

DARK BETRAYAL

Rebecca and Victoria Heap

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“Love is what moves the world, I've always thought...it is the only thing which allows men and women to stand in a world where gravity always seems to want to pull them down... bring them low...and make them crawl.”

Stephen King

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER ONE

Brenna Monaghan emitted a small moan of bliss as she sank into the warm embrace of the hot tub. The water bubbled up to greet her, matching the fizzing excitement of her heart, that hadn't quite recovered from recent events. She was still sure they'd chosen the wrong person and, any minute now, someone would come in to brand her as an imposter and force her off the premises. She glanced towards the door. No sign yet of being disturbed. Grinning she sank back under the water. Better get on with enjoying herself. Gazing up at the stars above her, she thanked her lucky star, whichever one that was, for guiding her here.

It was certainly good luck that she'd had an argument with her mother, one in an endless round lately, which had resulted in her decision to bunk off college and go into town. Not that her mother really cared what she was doing. All she cared about was herself and her current boyfriend - the one that apparently loved her too much to ever try it on with her own daughter. How dare she even suggest such a thing? Why would he want her anyway? She was nothing. She was an ugly, skinny, carrot-top and always would be.

How she hated her! She'd longed to get out from under her but her brother had insisted she get her qualifications first. It was easy for him to say, not so easy to live it when her mother was such a bitch and her live-in lover was little short of a paedophile. Not that she'd mentioned the last part to Sean. She didn't want him getting himself all in a tizzy.

Why was she dwelling on this now? What had happened since proved she

was beautiful, at least in someone's eyes. 'Exceptional' they'd called her. She didn't need college anymore and she definitely didn't need her mother. As her body began to relax and her heart finally slowed, she took her mind back over the past few hours to see if reflection would make it any more believable. She'd never even considered modelling before; she'd never thought herself photogenic. But that man had obviously seen something in her and he'd been right! Because here she was.

At first she'd thought he was just making a play for her. Smiling, she remembered how flattered she'd been. He'd been gorgeous after all. Ebony hair, olive skin, with such a sexy angel tattoo on his right, incredibly toned, bicep. She'd been sitting by herself, cradling a cup of coffee, when he'd taken the chair opposite. But she wasn't stupid. She knew she looked vulnerable and had instantly dismissed the idea he was truly interested in her. She'd even steeled herself to get rid of him.

But then he'd surprised her by slipping out a card and saying, "Don't take this the wrong way but I think you're exactly what we've been looking for. There isn't much time, but you could still make the interview."

She'd frowned.

He'd continued. "There's my business card. We're a legitimate agency. I've written the time and place on the back. We don't normally operate this way, so forgive my intrusion. But please give it some thought. There'll be other girls but I think you have a real chance. No harm in giving it a go, right?" He'd

smiled - *and what a killer smile!* Squeezed her arm and left.

It was only when he'd gone and she'd picked up the card that she'd even realised what he was on about. "Sebastian Sethos," it had declared. "Business Agent. Faces of the Future Modelling Agency." She'd flipped it over. The address on the back was somewhere she could vaguely place. One of the new shiny office blocks on Queen Street, she thought, and the interview time was only an hour away. She'd been cautious of course. This could just be a trick of some kind. Then she'd shaken her head. She'd read too many thrillers lately.

This was real life. But nothing like this ever happened to her in real life! In the end, the safest thing to do, she'd decided, was to take her friend Stacey with her as back-up.

She'd turned up with a giggling Stacey in tow, who'd had to miss her last class but had been more than willing to share the adventure. The man at the front desk had directed them to the fifth floor. There they had found other girls sitting on a line of chairs in the corridor. This had both reassured and frightened Brenna. So much competition! She had no chance. They'd all looked immaculately made-up and had what looked like portfolios on their laps. She'd nearly turned away.

But then an efficient looking, matronly woman with a clipboard had addressed her, asking for her name. Brenna hadn't given it. Instead, blushing with embarrassment, she'd said, "I think there's been some mistake. You won't have my name. I don't think I should be here."

Raising her eyebrows, the woman had retorted, "I'll be the judge of that. Now why are you here? Did someone invite you?"

Brenna had stuttered something like, "I think I'll just go. I'm sorry to have troubled you..." as she'd backed towards the lift.

It was then the woman had spotted the card clutched in her hand. She'd prised it from her and nodded. "This is your invitation. Good." Taking her arm and taking control, she'd admonished, "Don't be shy. Come with me," giving Brenna no choice but to acquiesce.

Stacey had made to accompany her but had been stopped. "No, no. Not you. You must leave."

Stacey had looked disgruntled but Brenna had mouthed, "Don't worry. It all looks legit. Speak later." She had been led swiftly past the other girls, who'd fired daggers at her because of her special, jump-the-queue treatment.

At the end of the corridor there'd been some double-doors. She'd been ushered through into an open, well-lit room before a long desk with three extremely serious-looking, suited people behind it. A large man sat in the middle with two very attractive, well-groomed women on either side of him, one blonde, the other dark-haired. All of them had immediately focused on her, eyes all different in colour but no different in intensity. Feeling like a contestant on one of those wannabe pop star shows, she'd made an attempt to flatten her awry hair and had looked pleadingly at her chaperon for rescue.

Smiling, her escort had said to the waiting audience, "This is..." and,

leaning down, had quietly asked Brenna her name before finishing off her introduction.

Then the man on the panel had said, “Welcome Brenna.” He’d stood and held out his hand. His smile had looked odd as though not suited to his face, which was rather pug-like, but it had seemed genuine enough. “I’m Harry, and this is Hilary and Margot.” He’d gestured first to his right then his left, introducing the two chicly dressed women.

“Hi,” replied Brenna nervously as she’d instinctively moved forwards and taken his hand. His grip had been firm, his large hand completely engulfing her small one. He’d held on to her, turning her fingers over in his and studying the nails and skin. He’d then looked up and scrutinised her face. Brenna had swallowed, uncomfortable. His dark eyes had felt like ants scurrying over her skin. She shivered at the memory.

She’d been relieved when he’d released her hand but he’d not released his gaze. Examining a lock of her hair he’d asked abruptly, “Is this your true colour?”

Brenna had simply nodded, her mouth too dry to form words. Apparently satisfied, he’d then dismissed her with a flick of his hand, instructing her to return to the middle of the room. He’d sat back down and perused some papers on his desk for a minute, a minute that felt like forever to Brenna as she’d stood there feeling like an insect under a microscope.

Then the questions had begun. Strangely this had put her more at ease. She

had expected questions.

“We don’t have much detail on you, I’m afraid. May I ask you your age?”

“Sixteen,” she’d responded truthfully.

He’d seemed troubled by this, his face creasing a little. “Not still in school are you?” She’d vigorously shaken her head. He’d nodded in satisfaction. Then, after a brief conversation with his two colleagues, he’d asked. “Could you turn around for us? Slowly please.”

As she’d revolved, feeling very self-conscious, Brenna had become convinced this was a candid camera show and any minute someone would jump out and surprise her.

Then Hilary, the blonde, had risen from her seat and walked towards her, carrying out a quick but concentrated appraisal of her. She’d wished she was wearing something a lot more flattering than her skinny jeans and favourite well-worn top. *If this wasn’t a wind up, then it must be some kind of weird dream.* Hilary returned to her seat and all three of them debated intensely between themselves.

What came next had come completely out of the blue. “We’re prepared to make you an offer,” Harry had said. “Subject, of course, to age verification and parental approval.”

Despair had quickly followed on the heels of elation. “Parental approval?” she’d queried. Her mother would positively revel in denying her such an opportunity. “My mother will never approve of this.”

“Father?”

She’d shaken her head.

“Do you have an appropriate adult who might stand in for them?”

She’d thought of her brother but quickly dismissed the idea of asking him. He’d definitely want her to finish college first.

“This isn’t going to happen, is it? I don’t even have a portfolio.” She was sure this would be the nail in the coffin.

“Oh, don’t worry about that, honey,” Margot had piped up. “We don’t put much store in pre-produced portfolios. Once you’re with us, we like to design our own around our concept of your unique selling points.”

Harry interjected. “Look, we like you. We think you have potential. But we need you to sign a contract with us so we can act as your agent and promote you. Because you’re under 18, in the absence of parental consent, there’ll have to be a disclaimer as well, confirming you understand the agreement and have waived the right to parental consultation. Are you alright with that?”

“Absolutely!” she’d confirmed without hesitation, her hopes reignited.

“Great.”

Margot had then shuffled some papers and produced a two-page document that she’d handed to Brenna with a pen, offering up her chair and saying, “Please sit down while you read through it.”

At least it wasn’t some mammoth agreement with lots of small print. This comforted her but she’d taken her time examining it. Her brother had always

counselled her to read any legal document carefully. It had looked OK to her. It talked about promoting and marketing with something about a 15% share in her income and a finder's fee once a contract was secured. She appreciated they needed their cut. Still she hadn't been sure, though. Maybe she should speak to her brother or get some legal advice first?

"Is there a problem?" Margot had asked when she'd deliberated over it for a while.

"Do I need to sign this right now?"

"Not at all. Take it away if you like." She'd shrugged but then continued, "Although there's no guarantee we'll still want you if you wait. We have a lot more interviews to get through."

At these words, she'd thought what the hell? What was the worst that could happen? She had nothing to lose.

With the agreement signed and stowed away, the other two had then risen from their chairs. Brenna naturally followed suit but was left rather flummoxed. "That's it?"

"Yes. We're absolutely delighted to have you with us."

Brenna shook her head. "But what does that mean?"

"It means you're officially ours now, dependent on medical checks. Don't look so surprised. You don't have any hidden scars or birthmarks we should know about do you?" Amusement had permeated her voice.

Brenna had shaken her head, numb with astonishment. "So, what happens

now?”

“Go home. Pack.”

“Pack?”

“Yes. We like our model prospects to live on site, as stipulated in the agreement. Oh, and make sure to include some swimwear.” Brenna half recalled seeing some note about location but hadn’t fully appreciated what it meant.

“Gives us the opportunity to polish you, refine you and create your portfolio,” she’d expanded. A car will pick you up in say,” she consulted her watch, “an hour. That give you time enough to pack and say your goodbyes?”

“No kidding?” Brenna had asked, her whole body buzzing with nervous excitement.

“No kidding.”

That had been the start of this amazing adventure. She put a hand to her mouth remembering with glee just how much satisfaction she’d got in telling her Mum where she could stick it and just what she thought of her. Happily letting the resulting tirade wash over her, the words no longer having the power to hurt, she’d quickly packed, dashing out of the house as soon as she’d heard the car pull up. Her mother had had it coming for a long time. Wrenching her at 6 years old away from her brother – the only proper family she’d ever known - just because she could.

That moment of loss came back to her suddenly, vividly. She remembered screaming as her mother dragged her away and her brother attempted to stop her,

her mother lashing him with the words, “She’s mine. You’re only her brother. You have absolutely no parental rights. Now get away from her.” She’d had no regard for Brenna’s well-being only for the power thrill it gave her to take something precious from someone else. This is what drove her. After all, how many marriages had she destroyed, not including her own?

Brenna bit her lip hard in an attempt to brook the tears that began to form. Silly girl! Why was she thinking of the past? She shook her head. No tears now, she swore to herself. Never again over her mother. It was time to concentrate on the future. She was free. Finally, and unexpectedly, free of her mother and her old predictable, painful life. It was crazy! Crazy but true! She pummelled the water with her fists in excitement and then she heard an exclamation of reproach and her head slipped under the water in surprise. She had a visitor.

She came back up spluttering, her face reddening even more when she saw that she had soaked him. She’d been so busy in her own head, she had failed to notice his appearance. He stood at the entrance to the patio, brushing at the water she’d showered him with, an amused smile on his face.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself but I think it’s time you got out before you wrinkle up like a prune,” he remarked.

It was the man who’d left his card with her at the café. *Sebastian*. Goggling him and struggling to compose herself, she was at a loss for words. She almost sank back under the water she was so mortified, not helped by how unnervingly attractive she found him. He must surely be a model himself?

He jerked an eyebrow and asked, “Well, do you intend to get out of there or should I join you?” He eyed her speculatively and she felt her colour rise once again. Boy, she wished she had more sophistication!

Trying desperately to be cool, or at least give that impression, she rose and held out her hand. “Help me out then, won’t you?”

It crossed Sebastian’s mind that he’d much rather help her out of that costume, as his eyes raked her. She reminded him of the actress Emma Stone. A very delectable package. But, as that thought crossed his mind, on its heels thundered Harry’s warning: “Hands off the merchandise. I mean it!” But surely there was no harm in a little nibble? Just to test the quality?

Taking her hand, he stood back as she stepped out of the tub but, as soon as she found her feet, he yanked her towards him. She yelped but more in astonishment than objection. “You got me wet already,” he rumbled, “you may as well finish the job.”

As his mouth seized hers and his hands grabbed her bottom, Brenna was at first flattered but then disconcerted as the kiss and his hold became a little too ruthless for comfort. Laying her hands against his chest, she pushed but this had absolutely zero effect. Panicking a little, unable to breathe, she felt herself on the verge of screaming when he finally released her. The smug satisfaction she saw in his face left her cold. It flashed through her head that she may have completely misjudged him... and the situation. Who was there to call on if he took advantage of her?

However, he must have recognised the alarm in her face and he apologised. “I’m sorry. You’re just so pretty and I found you too hard to resist. I hope I didn’t scare you?” He stroked a conciliatory finger down her cheek.

She had probably overreacted, she thought. After all, she’d only ever experienced a bit of tame snogging. He was very much a man and was treating her like a grown woman, that was all. He’d think her a baby if she made a fuss. Taking a deep breath and a step back, she said, “You just took me by surprise.”

“I was meant to give you this, not a kiss,” he confessed, handing her a piece of paper. “You took me by surprise too. I didn’t expect you to be so.....delectable.” He eyed her attire and smirked. He looked like a naughty little boy caught out by the teacher. She couldn’t help but take the paper and return his smile.

“It’s your itinerary for tomorrow,” he explained, “plus some general housekeeping information.” She thanked him and, noticing she was starting to shiver, he passed her the terry-cloth robe from the hook beside the tub. This considerate gesture helped to reassure her. “You’d better get some rest. It’s a busy day tomorrow.”

He was making his way out when she called after him.

Turning, he queried, “Yes?”

“Will I see you again?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Not likely, sweet thing. Harry doesn’t encourage it. He likes his girls to be completely focused on their work.”

When the door had closed behind him, Sebastian clenched his fists in exasperation. Everyone wanted them young and untouched lately. Couldn't blame them really. But this girl could be his so easily! Putty in his hands. It was a shame the operation was so snobbish. Breaking them in would have been much more fun. After all, it came down to the same thing, didn't it? Power and control. Ah well, he shrugged. Things could be worse. He was making money in a job he thoroughly enjoyed – there was a lot to be said for the thrill of the con and there was little risk attached to this game.

And, at least outside the operation, he could have any girl he wanted. One encouraging glance and they were practically wetting themselves. As he said this to himself, the image of the boss's daughter popped into his head to mock him. He scowled. *Not exactly "any"*. But he was biding his time where that one was concerned. An opportunity might yet come.

Brenna sighed as Sebastian left the room. He was so handsome! And he'd kissed her like no-one ever had before. Yes, he'd been a little over enthusiastic but, now the moment had passed, she remembered it with fondness. He'd been so keen to make up for it afterwards. What a gentleman! Well, no point mooning over him. He'd said they were unlikely to meet again. Better concentrate on what she was really here for.

After securing her wet hair in a towel, she indulged herself with a cappuccino from the luxury coffee-maker installed in her room and then made herself comfortable on the sofa. Reading over her itinerary for the next day,

excitement washed over her again. Looked to her like she was in for a day of utter pampering, followed by some photo shoots. She sipped her coffee contentedly. Could life get any better?

CHAPTER TWO

Brenna was becoming bored. She smiled as she twisted and turned for the camera but she'd been through this process before. She was getting tired of the posing. How many photos and outfits would it take before her portfolio hit the right note? She'd even agreed to some collagen lip enhancement. Maybe her brother had been right. Brains were more important than beauty and she was lucky enough to be blessed with both – at least that's what he'd always said. She'd always agreed with the brains part and maybe she really didn't have what it took in the looks department, despite their initial confidence in her. Other girls she'd met whilst here had got lucky and been offered work. She'd heard about it. She'd been here for nearly 3 months now and had even started missing her studies and her most annoying college friends!

She was actually relieved when they were unexpectedly interrupted by the entrance of the boss – Harry Pearson, the man who'd chaired her initial interview. Uh, oh. It was unusual for him to pay a visit. Was she going to be ditched? Now this prospect raised its head, her stomach turned over in dismay. She wasn't prepared to let go of her dreams - especially the dream of living with her brother in his classy apartment in New York or even finding her own place near him. Money for the flight to America would be chump change once she was a model. She'd been hoping to just show up and surprise him. She'd been emailing him but had kept her new situation a secret from him.

Harry addressed the photographer. "Enough now, Marcel. Brenna, come

with me.” His tone brooked no argument.

Feeling apprehensive, Brenna followed him from the room. He led her away from the photography studio and into a room she’d never really noticed before marked “Conference Suite.” Were her dreams going to end here and now? Closing the door as she entered, he smiled at her and invited her to sit in one of the chairs surrounding a long, glass-topped table. The place was clean and well-lit but eerily bleak and empty without the presence of anyone else. It made her feel on edge and suddenly inconsequential but she belied her nerves with an answering smile.

Taking a seat next to her, Harry put a folder on the table between them, tapping his fingers up and down on it. Brenna glanced at it, noticing the front held her name in bold type. She looked up from it pensively.

“Have you enjoyed your time here, Brenna?” Oh no, this was definitely it. This was the “we’re letting you go” speech. She nodded.

“Good, good. We’ve been having a little problem placing you though, haven’t we?”

Brenna was about to defend herself when he patted her knee, continuing with, “Not your fault, not your fault at all. Fashion is a fickle business. There’ve been new designers making a big noise and they’ve odd ideas about the kind of look they’re after.”

He shrugged. “Anyway, whilst the market can shift again just as dramatically, at any time, we just can’t afford to hold you on our books any

longer.”

Brenna blinked away the sudden prickling of tears. Hadn’t she known this was coming? So why wasn’t she ready for it?

“So,” his hand now delved into the folder, emerging with a piece of paper. He passed this across to her. “Time to settle up, I’m afraid, my dear.”

Frowning in confusion, she picked up the piece of paper. It was an invoice. Made out to her. For several thousands of pounds. “What’s this?”

“Your bill.” His tone had transmogrified from kindly grandfather to stern businessman.

“I don’t understand?”

“Your contract.” He pulled another piece of paper from the folder, that was fast becoming a nest of hidden monsters, and placed it in front of her.

“Unfortunately, your time is up. As agreed, the contract allows for a maximum placement period of 3 months. Once that period expires, as it now has, it becomes terminable and the fees for all services rendered become payable.”

Brenna stood to her feet in shock. “Is this some kind of sick joke?”

He brushed a hand over the contract. “It’s all in there, if you need confirmation.”

She glanced at it but didn’t need to read it. She had no doubt he knew what he was talking about. And she’d been stupid enough to sign it. Carried away by the prospect of it all.

“But what about your side of the deal? You promised me a modelling

career?”

“I’m afraid that’s where you’re wrong. We promised to do our best as your agent to get you signed. And we have. You’re worth much more to us as a successful model, believe me. We’re as disappointed as you are.”

Brenna sat down dejectedly and picked up the invoice again.

“I wish it were different, I really do Brenna. We have to invoke the 3 month clause extremely rarely.”

He placed a hand on hers in a gesture of mollification but she withdrew hers angrily. “You don’t really expect me to be able to pay this, do you?”

“Well, is there someone who can pay it for you? Your mother, perhaps?”

Brenna’s eyes widened in horror at this suggestion. Her Mum would just love that, her coming back to her, not only with her tail between her legs but cap in hand. No, even the thought of it and the inevitable “told you so, told you you were no good” rant, was too much to contemplate.

She closed her eyes. What was she to do? Fleeting her brother’s image came to her. He would pay this in an instant. But he’d be mad she hadn’t involved him from the beginning. And she’d so wanted to make him proud of her and to show him what a success she could be, all on her own. How could she face him now? The shame of it was just too great.

The sound of the door opening roused her from her dismal thoughts. It was Sebastian who entered. He didn’t acknowledge her but went straight to Harry and, leaning down, whispered into his ear.

Harry immediately rose to his feet. “Wait here,” he said to her and, letting Sebastian take his arm, they strode purposefully to the opposite end of the room and began to converse in hushed but urgent tones.

Once their mini confabulation was over, Sebastian walked back up the room and, on passing her, gave her a huge wink and then left. Brenna puzzled over this. Was she going to be given more time? Had Sebastian intervened on her behalf? Her spirits began to reassert themselves a little. Harry remained in thought at the end of the room. Abruptly, he seemed to make up his mind about something and then quickly re-joined her.

“There’s been a development,” he explained, as he regained his seat. Brenna waited tensely for him to expound on this with a mixture of both hope and fear, fear that the hope would prove false.

Harry smiled slyly. Something about that smile made Brenna feel a bit queasy. “It seems you have an admirer.” Did he mean Sebastian? This was repudiated by the words that followed. “A wealthy tycoon has seen your publicity photos and he likes them.”

“He’s going to offer me a contract?” Brenna jumped in eagerly.

“No, no.” Harry waved a hand at her, dismissing this idea. “He’s not in the fashion or advertising industry.”

“Oh.” Brenna was confused.

But then Harry leaned forward and grasped her hand excitedly. “He wants to sponsor you!”

“Sponsor? What does that mean?”

“He’s going to fund your continued promotion. He believes you have huge potential and that we’ve not to give up on you. He’s convinced you’ll make it and he’d love to be credited with some part in your eventual success.”

Brenna was stunned but also a little wary. Wasn’t this all a little too convenient? “What’s the catch? He must want something in return?”

“Well, of course! He wants a cut of any earnings you make, but only a very small percentage. Oh,” he tagged on, almost as if he’d forgotten, “and he’d like to meet you. Immediately.”

Brenna turned her head, thinking this was a cue and expecting her “sponsor” to walk into the room.

Harry laughed. “No. Not here. He’s invited you to his home. For dinner.”

Brenna’s harsh intake of breath was audible.

“Remember,” Harry rationalised, “he’s only ever seen you in photographs. He wants to meet and get to know the person behind the image.”

Rising, Harry grasped her arm, pulling her to her feet, ignoring the shock clearly delineated on her features. “Now, go and get yourself ready. You’ll find Melanie already in your room, ready to make you look perfect!”

“Wait! Wait!” Raising her arms, she dislodged Harry’s grip. “I’m still trying to get my head around this!”

“Don’t try and do that, my darling. Just go. You’ve been granted a well-deserved reprieve. Hurry now,” he said waving her on her way, “we don’t want

to keep him waiting and risk him changing his mind.”

CHAPTER THREE

In her room, Brenna submitted to the familiar routine of being buffed and beautified but her mind was whirling. As Mel, her attendant, helped her into a slinky jade dress and a pair of silver heels, Brenna asked her, “Do you know anything about this man I’m going to meet?”

Mel shook her head, as she fixed the tiny buckles on her shoes. “No, but I do know you’re one lucky girl!”

“Don’t you think it’s strange that he came forward when he did?”

“I wouldn’t be one to question good fortune, love. It can just as quickly ‘poof’!” Widening her arms, she then clapped her hands together by way of demonstration.

She finished zipping her up and turned her to face the full-length mirror. “You look fabulous! You’ll knock him dead!”

Brenna looked at herself in the glass and, flipping her hair, couldn’t disagree. She loved the rich green against the vibrant red of her hair. She began to feel better. Maybe this man would even be worth it? He might be loaded *and* good-looking.

However, Brenna’s misgivings began to resurface as she began the journey to her sponsor saviour. Now ensconced in a sleek black Mercedes, having made a speedy transfer from helicopter to car, she fretted over what lay ahead. How long was she supposed to stay with him? What if he expected more than just dinner with her? After all, she owed him quite a debt for coming to her rescue

like he had. Her stomach trembled uneasily and it suddenly seemed all too likely that she was placing herself in a very risky situation.

“Can we go back? I think I’ve changed my mind,” she addressed the driver.

Sebastian Sethos looked up and into the mirror at her but didn’t slow his speed. “We’re nearly there now. Don’t fret, sweetie. Here,” he leaned over his shoulder and passed her a small black device with a button at its centre. “That’s a pager. Put it in your purse. Anytime you want to leave, press it and I’ll come get you.”

Her insides untwisted themselves a little as she accepted the pager gratefully. “Any time?” she echoed.

“I’ll be right there. Promise. Now here we are.”

She realised that they had indeed reached their destination as he smoothly turned the car up a long gravel driveway. Her attention was drawn to the lights at its crest, which illuminated the mullioned windows and Greek portico of a magnificent red-stoned edifice of a house. She gasped in awe. Reaching the top, Sebastian manoeuvred the car around an ornate stone fountain, the cascading water sparkling in the lights from the house, and drew to a stop outside the formidable front doors.

Brenna’s stomach now clenched in nervous knots again. Sebastian scooted out of his seat and opened the car door for her. She gingerly stepped out on her spindly heels and he offered her his arm, which she took with gratitude,

escorting her safely to the doorstep. She anxiously gripped that arm as the doors opened before they'd even knocked, the owner clearly already alert to their arrival.

Sebastian whispered in her ear, "Make a good impression." He gave her a peck on the cheek and was gone.

It was really no surprise, she told herself, when the doors opened to reveal a well-dressed but distinctly overweight florid-faced gentleman, but still she quailed. Who had she been kidding? Had she really been hoping for someone blessed with looks as well as wealth? She just wasn't that lucky. Never mind. She had the pager if she needed it. The fifty-something walrus of a man smiled a welcome and took her arm.

"Come in, come in. I've been looking forward to meeting you, Brenna, for such a long time. My name is Williamson. Dominic Williamson. But please just call me Dom."

Some time later, Dom stood up from the table they had shared saying, "I'd now like to show you something, Brenna. Follow me, if you would?"

Brenna was happy to oblige. She'd been plied with spectacular food, very expensive wine and humorous tales of Dom's college experiences in an obvious effort by him to find some commonality with her. He'd not once patronised her and had listened with interest to her description of her life at home. It was flattering to be shown such respect by a man as intelligent and successful as he clearly was, in spite of the difference in their age and experience. Whilst initially

disappointed, she was now feeling rather pleased. Surely Dom was living proof of that old adage ‘appearances can be deceptive’. He’d proved to be a very convivial host and had shown that his interest went far deeper than appreciation of her physical appearance. Perhaps this is what it would have been like to have a father? He’d referred to himself as her patron, not liking the term sponsor when they’d touched on his future role in her career. She liked that.

Having knocked back more alcohol than was probably good for her, along with a generous slug of pleasant conversation, she jounced out to meet him in the main reception area feeling buoyant. He beckoned her to join him at the top of some stairs that led off the back of the main hallway.

“Where are we going?” she asked, curious and peering down the dark stairwell.

“A very secret, very special place,” he told her in almost reverent tones. He turned to her. “One I’ve prepared just for you.”

Brenna froze and her stomach roiled in confusion. She looked into his once benevolent eyes. What she saw there left no room for doubt. He meant to do unspeakable things to her. They glimmered with a deep, dark maniacal glee. Frantic, she dug into her purse, frenziedly pressing the pager Sebastian had given to her.

Dominic grabbed her hand and easily pried it from her fingers. Then, rather than throwing it aside as she’d anticipated, he studied it with growing amusement. “Do you know what this is, Brenna?” He giggled. “It’s a garage

door remote control. I'm afraid we don't have any garage doors here that will open for you."

Any hope of assistance gone, her only remaining choice was to make a desperate run for it. But she was too slow, made sluggish by the wine. He seized her by the arm as she turned, his grip bruising. "Don't try and run. You're mine. You always have been. Duly bought and paid for."

She screamed with the horror of capture and betrayal, twisting in his grasp, but it was no use. He had the strength of the brute he truly was. He struck her forcibly in the face and, after the pain exploded, it was something of a relief when she swiftly fell into the numbing blackness of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER FOUR

Charles Hughes sat in front of his computer station glaring at the screen in front of him. His spreadsheets were refusing to print. They appeared in the printer queue but then just seemed to freeze there. He sighed, ran a hand through his tawny blond hair, destroying its usually neat appearance, and walked over to the office printer for the fifth time just to check that his print out hadn't suddenly materialised. He had asked and no-one else in the office seemed to be having the same problem so it couldn't be a server error. He went back to his desk and decided to do a search for another printer on the network that he could try to connect to.

He found another HP laserjet and set it as his default printer instead. He tried printing the spreadsheets again and the screen seemed to indicate that it was successful. He then checked the location of the alternative printer he had used and was surprised to realise that it wasn't on his floor and therefore belonged to another company in the building. He traced the printer he had used to the next floor. He would have to get the technical guys to sort things out as he was obviously linked up to the wrong network. Nevertheless, at least his work should have printed this time.

He walked out of the office and up the stairs to the floor above. "Bespoke Cars – Accounts Section" stated a simple metal plaque next to the double doors where the printer lived. He smiled. Finally he might gain entry into this prestigious company, even if it was just the Accounts Department! He had

applied for a job with Bespoke Cars because of his love of top of the range convertibles but hadn't even been offered an interview.

He pressed an intercom and explained what he wanted to the person that answered. He was buzzed in and a slickly dressed, morose-looking man examined his id tag and looked him up and down disapprovingly.

"I can't see your stuff being here," he grumbled. "You guys aren't even on the same server as us."

"I did seem to manage to connect to your printer though," Charlie insisted. "Can I just check and retrieve my documents?"

The man frowned at him. "If they have printed out here, I won't print to it again," Charlie assured him. "I'll get our technical people to sort it out, I promise."

The employee grunted and invited Charlie to follow him to a printer in the corner of the office. He shuffled through the documents in the printer tray, muttering to himself.

His expression changed to one of reluctant astonishment and he thrust some paperwork at Charlie. "Here you are. This must be yours."

"Thanks," Charlie said, taking it and turning to leave.

"Hey!"

Charlie pivoted back. "Don't think you can come up here again," the fellow warned, his thin lips pursed into non-existence in his saturnine face.

"Make sure you get it sorted OK? If anything else prints out that isn't ours, it's

going in the shredder!”

Charlie raised his hands in a gesture of acquiescence and then left, shaking his head.

When he got back to his desk, he looked through the documents to check that he had everything. At the back of the pile was a sheet of information he didn't recognise. After all that griping, the stupid man had given him one of *their* documents! He glanced down at it and was interested to see that it was an invoice for an expensive sports car. He read through the specifications, resting his hand on his cheek in dreamy contemplation. What he wouldn't do to own such an incredible vehicle!

As he looked down the list, something jarred but he couldn't quite grasp what it was at first. He read through the details again. When he realised what he had seen, he suddenly sat back in his chair, a puzzled look on his boyish face. A Porsche Cayman S did not have a folding roof and yet this invoice clearly stated “convertible.”

He assumed it was some kind of mistake. No matter how good these people were at personalizing cars, surely they couldn't change a structural part of the car like that? In any event, if the buyer wanted a convertible car, all he had to do was buy a Porsche Boxster or similar instead? Charlie knew it was none of his business but it niggled at him. He decided it must be an administrative error of some sort. He had no wish to return to their office to point this out to them in person and doubted he would be permitted entry a second time anyway.

Nevertheless, he had no qualms about ratting on the prick he had dealt with in their office. He therefore decided to drop them a quick email explaining how he had obtained the invoice and pointing out the error.

Charlie checked his inbox before shutting down his computer for the day at 4pm. He shrugged. Bespoke Cars hadn't replied to his email. He got the invoice out again to have a look at it. His eyes fell on the delivery date stated at the bottom. It was yesterday! His gaze moved to the delivery address. The house had a name rather than a number, which suggested that it was an upmarket property, but the area postcode indicated that it was local.

He rubbed a hand across his mouth thoughtfully. It wouldn't be too far out of his way to make a detour on his way home. The car could be parked on a driveway and, as it had been a clear day and the clocks hadn't gone back yet, it should still be light enough to see. If the car was out of sight and he felt audacious enough, perhaps he could even impose on the homeowner to let him view it? He might be more than happy to show off his new purchase? Decision made, he stuffed the invoice in his back pocket and left the office, his step a little bouncy and his skin prickling with anticipatory nerves.

"You have reached your destination", Charlie's SatNav declared as he pulled up opposite some rather imposing wrought iron gates. All he could see was a glimpse of a driveway through the gates and then his view was obscured by a high stone wall that must extend around the house and grounds. He could see some kind of intercom set into one of the pillars that supported the gates.

This was going to be more difficult than he had envisaged. If the owner was as security conscious as it first appeared, he wasn't going to let some complete stranger come and nosy around his new car.

He dug the invoice out of his bag and looked at it again. Should he pose as a representative of Bespoke Cars? He wrestled briefly with his conscience and then decided to go for it. He had come this far now and what harm would it do? The man could always just turn him away.

He got out of his car and walked confidently over to the intercom; he wanted to look purposeful in case there was also a camera on the gate. He hesitated briefly but then pressed the buzzer. He was committed now. Nothing happened at first and he peered between the bars on the gate, finally catching sight of a large, mansion style house at the end of the long, stony driveway.

There was a sudden gust of wind that shook the trees on either side of the approach, the branches rattling together like loose bones. Red autumn leaves rushed down to lie like dark drops of blood on the wet ground. Charlie shivered and turned up the collar of his jacket. He was about to head back to his car and he jumped in surprise when a loud voice suddenly emanated from the speaker.

“What do you want?” it demanded belligerently.

He started to respond, his voice at first deserting him and forcing him to cough. He then began again in a more assertive tone.

“Hello, Mr Williamson,” he said in greeting, having noted the name from the invoice. “I understand that you have taken delivery of a luxury vehicle

recently and I am just following up as part of Bespoke Cars' customer care service."

There was a long pause and then the man queried suspiciously, "I don't remember this being mentioned when the sale was finalised. What is it that you want exactly?"

"I'm just checking that everything is to your satisfaction, Sir. I won't take up much of your time," Charlie replied.

"Can't this kind of thing be done over the phone?" Mr Williamson asked.

"Yes, Sir," Charlie accepted, "but we prefer to offer a more personal service. I'm sorry if it is unexpected. I was in the area and was asked to drop by."

"I'm not sure about this. I was promised that this sale would remain very private. You turning up on my doorstep is not exactly what I would call discreet."

"I assure you, Sir, that client confidentiality has been in no way compromised," Charlie declared, now starting to regret his decision to investigate the car. This joker seemed to be very uptight and he hadn't thought it would be quite so difficult to gain access. He'd now embroiled himself in a pretence that could prove hard to maintain. What if this guy ended up calling the police?

However, Charlie had never run away from a challenge in his life and, though all his instincts were screaming at him to get out of there, his curiosity

was highly aroused. If he didn't follow this through he would be left forever wondering about the car and castigating himself for being such a coward.

"I am not happy about this. Not happy about this at all," Mr Williamson said, profound annoyance seething behind his words. There was a very long pause. Charlie almost turned away, deciding that he wasn't going to be granted admission anyway.

"I suppose you'd better come up to the house," he heard the man finally concede. A high-pitched beep sounded and the gates gradually began to open. Charlie expected them to creak but they glided open with an almost eerie smoothness.

"I still need to know what you want. This is highly irregular and I am sure there is something else you're not telling me."

Charlie returned to his car and drove through the open gates, shrugging off the chill that shuddered briefly through him as he watched them shut behind him. As he approached the house, even in the dimming light, he could see how beautifully well-built and ornate it was. His optimism returned. A man with taste like this surely couldn't be that horrible? He spotted the sizeable garage over to one side and his mood lifted even more.

He parked near the entrance and walked up the steps to the porch, even more amazed by the sheer wealth that exuded from this house as his gaze took in all the elaborate details of the external design. An unconcealed camera swung towards him as he approached the front door and his nervousness returned, its

glowing red eye pinning him with its malevolent glare. He couldn't prevent himself from starting a little when the heavy front door opened noiselessly and a large, fleshy man stood there, eyeing him with obvious displeasure.

“I can't say you are welcome,” he grumbled. “As you can see,” he said, tightening the belt on the maroon velvet dressing gown he wore, “I wasn't expecting visitors.”

He opened the door wider and grunted, “Follow me.”

Charlie obeyed, a little disconcerted, especially as the guy didn't appear to be wearing anything underneath his robe. The man's backside wobbled revoltingly even beneath the thick garment and flabby legs, riddled with ugly raised purple veins, both drew and repelled his gaze. They entered a large living area and Charlie's expression changed from one of disgust to one of wonder. This single room was bigger than his entire house and was tastefully decorated with myriads of sparkling lights that beautifully highlighted the fascinating sculptures and large paintings positioned around the room.

Mr. Williamson gestured for him to sit on a large black sofa that was set in front of an exquisitely carved dark oak table. Charlie remained standing, sharply aware of his intrusion in this house and now anxious to just see the car and get out of there. “I am sorry to impose on you like this. I won't sit down as I don't want to take up any more of your time than is necessary. May I see the car?”

The man appeared to frown, but it was hard to tell as his face had been surgically altered, the skin unnaturally taut as though a skin-coloured balloon

had been stretched unwillingly over the frame beneath. “Why do you need to see the car?” he answered irritably. “I thought you were simply here to check on my satisfaction with her?”

Charlie hesitated, now wondering whether to come clean and admit to his deception in the hope that the man would take pity on him. However, one look into Mr. Williamson's muddy blood-shot eyes, forced him to quickly discard that idea; he'd seen wild dogs with more empathy in their gaze.

“Yes,” Charlie agreed. “I am here to make sure you are completely satisfied. I am also here to check that the car is exactly as you ordered and all the specifications are correct.”

Mr. Williamson was definitely not reassured by Charlie's words. He scowled, putting a hand to his mouth, his eyes scouring Charlie's face as if he could gauge the true meaning behind his words by the intensity of his gaze alone.

“Why do you need to check her? That kind of thing should have been done before she was passed over to me.”

Charlie felt flayed by the man's scrutiny and he dropped his eyes and began to discreetly move backwards. “I can see this is a bad time,” he mumbled apologetically. “I'm so sorry to have bothered you. I'll go.”

However, the big man didn't allow Charlie to retreat, striding over to him and gripping his shoulders painfully with his huge hands. His eyes narrowed into pig-like slits as he glared into Charlie's face. “Why are you really here?” he

demanded harshly, almost spitting at him, eyes glinting with anger and suspicion. “There's something wrong with her isn't there?”

“No, of course not!” Charlie refuted, now reckless in his desperation to appease this madman and get out of there. “I just wanted to see the car! I wanted to see if she was really a convertible!” If Mr. Williamson had been enraged before, Charlie's outburst was the flame that lit the touch paper.

Colour flared on the man's cheeks and his face now favoured a red balloon that was about to burst. “What are you saying?” he screeched. “She's not really a virgin?!” His grip on Charlie tightened excruciatingly and he bellowed like a wounded baboon. “I knew it was all too fucking good to be true!” Charlie didn't understand Mr. Williamson's words but he squeezed his eyes shut and turned his face away, certain that he was going to be struck.

However, a few seconds passed and nothing happened. Charlie ventured opening his eyes and found that his antagonist's face had changed from one of acrimony to one of sorrowful resignation. He abruptly released Charlie, swearing and muttering under his breath. He ignored Charlie's attempts to question him and commanded, “Wait here!” before turning and leaving the room.

Charlie gazed after the man in bewilderment, absently rubbing one of his throbbing shoulders. What did the man mean? What the hell had he got himself into? He decided that his curiosity had already got him into enough trouble and he wasn't going to hang around to find out. This whole idea had patently been a disastrous mistake. He hurried to the front door and was about to step outside

when his already frazzled nerves were torn apart by a heartrending scream.

He jolted in shock and his primal instincts took over. He was in his car and turning the key in the ignition before his conscious mind could even react. He was about to tramp the accelerator and get out of there when his thoughts interrupted. Who had screamed? What was going on in there? Could he just up and leave? He bowed his head, his whole body shaking and his hands gripping the steering wheel so hard it shook a little along with him. What if someone was hurt or needed help?

He returned cautiously to the house, his senses at full acuity from the adrenaline coursing through his system but feeling disconnected from himself. As he re-entered the house it felt like he was stepping back into some awful waking dream. He found himself back in the room he had fled. The room was empty, nothing was disturbed and all was quiet. He scanned the room again, his ears straining for any noise. Could he have imagined the scream?

He was torn between venturing further into the house and leaving for good this time, when he heard some strange sounds that seemed to be coming from the hallway just outside the room. The grunts and scufflings became louder. He watched in rigid fascination as Mr Williamson entered, panting with exertion as he dragged someone behind him. Charlie's gaze changed to one of utter dismay as he got a proper look at who it was. It was a slight young woman. He couldn't tell how old she was. She was fully developed but there was something about her that shrieked of youth.

She was naked and her long coppery hair hung in streams over her face. His mind registered that there was something wrong with her skin but he could not initially comprehend what it was. Was she covered in birthmarks? Most of her skin was a normal pale pink but scattered here and there were darker marks, some reddish, some a livid purple. There was a long streak of red tracking her passage across the floor. He couldn't suppress a small sob of distress as the realisation hit him like a physical pain; the red trail was blood and the mottled stains on her body were bruises. If it was she he had heard cry out, she wasn't making any noise now.

Mr. Williamson came to a halt in front of Charlie and let go of the girl's arm. As soon as he released her, she curled up into a foetal ball, clearly an instinctive defence mechanism. Mr. Williamson spotted Charlie's appalled countenance and exclaimed bitterly, "You surely can't expect to get her back in the same condition she arrived in? You have breached the terms of our contract. You admitted yourself that she is not as described. Take her away. You think I would keep second hand goods?!"

He turned to the girl and kicked her viciously. Her reaction earlier showed that she had already become accustomed to this kind of brutality. "Get up, you worthless bitch!" he spat at her, his ugly face almost rendered inhuman with venom and disgust.

She slowly uncurled herself and began to falteringly get to her feet. Charlie was unable to stop himself rushing over to her to offer some support. His horror

deepened when she flinched at his touch, turning big green eyes upon him, full of despair.

He turned to Mr. Williamson, his shock now making him angry. He now had no illusions as to what kind of business he had stumbled upon. “Car” had obviously all along been a euphemism for “girl”. He realised that he had to try and stay in character and just meekly leaving with the girl would probably register as odd.

“What the fuck have you done to her? You've barely had her five minutes and she looks like you've used her for boxing practice! At least get her something to cover herself with!”

Williamson glared resentfully at him but did as requested and returned with a large blanket. Charlie wrapped it around the shivering girl, noticing that blood was now dripping on to her feet. He looked for any open wounds on her body but couldn't see any. Where was the blood coming from? He spotted scarlet streaks on her inner thighs.

“Is she on her period?” he asked Williamson.

At this query, the man merely smiled, the malevolently sly look in his piggy eyes sending a shiver of revulsion through Charlie.

“No,” he answered. “Thought I'd get the pleasure of seeing her bleed like a virgin, even if she isn't one.”

“What?” Charlie gasped but the man merely sneered at him and, balling his hands into fists, hissed menacingly, “You'd better get the fuck out of here

before I decide to get my money's worth out of you too."

The girl was in no state to move fast so Charlie lifted her into his arms. Charlie felt his heart wrench as she burrowed herself into him. She still made no sound but he couldn't help whispering to her, "You're alright. You're safe with me, I promise." He walked out of the room with her, unable to prevent himself looking back over his shoulder to give the bastard a last blisteringly disparaging look.

He got back to his car and laid the girl down gently in the back seat, trying to bunch the blanket up between her legs to help stop the bleeding. He glanced at her face and his heart turned to ice in his chest. She was so pale and still he thought she was dead. He was about to check her vital signs when she moved slightly. She remained unconscious but her face twisted and she moaned weakly, whether due to current or remembered pain he couldn't tell. The sounds she made sent a shudder of dread through him. He closed the door and tried to gather his shattered wits. He would drive to the hospital and get some help and then everything would be alright...he could unload her and this whole awful mess on to someone else.

His car started up alright but, in his haste to leave, he didn't depress the clutch properly and the gears crunched loudly. He glanced anxiously back at the house but no-one appeared. He sped down the long driveway, his stomach clenching when he remembered the gates. There must have been some sort of sensor as they opened automatically. He almost sobbed in relief but his nerves

were so fraught that he felt like any release of pressure would set him off, flailing and out of control like a wind-up toy. He skidded back out on to the road. The wind howled like an abandoned hound, pushing fretfully at the swollen clouds and flinging wet leaves and debris at Charlie's little car as though in an effort to hinder or chastise him.

He travelled for about a mile and then, finding a small layby, he pulled over. He dug in his pocket for his mobile phone and accessed the SatNav application so agitated that his hands shook in sync with his frenetically beating heart. Locating the nearest hospital, he programmed directions to it, swearing under his breath when his trembling hands failed to lodge the phone in its holder securely and it fell to the floor.

As he turned and bent to pick up the phone, his gaze met that of his injured passenger and he flinched back in shock, both at the fact that she was conscious and at the depth of desperate supplication in her eyes. "Phone?" he thought he heard her whisper.

"Don't be afraid," he assured her. "I'm taking you to the hospital."

"No," she now said quite plainly, her eyes ablaze in her damaged face.

"Yes," Charlie contradicted her firmly. "You are losing a lot of blood. If I don't get you to hospital you might die!"

She weakly began to attempt to move herself into a more upright position.

"Hey, stop!" Charlie burst out in panic, "Stay still! You shouldn't move!"

"Phone. Please," she mouthed, trying with difficulty to raise her hand.

“OK, OK!” he conceded, worried she might continue to exert herself.

“Look, I'll give you the phone and you press the numbers. Then you need to give it back to me and lie down. I'll do the talking.”

He watched her as she touched the screen of the phone, her fingers trembling and her face frighteningly pale but her mouth fixed in a rigidly determined line. He couldn't help feeling a flare of admiration but it was tempered by another cold wave of dread. He expected that it was a product of his flayed emotions and his worry that the effort by this girl would achieve nothing but a worsening of her already fragile condition.

She handed the phone back to him and he looked at the screen. She'd entered what looked like a valid number. He couldn't believe that it was possible for her face to lose any more colour, but it had.

“What's your name?” he asked her, instinctively whispering as though even using too loud a voice might do her an injury.

Her gaze was feverish, her skin shiny with sweat.

She licked her lips effortfully. “Brenna,” she rasped, her voice brittle but clear.

He then watched in horror as her eyes rolled in her head and she slid back down on the seat, all semblance of life draining out of her like air from a balloon.

“Shit!” Charlie swore, the phone almost slipping out of his grasp again. He ignored the phone number on the screen and hastily brought his navigation page

back up.

He should never have allowed his sympathy for her plea to affect his judgment. He could not afford to waste any more time. He had to get her to the hospital before it was too late...if it wasn't already

CHAPTER FIVE

Charlie screeched into the ambulance bay at the hospital and sprang out of the car. “Hey! You can't park there!” someone yelled but Charlie didn't even hear them. His heart pounded deafeningly in his ears. He lifted the lifeless girl from the back seat, her body flopping like a rag doll in his arms. The sheet covering her was black with blood. A sob erupted from him and his knees almost collapsed from under him, her negligible weight not a factor, just the weight of the despair that overpowered him.

“Somebody help me!” he screamed, staggering towards the nearest entrance. He heard raised voices and a flurry of activity around him. The girl was lifted out of his arms. He heard somebody yell, “Get me a crash trolley here now!”

Someone put a hand on his shoulder and guided him over to a chair. It was a woman in a blue hospital smock. She started talking to him and he watched her mouth as it moved but his brain just didn't register the words. She may as well have been talking in an alien language. She frowned, smacked her hands on her knees in a gesture of frustration and moved away.

Charlie sat there for a little while longer, just gazing in to space, too shell-shocked to unscramble what was left of his overloaded brain and senses. Someone came again and sat next to him but he did not acknowledge them. A warm hand was placed on the one he had clenched in his lap. He looked numbly down at it.

“I know you're in shock, mate but you need to talk to us. We don't even know who the girl you brought in is.” The girl had not made it and the hospital had already called the police. But the young doctor speaking thought it prudent not to mention either of these facts to the man beside him.

Charlie eventually looked across at the medic. He had short dark hair, a smooth rosy face and a smiling mouth. He looked about the same age as he was but Charlie felt about a million years older. The doctor hadn't said as much but Charlie could read it in the way his smile failed to dispel the sorrow in his brown eyes: *Brenna hadn't survived*.

Charlie was about to speak when someone shouted, “Where's the idiot who parked their car in the middle of the ambulance bay?”

Charlie glanced up. He didn't care about where he had left the car but regret over Brenna pierced him like an already overused knife.

The tall, angry orderly must have seen this guilt in his face and descended upon him. “Is it yours?”

Charlie stood up but the man didn't wait for his reply. “Can you kindly move it out of the effing way?” he asked belligerently. “Don't you realise that your stupidity could mean the difference between life and death?” Charlie mouth twitched at this unknowingly shrewd observation.

Before the man could continue his tirade, he held up his hands and said, “I'm moving it. I'm moving it!” and ran outside.

He heard the doctor shout something after him but he ignored it. The man

was probably worried about him doing a runner but he had no intention of doing that. He knew he'd been in a bit of a state in there but he hadn't gone through everything and let that young girl die for nothing. He would go back in to the hospital and speak to the police about what he had stumbled across.

He eventually found a legitimate parking space some distance from the A&E entrance. He bought a parking ticket, the thought of having his usual rant about paying for parking at a hospital flitting through his brain but barely registering. Instead he felt a brief and bitter nostalgia for the time when he thought such irritations were worth getting stressed over.

As he bent to stick the ticket on his car window, his eyes fell on his phone still sitting in its holder. His thoughts returned to Brenna and her dreadful desperation to get in touch with someone before she died.

He picked up the phone and looked at it. The number might still be logged. He exited the SatNav function and saw the number on his screen, still there waiting to be dialled. He would forever debate the wisdom of giving that poor girl the phone in the first place but perhaps he owed it to her to ring that number.

Entering the car, he sat down in the driver's seat to make the phone call. He pressed the green dial key and listened tensely to the line ring out. It connected and he immediately began to speak, babbling in his nervousness, until he heard a loud tone and realised that he had been transferred to voicemail. He took some deep breaths to compose himself and began to leave a more coherent message, introducing himself and giving the girl's name. He knew he must sound like a

crank as he didn't even know who he was talking to. Because of this, he was reluctant to go into any detail about how he had come to have Brenna in his possession. Nevertheless, he mentioned that Bespoke Cars were to blame and gave the name of the hospital. He couldn't bring himself to say that the girl was dead. Nobody wanted to hear that kind of news as a recorded message.

He couldn't decide if he was relieved or disappointed that he hadn't managed to speak to someone. He sighed and pushed the phone into his back pocket. He remained sitting for a few minutes, resting his head on the steering wheel. A persuasive part of him wanted to just start the engine and get the hell away. He'd done the best he could and he wasn't sure he had the courage or the strength to relive what had happened and attempt to explain his actions. However, the police would no doubt track him down using the hospital cameras and his car registration. Driving away would just make his story even harder for them to swallow.

The slam of the passenger side door brought him back to his senses. His head snapped up and he found a stranger sitting next to him. Charlie lurched back in surprise but the man placed a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Please don't be alarmed, Charlie," he urged in a pleasantly soothing voice. "I'm here to look after you."

He was well-built, dark haired and had the kind of dazzling good looks that could easily have given him a successful modelling career. Charlie allowed himself to relax, not pausing to question why this man knew his name, the light

of this man's beauty blinding him as it had many others. In a society obsessed with appearance, we don't like to believe that a beautiful face does anything other than reflect inherent goodness.

He felt pressure at his side and looked down to see the barrel of a gun pressed against him. He gasped in surprise and stared with horrified dismay into the dark eyes of his accoster. When the man's gaze locked on to him, his composure shattered instantly like a blown bulb. The eyes were an unusual purple-black colour but lacked any warmth or depth; they were as soulless as the eyes of a carnivorous insect.

Charlie opened his mouth to scream but the scream was reduced to a choked cry of pain as the breath was jolted from him. The gun had been used to administer a well-aimed jab to his abdomen.

“Do as I say or I will kill you.” The man's soft tones had now taken on the sibilant menace of a snake.

Charlie closed his eyes. The world seemed to tilt for a moment. Would he ever awaken from this nightmare? When Charlie reopened them, the man was still there smiling at him. There was something innately creepy about it, like the false human smiles they put on dogs in a famous television advert.

“Drive,” he commanded.

“Where to?” Charlie asked, trying not quite successfully to keep the fear out of his voice.

“To your house, of course,” the man replied as though it was the most

obvious thing in the world. He prodded Charlie again with the gun and his eerie smile widened as Charlie grunted in protest. Charlie nodded in mute acquiescence and started the car engine.

As they drove onto the main road, he watched in his rear view mirror as the lights of the hospital building diminished, his hard won resolve fading with them.

He drove home, the gun in his side a constant irritation along with his companion's maddening grin. It did cross his mind to try and cause an accident but he never attempted anything. Perhaps this was because, in some strange way, after all the agonising decisions he'd had to make, it was almost a relief to hand responsibility over to someone else. He also clung to the belief that this man was not a killer and, if he did as he was told, he would get out of this alive.

He parked the car up in his garage and killed the engine. He somehow managed to will his legs to move and he staggered out of the car. The gun was now swiftly relocated to his back and he was marched up to his back door. His shredded nerves had now yielded their tenuous hold on his body and he stabbed at the lock with his key like a drunken man. Once inside, the man gestured for him to sit down on the sofa.

"Now then, Charlie," said the handsome man, his eyes crawling over his face. "My name is Sebastian."

Charlie looked at him warily. Why was this man introducing himself?

Sebastian continued, his voice light and conversational. "I have no

grievance with you. I have no feelings regarding you whatsoever.”

He crouched in front of Charlie and slowly ran the cold barrel of the gun down his face, cocking his head, his dark eyes dancing with devilish mirth. “I’d just as happily fuck you as kill you.” Charlie smothered a whimper. Did this man know his sexual orientation? Was he threatening to rape him?

“However,” Sebastian continued in the same chillingly affable way, “I am not here in my own right. I am acting on behalf of another.”

He now sat down next to Charlie and put his arm around him in an overtly friendly gesture. Charlie flinched a little but knew better than to try to move away.

“My employer is not a bad person. He has never lied. He has never stolen another person’s property.”

Sebastian fixed his reptilian gaze on Charlie. Why had he ever thought this man handsome? He was like a male Medusa. Beautiful but grotesque at the same time. He should have known he was a dead man as soon as Sebastian first turned those heartless eyes upon him.

“You, on the other hand, are nothing but a common criminal. You have lied. You have stolen,” his words were accusatory but his tone was still one of friendly banter.

Charlie shivered, feeling tears burning behind his eyes but he willed them away and gritted his teeth. If he was going to die, he’d be damned if he’d give this bastard the satisfaction of seeing him break down and beg.

“You have also threatened something most precious...my employer’s reputation. And why? Who knows? Because you felt like it? Because you just couldn’t help yourself?”

Sebastian now smiled, that wide, loose grin, exposing gleaming teeth.

Charlie quailed.

He tightened his arm around Charlie. “You are lucky, Charlie. I wish I could do this my way....I could always say that *I* just couldn’t help myself?”

Charlie glared defiantly at Sebastian. “That girl isn’t a piece of property! I haven’t done anything wrong! If your employer is behind what happened to her, he is the criminal.”

Sebastian leapt up at this and laughed out loud. “Aha!” he declared. “It speaks at last! Oh and what wise words too!”

He spun back to Charlie and yanked him to his feet, his voice now devoid of any humanity, “You are mistaken. That girl was legitimately bought, sold and paid for. You should not have interfered. And now you must take the consequences.”

Charlie felt a tear escape and slip down his face. He whispered fiercely, “You won’t get away with this!”

“I’m afraid this isn’t the movies Charlie, my boy. No-one is going to save you.”

Sebastian eyed him up like a predator circling its helpless prey. “Take off your coat and empty all your pockets,” he commanded.

Charlie had no choice but to do as instructed, knowing that the invoice he had kept with him would seal his fate as surely as a death warrant. Sebastian pounced on the paper and opened it out, his face indecently beatific with delight as he read the information on it.

“This never existed,” he stated bluntly. He took out a lighter and set fire to it. Charlie watched numbly as it turned to ashes and crumbled to the carpet, the Christian mantra “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust” tramping stupidly through his brain.

He was shoved through to the kitchen, forced into a chair at the table and given a pen and paper. Sebastian dictated a note, which declared his misery and resulting desire to kill himself. He performed all this in a kind of daze, doing exactly as he was told, his psyche now far removed as though already severed from his body. By contrast, his senses were queerly heightened and everything seemed sharper and more vivid, from the metallic ticking of the kitchen clock to the whorls and striations in the stained oak of the table.

Sebastian had set up another chair with a thin noose hanging above it. Charlie recognised his own green washing line. How helpful of him, he thought detachedly, to have rafters in his kitchen just right for the job.

He looked back down at the suicide note he was writing as he came to sign his name. He hesitated for a moment but a none too gentle prod from Sebastian’s gun and a curtly ordered “Finish it!” prompted him to add his signature. Something about the finality of this re-animated him and the thought burst into

his mind that accepting the inevitability of his death was not the same as accepting the way this psycho wanted to portray it; fighting him now could screw up his perfect little suicide tableau.

Charlie clenched the pen in his hand and tensed, adrenaline sluicing through his system. He began to get to his feet, intending to suddenly swing his arm up and round aiming for his tormentor's eyes.

Sebastian was way ahead of him. Before he'd even stood, he was pushed brutally forward onto the table, his head held down viciously against the unyielding wood. The pen was prised from his fingers and Sebastian's now familiar voice breathed with merciless humour in his ear, "I am a professional, Charlie. There's nothing you can do that I haven't already anticipated."

Things now happened very quickly. Before he could form another coherent thought, he was standing on the chair with the noose being tautened around his neck. He struggled reflexively, his body now on autopilot, concerned only with survival. However, this only served to tighten the ligature and he began to gasp and cough, trying in vain to twist away, panic now turning his guts to acid and causing a caustic bile to rise and burn in his throat. The chair was kicked away from beneath him and his body dropped, the pressure on his oesophagus now an unrelenting vice.

Charlie swung and kicked out, clawing frantically but ineffectively at the home-made garrotte, designed to drag out his dying throes as long as possible. The pitiless laughter of his murderer boomed and then faded in his ears, in time

with the pounding of his blood, like a percussion orchestra gone mad. Bright stars burst in his vision and then a creeping blackness began to seep around the edges, a remorseless tide that had come to drown him.

As his life seeped away, his grandmother's face slowly formed out of the swirling dark and, even in his agony, he smiled. She was the only family who had ever loved and accepted him. Sebastian noticed this and stopped laughing. Why is he smiling? He shouldn't be fucking smiling! He almost moved towards his dying victim but managed to rein in his anger as a voice screamed in his head, "Don't mark him! You don't want to fuck it all up now!"

His high spirits deserted him and he watched with a scowl as Charlie's body stopped spasming and finally went still.

If you would like to find out what happens after the events in this book, please check out our full-length novel, *Dark Secrets*, available on Amazon and soon to be available elsewhere.

To view and purchase on Amazon, just click [here](#).

If you enjoyed this prequel novella, I hope you will take a moment to share your enthusiasm with other readers by posting a review. With hundreds of new books published every month, it is difficult to stand out in the crowd and every positive review helps.

If you would like to let us know that you have posted a review, so that we can thank you personally, or if you would like to know more about us, you can

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Thank you for reading! Warmest regards, Victoria and Rebecca x