the hell are you talking about? I thought *I* was the one who’d been hit over the head – not you. You’re not making any sense.”

Trudi realised she was taking a risk. She was going to have to show her hand. And, although she wouldn’t have admitted it to anyone, she was frightened of what Balham would do when he found out she’d deceived him. She decided it was worth the risk. She was fucking sick of not being rich.

“I’ve got some friends in high places. They’ll make sure the whole thing goes away, if you agree to help them out – and Katie can put all this behind her. Apparently the poor girl is coming apart at the seams. If you really care about her, like you say, then you can’t stand by and let her suffer.”

Balham sat up in bed, the pain in his head forgotten. He stared at his wife as if she were a stranger. Finally, he managed to respond.

“Hold on, Trudi, back up a bit, will you? What friends in high places?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it bloody matters.”

Trudi simply turned and stared out of the window, pretending to be interested in something outside. Despite his injuries, Balham felt like climbing out of bed and throttling her, but he wanted to find out what she was up to.

“Okay then. Help them out how?”

Trudi knew that once she told him, there would be no turning back. But she decided she'd come too far to change her mind now. What the fuck, she thought.

"They want you to forget about trying to get the investigation re-opened into what happened in Afghanistan. If you agree, the police won't charge Katie and she can stop being such a worryguts. Remember, she saved your life. She doesn't deserve all this."

His head was spinning, as the full implication of what Trudi was saying sank in. There was only one person who wanted the bombing of the Afghan village blamed on Sergeant Balham - and that was Morton. He could hardly contain himself.

"Now it all makes sense. The way you've reacted to the hell I've been going through; the way you've rummaged through my things every chance you've had; and the weekly stopovers in London. You and Morton are an item."

Balham waited for Trudi to admit it, but she simply stared at him, giving nothing away.

"Jesus, you must have both been pissing yourselves behind my back, watching me fall apart. When I put my head through the noose, I was playing right into your hands. I know we've been growing apart, Trudi, but fucking hell - do you really hate me that much?"

"It's not a question of hating you. What was I supposed to do while you were wallowing in self-pity? I want a life. A life I deserve. And Simon will give me that life, if you forget about what happened back in Afghanistan. Someone made a mistake, calling out a few numbers. What can it matter now?"

"It matters to me."

"Well, bully for you. You can explain that to Katie when she ends up in prison as somebody's bitch."

"Jesus Christ, Trudi, how can you live with yourself?"

“If you’re expecting me to stick my head through a noose too, you’ll have a long wait.”

Balham was finding it hard to think. How could he have been so stupid? He’d been so self-absorbed, he hadn’t seen any of this coming. And it had been going on under his very nose.

But he realised he was getting emotional, when he needed to concentrate on doing what was best for Katie. He tried to focus.

“If I agree, what’s to stop me changing my mind, once Katie’s in the clear?”

“Think about it. Morton and his father aren’t going to let you ruin things. *You* might not be frightened of what they can do, but now you’ve got a weak spot. They know you care about what happens to your innocent little girlfriend. If you start causing trouble again, they’ll only come after her some other way.”

It would be so simple, he thought. All he had to do was walk over, put his hands around Trudi’s throat, and squeeze. But who would it help? Certainly not Katie. And she was what was important.

“Okay,” said Balham, rubbing his forehead in an effort to ease the pain in his head.

Trudi couldn’t hear him because he’d mumbled.

“What?”

“I said I’ll do it. Tell Morton I’ll drop it. But Katie needs to walk away scot-free.”

“Okay, I’ll tell him.”

“Trudi?”

“What?”

“Get the hell out of here before I fucking kill you.”

Chapter 36

The young porter hoped that the patient with the knife wound turned out to be a long-term resident of the hospital. The way things were going, he'd be a rich man in no time. When the wealthy uncle's employee had sought him out for a second time, asking him if he would be willing to pass the phone to the unfortunate knife victim again, he readily agreed.

This time Sean took the phone off the porter, no questions asked. The hospital employee, now with another thousand pounds in his possession, nervously watched the door. Seconds later the phone rang and the patient answered.

"Hello?"

The porter had deliberately picked a quiet time of the day, after the doctor had completed his rounds, but before visiting time. He listened to the phone conversation, desperate for it to end before someone came in and started asking questions.

"Okay, I'll do it! I don't suppose I've got much fucking choice!"

When he heard Sean's words, he couldn't help thinking the man and his uncle must have a pretty odd relationship. As soon as the woodcutter had put the phone down on the bedside table, the young hospital worker quickly leant over and pocketed it.

When he left the room, the policeman on the door hardly gave him a second look. As he made his way to the elevators, he searched for any sign of Compton but, as he'd expected, the man had made himself scarce.

"Time for a smoke," said the youth, tapping the bundle of £20 notes in the back pocket of his jeans.

“Hey, Mike!”

“What?”

Inspector Bradshaw glanced up from the mountain of paperwork on his desk, and looked over to see what the officer standing by the coffee machine wanted.

“You know that witness of yours who’s playing dumb?”

“Yeah, don’t remind me.”

“Well, while you were out, the hospital called.”

“And?”

“Apparently he’s made a miraculous recovery and he’s ready to talk.”

“Good God!”

The officer was looking forward to receiving a ‘thank you’ for passing on the welcome news, but Bradshaw had already left.

When the detective arrived at the hospital and stepped into Sean’s room, the woodcutter was sitting up in bed, drinking a cup of tea. The moment he saw Bradshaw, he placed his drink on the bedside table and shifted into a more comfortable position, in preparation for the forthcoming confrontation.

“I’m glad to see you’re feeling a lot better, Mr Williams.”

Sean didn’t respond, and Bradshaw suspected that squeezing answers out of the man would end up like trying to get blood from a stone.

“Okay, Mr Williams. Now that you’ve clearly recovered from your injuries, perhaps you can tell me what happened, and how you ended up with a knife in you.”

“There’s not much to tell. It was an accident.”

Bradshaw took a deep breath and sighed.

“Why don’t you start at the beginning. What were you doing up there, in the woods?”

“Just going for a walk.”

“Just for a walk?”

“Yeah. It was a nice day.”

“Did you know your wife was in the woods when you set off?”

“No.”

“How about Mr Balham? Were you expecting to meet him?”

“Is that his name – Balham?”

“Yes. I take it you’re telling me you’re not acquainted with the man?”

“I’ve seen him around, in the village, and he bought some logs off me. But I didn’t know his name.”

“Did you know he was having an affair with your wife?”

Sean scowled and gave Bradshaw an angry look. It was exactly what the detective had been hoping for. He had deliberately tried to elicit a reaction from the suspect. Suspect? Bradshaw couldn’t help thinking of him as one. He didn’t trust the man one bit.

“Yeah, I knew.”

“How did you feel about that?”

“How do you think I fucking felt?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you were consumed with anger. Maybe you went up there with a gun to kill them.”

“A gun? You haven’t found any gun.”

Now Bradshaw knew the man was lying. His response was all wrong. He’d been prepared for the question. Which told the detective there *was* a gun. And, because it couldn’t be found, there must have been a third man, too.

“What makes you think we’ve been looking for a gun?”

For the first time, Sean looked flustered. Bradshaw could almost see the man’s mind working, as he searched for the right response.

“You ... you just said I had a gun.”

“Did you have a gun?”

“No.”

“Are you sure you’re not still confused? Perhaps you’ve forgotten your friend took it with him?”

This time Bradshaw noticed a look of fear on Sean’s face. It took several seconds for the patient to compose himself.

“I was on my own. What makes you think I had a friend with me?”

“Mr Balham says that it was your friend who hit him.”

“He’s talking bollocks.”

“Just to be clear, Mr Williams. You’re saying that Mr Balham is lying and there was no other man present.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“So, it must have been you that struck Mr Balham over the head.”

Sean hesitated before answering.

“Yeah. But he attacked me first. I was just defending myself.”

“But he was struck on the back of the head – from behind.”

“Yeah. I managed to get the better of him.”

“I see. Apparently Mr Balham used to be in the army and, from what I’ve heard, he’s pretty handy with his fists. You must be able to handle yourself, Mr Williams.”

Bradshaw looked the man up and down, and Sean could see the scepticism in his eyes.

“Yeah, I can. Balham tripped. That gave me an advantage, and I didn’t want him getting up and starting in on me again - he was acting like a madman. Besides, I only tapped him.”

“It was hardly a tap, Mr Williams. The man’s lucky to be alive. Lucky for you, too.”

“Look, I was the one who was stabbed.”

“Okay, Mr Williams, let’s talk about that. Who stabbed you?”

“My bloody wife did ... but it was an accident.”

The detective thought Sean had made the second claim almost as an afterthought. It fitted in with what Mrs Williams had said, but Bradshaw got the impression that her husband didn’t want to defend her, and he was doing so grudgingly. It was almost as if he were talking against his will. Somehow, the detective was sure he was missing something.

“Tell me what happened.”

She came over and found me and lover-boy having a punch-up, and she started screaming. So I went over to see what was wrong, and I tripped.”

“It sounds like there was a lot of ‘tripping’ going on,” said Bradshaw, interrupting.

“Look, do you want to know what fucking happened or not?”

Bradshaw couldn’t help noticing Williams had a short fuse. He now had little doubt - Williams wasn’t the sort to watch his wife carrying on with another man and do nothing about it. The woodcutter knew the two of them were up there, in the woods, and he’d intended to teach them a lesson.

“I’d watch your step, Mr Williams.”

“Or what?”

“Or you could end up on an attempted murder charge.”

Bradshaw was annoyed with himself for rising to the bait. The conversation he’d had with his boss was still ringing in his ears and he was tired.

“I’m the one who was stabbed!” cried Sean, intruding on his thoughts.

“So you keep saying. But, you’re also saying you tripped and somehow ‘fell’ on to the knife, am I right?”

“Yeah.”

“So, if you were stabbed, you did it to yourself.”

Sean hesitated before answering.

“That’s right.”

“But it was in your wife’s hand. Why do you think she was carrying it?”

“How should I know? Maybe she was frightened of being attacked.”

“By you? Does that mean you’ve attacked her before?”

“Don’t try putting words into my mouth. She saw Balham on the ground, so she might have thought I’d killed him. She wasn’t thinking straight.”

“And you were, I suppose?”

“Look, I’ve told you what happened and it’s the truth. Katie didn’t intend to hurt me with the knife. It was an accident. I don’t want to press charges. I hit Balham, I’ll admit that. But it was self-defence, and if he says any different, he’s lying. That’s all I’ve got to say.”

The patient was staring at the wall as he spoke, and Bradshaw couldn’t help thinking the man was giving a prepared speech that had been written for him. This case was giving him a headache, and the hospital bed was starting to look mighty welcoming.

Something wasn’t right and he knew it. But then he thought about his little ‘chat’ with the chief inspector. To hell with it, he thought. If everyone wanted this mess to go away, then it could go away. He needed some sleep.

Chapter 37

Katie's entire body ached, and she knew why. The stress of the last few days had been almost unbearable. In her twenty-six years, she had never been in trouble with the police. So, having convinced herself that she might be accused of attempted murder, she'd begun to fear the worst. The thought of going to prison for years had filled her with dread.

She'd kept reminding herself that it was an accident, and that Sean had been intent on killing her, but, somehow it failed to ease her conscience. When she'd heard the gunshot, she'd known it must be Sean. That was why she'd picked up the knife. In her heart, she knew she would have killed Sean to save Jim's life. To the outside world, she would have looked like the adulterous wife, who murdered her husband so that she could be with her lover.

And Jim *was* her lover. When she'd thought that he might have been killed, it had felt as if her world had collapsed around her. She loved him more than anything. She knew that now.

Yes, it was little wonder that her body ached. She had spent the last three days terrified out of her life. But now, despite her physical discomfort, she felt euphoric. The police were finally satisfied that she was innocent. She wouldn't face any charges and, what's more, neither would Jim. And, as if all that weren't enough, she had learnt that he'd almost made a full recovery and would be released from hospital the next day.

Why Sean hadn't tried to press charges was a mystery. She assumed he was protecting himself. The gun might not have been found, but he had clearly gone looking for them in the forest to do them harm. If it had gone to court, and their testimony had been accepted as the truth instead of

his, Sean might well have been the one who had ended up in prison.

Whatever Sean's motives were, she knew she couldn't spend a moment longer under the same roof with him. That was why she was packing her bags. Laura had said she could move in with her until she got herself sorted out.

Katie had been tempted to escape the village altogether, but she wanted to be close to Jim. Besides, now more than ever, she needed to earn money and hold on to her job at the shop. She just had to hope that Sean wouldn't come after her, looking for trouble.

As she closed the door to her cottage, and said goodbye to her old life, she felt excited and full of hope for the future. It was time to start a new life – a life with Jim by her side.

Chapter 38

Balham too was torn by conflicting emotions. There was relief – relief at knowing that Katie’s suffering had ended. To him, her happiness was more important than his own problems. As he lay in his hospital bed, he even smiled at that. If ever you needed a definition of love, surely that was it.

But he had to admit that Katie’s freedom had come at a high price. Just when he’d been so close to proving his innocence, and bringing those responsible for Azita’s murder to justice, it had all been snatched away from him.

He might not have liked to admit it, but Trudi was right – his love for Katie was a weakness that Morton could exploit. Unless he had solid evidence to put the man away when he made a move against him, he would always run the risk of placing Katie in danger. And that he could not bear.

Unable to sleep or think straight, Balham cursed his injuries. There were still so many unanswered questions. For one thing, who had hit him and knocked him out? Could it have been Morton, keeping tabs on him? Or was there someone else? Somehow, Morton had got hold of the film and altered it before it was handed over to the major. But Balham had given the film to his mate, Compton. Had Compton betrayed him? Was *he* the one who’d followed him into the woods?

And then there was his sneaking suspicion that the misdirected air strike hadn’t been an accident, after all. But why would Morton deliberately blow the hell out of an innocent Afghan village? What did he have to gain?

Balham’s head began to hurt, and he reached over to his bedside table for a glass of water, so that he could pop yet more painkillers into his mouth.

Rage was taking control, and Balham realised that the only way to vanquish it would be to act. He would get the evidence he needed and find out what really happened on that terrible day in Afghanistan. He would go after Morton and whoever was helping him, and beat a confession out of them if he had to.

But then he remembered Katie, and a terrible realisation dawned on him. Before he got Morton in his sights, he would have to end his relationship with her. The very thought made him feel physically sick. But it was something he would have to do, if the nightmare were to ever end.

The pain in his head made him want to scream.

Chapter 39

Balham had been asleep barely an hour, when he was woken up by the noisy routines of the hospital. He was tempted just to get up and leave, but he had to wait for the doctor to visit before he could be officially discharged. Besides, he needed the doctor's prescription, if he were to have access to a supply of strong painkillers. He knew he wouldn't be able to function without them.

So, to pass the time, he decided to check his phone. There was a message from Katie. Apparently Sean had been discharged from hospital the day before, and she had moved out of their cottage to live with her sister's family, at least temporarily. She was hoping that he would come and visit her, just as soon as he was feeling better.

He felt like shit. He brought his hand up to his face and touched his stubble. He hadn't looked at himself in the mirror properly for days, and he presumed he looked as bad as he felt, in spite of the attentions of a pretty nurse who had flirted with him every morning.

Now, in the fresh light of day, the thought of visiting Katie and telling her it was all over had lost its appeal. He just wanted to go home, grab some things and disappear. So he decided to take the coward's way out. He would text her and tell her he was leaving.

I'm going away for a while, he wrote. What they'd had, had been wonderful while it lasted, but it was over. They were both still married and it was too complicated. It was for the best. He wished her every happiness for the future, and hoped she wouldn't think badly of him for deserting her.

Once he'd sent the text, he got up and went to the bathroom to shave. When he could finally bring himself to look in the mirror and examine his reflection, he loathed the man who stared back at him.

Chapter 40

When Katie received the text, she couldn't believe what she was reading. For an instant, she had hoped it was some sort of cruel joke, perpetrated by Sean to get back at her for leaving him. But, when she checked, it had been sent from Jim's phone.

The message had been sent at eight a.m. that morning. She looked at the clock by her bed, in her sister's guest room. It was almost noon. She cursed herself for being so lazy. Ever since her ordeal had ended, all she seemed to want to do was sleep. Maybe she still had time. Maybe she could catch him before he left.

Throwing on the first clothes she could find, she quickly checked her face and hair in the mirror. She never wore much make-up and Jim had said he found it refreshing. She didn't look her best, but it would have to do.

Her sister nearly dropped a basket of dirty linen, as Katie rushed past her in the hallway, before dashing out of the house. Jim's cottage was at the other end of the village, but she ran all the way, and a little under five minutes later she was standing on his front step, trying to catch her breath. She rang the bell and her heart sank.

Trudi Balham answered the door.

"What the fuck do you want?"

It was the welcome Katie had been expecting. Trudi stood there in skin-tight jeans and a designer T-shirt, her hair tied back. She still looked striking, but somehow it made her appear even more intimidating.

"I don't want any trouble, Trudi. I've just come here to see Jim."

"You don't want any trouble? You've got a nerve. Perhaps you should have thought of that before you decided to fuck my husband."

“Is he here?” asked Katie, determined not to be drawn into a slanging match.

“No, he’s not here. And he’s not coming back.”

Trudi couldn’t hide her satisfaction, when she saw the look of desperation appear across Katie’s face.

“Where’s he gone?” asked Katie, not expecting an answer, but Trudi surprised her.

“To London. The bastard drags me from the city to this Godforsaken shit-hole, fucks some slut from the village, and then buggers off and leaves me here.”

Katie ignored the insult. All that mattered was speaking to Jim.

“How do you know he went to London?”

“Why do you want to know? Are you missing him, sweetheart?”

Trudi feigned an expression of concern, and Katie knew what was coming next.

“Yes.”

“Oh, that’s a shame. Why don’t you fuck off and tell someone who gives a shit?”

Katie just stood there, as Trudi slammed the door in her face.

Chapter 41

Not for the first time, Ricky was feeling like a coward. He had headed for his aunt's bedroom door four times in the last hour, and in each instance, when he heard her crying, he had crept back downstairs. Being a teenage boy, he decided he wasn't equipped to deal with a weeping woman. Little did he know that as a grown man, he would probably be none the wiser.

On his fifth attempt, the sound of sobbing appeared to have stopped, and he summoned up his courage and tapped the door with his knuckles.

"Aunt Kate? Is it okay to come in?"

At first there was no answer, and he was preparing to make a hasty exit for the fifth time, when his aunt came to the door.

"What do you want, Ricky?" asked Katie, pulling a loose strand of hair behind her ear. Jim had liked the way she did that.

"It's about Jim."

Katie's face dropped and her shoulders sagged. Ricky pretended not to notice the redness around her eyes and filled the silence.

"It's important."

"Okay, I suppose you'd better come in."

The room was far from spacious, and Ricky was forced to sit on the only chair, at a small dressing table. Katie resumed her position on the bed, where a pile of tissues testified to the fact that she had indeed been crying.

"Where's Jim? Is he still in hospital?" asked Ricky.

"No. He was discharged this morning."

"Why isn't he here?"

As soon as he'd uttered the words, Ricky realised he'd said the wrong thing. From her reaction, it was as if he'd stabbed her through the heart. There was an awkward

silence until Katie finally answered. But her voice cracked and she had to cough to clear her throat.

“He ... he’s gone to London.”

“Oh.”

“Ricky, what did you want to talk to me about?”

This time it was the nephew who appeared to struggle for the right words. As he spoke, he looked down at the carpet, as if he couldn’t bring himself to look his aunt in the eye.

“I think I might have made a terrible mistake.”

“What kind of mistake?”

When he didn’t answer, Katie looked at him, and he was frowning, apparently lost in thought. Eventually he spoke.

“It wasn’t until afterwards that I thought it was strange. But then it was too late,” said Ricky, shaking his head. “Why did I have to show off?”

“You’re not making any sense, Ricky. What happened?”

Ricky could tell that his aunt was on the verge of breaking down, so he spat it out.

“Some guy I’ve never met before came up to me when I was waiting for the bus. Said he knew Jim. Apparently they were buddies in the army. He sounded concerned about him, you know?”

Ricky paused, as if he didn’t want to finish.

“Go on,” Katie urged him.

“I told him about the film, and how we’d worked out it had been tampered with.”

Katie sat up on the bed, trying to take it all in.

“Are you saying this man knew all about the incident in Afghanistan?”

“Yeah. But he sounded like he was on Jim’s side,” said Ricky quickly.

“It’s a bit of a coincidence, isn’t it? I mean, both of them were together in Afghanistan when that village was blown up, and he just happens to turn up here.”

"I know. That's why I've been beating myself up about being so stupid. What if he isn't Jim's friend and he's up to no good?"

Katie got up off the bed and went over to the window, as if the view of the high street would provide her with inspiration.

"Did he tell you his name?"

"He said it was Smith. How could I have been so dumb?"

"Don't blame yourself, Ricky. You weren't to know. Besides, we're just speculating. He might have been genuine. Did he tell you anything else?"

"He said he was staying at the caravan site."

Katie looked at her watch. It was two o'clock.

"Let's go over there."

"Why? What are we going to do?"

"We're going to see my friend Claire."

"The one who cleans the caravans?"

"Yes. Maybe we can find out exactly who this Mr Smith really is."

Chapter 42

Katie and Ricky found Claire sitting behind the reception desk of the caravan site, having a cup of tea while she flicked through a magazine. She was so engrossed in her reading material, she hadn't seen the two of them enter the building.

"Taking it easy, Claire?"

Katie's friend almost jumped out of her seat, and spilt some of her drink.

"Jesus, Katie, that wasn't funny. For a minute there, I thought you were the owners, come back early. What brings you here?"

"We were hoping you could help us find someone who's staying on the site. His name is Smith."

"He said he was here with his wife and kids," said Ricky, suddenly remembering a piece of information he'd forgotten to share with Katie.

"Well, let's have a look at the book," said Claire, taking a last gulp of her tea, before she reached over the desk and retrieved a large register. Her finger worked its way down the page for the previous week.

"Smith, Smith, Smith ... ah, here we are. We *have* got a Smith, but there's no mention of a family. Looks like he's on his own. Probably a fisherman or something. That's why Mrs Curtis gave him one of the old caravans at the back of the site, I'll bet. Didn't want him messing up one her precious new jobs."

"Do you know if he's still staying in it?" asked Ricky.

"I wouldn't know. But he's paid up for another week. I can show you where it is, if you want to have a look."

Ricky and Katie looked at one another, unsure what to do. Eventually Katie had an idea.

"Claire, do you have a spare key to his caravan?"

"Yes," said Claire warily.

“Could we borrow it for a few minutes?”

“I’m not sure about that, Katie. I don’t think Mrs Curtis would like it. What do you want it for?”

“Well, it’s a bit embarrassing, but Mr Smith came to the shop this morning, and when he paid for his papers he popped his phone on the counter. He must have the same make as mine, and when he left he took my phone by mistake.”

Katie took her phone from her pocket for effect, pretending it belonged to Smith, and continued with her story.

“The thing is, I’m desperate to get it back. If he’s not in and I had the key to his caravan, I could look and see if it’s lying on a table or something and swap it back. He’ll be none the wiser.”

“Oh, goodness. I know how you feel. I wouldn’t know what to do if I lost my phone. I’d be devastated if I thought a stranger was looking through all my personal things. Especially the photos,” said Claire, giving Katie a knowing wink. But then she remembered Ricky was there and composed herself. “Hold on, though. He’ll probably have it with him.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Katie quickly. “If he has, I’ll just have to pin a note on the door to the caravan. He won’t know I’ve been inside.”

Claire still looked doubtful.

“Please, Claire.”

Claire thought for a moment.

“Okay, but don’t take too long. Mrs Curtis might be back soon. And check this Smith isn’t in there first,” said Claire, reaching for one of the keys, hanging from a series of hooks on the far wall.

Ricky and Katie made their way to the edge of the site, and searched for Smith’s caravan.

“How will we know if he’s in there?” asked Ricky.

“You’ll have to knock on the door and find out. He’s already met you, so he shouldn’t be suspicious.”

Ricky gulped, not relishing the prospect.

“What will I say if he answers?”

“He said he knows Jim. Tell him you just found out which caravan he was staying in and you were wondering if he’d like to meet up with his old army pal.”

“What if he says yes?”

“That’s not likely. Unless he really is genuine.”

Before he had time to change his mind, he and Katie had reached the caravan. Taking a deep breath, he walked up and knocked the door. There was no answer. Katie retrieved the key that Claire had given her and, having one last look behind her to make sure nobody was around, she carefully opened the door.

The caravan was small, with a tiny kitchenette and a dining area that doubled-up as a spare bed. Along a narrow corridor was a toilet and shower, followed by a bedroom that contained a bed and precious little else.

“What do we do now?” asked Ricky.

“Let’s try and find out who he is.”

Ten minutes later they had searched every drawer and cupboard they could find and found nothing.

“It was worth a try. We’d better go before he comes back.”

They were about to leave, when Ricky looked over at the seating area, set behind the dining table.

“Does that cushion look a little higher than the rest to you?”

Katy shrugged, and she waited by the door, while Ricky walked over to investigate.

“Bingo!” he cried, and he held up a slim, lightweight laptop.

Ricky walked to the door, carrying it under his arm.

“We’re not stealing a laptop, Ricky.”

“Why not? The man’s out to get Jim.”

“We don’t know that. Besides, when he finds out it’s gone missing, he’ll complain and Claire could get the blame. She might even put him on to us.”

Ricky pursed his lips together. He hadn’t thought of that. He returned to the table, and Katie assumed he was going to put the computer back. But instead he sat down and placed it on the dining table. He’d already switched it on by the time she joined him.

“Put it back, Ricky. We haven’t got time.”

“It’ll only take a minute. We’ve come this far. It would be a shame to quit now.

Katie went over to the window to keep watch, while Ricky worked his magic.

“It’s asking for a password. I’ll type in ‘Smith’. It’s worth a try.”

“Any luck?” asked Katie.

Ricky shook his head.

“No. But it’s come up with a hint.”

“A hint?”

“Yeah. It’s for twats who forget their password. It says ‘tour’. Any ideas?”

“Tour? This is ridiculous, Ricky. It could refer to a holiday he’s had or anything.”

Suddenly Ricky smiled.

“Aunt Kate? Have you ever heard the phrase, ‘Tour of Duty’?”

“No. Why?”

Without answering, Ricky’s fingers tapped the keyboard.

“Shit. It didn’t work.”

Katie left the window, wondering what her nephew was up to. She looked at the screen to see what he’d typed in, but all she saw was a handful of dots. Suddenly she felt incredibly stupid. Passwords never appeared on the screen.

“What did you type in?”

“Afghanistan.”

“Okay, so it didn’t work. Let’s get ... hang on. You haven’t typed in enough letters.”

“Oh.”

“You did spell it with an ‘h’, didn’t you?”

“An ‘h’?”

“Yeah, after the ‘g’.”

“Oh,” said Ricky, realising his mistake.

“Now who’s the twat?” asked Katie, smiling, and Ricky laughed as he made a second attempt.

Suddenly the screensaver disappeared, and they had access to the files.

“Well done, Ricky. Perhaps you’re not a twat after all.”

“I’ll take that as a complement.”

Ricky proceeded to search through documents in the downloads folder, and found a name and address at the top of a telephone bill.

“It’s Compton!” cried Ricky. “He’s the one who passed on Jim’s film to the major.”

“Okay. We’ve found out what we needed to know. Let’s not push our luck. Switch it off and put it back exactly where you found it.”

Ricky was about to shut it down when he spotted something.

“Look at this,” he said, pointing to the screen.

“What about it? It’s just an insurance document.”

“That’s what it’s called, but it’s an ‘mpeg’.”

“A what?”

“A movie file.”

“So?”

Instead of answering, Ricky clicked on it. The screen suddenly came to life with a juddering image of soldiers in a dusty compound, armed to the teeth. They stared at the

screen in disbelief, and then at one another. Finally Ricky spoke.

“Holy shit, Aunt Kate. I think we’ve found the film.”

Chapter 43

“This could save Jim,” said Katie, patting Ricky on the back. “The only problem is, we’ll have to take the laptop now.”

“Thank goodness for the wonders of modern technology,” said Ricky with a flourish, as he took his house keys out of his pocket.

Attached to the key ring was a small flash-drive, which he inserted into the USB slot on the computer. He copied the file and was about to remove the drive, when he spotted a text document also called insurance. As an afterthought, he copied that too.

Katie had returned to the window to check it was all clear outside. She saw a fit man, in his thirties, walking purposefully towards the caravan.

“Ricky, is that Compton?”

Ricky ran over to have a look outside.

“Shit. Yes.”

He returned to the table and shut down the laptop, before placing it under the cushion where they’d found it.

“Now what?” he cried, nervously looking around the caravan.

“I spotted a fire-door in the bedroom. It opens out on to the rear.”

They ran to the bedroom and Ricky pushed the bar on the door but nothing happened.

“It’s stuck!”

“Well, kick the bloody thing.”

Ricky stepped back, feeling like a cop on one of the American TV shows he watched at the weekend. On the second kick, the door sprang open. They both jumped down on to the gravel as quietly as they could and pushed the door to. It wouldn’t lock, but there was nothing they could do about it. So they waited and listened.

A few seconds later they heard Compton opening the front door, and they could feel the caravan rock slightly as he walked from one end to the other.

“We can’t run for it. He’s bound to see us,” said Katie.

“Through here.”

Ricky pointed to a thick hedge that separated the caravan site from a farmer’s field. It was covered in thorns, but they had no choice. Ricky said he’d go first, and by bringing his hands up into the sleeves of his jacket, he was able to forge a way through without serious injury. Katie quickly followed behind, using her nephew’s body for protection.

By the time they had skirted the field and made their way back to the village, they were both gasping for breath. But they wasted no time and headed for the house, and Ricky’s bedroom. While Ricky loaded the files he’d copied from Compton’s laptop, Katie rushed downstairs to fetch them both some bottled water from the refrigerator. She’d broken into a sweat and she decided they deserved it.

When she returned to Ricky’s room, he’d already found the part of the film where Balham passed the scrap of paper with the co-ordinates on to the lieutenant. Ricky froze the footage on the clearest frame he could find and outlined the numbers on the paper. When he used the zoom feature to get a closer look, every single digit could be seen.

“The numbers are all there. Now we can prove that Jim didn’t make a mistake,” said Ricky excitedly.

“That’s if those numbers aren’t the co-ordinates to the village that was attacked,” said Katie cautiously.

“It’ll be easy to find out. The army is bound to have kept a record of the grid reference the lieutenant radioed in. Anyway, the numbers Jim calls out on this film are different from those on the doctored film.”

“What was the other document?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t looked at it yet. It’s probably nothing,” said Ricky, closing the film and clicking on the other file.

Ricky was wrong.

The document explained everything.

Chapter 44

Katie took a seat next to Ricky, and they both leant forward, staring at the screen, as if the action would help them to absorb the contents of the file. The text was laid out in the style of a formal letter. At the top, it identified Compton as the author, and stated his rank and serial number, when he had served in Afghanistan. The date and location of his patrol, when the air strike was called in, were also given. The next line stated: ‘Opened upon my death.’

When he read it, Ricky looked at his aunt, puzzled.

“What do you make of that?”

“I’m just guessing,” said Katie, “but I bet this letter has been printed off and given to a solicitor or something, just in case anything happens to him. Like an insurance policy.”

“I guess that explains the name of the file.”

They turned their attention back to the substance of the letter, and Katie opted to read it out.

Lieutenant Simon Morton came to me with his plan three weeks prior to the air strike mentioned above. He explained to me that his father, Sir Phillip Morton, needed somebody out of the way

The father and son had discovered that a journalist called Richard Pearson was taking an unhealthy interest in their affairs, and the lieutenant began investigating the movements of the man, who was in Afghanistan, covering a story at the time. When the lieutenant found out that the journalist would be meeting the elders of a village, close to where we were deployed, he hatched his plan and approached me.

He explained that he would call in an air strike on the village at the time the journalist would be there. To absolve himself from blame, he told me that he would order

Sergeant Balham to work out the grid reference before calling it in. When the wrong location was attacked, Morton would simply say Balham had given him the incorrect co-ordinates.

When the sergeant struck the lieutenant, Morton made sure that I was the one who accompanied Balham back to base. Lieutenant Morton knew that Sergeant Balham's helmet-cam would record the incident, and that was why he had enlisted my help. He also knew that Balham trusted me, and that the sergeant would ask me to pass the film on to the major.

The equipment and software had already been set up in Lieutenant Morton's quarters, and that was where I doctored the film. I had practiced the procedure many times, and a recorded 'sound bite' had already been made, using someone who could mimic Balham's voice extremely accurately.

The plan was successful. Richard Pearson was killed, and, once he'd viewed the doctored film, Balham blamed himself for the 'misdirected' air strike.

I testify that all the above facts, as I have stated them, are true.

Signed

Corporal Harry Compton

"I can't believe it," said Katie, once they'd read the letter. How could they kill all those people? And to blame it on an innocent man? Jim nearly killed himself because of the guilt he felt. They're monsters."

"Yeah. Sir Phillip Morton? Is he the one I've seen on the news? The government minister?"

"Yes. It's unbelievable. But now we've got the proof."

"Not quite," said Ricky, and Katie's face dropped.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the film looks like it’s the original, but they could always say it’s been tampered with, like the other one.”

“But what about the letter?”

“In some ways that’s even less convincing. It’s just a text document. Without Compton to testify that it’s genuine, it’s probably worthless. They could say it’s all a figment of our imagination and that we typed it out ourselves.”

“I suppose you’re right, but at least we know the truth.”

“Are you going to tell Jim?” asked Ricky.

“I would if I knew where to find him. I’ve tried calling his number, but he’s not answering his phone.”

He could tell Katie was feeling hurt, and he thought for a moment, before he decided to ask his next question.

“Aunt Kate? Why were you crying earlier?”

“Was it that obvious?”

“Kind of.”

“Jim and I broke up.”

“Broke up? Why?”

“He didn’t really tell me. He just sent a text saying it was too complicated, because we’re both already married.”

“I don’t buy it,” said Ricky. “You were great together. Besides, you both knew the other one was married before. It didn’t seem to matter then.”

Katie laughed.

“Look at my nephew, the relationship expert,” she said, giving him a friendly pat on the arm.

Ricky lowered his eyes, suddenly feeling shy in front of his aunt.

“I’m not an expert. It just doesn’t make sense. Until now I didn’t realise how ruthless these bastards are. Perhaps he’s just trying to protect you?”

Katie wasn’t sure she agreed with her nephew, but suddenly she found herself feeling a lot better than she had

that morning. Ricky brought his hands up to his eyes and rubbed them.

"Hey, I've just thought of something."

"What?"

"Jim said there was another person in the woods who hit him over the head, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"And now we know that must have been Compton, right?"

"Right," said Katie, happy to let her nephew go on.

"So, he must have helped Sean, when Jim was beating him in that scrap."

"Right."

"That means they were working together."

"Of course!" cried Katie.

"And then, out of the blue, Sean suddenly decided he didn't want to press charges. That wasn't like him. I'm sorry, Aunt Kate, but I suppose I can say it now - I never liked him."

"You were right not to like him," Katie said.

"Anyway, do you see what I'm driving at?"

"Not really."

"Maybe they made a deal. I'd told Compton we knew the film was a fake. He and Morton must have been worried that Jim would stir up trouble. Maybe they persuaded Jim to drop any idea of exposing them by promising to get you off the hook."

"My God, do you think so?" said Katie, suddenly excited.

"He must still love you."

As soon as he'd said it, Ricky felt embarrassed, and blushed.

"If you're right and he did all that for me, I want to help him. If only we could prove what really happened."

"I might have an idea how we can do just that."

Chapter 45

When she thought about how Ricky had managed to find the files on Compton's computer, she was really proud of her nephew. But now, when he suggested they try and discover what the journalist in the Afghan village had been working on, she couldn't help thinking he was getting carried away.

"But he's dead," said Katie.

"I know, but what if he shared what he knew."

"If he'd done that, surely the paper he worked for would have followed it up."

"I wasn't thinking of the people at his paper."

"Then who?"

Ricky smiled before he answered.

"His widow."

"His widow? I'm not sure."

"What are you not sure about?" asked Ricky, sounding a little deflated at having his idea discounted by Katie so quickly.

"We don't even know if he was married."

"I can soon find out," said Ricky, pointing to his computer.

"Okay, let's say for the sake of argument there is a widow and she knows what he was investigating. Why hasn't she passed that on?"

"Why would she? As far as she's concerned, her husband was killed because of a tragic mistake."

"But ... but how would we find out what she knows?"

"That's simple. We'll just go and pay her a visit."

* * *

Once Ricky had found out that Richard Pearson had indeed been married, he continued to avail himself of the

World Wide Web in order to locate where the widow lived. Her address turned out to be in Islington, London. Ricky didn't want to admit it to his Aunt Kate, but he was enjoying himself. He was starting to feel like a real-life detective.

When he suggested they headed straight off, he was a little put out when Katie refused. But she wanted to check with her sister that it was okay to drag her son off to London. Besides, she didn't feel comfortable arriving at Mrs Pearson's home unannounced, and she insisted they contacted her first to make an appointment.

Katie may have wanted to do everything she could to help Jim, but if she and Ricky were going to continue working on this together, she decided she ought to at least act like the responsible adult, even if she didn't feel like one. So it was decided that they would catch the train the following day, provided Mrs Pearson agreed to a meeting.

However, that night, as Katie sat by her phone, plucking up the courage to dial the number of the journalist's home, she was beginning to wish she'd let Ricky have his way. She didn't want to be turned down. She took a deep breath and typed in the number.

"Hello, is that Mrs Pearson?"

"Yes, can I help you?"

"I hope so, Mrs Pearson. My name's Katie Williams. You don't know me, but I was hoping I could discuss something with you that's very important."

Abigail Pearson was about to put the phone down, assuming the caller was about to launch into a sales pitch. But something about the woman's voice caused her to stay on the line.

"Perhaps if you told me what this is regarding."

"It's about your late husband."

Abigail Pearson didn't respond. If there was one thing she didn't want to talk about with a stranger, it was her husband.

"Mrs Pearson, are you still there?"

"Yes, but ... Katie, is it? I'm not prepared to discuss my late husband's affairs when I don't know what this is all about."

"I'm trying to help a friend of mine."

"I see. And who exactly is this friend of yours?"

Katie paused before answering, and braced herself for Mrs Pearson's reaction.

"His name is James Balham. He's the soldier who was thrown out of the army for killing your husband."

Chapter 46

Katie and Ricky had risen early and driven into town to catch the train to Birmingham. From there they would change trains for London, and finally catch the tube into Islington. Katie hadn't been to London in years. She had wanted to go – to shop and maybe see a show – but Sean had refused to take her. Unfortunately, on this occasion, there would be no time to take in the sights.

“How did you get her to agree to see us?” asked Ricky, sipping coffee from a paper cup, as he sat opposite Katie on the train.

“I told her the man who'd ordered the air strike that killed her husband had used Jim as a scapegoat. I don't think she believed me, but she was intrigued. She sounds like a nice lady. I think she even welcomes the interruption. I can't begin to imagine what she's going through.”

“You're a nice lady too, Aunt Kate. She could probably tell, even over the phone. I reckon that's why she agreed to see us.”

Katie smiled.

“That was a lovely thing to say, Ricky. I think you're my favourite nephew.”

“I'm your *only* nephew.”

“I know. But that's not your fault.”

Ricky had been taking a sip of coffee and almost spilled it when he couldn't stifle a laugh. When he'd recovered, he shared his thoughts.

“I'm looking forward to getting to London.”

“You probably won't get to see much of it.”

“I know, but I might get to see some pretty girls at least. In fact, I'll probably see more girls today than I've seen in the past five years in our village.”

“You're probably right. Ranton's no place for a young man. Especially when he's a shit-hot detective.”

Ricky smiled again, and sipped some more of his coffee, as he watched the scenery pass by the window of the carriage. Eventually he sat up a little straighter.

"I *am* a shit-hot detective, aren't I?"

* * *

When they arrived at Abigail Pearson's home, they discovered it was a four-storey town house, larger than most of the cottages in their village. Katie didn't even want to think about how much a big property near the heart of London would have cost. You could have probably exchanged it for a mansion back in Wales, she thought. Putting idle musings aside, she rang the bell.

Abigail Pearson looked younger than she had sounded on the phone. Katie would have said she was in her early forties. She was slim and had long, dark hair. Her features were delicate and Katie could detect a sadness in her eyes, behind her frameless spectacles.

"Mrs Pearson?"

Abigail smiled, but it did not come naturally. Katie could tell that the woman before her had not smiled properly for a long time.

"Yes. And you're Katie?"

"Yes. And this is my nephew, Ricky."

"Please, come on in. We'll go through to the kitchen."

The kitchen was even larger than Katie had expected. It stretched along the whole width of the house, and extended into the garden. Skylights in the roof bathed it in natural daylight. There was a large oak dining table, where they were invited to sit.

"Would you like a tea or a coffee?"

"Oh, tea would be lovely, Mrs Pearson, thank you."

"Please, call me Abby. Two teas?" she asked, looking in Ricky's direction.

“Yes, please, Mrs ... Abby.”

Abby smiled for a second time. But on this occasion it appeared genuine, thought Katie.

Suddenly they heard footsteps descending the stairs and a girl’s voice called out from the hallway.

“Did I hear someone ordering drinks?”

A strikingly pretty teenage girl entered the kitchen, and Ricky looked up, his eyes as wide as saucers. She possessed the same long, dark hair as her mother, but it was tied back in a pony-tail. She was wearing a simple white T-shirt and jeans, but somehow Ricky could tell they were expensive. They fitted her *too* perfectly. When she saw Ricky, she smiled. Unlike her mother, her smile appeared more carefree.

“Yes, that’s perfect timing, sweetheart,” said Abby. “Three teas. Four, if you’d like one yourself.”

“Thank you, mother. You’re *so* kind.”

“This is my daughter, Samantha.”

“Nice to meet you, Samantha,” said Katie.

Ricky didn’t respond. He appeared to have lost the power of speech. While she waited for the kettle to boil, Samantha joined them at the table. A black and white cat had followed her into the kitchen, and she picked it up and sat it on her lap.

“I prefer Sam,” she said, looking directly at Ricky. “What’s your name?”

Ricky ran his fingers through his dishevelled hair, in an effort to appear relaxed, but the tremor in his voice gave him away.

“It’s ... it’s Ricky.”

“What’s that short for? Richard?”

“Yeah.”

“That was my dad’s name.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Don’t you like Richard? Is that why you shortened it to Ricky?”

Ricky struggled to return her keen stare. Her pretty blue eyes were mesmerising.

“No, it’s okay, I guess. It’s just that I prefer Ricky. Like you prefer Sam,” he said, hoping he appeared insightful.

“Cool. Just never shorten it to Dick.”

The kettle had boiled and, as Sam got up to make the tea, the black and white cat jumped down and ran through a cat-flap into the garden.

Katie and Abby shared a knowing look, as Ricky watched Sam bend down for some milk in the refrigerator. They’d both been teenagers once, it said. Katie hoped it was a sign that Abby would help them.

“I have to say, Katie, I was intrigued by what you said over the phone, but I hope you haven’t had a wasted journey. I can understand you wanting to help your friend, but it was all thoroughly investigated at the time. What makes you think he’s being used as a scapegoat?”

Sam had brought a tray of drinks and some biscuits. She joined them at the table and rested her chin on her hands, watching. Ricky couldn’t resist trying to impress.

“I’ve managed to prove it.”

Sam and her mother both looked at Ricky as if they were seeing him in a different light.

“How? Are you some kind of detective?” asked Sam, smiling.

Katie was grateful for all her nephew had done and, above all, she was proud. She decided to help him in his quest to impress.

“Ricky’s a whizz with computers. He showed me how the film Jim’s camera took that day in Afghanistan has been tampered with.”

“Who’s Jim?” asked Sam.

Abby seemed content to let her daughter do the talking, but Katie could tell she was hanging on every word.

“He’s Aunt Kate’s boyfriend,” said Ricky.

Katie winced. She didn’t want to get into a conversation about husbands and wives and extramarital affairs. It would only put her in an unfavourable light. Fortunately, Abby didn’t pursue it. Instead she asked a question.

“Why would anyone tamper with the film?”

Katie paused. She knew they were coming to the most difficult part of the conversation. Abby and her daughter were nice people, and they had been through a lot. She didn’t want to upset them unnecessarily, but they had a right to know the truth. For the moment, she let Ricky explain. They’d already agreed on the train that she would handle the tricky part.

“Because Jim gave the right co-ordinates for the air strike. It was the officer who radioed in the ones for the village.”

Sam was about to speak, but her mother interrupted her.

“We know it was the officer who ordered the air strike. But he said he was just passing on what he’d been told by his sergeant. How can you prove he was lying?”

“We have a copy of the original film, before it was altered.”

Ricky got the reaction he had been hoping for. Sam’s cool demeanour deserted her for a moment, and she sat there open-mouthed, staring at him. Result, he thought.

“How did you get that?” she asked.

“We got it off Compton’s computer. He’d been keeping it as insurance in case Morton tried anything.”

“Who’s Compton?” asked Sam.

Before Ricky could answer, Abby was waving her hands in the air, as if it were all too overwhelming.

“Just stop there. This is too much to take in. I’m sure you’re both genuine, and I truly want to understand, but can we please take this one step at a time.”

Nobody said anything for a few moments, and Katie realised it was time for her to take over, before the enthusiasm of the teenagers ruined her chance of finding the answers she was looking for.

“I’m sorry, Abby, I realise this must be very hard for you, and I don’t want to prolong this any longer than necessary. So, I’ll just explain what we’ve found out as best I can, and you can decide what to do with it. Is that okay?”

“I’d appreciate that, Katie, thank you.”

“Okay.”

Katie drank a sip of her tea and took a deep breath before continuing.

“When Jim gave Lieutenant Morton the co-ordinates for the air strike, he also wrote them down on a piece of paper, just to make sure there was no mistake.”

“We didn’t know that, did we, mum?” asked Sam, looking across at Abby.

“No.”

“You wouldn’t,” said Katie. “because it wasn’t on the film that was used in the investigation. But it is on the original, and you can clearly read the co-ordinates – and they’re not the ones Lieutenant Morton radioed in.”

Abby took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes.

“Are you saying Lieutenant Morton was the one who made the mistake?”

“I’m afraid it’s worse than that, Abby. Morton *deliberately* called in the co-ordinates of the village.”

“But why? Why would he do such a thing?”

Katie hesitated before answering.

“Abby, do you know who Lieutenant Morton’s father is?”

“Of course. But what does that have to do with anything?”

Again, Katie paused, determined to handle the situation as delicately as possible.

“Abby, do you have a computer we can use?”

“Of course, why?”

“Ricky has something I think you need to see.”

Abby turned to Sam.

“Sweetheart. Go and get the laptop.”

Chapter 47

Once everyone was looking at the computer screen, Ricky was happy to show off his skills, as he manipulated the film footage, and highlighted the numbers on the paper Balham had passed to Morton. Abby and Sam looked at the screen intently.

“How do you know they were the right numbers?” asked Sam.

Katie had realised as soon as they’d met, that Abby’s daughter was an enquiring and intelligent young woman. She wasn’t going to miss a trick.

“We don’t,” said Katie, determined to be as honest and up-front as possible. “But we’ll be able to find out. And Jim’s telling the truth. He wouldn’t lie.”

This time it was Abby who looked a little uncomfortable before she spoke.

“Katie, please don’t take this the wrong way. I’m not saying I don’t believe you, but you’re obviously very close to this Jim, and it must make it harder to be objective. It’s only natural that he doesn’t want to be blamed for what happened. But it might just be wishful thinking on his part. I’ve only just come to terms with the fact that it was a dreadful accident myself. He might have to do the same.”

“I totally understand what you’re saying, Abby, but there’s more.”

“More?”

“Ricky. Show them the letter.”

As Ricky clicked on the file, and stepped back so that Abby and Sam could read the tale of deceit and corruption, Katie began to have qualms about showing it to the dead man’s daughter. The teenage girl gave the appearance of being older than her years, but it didn’t get away from the fact that she’d lost her father in tragic circumstances.

As they read the letter, Sam's eyes widened, and Abby took a sharp intake of breath and clutched her chest. Katie almost couldn't bear it. Somehow, she felt responsible for their pain. Abby finally removed her glasses and put her head in her hands.

"Are you saying these people actually murdered Richard? It just can't be true. How on earth did you get hold of this letter?"

Ricky couldn't resist scoring points and impressing Sam.

"We broke into Compton's caravan and I copied it off his laptop."

"Good God," said Abby. "Look, I'm not saying I'm ready to believe all this, but are you saying that Lieutenant Morton did all this for his father?"

"That's right," said Ricky.

"But Phillip Morton's famous. I've seen him on the news. He can't be a murderer," said Sam, and she touched Ricky's arm as she spoke.

Ricky kept absolutely still and pretended not to notice, even though it felt wonderful.

"It's all too incredible," said Abby, shaking her head.

"Believe me, we felt the same," said Katie, desperate to keep Abby on her side. "That's why we're here. We thought you might know what your husband was working on when he died."

"He never usually discussed his work with me. It was a sort of house rule. We led such busy lives, and time together was precious. We did our best to leave work at the door and just enjoyed being together."

As she spoke, Abby's eyes began to fill with tears. She got up and walked over to the corner of the kitchen, reaching for a box of tissues. It only made Katie feel even more guilty.

"What about dad's study?" asked Sam.

“What about it?”

“He kept all of his notes and paperwork there. Maybe we could find a clue.”

Katie could see that Sam was clearly swept up in the moment. Any fears she’d had that the young girl wouldn’t be able to handle these latest revelations were unfounded. But Abby was a different matter.

“I don’t know, Samantha. I haven’t been in there since ...”

Abby was unable to finish the sentence, and she wiped her eyes with a tissue.

Katie almost couldn’t bear it. In spite of her desperate need to find the truth, she didn’t want to cause the woman any more suffering.

“Please don’t get upset, Abby. It can wait. We don’t want you to do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. When you’re ready, then maybe you can find out if Richard left anything behind to help us. You’ve been more than kind, and we’ll leave you in peace.”

“Mum,” cried Sam. “I don’t mind looking through dad’s things.”

“I’m not sure,” said Abby.

“But what if this letter is genuine?” said Sam, pointing at the screen. “These people *murdered* dad. They deserve to be punished.”

Abby wiped her eyes and nodded.

“You’re right, Samantha. We’ve got to know the truth. Why don’t you take Ricky and Katie up to your dad’s study? I’ll stay here.”

“Don’t worry, Abby. Ricky knows what to look for. He and Sam can manage on their own. I’ll stay with you and make another drink.”

When he almost smiled, Ricky felt bad. The mother and daughter were suffering. But, as he followed Sam to the

study, admiring her graceful movements as she climbed the stairs, he couldn't believe his luck.

Chapter 48

The study was larger than Ricky had expected, and when he saw shelves on three of the walls, straining under the weight of piles of papers, his heart sank.

“Don’t worry,” said Sam, noticing Ricky’s reaction. “Most of this stuff is from years back. Dad never got rid of anything, just in case he ever needed it.”

“It smells kind of musty in here,” said Ricky.

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Mum’s kept the door closed ever since ... well, you know.”

As Sam went to the window to open it, Ricky cursed himself for his tactlessness. He needed to think before he spoke, he reminded himself.

“I’m sorry about your dad,” he offered, thinking it was the right thing to say.

Sam shrugged and looked embarrassed.

“Yeah, well ... there’s nothing we can do about it. Me and mum will cope, somehow.”

She went over to her father’s desk, clearly desperate to change the subject.

“Dad always seemed to have this red folder on his desk. Maybe whatever he was working on is in there.”

“Yeah. It’s the only red folder in here. Perhaps that way he knew he’d always find it.”

Sam gave him a strange look.

“Are you trying to act like a detective again?”

“Yeah, I suppose. Can I take a look?”

“Be my guest,” said Sam, pushing her father’s antique captain’s chair up to the desk.

Ricky sat down and opened the folder, while Sam jumped up and sat on the edge of the large desk. As she swung her legs back and forth, he wondered what they’d look like if she weren’t wearing jeans. They’d look great,

he decided. He caught a whiff of her delicate perfume and did his best to concentrate on the papers in front of him.

The documents were difficult to understand. Most of them were financial accounts and spreadsheets. They all appeared to relate to the same company – ‘*Safeguard*’.

Another sheet contained a list of shareholders, but Sir Phillip Morton’s name wasn’t mentioned. He kept sifting through the file, until he came across a photocopy of a list of names. At the top was the emblem for the Houses of Parliament. As far as he could make out, it was a list of politicians on some sort of committee that oversaw the purchase of military equipment. Morton’s name was on it. Ricky felt he was out of his depth, but didn’t want to let on to Sam.

“Do you think your mum would mind me taking photos of these with my phone?”

“I can’t see why not.”

“I’ll take them and if she says no, I’ll delete them. Would that be okay?”

“Sure.”

Ricky moved the papers towards the window, where there was some natural light.

“Why don’t you just put the table lamp on?” asked Sam.

“Artificial light tends to reflect off the paper and glare back at the camera.”

“Oh.”

Sam watched, as Ricky stood up and pointed his phone down at one paper after another, checking each photo as it was taken.

“You look as if you’ve done that before. Are you sure you’re not a spy as well as a detective?”

Ricky shrugged and did his best to look nonchalant. For one glorious moment, he felt like James Bond. And, of course, Sam was his ‘Bond girl’.

Before he got carried away, he noticed a newspaper, several months old. He picked it up, wondering if it was significant, but then he realised it was probably just the last paper Sam's father had read before he left for Afghanistan. He was about to place it back on the desk, when he noticed that he'd uncovered a small rectangular notebook. He picked it up and thumbed through to the last entry.

Once again, he was presented with a list of names, but this time Pearson's neat, handwritten note appeared underneath. It said: 'Intermediaries used by Phillip Morton to hide controlling interest in *Safeguard*'. Beneath that he'd written: 'Clear conflict of interest', and it was underlined several times.

Ricky had been so engrossed in what he'd found, that he hadn't noticed Sam leaning over his shoulder, peering at the notebook. When she spoke, the sound of her soft voice in his ear was so pleasurable, he had to concentrate to listen to what she said.

"So, dad *was* investigating Morton. You were right."

"It looks that way, doesn't it?"

Ricky had turned his face towards her when he spoke, and their cheeks almost touched. He wanted to celebrate by kissing her, but didn't have the nerve. Instead, he reached for his phone again.

"I better take a few photos of this, too."

When he'd finished, Sam couldn't contain her excitement any longer.

"Let's go downstairs and tell mum and your aunt the good news."

"Good idea."

When they reached the kitchen, they found the two women sitting, glasses in their hands, giggling, and there was a half-finished bottle of white wine on the table. It was the first time Sam had seen her mother laugh since the

death of her father. She didn't want to spoil the rare moment, but couldn't wait to give them the news.

"Mum, dad *was* investigating Morton."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's all in dad's notes."

"Mrs Pearson, I took some photos. I hope that was okay," said Ricky, who was at that awkward age where he still found it difficult to call adults by their first name.

"Of course," said Abby. "What did you find?"

Once Ricky and Sam had explained, it was Abby who now seemed to be enthused.

"It sounds like Sir Phillip is making profits in a company that sells arms to the British Army. He was one of the politicians who pushed to get us into the conflict in the first place. No wonder he's trying to hide his investment in this company what did you call it?"

"*Safeguard*," said Ricky, impressed with how quickly Sam's mother had put it all together.

"Mum used to be a journalist too," said Sam, as if she'd read his thoughts. "But she packed it in when she got married and had me. Mum, you should go back into it. You haven't lost your touch."

Abby smiled, but not just at the thought of her daughter's naïve suggestion. She was also pleased that she could still occasionally impress Samantha. It felt good. But then she remembered why they were discussing Richard's notes.

"My God, Katie, you were right. Somehow Morton found out Richard was going to expose him, and used his son to kill him. I still can't believe it. We have to go to the police."

"I just hope we've got enough proof, and the police will take us seriously. Phillip Morton's a very important man," said Katie.

“You’ve probably had enough of the police, haven’t you, Aunt Kate? Perhaps we should go to the papers.”

As soon as he’d said it, he was kicking himself. Abby was looking at Katie, wondering what her nephew had meant.

“It’s a long story,” said Katie, not wanting to open another can of worms. Instead she tried to draw everyone back to the problem at hand. “So, how are we going to handle this?”

“Perhaps, we ought to do both,” suggested Abby. “Why don’t Samantha and I collect everything Richard found out about Morton, and I’ll give it to his colleagues at the paper. In the meantime, you and Ricky can put together what you’ve got and go to the police. That way we’re covering both angles.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Katie, looking at her watch. “Ricky, I suppose we’d better get going. Your mum will be worried.”

This time it was Ricky who winced. He didn’t want Sam thinking he wasn’t his own man. When he looked to see her reaction, she just seemed upset.

“Why don’t you stay here tonight?” she asked.

“That’s a very kind offer, Sam, but we’ve imposed enough,” said Katie, and Ricky tried to hide his disappointment. “Besides, I think the sooner we pass on what we’ve got to the police, the better I’ll feel.”

“I hope this Jim of yours knows what a good friend he’s got,” said Abby, surprising Katie when she walked over and planted a kiss on her cheek.

“Next time I see him, I’ll let him know.”

Katie didn’t have the heart to say they’d split up.

“And,” Abby went on, “Samantha and I owe you a debt of gratitude, too. If you hadn’t come here, we would have still thought Richard’s death was an accident, and his murderers would have gone unpunished.”

“I hope I did the right thing.”

“Of course you did. I can’t say what you’ve found out hasn’t been shocking and upsetting, but I’d rather know the truth than live in ignorance.”

“I know the circumstances have been terrible, and I hope it doesn’t sound strange ... but it’s been lovely to meet you.”

“You too, Katie. Let me show you out.”

As they walked to the door, Sam suddenly ran up to Ricky.

“I’ll give you my number in case you have any more questions.”

Ricky smiled.

“Good idea. You’d better have mine too. Here, let’s swap.”

Moments later they’d keyed each other’s numbers into their respective phones.

Abby and Katie shared a knowing look.

When Katie and Ricky made their way to the street, mother and daughter waved them off. As Katie watched her nephew walk back to the tube station, she wasn’t sure whether it was their successful visit that explained what she saw, or Sam’s interest in him.

Whatever it was, Ricky certainly had a spring in his step.

Chapter 49

It was already late afternoon by the time Katie and Ricky left the Pearson home, but Abby and her daughter decided they couldn't wait until the next day to do something about what they'd discovered.

So, while Sam collected all the relevant documents from her father's study, Abby rang a trusted journalist at the paper where her husband had worked. When she explained that she had found information in Richard's papers that exposed corruption at the very highest level, the man agreed to wait at his office for her to bring them to him. Sam insisted on joining her mother and, with the papers clutched tightly to her chest, Abby and her daughter caught a taxi to Fleet Street.

Peter Gardener's 'office' turned out to be a desk, surrounded by dozens of others, set in a huge, brightly lit room. When he saw Abby Pearson and Sam working their way between the rows of tables to get to him, he walked over to greet them, embracing Abby and kissing her on the cheek.

"It's lovely to see you, Abby. And ... it's Samantha, isn't it?"

"Hi," said Sam.

She vaguely recognised Gardener from her father's funeral, but couldn't remember his name, and she hadn't thought to ask her mother on the taxi ride over.

"How are things, Abby? How are you coping? I've been meaning to come by, but you know how it is down here. It's just one thing after another."

Abby realised that Gardener was merely going through the motions – saying the right things to the poor widow – so she let him get the niceties out of the way, before she got to the reason for why they'd come.

“Don’t worry, Peter, Samantha and I are coping just fine,” she lied. “Anyway, the thing is, I came to give you these.”

Abby passed over the red folder and her husband’s notebook to the journalist, explaining as she did so.

“Sam and her friend were going through Richard’s things, when they found the story I think he was working on before he went to Afghanistan.”

“Oh ... er ... thank you, Abby. I’ll have a good look at them as soon as I get the chance,” said Gardener, thinking he might have wasted his time. He could have been halfway home by now, he thought.

“Peter,” said Abby, “I’d really appreciate it if you could take a look at them now.”

“What’s this all about, Abby?”

Sam realised that they were in danger of losing the journalist’s interest, and she thought it was time to grab his attention.

“Sir Phillip Morton has a controlling interest in a company that manufactures military equipment, but he’s been keeping it a secret because he’s on the committee that oversees the purchase of the company’s stock for the army.”

Abby looked at her daughter with admiration in her eyes. She was definitely her father’s daughter.

“My God,” said Gardener. “And you’re saying that what’s in this folder proves all this?”

“As far as we can tell,” said Abby.

Suddenly Gardener swivelled in his chair and called over to a man at another desk.

“Bill! Tell Walters we might have something for tomorrow’s edition. And order a takeaway - it could be a long night.”

Abby and Sam's eyes lit up, and they shared a look. Richard Pearson, loving husband and father, might get his story told, after all.

"Have you told anyone else about this?" asked Gardener, suddenly concerned that he might lose his exclusive.

"No, we came straight here," said Sam.

"You said something about a friend. Do they know what's in these papers?"

"Yes," said Abby.

"Ricky and Katie are the ones who told us Morton had dad killed," said Sam, seeing no need for subtlety.

"Whoa! Hold on a minute. I must be hearing things. I swear I just heard you say Morton killed Richard. Are you mad?"

Gardener suddenly had a terrible feeling that he'd been fooled by the overactive imagination of a couple of grieving women. But then again, if it were true, it would be the scoop of the century.

"I know it's hard to believe, Peter, but it's true, I assure you," said Abby, trying her best to portray a calm demeanour, as a counterbalance to her daughter's more unguarded approach.

"Abby, I'm going to say the words out loud, just so there's no confusion here. You're saying that Sir Phillip Morton killed your husband."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, Abby, but that's ridiculous. Richard was killed in a bombing raid in Afghanistan, for goodness sake."

"That's right," said Sam, unable to keep quiet any longer. "And the air strike was called in by Morton's son."

"Wait a minute, let me think."

Gardener held up his hand, as if he couldn't digest any further information until he'd processed what they'd shared

with him so far. He racked his brains, trying to remember what he knew about the circumstances of Richard Pearson's death.

"If I remember rightly, some sergeant got the location for the air strike wrong, didn't he? The last I heard he got drummed out of the army."

"Yes, that's right. His name's Sergeant Balham. He swears he's innocent and gave the correct co-ordinates to Lieutenant Morton, Phillip Morton's son."

"Well, he would say that, wouldn't he?"

"But Ricky and Katie have got proof he's telling the truth," said Sam, desperate for Gardener to believe their story.

"Have you seen this proof?"

"Yes, we have," said Abby calmly. "There was some film footage from a camera Sergeant Balham was wearing on his helmet. It shows him handing over a piece of paper with the correct co-ordinates."

"And there was a letter, implicating Lieutenant Morton's father," offered Sam.

"They could have been fabricated – just to get this Balham off the hook. Did you think of that?"

"Of course I did, Peter," said Abby, trying to remain calm. "But I believe these people are telling the truth."

"Where did they get this letter?" asked Gardener, ever the journalist. Always check your source, he reminded himself.

"They got it off a man called Compton. He was there when the air strike was called in. He works for Morton," said Sam, determined not to be left out.

The three of them were so engrossed in their conversation, that they hadn't noticed the man called Bill, leaning on the next desk, listening in.

"It sounds like you've got a live one here, Pete," he said.

Gardener jumped, startled, then turned to face him.

“Have you told Walters to hold the presses?” he asked, failing to hide his irritation.

“Yes.”

“How about the takeaway?”

“I’m right on it,” said Bill, getting up and making his way to the door.

Before heading for the local Chinese restaurant, Bill Fenton made his way to the underground car park, situated beneath the building. He got into a rather impressive Audi, courtesy of a windfall he had received shortly before the death of Richard Pearson.

This time, contacting Sir Phillip Morton was going to be far easier. He had already proved his loyalty and saved the minister from ruin, when he’d told him about Pearson’s damaging investigation. He called the number he had stored on his phone.

“Fenton?” said a deep, luxuriant voice. “I didn’t think I’d be hearing from you again. I sincerely hope this is important.”

“I’m sure you’ll find what I have to tell you extremely useful.”

“I see. Then feel free to proceed, dear chap.”

“Sir Phillip. I was wondering if we might be able to have the same arrangement as before – considering the risk I’m taking.”

Phillip Morton sighed. These people were always so predictable.

“I’m sure something can be arranged,” he said, hoping that would be the end of it. But Fenton had other ideas.

“Unfortunately, this time I must insist that the figure is doubled.”

“Doubled? May I ask why?”

“Certainly. Not only must the information I have be acted upon immediately, but it’s consequences will be far more devastating to you if it reaches the police.”

“The police? I see. In that case, Mr Fenton, I will agree to your terms. Now, perhaps you would be kind enough to tell me what you know.”

Chapter 50

Simon Morton was not happy. As he sat in his apartment, overlooking the Thames, he kept telling himself that his problems were solved, but remained to be convinced. And he didn't really know why. His plan had apparently worked.

Trudi had passed his message on to Balham, and she'd clearly been damned persuasive. His washed-up sergeant had agreed to stop his meddling, for the sake of his darling Katie – so, job done. But then Trudi had called him with some rather unsettling news, and he had poured himself a stiff brandy, as he stared down at the city from his balcony.

Apparently, Balham had disappeared into thin air. And then there had been the unexpected visit of this Katie woman. It would seem that she too was none the wiser as to Balham's whereabouts. Which rather pointed to the fact that he'd cut her loose, getting rid of the dead wood, so to speak. Now, why would he do that, after sacrificing so much to set her free? He was up to something, Morton was sure.

And then, as if things couldn't have got any worse, his phone rang and he saw that it was his beloved father calling. When his errant pater chose to contact him, it was never good news.

"Hello, sir. What a pleasant surprise."

Even from a young age, his father had always insisted on being called 'sir'. He enjoyed having the respect of others, and that included members of his family.

"This is not a social call, Simon."

Was it ever? Simon Morton's heart-rate increased, and he knocked back the rest of his brandy in preparation for what was coming next.

"Is there a problem, sir?"

“Yes, Simon, I would say there is. A rather significant problem.”

Even now, he thought, the old man isn’t willing to demean himself and just spit it out. He wants me to ask him, in spite of the fact that he called me.

“What is the significant problem?” he asked, unwilling to play games.

There was nothing but silence at the end of the line. He found the silences almost more terrifying than the controlled anger his father usually exhibited. But he waited. Eventually his father spoke.

“It seems that Richard Pearson kept notes on the story he was working on before his unfortunate death. My sources tell me that his pretty widow and daughter somehow felt a need to deliver these notes to the offices of the newspaper where he worked. They are running the story tomorrow.”

“Dear God, sir. What are you going to do?”

“Let’s leave God out of it, shall we? There’s a good boy. This is no time for hysterics.”

If he hadn’t felt sick to his stomach, he could have almost laughed. In his father’s calm and orderly world, his simple question had merited the description ‘hysterics’. He was at a loss for words. Fortunately, his father was willing to break the silence.

“It is fortuitous that I have some of the greatest legal minds in my employ. With assiduous planning, I am sure that any suspected wrongdoing on my part can be put into doubt, given a fair wind. But that is not why I have called.”

Jesus. There was worse to come? How did the man stay so calm?

“Simon, I was under the impression that you had solved the troublesome Balham business.”

“I have, sir. He’s out of the picture.”

“Oh, really? I understand there were others who were assisting him in his quest?”

“Yes - the woman who saved Balham’s life when he tried to commit suicide, and her nephew. But, without Balham, what harm can they do?”

“From what my contact has told me, they are in a position to do a great deal of harm. Incredibly, it would appear they know everything.”

“But ... but, how could they?”

“Rest assured, that is a question I have been asking myself. How could they indeed? Unfortunately, I believe there can be only one answer. You and your friend Compton have rather made a mess of things.”

“It’s just impossible ...”

“No! It’s clearly not impossible. Because of your bungling, I could very well be facing the indignity of a sabbatical, at Her Majesty’s Pleasure. I understand these troublesome people are about to deliver whatever evidence they have to the police.”

“Dear Christ.”

“May I suggest, rather than appealing for Divine intervention, you might make better use of your time.”

“What did you have in mind?”

He heard his father sigh - an indication that he was extremely disappointed in his only offspring.

“What I had in mind was that you and Mr Compton make the problem go away before it is too late.”

Simon Morton closed his eyes, and tried to fight the panic threatening to rise up from the pit of his stomach. His father had already made him a murderer, but this time it would be up close and personal. Finally, he found a voice.

“I’ll take care of it.”

“See that you do. Unless, that is, you want to kiss goodbye to your undeserved inheritance, and spend the rest of your days staring at four walls.”

“I said, I’ll take care of it!”

Simon Morton had never yelled at his father before, but he was past caring. He ended the call, not waiting for a smug retort. ‘Sir’ Phillip had lost his respect.

Chapter 51

Balham was disgusted with himself. In the army, he had taken pride in his foresight and planning. And now here he was, sitting in his Land Rover, parked in a London street, having gone off half-cocked. As he sat there, staring up at Morton's apartment, he asked himself for the umpteenth time - what am I doing here?

He'd had some vague notion that he would confront Morton and, using simple brute force, make him confess. He was still tempted. He would enjoy taking the fucker apart. But what would it achieve? As much as the sight of Morton's broken body would give him satisfaction, he'd simply end up looking like the deranged, suicidal ex-soldier, taking revenge on the officer he blamed for his downfall.

He should never have come to London, he decided. He'd take what little evidence he had, in the shape of the altered film, and go to the authorities and trust that justice would prevail. Justice? He let out a mirthless laugh. A disgraced soldier accusing a minister's son? He doubted if he would find justice.

Suddenly he was torn from his thoughts by the sound of a car's tyres screeching, as it left an underground car park, situated beneath Morton's apartment building. It was an expensive-looking Aston Martin, but since they were commonplace in central London, he almost decided to ignore it. Yet something about the way it had torn out of the car park made him start his engine and follow it.

As his old Land Rover noisily made its way along the street, he cursed himself for a second time. He couldn't have picked a worse car to use for tailing someone in London. He stood out like a sore thumb. What's more, if whoever he was following managed to escape the heavy traffic, he would have the devil of a time keeping up. He

would simply have to hope for the best. Besides, he was probably just on the tail of someone late for a business meeting.

When the Aston Martin got stuck at the next set of lights, he was two cars behind. The back of the driver's head could certainly belong to Morton, he thought. Was it just wishful thinking? Ten minutes later, he finally had a piece of luck. The Aston Martin had pulled into a garage for petrol. Balham took a risk and headed for the other side of the forecourt, pretending he was going to pump up his tyres. When he got out, he made sure to keep the Land Rover between him and the driver of the Aston Martin.

When Balham spotted him, he almost punched the side of his car in triumph. It was Morton. And he was in a hell of a hurry. He'd filled his car and swiped his credit card in the petrol pump in record time, before heading off, tyres screeching for a second time. Balham followed, trying to keep just enough cars between them so as not to be spotted, but not to lose him.

But things soon started to go pear-shaped. Morton was making his way to the motorway, heading west. Once he reached that, Balham would lose him for sure. But there was nothing he could do, so he carried on, hoping an answer would present itself.

All too soon, they'd reached the motorway. Balham pressed his foot down hard on the accelerator, and the Land Rover shuddered and protested. But, in spite of his best efforts, the Aston Martin soon forged ahead and was out of sight. Balham smashed the palm of his hand against the steering wheel in frustration, but he knew there was nothing he could do.

He tried to think. At first, he'd suspected that Morton might have been heading for Heathrow, and was late for a plane, but then he dismissed the idea. Why would he fill up the tank of his car, just to leave it at the airport? No. He

was going on a long trip. Balham sighed. It had all been a complete waste of time. But at least he was heading in the right direction for home.

Home? What home? He could hardly call the rented cottage in Ranton home. And the thought of facing Trudi was more than he could stomach. Suddenly, he had a yearning to see Katie, but knew that would be a mistake. He'd made the decision to be on his own until he'd cleared his name, and he would stick to it. He'd book into a hotel. But where?

Before he knew it, he was seeing the signs for Bristol and the Severn Bridge. And beyond that, Wales. Of course! How could he have been so stupid? Where else would Morton be going to in such a hurry? He must be on his way to Ranton. Had he been there before? Was Morton the one who'd hit him and knocked him unconscious. Or was it Compton? Either way, something must have gone wrong to make Morton leave in such a hurry. But what?

Balham decided that letting his imagination run riot would solve nothing. So he kept pushing the Land Rover for all he was worth.

He was heading for Ranton.

Chapter 52

It was late in the evening when Katie and Ricky finally got home from London, and Katie was exhausted. But, now that they had the evidence they needed, she wanted to contact the police right away. Of course, the days when you could pop round to the local Bobby were long gone. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a policeman walk a beat in Ranton. Any police presence usually consisted of a patrol car rushing through the streets of the village, lights blazing, on its way to somewhere else.

The thought of calling the police station in town, and trying to explain the complexities of the situation to some random officer on the other end of the line, was not an appealing prospect. She briefly toyed with trying to contact Inspector Bradshaw. But since he'd been rather keen to build a case against her, when she'd had to defend herself against Sean, she quickly shelved that idea.

It could wait till morning, she decided. At least that way she would get some rest before she faced what was likely to be a lengthy interrogation. Besides, she wanted Ricky with her to help explain the computer-based evidence they'd managed to obtain. She would need to talk to Laura about that. Almost before she'd completed the thought, Ricky delivered some news that settled the matter.

"I've just found a note from mum and dad in the kitchen. Grandad's come down with a bad case of the flu, so they've gone to Oxford to take care of him for a couple of days. I've just texted to let them know we're home safe and sound."

"Oh, I hope Gary's dad is going to be all right. I'll call Laura in the morning. I was going to ask her if it would be okay if you joined me at the police station tomorrow, but it sounds like she's got enough on her plate."

“Don’t worry about that. I’m looking forward to it. It’s probably best not to mention anything. She’ll only worry.”

“I’ll decide what to do in the morning. I’m sorry, Ricky, I’ve got to get some sleep. I’m absolutely shattered. Is that okay?”

“No sweat. See you in the morning.”

Unlike his aunt, Ricky was far from sleepy, and he found himself buzzing with excess energy. He was loving every second, and the last thing he wanted was to go to bed. It was almost as if he were getting high on solving a mystery, and he couldn’t rest until he’d found all the answers.

He looked at his phone, and sifted through the numbers he had stored. There it was. Sam’s number. He could call it right now – talk to her about the case. He looked at his watch. It was nearly eleven-thirty. Perhaps calling wouldn’t be a cool move. He didn’t want to appear too keen. But he had to do *something*. And then an idea came to him. Acting on impulse, he put on his coat, grabbed his laptop and his keys, and headed for the caravan site.

Ranton was not over-endowed with street lights, and he had to use a torch to make his way down the country lane to the site. When he arrived, he could still see lights on in one or two of the caravans, but outside was deserted. He sat down on a bench, next to the main door of the reception area, and switched on his laptop.

Unlike their son, Ricky’s parents were behind the times when it came to technology, and he’d been forced to pester them for years, before they finally relented and had Wi-Fi installed in their home. Consequently, prior to that, he had been forced to walk across to the caravan site and use the Wi-Fi it offered to its residents. Fortunately he still had the code installed on his laptop, together with the password – ‘CARAVAN’. How imaginative, he thought.

Ricky knew that public Wi-Fi areas always presented a risk. It made the life of would-be hackers using the same Wi-Fi point far simpler. Especially if they possessed the software he'd downloaded a few months ago. It was beautiful.

Ricky started it up, and was presented with a list of all the computers using the same Wi-Fi code. There was his own laptop, of course, and, on this particular occasion, considering the late hour, there were only two others. One was accessing a porn site, and the other a film streaming service. He clicked on the second. The user was watching a documentary about the Gulf War. Compton was an ex-soldier. Could it be him?

Unfortunately, the software couldn't identify the location of the user, and only provided the computer's IP address. But Ricky wasn't prepared to give up. All modern laptops have a camera and microphone built in, and he was well aware that these devices were often not password-protected. As luck would have it, he just happened to have another piece of software that would tell him if this was the case this time.

He loaded it up, tingling with excitement. The main screen came up, providing a number of options. He chose 'Access Webcam'. The rectangular black screen in the top-left-hand corner came to life. Ricky had to stifle a whoop of delight. It had worked.

The image showed Compton, fast asleep in a chair. The kitchen and front door of the caravan were clearly visible in the background. Hardly exciting. He clicked on another option – 'Access Mic'. Within seconds, Compton's gentle snoring could be heard coming from the speaker in his laptop. Ricky was elated by this further demonstration of his technical prowess, but it hadn't achieved anything. What was he going to do - watch the man sleeping all night?

The screeching tyres and the roar of the Aston Martin's engine nearly frightened the life out of him. The sudden onslaught of noise had seemed to come out of nowhere. For a second, he had been caught in the car's headlights and, on instinct, he had almost run. But before he could act on the thought, the car was gone, heading for the far side of the site.

Ricky's heart was racing. Could the car have been heading for Compton's caravan? The sound of knocking, emanating from his laptop, gave him the answer. He watched, fascinated, as Compton roused himself, and answered the door. Another man, with well-groomed dark hair and an athletic physique, burst into the caravan. Another soldier-type, Ricky decided.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

It was Compton's voice.

"I've had a call from the old man. The shit's hit the fan. That fucking woman and her nephew have been poking their noses into our business and somehow they've found out about everything."

Ricky stood up without thinking. The instinct to run was almost overwhelming. But then he reminded himself that the two men didn't know he was watching them. He had to keep listening and find out what they were going to do.

"How?" he heard Compton say.

"You fucking tell me."

"What the hell are you getting at?" asked Compton.

Compton had found the rear door to the caravan unlocked the previous day, but he wasn't going to admit it to Morton.

"I'm just wondering how much we trust each other, Compton. Maybe you've been keeping something for a rainy day and maybe they found it."

"Shit!"

Ricky yelled out without thinking. The other man was Morton, and he was clearly the brains of the partnership. He'd figured it out already.

"Look, don't blame me, Morton. This is your family's mess. I'm just helping out."

"And you're getting well paid. Talking of which, if you want to be free to spend that money, then we've got to stop these fuckers before they go to the police."

Ricky watched, as Compton retrieved a pistol from a case on the table next to his laptop.

"No problem."

Chapter 53

Ricky snapped his laptop shut and ran out of the caravan site as fast as his legs would carry him. Why was he carrying his damn laptop, he wondered? This was life and death. He almost laughed at himself, a laugh born of a black teenage humour. Even when staring death in the face, he couldn't relinquish his precious computer.

The roar of a car's engine, its tyres throwing gravel against metal, suddenly made its presence known. As he ran down the narrow lane, leading back to the village, he knew he only had one chance of beating the two men back to his house. A footpath cut across the field, and would bring him out behind the village pub. He threw the laptop in his bag and vaulted the gate, but slipped. His foot had landed on a pile of sheep shit. Somehow, he remained upright and reached the pub, before racing through the car park.

He fumbled for his keys and dropped them, cursing. Why were there no fucking street lights? Something glinted in the moonlight. He snatched them up, and ran to his front door. His lungs threatened to burst, as he opened the door and slammed it shut behind him. But there was no time to rest.

"Katie! Katie!"

He was running up the stairs to his aunt's room. He burst in, screaming.

"They're coming to kill us! They've got a gun. They're going to fucking kill us!"

Katie jumped out of bed, woken from a sound sleep. Ricky rushed to the window.

"They're here now! What are we going to do?"

Katie was wearing nothing but a T-shirt and a pair of pants, so she threw on her jeans and trainers.

"Back door!" she yelled.

They raced down the stairs, and they could hear the sound of footsteps, making their way up the path. Katie headed for the rear door, at the far end of the kitchen. She pressed her finger to her lips, signalling for Ricky to be quiet. He nodded, but he was breathing heavily.

The key was in the lock and she turned it, before opening the door as quietly as she could. They ran to the end of the garden, where there was a gate, leading to an alleyway. They kept running, and it brought them out on to the road around the corner from the house.

"We can't stay on the streets in the village. They're bound to find us," said Ricky in a loud whisper.

"Follow me," said Katie.

Ricky did as he was told, wondering what his aunt had in mind. She made her way to the western end of the village, and he soon realised where they were going.

"Are we heading for Sean's barn?"

"I've got a key to the padlock," she said by way of explanation.

Two minutes later they were inside, closing the door behind them. Ricky went to put on the light, but Katie stopped him.

"Better leave it off. If they start searching the village, it would be a dead giveaway."

"You're right, I wasn't thinking."

As they caught their breath, Katie looked at her nephew and finally uttered the question she'd been dying to ask.

"Who's after us? Compton?"

"Yeah, and Morton, too."

"How did you know they were coming for us?"

"I couldn't sleep. I went to the caravan site to keep an eye on Compton."

Katie was about to admonish her nephew for putting himself in danger, when she realised the foolishness of her reaction.

“Thank God you did, Ricky. You just saved our lives.”
“Yeah. But for how long?”

Chapter 54

When they found the front door locked, Compton and Morton headed to the rear of the property. They shared a look when they discovered the door was open. Compton led the way and, once he was satisfied the ground-floor rooms were empty, he started to head up the stairs. Morton grabbed him by the wrist.

“Don’t kill them. I want it to look like an accident.”

“Believe it or not, I know what I’m doing. I thought it might come to this and I’ve got a plan. Just leave it to me.”

Morton wasn’t happy. He was supposed to be the one calling the shots, not Compton. But, for now, he decided to let the man have his moment of glory. He could always deal with him later.

After a few minutes, Compton returned, empty-handed.

“They’ve gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?”

“What the fuck do you think I mean? They’ve left, and in a hurry - the bed’s still warm.”

“I thought the kid’s family lived here,” said Morton.

“Yeah.”

Compton put on the light in the kitchen. The note from Ricky’s parents was pinned to a cork board on the wall.

“Looks like the parents are away,” said Compton.

“Yeah, but where are the boy and his aunt?”

Compton shrugged.

“Okay,” said Morton, happy to take charge again, “let’s search their rooms - see if we can find out what they’ve been up to.”

“Then what?”

“Then we’ll go looking for them, and they can have that little ‘accident’ you’ve got planned.”

* * *

“What are we going to do, Katie?”

Katie noticed that her nephew had dropped his customary ‘Aunt Kate’. He was having to grow up fast.

“First thing in the morning, we’ll catch the early bus into town and go to the police. I just wish we had the evidence with us.”

Ricky tapped his bag.

“It’s all right here, on my laptop. And I’ll copy everything on to my phone, just to be on the safe side.”

“What would I do without you, Ricky?”

“We make a good team, don’t we?”

“We do. But I’ll be happier once we’ve given the evidence to the police. Then those two thugs won’t have a reason to come after us anymore.”

“Why don’t we call the police now?”

“I don’t think we ought to risk it. Compton’s armed, and we don’t know what he and Morton are capable of. If the police turn up here, the two of them might do something stupid. This way, with luck, they won’t be able to find us.”

Ricky checked his watch. It was a little after one.

“The first bus arrives at six-thirty. I’ll set the alarm on my phone for six.”

“Great. It’ll be daylight and there’ll be a few people milling about, so we should be safe enough. Until then, let’s try and get some sleep.”

* * *

It was approaching one o’clock when Balham finally arrived back in Ranton, and he headed for Katie’s temporary home. He needed to know that she and Ricky were safe. It was then that he spotted something that caused his heart to hammer in his chest. Parked in front of the house was Morton’s Aston Martin.

He ran up the driveway and could see a light on in the kitchen. The front door was locked, so he ran to the rear of the building. Staying in the shadows, he peered inside the house, but saw no signs of life. With no time to waste, he ran through the open door. Passing through the kitchen, he suddenly stopped and opened a couple of drawers. He found what he was looking for - a carving knife with a strong, wooden handle. He made his way up the stairs, and cursed when one of the floorboards creaked.

Upstairs the rooms were empty, and Ricky and Katie's rooms were in total disarray. Balham assumed they'd been ransacked. What the hell had the bastards done with them? He slipped the knife into his belt and made his way to the streets of the village. He had only one thought.

Please, I hope I'm not too late.

Chapter 55

I've turned into a robot, thought Sean, as he made his way to the barn, just as the sun was rising. I get up, I cut logs all day, and then I go back to an empty house to stare at the TV. Some fucking life.

As he entered the barn, he immediately caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye. Katie and Ricky were lying on the floor, fast asleep. What the fuck?

He was about to yell and kick them out, when he decided he had a better idea. He went back outside and headed for a trough, full of green, stagnant rainwater. He picked up a large bucket and filled it to the brim, before setting off for the barn. For the first time in days, he smiled.

Time for a wake-up call.

Suddenly the phone in his coat pocket rang. Cursing, he quickly answered it, not wanting the noise of the ringtone to awaken his uninvited guests, and spoil the surprise he had prepared for them.

"Yeah?"

"Williams?"

"Yeah, who is this, phoning at this time of the morning?"

"It's your guardian angel. Did you find your shotgun okay, where I put it?"

"Yeah."

'Thank you' wasn't part of Sean's vocabulary.

Standing next to an old war monument in the centre of the village, Morton was waving his hand, urging Compton to get to the point.

"I'm looking for your wife and her nephew. You wouldn't happen to know where they are, would you?"

Sean almost told Compton to go to hell. The ex-soldier had said that Katie and Balham would end up being prosecuted for attempted murder, if he co-operated. The

lying bastard had even promised him some kind of reward. And it had all turned out to be complete bullshit. But he realised that Compton was bad news, and this was his chance to pay Katie back for her betrayal.

Sean looked back at his barn.

“Do I know where they are? Funny you should say that ...”

* * *

Balham just hoped he'd made the right decision. But, as the sky behind the hills started to brighten, he began to have his doubts. Earlier in the night he had wandered the streets of the village, looking for any sign of Ricky and Katie. He'd even headed along the trail, leading up to the forest. But he soon realised he was searching aimlessly.

He'd returned to the village and tried to think. He soon decided that his best chance of finding them was the Aston Martin. Morton had to return to it eventually. And if the bastard had harmed one hair on Katie's head, he'd find his throat slit with a kitchen knife.

So now he was in his Land Rover, waiting. He'd briefly thought of calling the police, but the last thing he wanted was them turning up, lights flashing, scaring Morton and Compton away. But now he was doubting his decision, and he picked up his phone, doing his best to fight the feeling of despair, threatening to rise up into his chest. He needed to remain calm for Katie and Ricky.

And then he saw Morton and Compton, running towards the Aston Martin. For a second, he thought about tackling them then and there, but decided against it. He had no qualms about taking on the two of them in a fight, but they might be armed. Besides, he still didn't know what had happened to Katie and Ricky. He just had to hope his fellow ex-soldiers would lead him to them.

He slumped down in his seat, in case they looked over in his direction. But this time his Land Rover fitted right in, and neither of them paid him any notice. As they pulled away, he started the engine and followed. A few minutes later they were pulling into the dirt track that led to Sean's barn.

Balham pulled up and parked on the road. Now what? Should he follow them? But what if Katie and Ricky weren't there? Besides, if they were meeting Sean, he would be up against three of them. He had never felt so impotent in his life.

Before he could torture himself further, the Aston Martin suddenly shot out from the dirt track and headed away from the village. Katie and Ricky were seated in the back.

"Shit!"

Balham put the Land Rover into gear and pressed his foot to the floor. For once, he cursed the empty roads that fed the village, free of traffic. He was going to lose them again. As he hit a long, straight stretch, leading out of the valley, he watched the black car pull away, heading towards the first bend. Finally he reached it too, and nearly turned the Land Rover on its side, when he took the corner too fast.

By the time he came to the next village, they were nowhere in sight. Nevertheless, he continued, passing the crossroads at its centre. Had he seen some movement to his left, out of the corner of his eye? He dismissed the thought. The tiny lane that led from the crossroads was a dead end. There was nothing in that direction but common land and the occasional farm.

Soon he reached the top of the first hill, and he pulled up in a lay-by. From his higher vantage point, he could see the main road stretching out before him. He reached into the door of the Land Rover and pulled out a pair of binoculars.

From the hill, he would be able to spot Morton's car, and hopefully get some clue as to where he was headed.

When he could find no sign of the speeding car in the distance, he was stumped. Where the hell had they got to? Without thinking, he turned the Land Rover around and headed back to the village through which he'd just driven. At the crossroads he turned right, in the direction from where he thought he'd spotted something moving.

After twenty minutes of hard driving, he began to fear the worst. He'd made another miscalculation. He was almost at the top of hill and, apart from a few farms, he hadn't spotted a thing. Could they have headed for another farm building? It didn't make sense.

And then he saw it. The black Aston Martin was parked incongruously on the muddy grass at the side of the road. It was empty. Balham got out and spotted fresh footprints, heading along the ridge of the hill. He checked the knife was still in his belt and ran, desperately searching ahead for any sign of Katie or Ricky. Where the hell were Morton and Compton taking them?

That was when he remembered the cliffs.

Chapter 56

Katie and Ricky were forced to walk on ahead, while Morton and Compton brought up the rear. Compton had taken them at gunpoint, when he and Morton had arrived at the barn, and Sean had done nothing to stop them. Katie didn't know who to detest more – her kidnappers or her treacherous husband. It probably didn't matter anyway. Their situation was hopeless. She turned to Ricky and whispered in his ear.

“Where do you think they're taking us?”

Ricky kept looking forward, and muttered under his breath.

“I don't know. But when we set off, I saw Jim's Land Rover following behind us.”

Katie's heart leapt. Was it possible? Had he come back to save them? But surely he wouldn't find them in time. Not here, in the middle of nowhere.

She had gone walking in the area before and, when she saw the cliffs in the distance, she began to suspect what the two former soldiers had planned for them. They could have shot their captives any time they'd wanted, but, when their bodies turned up with bullets inside them, the result would have been a murder enquiry. This way, it could be made to look like an accident.

Her suspicions were proved right all too soon, when they were herded towards the ridge that followed the top of the cliffs. Over two hundred feet below sat a pretty lake, but Katie knew that it was frustratingly shallow. If anyone were foolish enough to jump from the top of the rocks, the water wasn't deep enough to save them.

“What's in that little bag of yours?” asked Morton, pointing at Ricky.

“Nothing.”

“Don't be cute,” said Compton. “Toss it over here.”

Compton had his pistol levelled at the teenager and kept his distance. Not that Ricky had any intention of tackling the tough ex-soldier. Suddenly he didn't feel like James Bond anymore.

He threw the bag over, and Compton pulled out the laptop.

"Would I be right in saying that there might be a film on that? A film about what happened in Afghanistan?" said Morton.

When Ricky hesitated, Compton pointed his pistol at the boy's head.

"Yes, it's all on there."

"You don't mind if I keep this do you, Ricky? I could do with a new laptop," said Compton, smiling.

"I've seen your laptop," replied Ricky. "You could."

The insult wiped the smile from Compton's face. He was about to think of a suitable punishment, to teach the teenager a lesson, when Morton spoke up.

"You fucking asshole, Compton. You kept the original film on your computer, didn't you? That's how boy-wonder ended up with a copy."

"Yeah, I kept it. And there's a nice, juicy letter in a solicitor's safe, with instructions to open it if anything happens to me. So don't get any clever ideas when this is over. We're in this together all the way."

"Let Ricky go," said Katie, when she realised their time was up. "He's just a boy. He won't cause you any trouble, I promise."

"Are you fucking retarded, lady? Now, stand on the fucking edge of the cliff and ... aaah!"

Compton suddenly fell forward on to his knees, crying out in agony, a knife embedded in his thigh. But he managed to hold on to his pistol, and turned to face the new threat.

Balham had emerged from the lush ferns he had used as cover, and sprinted towards him. Compton pulled the trigger, but it was a wild shot, fired in desperation, and it missed Balham by several feet. Within seconds the ex-sergeant was on him, grabbing his gun-arm.

As Balham had feared, Morton was armed too, and the ex-officer had pulled out his pistol, taking aim. As the men fought, Morton couldn't get a clear shot without risking hitting Compton. He was tempted to shoot anyway but, in light of what his partner had just shared with him, he thought better of it. So he ran forward, intending to pull Balham off his partner and overpower him.

But, before he reached them, Balham smashed Compton's arm against a rock, causing the man to fire. This time, luck was on Balham's side, and the bullet struck Morton in the ankle. Just like Compton, he went down, screaming.

Balham mercilessly smashed Compton's arm again and again, until he released the pistol. It flew off into the undergrowth and, while Balham was busy pinning Compton to the ground, Ricky ran forward to pick it up.

"Hold it!"

Despite the burning pain, surging up his leg, Morton sat up and kept his gun trained on the teenager. Ricky froze in his tracks.

"Now, step back to the edge of the cliff."

Ricky did as he was told.

Compton was flat on his back - the fight having gone out of him. Balham was sitting up, and now Morton had a clear shot.

"Balham! Don't worry, you'll be heading for the bottom of the cliff soon enough. But I'm sure you'd like your friends to go first, ready to welcome you."

Morton turned his gun on Ricky and Katie.

“Now, both of you, fucking jump, or I swear to God I’ll shoot you where you stand.”

Morton watched as they both stepped closer to the void, but then his partner suddenly cried out, and his peripheral vision registered a glint of shiny metal.

Before he had time to take in what had happened, Morton looked down at his chest, where the handle of the carving knife protruded from its centre. He fell back, screaming.

Compton pressed his hands against a gaping hole in his leg, from where Balham had removed the knife, before using it once more to great effect.

Within seconds, Balham had retrieved the pistol from the undergrowth and was pointing it at Morton. The ex-officer tried to raise his arm to fire, but his strength failed him. Balham walked over and pinned the man’s arm to the ground with his foot, before peeling the gun from his fist.

In the meantime, Ricky and Katie had come away from the cliff edge. Ricky had retrieved his phone from his pocket and was busy manipulating icons on the screen.

Compton looked over, his trembling fingers doing their best to stem the flow of blood, oozing from his leg.

“You’d better be calling for a fucking ambulance.” he said, groaning.

“In a minute.”

Compton looked exasperated.

“What do you mean, in a fucking minute?”

“I’m busy. I’m just uploading a film on to social media.”

Chapter 57

The village of Ranton had never seen anything like it. When, a few weeks earlier, the stabbing had occurred in the forest above their homes, the locals had only had to deal with the occasional newspaper reporter.

But the next few days were very different. This was a *global* news story. If the accusations were true, a senior cabinet minister in the British Government was going to end up behind bars. And the story had culminated in the sleepy village of Ranton. Who would have thought it?

For the three locals who had thwarted the cover-up of a serious crime, it was a time to finally breathe a sigh of relief, and succumb to the wants and needs of the authorities. The fact remained, that another two men had been seriously injured in the scenic countryside, surrounding the Welsh border town of Ranton. Such events might well have been commonplace in the nation's larger cities, but here, three knife attacks in as many weeks was almost unheard of.

The two victims, Morton and Compton, had survived. The air ambulance had come to the rescue once more, and the well-trained paramedics had worked their magic. The knife in Compton's leg, before it had been removed by Balham to disable Morton, had missed any arteries, and the blood-loss was contained until the patient was delivered to the nearest hospital, over the border in England. The same hospital where Balham and Sean Williams had been guests until very recently.

Morton's wounds had been a little more serious. Although it had missed his heart, the knife in his chest had punctured a lung. The bullet wound to his ankle had not initially been life-threatening, but extensive damage had been caused to the delicate arrangement of bones, tendons and ligaments. The result was that the patient would require

several operations to repair the worst of the damage, and months of rehabilitation before he would be able to walk normally again.

The police, of course, had the difficult task of finding out which individuals were responsible for which particular crime. As for the events that had taken place on the cliff edge, Balham and his two friends insisted that his actions had been in self-defence, when he tried to stop Morton and Compton from killing Katie and Ricky. Their claims seemed to be borne out by the fact that the two guns belonged to the victims, while Balham had only been armed with a kitchen knife.

As for the more serious crime of mass-murder, the police were dragged along by events, rather than leading the investigation. The film was out there, together with a helpful narrative provided by Ricky, pointing out that the written co-ordinates Balham handed to Morton had indeed been correct, and did not match those of the village that was all but wiped out. Quite simply, he had been blamed for a mistake he did not make.

And then there was the letter. Sir Phillip Morton's lawyers had wasted no time trying to have it removed from the various platforms on the Internet where it resided, but it was not that simple. The advent of social media meant that information could be shared almost instantaneously. Once it had been put out there, the legal niceties were almost an irrelevance. It was too late.

The final nails in the coffins of Sir Phillip and his son, came in the shape of documents printed in the newspaper where Richard Pearson had worked. This, together with Compton's willingness to make a deal, and thereby reduce his potential sentence, tied all the facts together for the lucky prosecutor, who would make a name for himself, exposing corruption at the very heart of government.

When Balham, Katie and Ricky were finally free to return home, they couldn't quite believe it was all over. As they forced their way through the gauntlet of journalists and news crews, camped in the village, the enormity of what they had uncovered finally hit them. Once they'd reached the safety of their home, Ricky and Katie said they wanted Balham to stay - at least until Ricky's parents returned. When Katie drew the ex-soldier towards her and kissed him tenderly on the lips, he was more than happy to oblige.

His hope now was that, once things had calmed down, the two of them would begin the journey of a happy life together. Ricky, on the other hand, was looking forward to all the female attention his sudden notoriety would bring. He decided he'd start the ball rolling by giving Sam a call. So, everyone was happy.

Everyone, that is, except Trudi Balham.

Chapter 58

Balham waited until the weekend to return to his cottage to pack. Trudi's Alfa Romeo was nowhere to be seen, and he assumed that she had gone into the city for her usual 'break' from village life. But he had barely started helping himself to clothes from his closet, when he heard the distinctive click-clack of his wife's high heels, heralding her imminent arrival. He braced himself for what was to come.

"I thought you were away," he said, when she poked her head around the bedroom door.

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"I'll be out of your hair soon."

"Don't hurry on my account. Going somewhere?" Trudi asked, having spotted Balham's passport, sitting next to his wallet on the corner of the bed.

"Katie and I are going away for a week or two. After what we've been through, we thought we deserved a holiday."

Balham had expected Trudi to have some kind of tantrum when he showed up. He was surprised that she was being remarkably civil. Of course, it didn't last for long.

"Where are you going?"

"Florida. Katie's always wanted to go to Disneyland."

"Disneyland? How old is she? Fucking six?"

Balham refused to take the bait.

"She's a child at heart, yes. Luckily, she hasn't reached the bitter and twisted stage, just yet."

He looked his wife up and down, just to make sure she got the message. Incredibly, Trudi appeared to keep her temper in check, and Balham couldn't help wondering why she wasn't lashing out, which was her usual style. He soon had his answer.

"Do you expect me to say thank you?"

“For what?”

“For not telling the police I knew what Morton was up to.”

“Forget it.”

“So, why didn’t you?”

“Why didn’t I what?”

“Tell them.”

Balham sighed.

“At the end of the day, you’re still my wife. We had a child together, until she was taken from us. Just say, I did it for old-times’ sake.”

Trudi watched, as Balham continued to pack his case.

“We had fun once, didn’t we?”

Balham stopped what he was doing and looked her in the eye.

“Yes, Trudi, we did.”

“And the sex was fantastic.”

Balham watched Trudi, as she put her hands on her hips and struck a pose. All her curves were still in the right place.

“I can’t deny it, Trudi. But it’s a hell of a thing to base a marriage on.”

“We could try,” said Trudi, licking her lips.

“I don’t think so.”

Balham finished closing his suitcase and lifted it off the bed, before slipping his wallet and passport into his jacket pocket.

“So, that’s it,” said Trudi, “you’re leaving me for this bloody Katie?”

“We left each other a long time ago.”

“Very poetic. Where did you get that from - one of your girlfriend’s books?”

“What?”

“Don’t think I haven’t heard people talking around the village. They’ve seen you, following her into the woods for

your sordid little picnics. How do you think that made me feel?"

"I shouldn't imagine you cared. Particularly as you were shacking up with Morton at the time."

"Big deal. He turned out to be another fuck-up, like you."

Balham shook his head and headed for the door before answering.

"Yes ... well, this fuck-up is busy. I've got things to do. Perhaps you'll have more luck next time. I hope you find someone who's finally worthy of you."

Balham had reached the door and was about to leave, when Trudi screamed at him.

"How dare you patronise me, you little prick! Whatever you think you've got going with this bitch won't last. You'll fuck it up. Just like you fuck everything up!"

"See you, Trudi. Have a nice life."

Trudi followed him and had the final say, before slamming the door.

"Screw you!"

Chapter 59

It was good to escape, and to know the nightmare was finally over. They had decided that the two weeks in Florida would help to draw a line under what had gone before, and let them start anew. They were in love – of that they were certain. Having both escaped from loveless marriages, they knew what they had was special.

They had saved one another from the abyss. Katie had thwarted Balham's suicide attempt and helped prove his innocence, and Balham's love for her had given her a reason to live. They were incredibly happy and nobody could take that away from them now.

Balham had never been to the States and he was determined to get the 'full experience' while they were in Florida. With that in mind, he had rented a large, detached property for the duration of their stay, complete with swimming pool, and a master bedroom that turned out to be not much smaller than his rented cottage in Wales.

As for their transportation, he also decided to be a little extravagant. When they'd picked up the classic 'gas-guzzler', like the one he'd seen in a Steve McQueen film as a youngster, Katie pretended to give him a disapproving look.

"I see we're helping to look after the environment during our stay."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't resist," said Balham, and he offered her a cheeky grin. "Listen to this."

He started the engine, before hitting the gas pedal, and was rewarded with a throaty roar.

"Boys with toys," said Katie, and she gently touched his cheek. "But I must admit, it suits you."

On the way to their new Floridian home, Balham stopped to pick up some food and drink. When Katie saw

him return to the car, laden with goodies, she looked at him enquiringly.

“Aren’t we going out for dinner?”

“No, I thought we’d eat in. You’ll probably be tired.”

“What makes you think I’ll be tired?”

“I’m glad you asked. You see, when we get to the king-size bed the holiday brochure promised us, we’re not leaving it until I’ve finished loving you from head to toe.”

Katie smiled, enjoying the wind in her hair, as they raced towards their destination. Eventually she looked over, and caressed Balham’s hand.

“Doesn’t this thing go any faster?”

Chapter 60

Joe Wexler couldn't believe his luck. Without a doubt, it was the best sex he'd ever had in his life. What an incredible body she had. And the way she talked dirty, with that amazing British accent. He must have died and gone to heaven. He took back everything he'd ever said about stiff-ass Brits.

And she was fun too. At first, he'd been worried that she would only be interested in herself and how she looked, but far from it. She'd actually taken an interest in him and his hobbies. Especially his gun collection. He remembered the sexy squeal she'd let out, every time she fired his Smith & Wesson .38 – and, before you knew it, she was hitting the centre of the target every single time. What a woman!

Trudi couldn't believe how easily her plan had fallen into place. She even amazed herself. Of course, she had taken risks but, so far, she'd got away with it. She'd even booked herself on the same flight as her treacherous husband and his little whore – and he hadn't even noticed. Mind you, it was no wonder, considering the way he'd been fawning over the trollop.

Naturally, she'd taken precautions. For the first time in her life, she'd dressed up like a virgin Sunday school teacher – long, tweed skirt, flat shoes, glasses, twin-set and pearls. When she'd looked in the mirror, she couldn't even recognise herself. In fact, she'd made such a good job of her disguise, that she'd had a little trouble at the airport when she'd handed over her passport. The officious-looking woman behind the desk had made Trudi take off her spectacles so that she could get a good look at her face.

The only hiccup had come when they landed. Jim had hired a car. She hadn't counted on him doing that. Fortunately, when she'd followed them at a discreet distance to the car park where their car was waiting, she'd

spotted a single taxi. It had been about to pick up a businessman, and that was when she cursed her outfit. But, once she'd hitched up her skirt, removed her glasses, and thrust her breasts forward, the male taxi driver predictably avoided his intended fare and headed straight towards her. He picked her up, just seconds before Balham's car pulled away.

"Follow that car."

She'd laughed when she'd said the words, and the driver asked if she was putting him on.

"I'm deadly serious."

She'd enjoyed her double-edged reply.

When they finally pulled up across the street from the large house Balham had rented, she cursed. The bastard had never once spoiled her like that.

She asked the driver to take her to the nearest hotel, and that night she had headed for the local bar, in search of someone who could meet her needs. And he came in the shape of Joe Wexler.

Long gone were the tweed skirt and twin-set, to be replaced by her trusty mini-skirt, high heels, and low-cut top. The man had practically salivated when she chose to stand next to him, at the bar. While she sipped her drink, she listened to him talking to some guy about his gun collection.

Thankfully he wasn't bad-looking. She wasn't about to sleep with an ugly bastard, but she didn't want some hunk who thought he was God's gift to women. She wanted the man to be grateful for what he was about to receive.

Getting him to show her his gun collection had been ridiculously easy. He was flattered by her interest, and he was keen to show her how 'macho' he was. She actually enjoyed it. The only thing that had surprised her, when Wexler let her fire some of his treasured possessions, was the power of the recoil. But she was strong, and once he'd

shown her how to stand and hold the gun properly, she became a good shot in no time.

She decided that the Smith & Wesson revolver would be her weapon of choice. She liked the simplicity of it. Besides, Wexler kept it in his bedside table, right where she needed it.

The next night, incapacitating him presented no problem. When they arrived at his apartment, after another night at the same bar, he continued to drink heavily. And, when they finally climbed into his bed to have sex, she applied herself assiduously. After thirty minutes of Trudi's ministrations, Joe Wexler was dead to the world.

Once she was sure he was sound asleep, Trudi climbed out of bed and retrieved her clothes, together with the fully-loaded Smith & Wesson revolver. As soon as she was dressed and armed, she called for a taxi and headed for her husband's little love nest.

When the taxi dropped her off, she managed to make her way to the rear of the property unseen. In her large handbag, she had thought to bring a screwdriver, with some vague notion of how she might use it to break in. As it turned out, she had no need of it. A sash window to a small guest room had been left open a few inches. She eased it up and climbed over the sill.

Once inside, she retrieved the gun from her handbag and simply stood there, listening. She was thoroughly impressed with herself. She wasn't even breathing hard. It was as if she were born for revenge. And she would get away with what she was about to do. Somehow, she just knew it.

Once she had found their bedroom, she would shoot them dead, where they lay. Then it would just be a matter of walking away. She was wearing gloves and she would get rid of the gun, before she called for another taxi to take her to the airport. She had her passport in her bag, and she

would be back in the UK, free and clear, before their bodies were even cold.

* * *

Balham thought he had heard a noise, and he started to climb out of bed to investigate, but Katie stirred and she reached across, pulling his body close to hers. She brought her lips next to his ear and whispered.

“Kiss me.”

Balham hesitated for a second, but then relented, kissing her passionately on the lips.

It was probably nothing, he thought.

“Katie, I love you.”

“I love you too, Jim. Nothing in this world will ever take you from me.”

Within the confines of the room, the shots rang out and, for an instant, Balham’s world was filled with blood and pain.

The blinding light returned. As it slowly faded away, Balham became aware of warm sand between his toes, and the beautiful beach stretched out before him. Emily and Azita ran towards him.

“You came back, daddy. You came back.”

Balham fell to his knees and scooped the girls up in his arms. Azita kissed him and giggled, and Balham noticed she was clutching the pink teddy bear.

“Emily gave it to me,” she said.

She had spoken in Pashto, but Emily appeared to understand her.

“Was that okay, daddy? We’re sisters now.”

Balham wept tears of happiness, but he also ached inside. To see Azita and his daughter alive and well was all

he'd ever wanted, but now Katie had been cruelly taken away from him. Emily tapped his arm excitedly.

"Daddy, you brought the nice lady. I knew you'd bring the nice lady!"

Balham heard the sound of feet, wading through the lapping waves.

"Katie!"

Katie ran to them, and Balham thought she had never looked more beautiful. She knelt down and put her arms around him. The little girls hugged her too, and the four of them laughed and cried tears of joy. Finally Katie spoke.

"I told you nothing could take you from me."

A terrible doubt grew in Balham's consciousness. Was this really a wonderful new world, where he could live the rest of his days in bliss? Or was this simply another dream, created by his dying brain cells, before he finally faded away?

But then a simple truth emerged, easing his troubled mind.

*There was an eternity before I came to be.
There will be an eternity when I am no more.
Yet, in the few seconds of my existence,
I found you.
That is enough.*

Author's Note

Hugh Everett, an American physicist, first proposed the Many-Worlds Interpretation of quantum physics, in 1957. The hypothesis states that there is a very large – possibly infinite – number of universes. Many paradoxes that exist in quantum theory are resolved by the interpretation.

The quantum mind hypothesis suggests that quantum mechanical phenomena play an important part in the brain's function.

The idea that consciousness, as a product of the quantum mind, could re-emerge in another universe, is pure conjecture.



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