



THE WOODS OF RED HILL

SHAUN WHITTINGTON

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By

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Prologue

The young boy stood still, frozen, almost as if rigor mortis had set in his fresh, and very much alive, body. He had never seen anything like this before and he attempted a gulp, which felt like swallowing a jagged pebble. His throat had never been so dry and the pulse in his temple quickened, as realisation began to soak into his fragile, innocent mind.

The man was dead.

The boy was young, and although he had only seen dead people on the television, he knew this was the real thing. As well as the smell of burning, he could smell something else, something that was overpowering.

He could smell the man's blood.

The body was slumped only a couple of yards from him and he could see the bloody fragments of skull scattered inside the shed, like a completed jigsaw puzzle that had been kicked. The look of the body was surreal; there wasn't much left to suggest that a man once owned that body.

He now knew what the loud bangs were: they were the same loud bangs that attracted the inquisitive youngsters to investigate the wooden shack. The strident noises were gunshots, and he was now looking at the damage just one pull of the trigger could do to a human's head. He staggered backwards as the shock burrowed into him and for the first time, he wondered about his friend, but he continued to stand there in the garden shed, looking at a man whose head had exploded from the smoking gun that sat next to his feet.

The young boy's trance state was broken when he heard screaming from inside the house, he turned away from the horror scene that was in the shed and ran across the garden into the wooden shack where the voice of his friend continued to scream; the macabre scenes grew worse as he entered the living room.

He wasn't prepared for what he was about to witness. The body of the man was dreadful enough, but to see another two bloodied corpses in the shack's living room created a stinging sensation in the back of his throat, his throat was stinging from the acid he was bringing up. Because of the distraction of the carnage, he hardly acknowledged that his friend was standing right next to him, his friend's breathing was erratic, like an asthmatic who had suddenly been covered in dust and feathers. His heart gathered momentum and started to gallop; he tried to control his own erratic breathing, but it was difficult, considering the circumstances.

A family had been massacred.

Chapter One

Ridgeware was a small town on its own surrounded by woodlands, farms and private lands, and in the northwest of the town there was an estate, scheme or neighbourhood that was situated not far from a place known as common hill. The last street in the northwest of Ridgeware, known as Churchill Street, overlooked a playing field; on the right of the playing field was a dirt path that was situated parallel to the field and eventually veered right which led to the bottom of common hill, or to the children of Churchill Street, it was simply called, the common.

Young children loved the common in the winter or even in the summer. In the winter, children would grab their plastic sledges—or if they were really unfortunate—grab a plastic sheet or carrier bag and head with friends to the hill passing the dirt track to the right of the playing field, turning right facing the bottom part of the hill and eventually making the arduous climb.

Despite the effort of the climb itself, each child would have an immense sense of satisfaction and relief knowing that they had made it to the top. At the top of hill was where the merriment activities began, this is why they punished themselves to climb the hill; this was the highlight of their holidays. Just as the children would approach the downward slope of the hill, they would line up patiently ready for the descent. Some of them sat on their sledges, and some sat inside their plastic sheets.

Other activities included football in the playing field if an adventure onto the common was off the list. The football field was another environment that was regularly used, which was situated behind the back of the houses that belonged to Churchill Street. It was perfect entertainment for close friends Neil Warner, Steven Dawson and Alan Miller who only lived yards away which was advantageous before a meal time, if they simply could not be bothered walking up the steep common hill. The three boys had known each other from the ages of two—although Steven was nine months younger—and had played together in the street for years, they went to nursery together and were now attending the same school.

When the trio had the energy to climb the hill, they would often look into the direction of the archaic wooden house, that could almost be seen behind a selection of ungainly looking trees that it was surrounded by. The wooden house was enveloped in mystery, and children, especially from the Churchill area, seemed to be obsessed with the wooden house. Adults who rarely took to the common, apart from joggers and dog walkers, seemed unruffled by the eerie sight of the run down establishment.

Some of the children who were brave enough to have gotten nearer to the house, noticed that the only protection it had was a small four-foot fragile wooden fence that even *they* could break through if need be. But most of the time the children wouldn't see anything. There would be no sign of life. No sign of the old man. But they wouldn't dare trespass. Nobody was stupid enough to trespass.

The house had looked like it had years of repair that needed attending to; a lot of the wood was decayed due to the usual bad weather and the constant hunger of termites that had left the outside of the house looking worse than it should have been for its age.

To the left of the wooden establishment was a small wooden shed that looked brand new, but the owner had no padlock on the shed, and the small sealed off area of land where the house was situated was only half a mile from the outskirts of Ridgeware's

Churchill Street. Behind the house was acres of land owned by a local farmer whose house was situated another half a mile away.

The shed looked to be in better condition than the egregious living arrangements itself; a tree stump sat about fifteen yards away from the house in the long neglected grass which was quite near the dark brown wooden front door. The two front windows looked slightly tinted but it was actually dust and neglect that had tinted the windows.

These were the only windows that could be seen as the back of the house was completely covered with trees and the garden had been cruelly ignored over the years. It looked that the only time the windows were washed was when the heavens opened, which in the middle of England was a regular occurrence. But not this summer, it was July and it hadn't rained for two weeks and temperatures were soaring to thirty-five degrees Celsius, an average day in Spain, but this was considered a heat wave in England.

Even in blistering temperatures, the house windows still remained closed and the unmistakable smoke bellowed, as it always did, out of its decrepit chimney.

People had talked about the house for decades. Younger people claimed that some sort of bogeyman lived there, but the older children claimed it was the home of an old man that had been known for years, even before they were born, who was known by the nickname of, Killer Kelly.

Some declared that they had seen the old man chopping wood in the backyard, others claimed that he sometimes could be seen peering out of his window with the curtains pulled slightly back, revealing just half a face showing his long grey matted hair that matched his straggly beard, with his deep almost black eyes that coincided with his black disintegrating crumbling teeth.

Others also claimed to have been chased by Kelly, who held his gleaming trademark axe as he ran after the annoying trespassing youngsters who were far too expeditious for the old man to catch. Sometimes, for the younger children, the sight of the bellowing smoke alone would prevent them from continuing their journey, as fear would temporarily paralyse them. Stories that were constantly told by the older children about Kelly did nothing to quench that fear either. It was tradition that the teenagers would put the fear of God into the infants, by feeding their heads with macabre stories about Kelly, a tradition that had been passed down many a time, helping to keep the story alive and fresh throughout the decades.

Once the years passed, the sight of the bellowing smoke didn't seem to affect the children as much as they became older, and even a glimpse of the run down house that brought back some of their apprehension, didn't stop them, as long as the youngsters were with the big boys, they felt quite protected and their anxiety would be eased once they had made it by the house and into the woods.

Once the children had gone by the run down dwelling, they were greeted by a steep hill leading downward known as the jungle of nettles. The jungle of nettles could easily be avoided; as to the left side of the downward hill was a dirt path that was shaped in a semi circle, which eventually took the individual to the bottom of the hill near the woods. The path led to the outskirts of a small town next to Ridgeware called Red Hill, and if a person decided to veer left through some trees rather than following the path that led to the woods, it would take them to a small secluded wooded area that had available car parking spaces, which was mainly popular with picnic goers and lovers—especially on a night time.

Walking through the car park led to a main road that would lead individuals back to Ridgeware if they decided to turn left, turning right would eventually lead into Red Hill, Ridgeware's little sister town.

Not many people managed to walk through the jungle of nettles without getting stung, and to successfully complete the journey downhill, their long trousers would be tucked into the socks, which was a priority no matter what, and if that particular brave person progressed to the end of the jungle, there it was.

A gravelled steep path. The gateway to a child's paradise. The woods.

The beginning of the woods was situated in Red Hill, it was where Ridgeware ended and Red Hill begun.

Although a lot of the residents of Ridgeware claimed that the woods was a part of their town, geographically that wasn't strictly true and the small members of Red Hill—which held only two hundred residents—always found the comments and opinions of their neighbours arrogant and unnecessary.

To a child, the path leading into the woods looked almost vertical; it was the main entrance to every child's dream who possessed imagination. Once a youngster entered the woods, they could be whoever they wanted to be, they could be wherever they wanted to be. When you possess the imagination that only a child can have, anything was possible.

The climb up to the gravelled hill was time consuming, even for an adult. The climb itself would consist of two steps forward and a half a yard slide, causing a mini pebble avalanche, and running up the path was virtually impossible for a child at least, only the fittest or determined of adults could make the path without any mishaps taking place. Once the steep path had been completed it would be the beginning of the woods. Although many of the macabre tales that haunted some of the Ridgeware residents were related to the woods, children seemed to be more frightened of the minatory looking house, and the mystery of the individual that lived inside it.

The wooden shack frightened the children, and the woods made the adults uncomfortable because of past events. Although most of the children were warned about going too deep into the woods, their warning made the woods even more attractive and exciting. What could the parents do? They couldn't keep their kids indoors on a leash, especially in thirty five degree heat.

There were stories about children going missing in the woods, bodies hanging from the trees and older children told stories that they had seen young boys being burnt alive on a spit, the latter to even a nine year old was a little far fetched, and was the result of older children trying to scare off their younger counterparts so tree houses and camps that were built by the older boys, would not be interfered with by the menacing youngsters. It was a clever ploy to have the woods all to themselves. It didn't work, however.

Whatever happened, no matter how much pleasant adventure was taking place, there was one rule that children adhered to in the summer. Always journey back home before the sun started to fall, as the only lights that could be seen were the faint lights that came from the old man's shack. *Always go back home in plenty of time or when you were due for your dinner.* In the summer, however, it didn't seem to matter a great deal, as nine o'clock at night seemed a reasonable time to venture back due to the lighter nights, as long as the parents endorsed it, and it wasn't a school night.

Ridgeware being a very small town, and virtually unheard of to any other British citizen, was like most towns; it had its own history with some areas of history that the town was quite proud of such as its mining history, the iron forges and the textile factories. But there were other parts of history that they would like to overlook;

history that only the adults knew about. They may tell their child the odd story in order for them to behave themselves. But not the real stories. Not the true stories. Not the stories that would frighten them so much they wouldn't sleep for a week.

An adult may be cruel to its child occasionally by using the odd blackmail line, "If you misbehave Father Christmas won't bring you any presents," or, "if you don't behave yourself I'll take you to Killer Kelly's house." But no horror stories. Not the true ones that still haunted some adults of this small town.

That would be too atrocious

That would be too cruel.

Chapter Two

It was Thursday afternoon, and estate agent, Gary Strand, had one more client to show round one of the homes on the eastside of Ridgeware, and he could then finally look forward to a long weekend by having Friday off—unknown to his other employees.

Spending most of the afternoon in bed with his new woman, and having a few drinks after with his friend, sounded like the perfect way to start a weekend and nothing was going to stop the determined individual. He had spent most of the day trying to concoct an excuse for his future absence, but was seriously struggling for ideas.

At his work, Gail Webster had already been absent with severe migraine; Jason Bellion had sickness and diarrhoea and David Lansdowne had been absent all week with mild heatstroke. Lying bastard, Gary thought.

Gary was convinced that David Lansdowne had been sitting in his garden all week in the unusual heat, supping on a couple of delightful cold beers. David had no worries, he was going out with the Managing Director's daughter, he kissed most of the senior managements' arses and had won employee of the month in April.

"Fuck it, if some of these can take most of the week off then a day absent from me won't kill them," Gary muttered under his breath, wrestling with the guilt whilst driving through the town centre.

He had only been in the job six months and would have liked a good clear absent record, which would help if ever promotion reared its ugly head. However, the temptation of a long weekend, basking in the heat and, of course, spending some quality time in the bedroom, was too much of an opportunity to turn down.

Gary had been sent by his superior to meet a young female who was interested in one of the properties on the eastside. There was an hour to go before he finished for the week, and liked the idea of spending time with a young lady to round off a fairly quiet week, but any place was quiet, compared to the crazy strident lights of London.

Gary was born, raised, and worked in Tottenham. The reason for his arrival at Ridgeware six months ago, had nothing to do with Gary wanting a change of scenery or wanting to transform his lifestyle, as he was simply on the run.

A small time gangster known as Charlie Stevens, who had deals involving drugs, had discovered that his wife of eleven years had been having an affair with Mr. Strand. Of course, Gary never knew that the sumptuous Sarah Stevens was married to a local gangster, but he did know she was married, and this made it the more exciting for this mutinous young single male.

The affair went on for two months and she was eventually caught when Charlie Stevens became suspicious of his wife's recent shopping sprees, involving her going out three or four times a week. Charlie had his wife followed for three days, which resulted in photographic pictures of her leaving Gary's apartment, and a couple of pictures that were taken had shown him to be kissing Mrs. Stevens goodbye and waving her off after another successful session in the sack.

Sarah had called Gary, sounding very distressed, and told him about the situation, about her husband, and his gangland connections and that he had found out about the affair and had ordered one of his heavies for Gary Strand to be "severely punished" for playing about with his wife.

Severely punishing Gary—according to Sarah when she called him—would involve two heavies holding him down with his trousers round his ankles, exposing his penis, and a third man standing over him holding a razor blade. Gary had left London within two hours and headed north, he used his savings to get himself accommodation and was lucky enough to get a job in one of Ridgeware's estate agents, thanks to a little tinkering, and the odd white lie on his curriculum vitae.

It was a short journey to the eastside, and approaching the showroom, Gary could see a solitary figure standing on the pavement next to one of the houses. He could barely see anything, as the vociferous sun ruined his vision; he managed to pull up by the pavement safely.

He wasn't disappointed as he stopped the car; he looked to his right and stepped out of the car to be confronted by a five foot eight stunning lady, no older than twenty-five with gold locks reaching her shoulders. Her lips were large and seductive and her deep, dark brown eyes were enough to make any man weak with desire. Her yellow shorts didn't help Gary's concentration either, as he always had a weakness for deep tanned legs; her stripy top also played with his mind.

Gary briefly glanced at her top, which revealed her breasts, and the nipples looked like they were aching for fresh air as they almost pierced through the clothing.

"Good afternoon or good evening," Gary looked at his watch.

"I've come to look at the house," came the response.

"Of course." Gary held the keys in his hand and gave them a playful shake.

She smiled at him with civility, which did not help the leaking that was appearing under Gary's armpits; it had been an elongated boiling day and now he was in the presence of a beautiful woman. He became a little uncomfortable as he felt two drops dripping from his right side onto the fabric, as if some ingenious plumber had somehow managed to attach a dripping tap under his armpit.

"Armpits don't fail me now," he quietly muttered.

"I'm Cara," she held out her hand.

"Gary," came his ebullient response. "My boss didn't tell me who I was meeting, as I'm actually covering for a colleague, so excuse our unprofessional approach."

"That's fine," she giggled nervously.

"Right, now we are done with the formalities," Gary spoke with merriment, "let's get yer into the house—I mean, show yer round the house."

Gary could feel his face slowly getting warmer, as if he had it pressed up against a dying furnace, and hoped that the blushing would be mistaken by his client as mild sunburn. Not many women had this effect on Gary Strand, although he wasn't the fussiest person when it came to women. In his London days his motto was if it's still breathing and got a pulse then nothing else matters, or every hole's a goal. And if he ever had any woman who refused to be seduced by his charm, he would tell his friends that there's plenty of more fish in the sea, you just have to get your tackle out and see what bites.

Although in the past he had been fond of the women he had relationships with, he was the kind of man who liked to keep his options open, especially if a woman like Cara could turn up out of the blue. However, any woman with sense could see he was a sexist pig, who only cared for himself.

"Right let's go inside." He turned the key to reveal the reception area of the new home.

"Listen," Cara spoke, "is it alright if I take a look around on my own and ask you any questions after?"

"Of course, Cara." Gary looked at her flirtatiously. "Take yer time."

Cara walked slowly up the stairs not looking back, which gave Gary the opportunity to have a sly glance at her bottom.

"This is too much," he whispered to himself, and picked the perfect moment to inspect his hygiene. The result was that a few stains had started to develop, but there was no sign of any odour to Gary's relief. He walked around the downstairs of the home and could hear her walking upstairs. A few moments passed, when slow, hard footsteps could be heard descending downstairs. Gary brushed his damp hair with his fingers, ready for her presence, and as she entered, he smiled.

"Everything all right?"

"Fine," she replied. "It's a lovely house."

She walked by Gary, ever so slightly brushing past him and went to inspect the kitchen. She walked back and tried the patio door but it was locked.

"Oh." Gary clumsily searched for the key on the ring and unlocked the door that led to the back garden. "There yer go."

"Thank you." This time she looked at him flirtatiously—or so he thought—which for a brief second, gave Gary's confidence a slender boost. Two minutes later, she walked back into the house.

"How much is the house selling for again?"

"About three hundred and fifty thousand, or over," he responded.

"I suppose I could just about afford it," she sighed. "Can I get back to you on this one? I'm not one hundred percent sure."

"Of course." Gary scrambled in his left pocket.

"Anything wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing, nothing. So are we finished?"

"Yes, I have to look at some other properties but I especially like this one."

"Excellent," Gary said excitedly. "I'll look forward to hearing from yer then."

Gary locked the patio door and they both stepped outside into the blistering heat and walked backed to their cars.

"Hold on a minute," Gary raised his arm to Cara and tautly opened the car door. Cara smiled to herself, as she knew what effect she was having on Gary, as she had seen it a hundred times before whenever she spoke to anyone of the opposite sex.

Cara knew she was attractive—although she never showed any arrogance—and although she was married and wanted it to stay that way, she loved the attention she received from her husband's friends, her male work colleagues, new people that she would meets through work and socially. Even her own father-in-law mentally undressed her whenever they met.

Her theory was, so long as they only looked, didn't touch, and make any suggestive remarks or actions, she was fine with that. There was one thing that she couldn't stand and that was slimeballs; slimeballs who were full of themselves, slimeballs who thought they were God's gift to women, and she wouldn't think twice to put them in their place.

"Here's my card." Gary handed Cara his business card, the card was slightly soggy with perspiration, but Cara reluctantly took it.

"Your card?" Cara looked at him suspiciously.

"In case you ever want to talk about the house details, babe." He smiled.

"Wouldn't it be easier and cheaper to ask for you at the office?" She stared at his mobile number, ignoring Gary's 'babe' remark. "I've got the number to your work, anyway."

"Well it's up to you, I suppose," he said, staring at her impressive chest; a stare he was finding trouble to subjugate.

"I'm not too sure." She put the card into one of the pockets of her yellow shorts, and immediately noticed his gape making her uncomfortable and exasperated.

"It's all in your hands." Gary winked with a smile.

"What was that?" Her voice had changed into a more negative tone.

"What was what?"

"Tell me you was squinting because of the sun."

"What?" Gary became increasingly anxious and realised that he had completely read the signs wrong, and was short of an excuse for his unprofessional behaviour.

"Are you flirting with me?"

"No, babe." Gary put his hands on her shoulders to reassure her. Realising that he was now touching his client, he immediately took his hands off her tanned skin.

"Get off me." There was nervousness in her voice. "Here." Cara handed Gary his card back. "I don't think my husband would appreciate me carrying strange men's phone numbers around with me."

Gary took the card back, completely humiliated, and lowered his head in a pathetic attempt for forgiveness, and more importantly, to make sure that she didn't report the incident to his superior.

"Are yer still interested in the 'ouse?" Gary said trying to change the topic.

"Not sure now."

"Bring yer husband round next time and you can both have a look."

"He works a lot of hours, besides, I think I've seen enough of your face for one week."

"Okay fine." The rejection was apparent in Gary's tremulous voice.

Cara again brushed past Gary but this time it definitely wasn't a seductive technique, and as she got into the driver's seat, he could still feel himself looking at her, and the blood was yet again pumped into his cheeks as she became uncomfortable with this man's monomania. He bent over to her side of the car and knocked on the window, she looked at him and reluctantly wound down the window.

"Listen," he grovelled. "I'm sorry if yer thought I was coming on to yer, really I wasn't. I'm just a flirty kind of guy."

"Really?"

"Yes, and I'm sorry if yer took it the wrong way."

"I didn't take anything the wrong way, goodbye." Cara drove away, leaving Gary alone and embarrassed.

Gary got into his car hoping that there wouldn't be a call for him at the office from Cara's husband despite what she said, some women—Gary thought—don't usually hold their tongue when situations like this happen.

*

Some time later, he pulled into the car park, left his jacket inside of the car and walked round to the entrance of the office and popped his head inside. He told his superior he was finishing for the day; his superior relieved Gary, and the rejected male walked into the town centre. He walked into the newsagents and got himself an evening newspaper and decided to head back to the car.

As Gary strolled along by the local sports shop on his way back to his car, he could see a woman about twenty yards away from him, she was clearly struggling with some of the shopping she had recently purchased, and although she was no Cara, she certainly had potential. Or as the male chauvinist Gary Strand would put it: she was second division material.

Gary had been told for years by friends and relatives that he was a chauvinist swine, but it never seemed to have made any difference, as his attitude had been the same ever since he lost his virginity. As soon as he had his first sexual encounter at the tender age of sixteen, something in him changed. The shy Gary Strand had disappeared, and the birth of a new, yet bothersome and flagrant personality had occurred.

Gary, immediately attracted by the woman's modest figure, despite being a little older than he would have liked, went over to her with a confidence in his step.

"Do yer need a hand?"

"I'm okay," she said, looking startled and surprised by her admirer.

Gary picked some of the tins that had burst their way out of one of the bags and put them inside the already bulging bags that she was carrying.

"How are yer gonna get home with all that?" Gary asked.

"It's okay, my husband is suppose to be meeting me," she said to Gary's disappointment, his second one of the day. "Well, I hope so anyway."

"I've just finished work. I can give yer a lift, if yer like."

"No, honestly, my husband should be here soon." The woman was feeling uncomfortable; she had been speaking to this guy for ten seconds and he was already offering her a ride home. She poked her head over Gary's shoulder, waiting to see the figure of her husband and hoping that Gary would make a sharp exit away from her.

Gary took his cursed business card out of his pocket, and slipped it into one of her bags while she was peering over his shoulder.

"My name is Gary Strand." He held out his hand.

"I would shake it, but I'm a little busy right now." She nodded towards the bags.

"Of course," Gary laughed, not picking up on her desperation for him to leave. "I think I've seen yer before."

"Really," she remarked. "Don't you stay in Churchill Street?"

"Well, I visit a friend up there every now an' again."

"Oh right," she said, sounding uninterested.

"I don't think he's coming." Gary began to satirize, to the annoyance of the raddled woman.

"He'll be here." As soon as she spoke those three words, the recognisable large figure came bustling through the crowd, with short grey hair, and as he spotted his wife with the good-looking stranger, he began to scowl.

"Who's this?" he bellowed.

"Gary Strand." The rudderless Gary Strand held out his hand apprehensively.

"What are you doing with my wife?"

"Nothing."

"He was helping me with my shopping," she intruded.

"As long as that was all he was doing, girl."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Nick." She walked away from the two men. "I don't know why I bother with you sometimes, I really don't."

Nick turned his attention to Gary. "Stay away from my wife, do you hear me?"

"Relax, I was helping her with her shopping, mate."

"Just stay away, right?"

"Alright," came the response. "I hear yer."

Gary, clearly intimidated by the size of the man, immediately hoped that the woman wouldn't notice the card that he so arrogantly and stupidly dropped in one of the bags. He was now hoping that the card wouldn't be found and be thrown out with the empty bags, but if she did find it, would she tell her monster of a husband? The thought of it

was unthinkable and as the man walked off to catch up with his wife, Gary cursed himself under his breath about his ridiculous behaviour.

He blushed under the refulgent sun, after noticing that the scene that was caused in the town centre caught the eye of a few inquisitive passers by. He lowered his head, ran his fingers through his short dark hair and began to walk sheepishly, heading back to his car, hoping that there was nobody in the town that would recognise him.

It had been an unsuccessful day, as far as women were concerned.

Chapter Three

It was a hot and clammy night, it was the eleventh of July and the Dawson household were ready for their beds. Young Steven Dawson had other plans, after refusing to go to bed and making noises upstairs above the living room ceiling—that a herd of elephants would have been proud of—his father's patience was starting to wear thin. Steven's younger sister, Alice, who was four years younger, was a little angel compared to her splenetic older brother and he was prepared to irritate his father as much as possible, simply because there was nothing else to do.

Trying to ignore his son's antics, David Dawson opened the Ridgeware's local newspaper, and started to read an article.

"Sick bastards, what's this town coming to?"

David sighed and folded the newspaper after reading about the latest vandalism on the town's bus shelters. He slapped the newspaper onto the floor, and rolled his eyes at the bedlam that was gathering momentum upstairs.

Young Steven was jaded, wide-awake, and the suffocating warm atmosphere outside made it difficult for him to sleep. Steven stomped down the stairs and walked through the living room, walked straight into the kitchen, and poured himself a glass of water from the fridge.

"Steven." His father sat scratching his left ear with gritted teeth, but there was no reply from the youngster. "Steven!" David repeated, only this time his voice steadily rose.

"What?" came the snappy reply.

"What do you mean, *what*? I thought I told you to go to bed?" His father was becomingly increasingly impatient, and became concerned momentarily as he sounded like one of his old teachers, Mr. Playfair.

"I'm not tired," his son replied.

"I don't care if you're not tired it's way past your bedtime, Alice was in her bed at eight o'clock," his father muttered. "Have that water, then go upstairs and get yourself to bed."

"Don't want to go to bed."

"I don't care what you want."

"I don't care what *you* want either, I'm not tired," Steven interrupted.

"You cheeky little—"

"You can't make me."

"Oh, can't I?" the father replied.

"No," replied a determined Steven. "I'm supposed to be your son, not some slave you can go and order about."

David could feel the blood filling his face, the fingers curling into the hand creating a temporary fist, the frustration and anger was becoming unbearable.

"If there is any more cheek from you, young man, I'll give your backside a good tanning."

Steven shrugged his shoulders telling his father that he didn't care.

"I'll ground you for the rest of the holidays."

Again, Steven shrugged.

"I'll take you up to Kelly's house!" David snarled uncontrollably, surprising even himself.

There became an awkward silence, with David waiting for his son's reply to his father's intimidation.

"Well go on then, see if I care," replied an adamant Steven Dawson. "See if I care, I bet you won't."

"I will!" His father reacted vociferously.

David Dawson immediately rose from his chair as if he had just sat on a protruding needle, and belligerently told his son to go get his coat.

"Fine," said the stubborn child, standing in the kitchen.

Why should I go to bed? Steven thought. Alan and Neil can go to bed when they feel like it and it is, after all, the holidays.

Mary Dawson, the mother and wife in the middle of this petty argument, sat watching the television in her pink dressing gown, her hair still damp from the shower she had twenty minutes before. Mary didn't respond to the words that were being exchanged from father to son thus far, she just gave a look of disapproval, but she couldn't hold her tongue for any longer.

"Oh for God's sake, I'm sick of this," she murmured, finally breaking her silence, "Steven, get to your bed. David, sit down. I'm not putting up with this every night. Were not even half way through the holidays and you are both getting on my nerves."

"We can't let him walk all over us, Mary," David insisted.

"I'm not saying he should do," she replied. "But I would like to watch a programme for the first time in three days, without you pair squabbling over something or nothing. If this carries on, I'm going to end up having a nervous breakdown, or killing the pair of you."

"Alan and Neil can go to bed when they want," Steven said, keeping the argument rolling along.

"Well," replied David. "They're just saying that to be big; anyway, you're younger than those two."

"Only by about nine months," Steven butted in. "And it *is* the holidays."

"Steven, this is the last time I'm going to tell you."

"Well, thank God for that."

Mary couldn't help herself and started to smirk at Steven's cheeky comment. She held up her hand apologetically to David, and waved it as she put the other hand over to her mouth, then removed the hand from her mouth to speak.

"Right, Steven, go to your bed." David pointed towards the stairs door.

"No," Steven stubbornly said, he had now had his arms folded.

"For goodness sake, Steven, do as you're told," his mother, at last, butted in.

"Right, I've had enough," the father sighed. "Steven, you're coming with me."

David Dawson's patience had now been tested to the limit, as he disappeared upstairs to return thirty seconds later with Steven's coat. David threw the coat in the direction of Steven, who caught the coat immediately and put it on without any hesitation. Steven started to button up the coat and David walked over, grasped young Steven's hand and headed towards the door with no struggle from his cheeky son. Steven gave his mum a cheeky wave and left with his father into the summer night.

"Wait a minute!" Mary shouted. "David, he still has his slippers on."

The door slammed shut with the words of the mother being unheard.

The father started to take the child by the hand through Churchill Street with the child not battering an eyelid, quite happy to march in the night with his dad, although the hand holding wasn't necessary. They trudged along the street, every twenty steps took the pair of them underneath an orange glowing light beaming down from the lamppost; there were three more lampposts to go before the end of the street. The

concrete path veering left was the next step, and then it was the playing field. They passed the third lamppost from the end, which saturated them in a blanket of orange glow. Twenty more yards, and the second from last lamppost was quickly passed.

One more to go. His father glanced at his son once again *Damn. Still no sign of him backing down.*

They approached the final lamppost ponderously, before reaching the concrete path that led to the playing field.

His dad glanced towards his son's cheery face. He loved his son, but sometimes he didn't like him very much, and if looks could kill, Steven would have been dead meat on this particular night.

He won't take me to Kelly's house, was the thinking of the child.

Then the playing field appeared, although it was virtually unrecognisable, as it was ten minutes past eleven and covered in a dusky sheet. The young boy could now feel his slippers scraping along the dirt track, and his heart started to beat a little faster than normal.

His dad looked to his left, looking at the expressionless face of his son, and deep down, young Steven Dawson was starting to fear the worst. His hands became a little moister than he hoped and convinced himself for just a few seconds, that it was down to the unusually warm climate that had invaded the town of Ridgeware.

Young Steven looked up to the patchy black and blue sky that hung over the uncongenial Ridgeware area. The youngster's mordant mutinous attitude was now turning into unhappiness, and his disinclination was increasing with every dragging footstep he took.

He won't take me to Kelly's house.

His pace started to decrease and his father was still marching at normal pace, half dragging his now petrified son along the dirt path.

"Come along," his father said with a wry smile, knowing that his son was showing signs of weakness. The dirt track was now coming to an end, and there was only one way to go now and that was to follow the path and turn right, which led to the bottom of the common hill.

Ten more steps to go.

Nine more steps to go.

Eight.

Seven.

Six.

"I'm sorry dad! I'm sorry!" Steven wailed and begged. "I'll behave myself from now on. Don't take me to Kelly's house! Don't take me to Kelly's house! I'm sorry! From now on I'll go to bed when you tell me to go and I'll go straight to sleep. Please! Don't take me to the house!"

His wailing was uncontrollable and his father almost felt sorry for him.

"Next time," he replied to his son's emotional outburst. "You're definitely going." David Dawson's finger pointed at his son's chest, the way Mr. Playfair's used to with his unceremonious pupils.

The child threw both arms around his dad's waist, and repeated once again. "I'm sorry, dad."

"Come on, Steven, let's go back," his father sighed. "Just because it's the holidays it doesn't mean you can go to bed when you feel like it, you're only nine years old, got it?"

The now pathetic child with his bottom droopy lip and lowered head, ashamedly nodded his head, with the tears still streaming down his face.

“Yes,” Steven replied, wiping the tears that were leaving his eyes with vamoose. His face had the look of a child that had lost the battle.

They slowly walked back to Churchill Street and the handholding was no longer needed. In a perverse kind of way, this had given Steven’s father a temporary sense of power and control that he had lost over the past couple of days. David wore a grin on his face; he had now temporarily found a “weapon” that could control his recalcitrant child without using physical punishment: The Kelly weapon.

He had never used it before, although many other fathers had—and still did. He had never had to use it, but he had become a desperate man.

He entered Churchill Street with his grin widening into a devilish smile that pushed back the skin in his cheeks.

His grin diminished as thoughts raced through his mind. David had mentally begun to question himself as a father.

Was this the appropriate action to take for a disobedient child? Threatening to take him up some killer’s house? Frightening him half to death? Is this the actions of a normal father?

David Dawson’s barbarous actions were now chiselling away inside his cranium, and his chagrined facial expression was the look of a man who was ashamed. Of course, he never would have taken his son to that house anyway, he had a good reason for that.

How could I be so cruel to my own child? The last thing I want is to turn out like that bastard!

David had a brief flashback and could see his father's face towering over him, growling at him with his clenched fist, and looking down on his petrified son.

“There’s plenty more where that came from!” his father’s voice bellowed.

He could still feel the fist like a hammer plunging into his timid midriff; although it was so many years ago, he could still remember trying to pull himself up, as there didn’t seem to be enough oxygen on the floor to breathe. Unbeknown to the young David Dawson, his father had just knocked the wind out of him.

He could still see the vision of himself, waking up in the morning for school, covered with blue, purple and black blotches all over his stomach. David could remember painfully trying to get himself dressed without shedding a tear. The excruciating pain that started in his stomach, shot up to his temples every time he accidentally touched the fresh bruises with his hands.

He remembered the walk down the stairs, which produced a shooting pain with every step he took, and walking to the kitchen door where his dad was standing, puffing on a cigarette, dressed like a tramp and holding a written piece of paper. Whenever David reminisced about his childhood, this particular memory always seemed to turn up.

“You best give this to your gym teacher, no sports for you today,” his father’s gravelled voice had said, releasing more toxic fumes that slithered up to the kitchen ceiling. “And you better get yourself down to the chip shop after school, ‘cos I’ll be in the pub.” He released smoke with every syllable being pronounced.

“What, again?” David whispered.

“What?” His father stormed over to his son with both fists clenched, and the shaking within David’s body had once again started. He was thinking that it was a little early in the day for this, and he had not anticipated another beating. His father towered over his son like a ferocious bear and grabbed his unwashed, neglected, creased and gravy stained school shirt with his left hand.

“Just remember one thing sunshine,” his father spat. “If you’re precious mother, who we haven’t heard from in years, hadn’t left us in the shit, we wouldn’t be in this fucking mess. Just remember that.”

“Okay,” said David. “I’ll remember.” He turned his back on his father, picked up the school bag expecting a blow in his back, and approached the door leading to a safer outside world, a world that was gladly greeted by the fourteen-year-old, David Dawson. He stared at the folded letter whilst walking to his school and started to read the letter, which had been hurriedly written with a pencil explaining that he had a sore throat—or something like that—of course, what it really should have said was:

Dear Mr. Playfair.

David cannot attend Sports today as last night he spilt shampoo on the bathroom carpet, which resulted in me kicking the shit out of him. His mother would have written this note herself but she left two years ago, why? I don’t know. Maybe a clash of personalities or maybe she was fed up being punched in the stomach for burning the dinner, losing the remote or just not giving me some.

Mr. Dawson.

After leaving school, David got himself a job as an office junior in the town centre, and after another five years of putting up with the occasional slap and finding his dad sleeping on the sofa, fuelled with drink, David had decided that enough was enough. Once the young David Dawson gained promotion, he realised with the finances he was bringing in, he could just about afford to run the house on his own. He had had enough of the house stinking of alcohol, he had had enough of waking up at two in the morning to find that his dad—after another boozy night—had put the oven on and went to sleep, he had had enough of waking up in the morning and finding the back door wide open.

The result ended in David punching his father, fracturing his right cheek and throwing out all his belongings onto the garden. Three days later, his front window had been shattered by a thrown brick, it didn’t take a genius to work out who was the culprit, but he never saw his father again. David had told Steven and Alice that their grandfather had moved away, and that he had not seen him for years—the latter being the truth.

David thought that Steven’s and Alice’s quality of life would be much enhanced without him in their lives, if he gave him a chance David was convinced his father would be just as bad at being a granddad than he was as a dad.

*

Young Steven looked up to his dad as they got nearer to their house in Churchill Street, his dad looked back and Steven managed an apologetic smile beneath his tear stained cheeks. Tormented by his black-hearted treatment of his son, David’s guilt forced him to break the awkward silence between them.

“Are you speaking to me, son?” he questioned.

“I suppose,” Steven tearfully mumbled.

“We still friends? What do you reckon, champ?” said David, playfully punching Steven on the right arm.

“Yeah. Okay.” Steven sniffed. His dad put his arm round his son as they ventured past the orange glow of the lampposts, and continued walking until they reached their house on the end of Churchill Street.

If only he knew where his granddad really was, David thought. *Even my own wife doesn't know where my father is.*

Chapter Four

Neil was ten years old, and was lucky—or so he thought—that his parents had recently split up. His mother had been dating an estate agent that worked in Ridgeware's small town centre, and went by the name of Gary Strand. Her suave new boyfriend, Gary, was a handsome six-footer, had dark hair and looked like he should be still going out with friends rather than lumbering himself with a recently separated mother of one.

Neil had flagrantly started to tell the other children at school all kinds of tales, including his sidekicks Steven Dawson and Alan Miller, that his new stepfather gives him anything he asks for, as Mr. Strand wants to stay in his mum's good books. This made Neil Warner the envy of the school, as he would tell other children that he now would be getting extra presents for his birthday and Christmas, as well as the additional gifts he received whenever Mr. Strand showed up at the house.

Mr. Strand had gave Neil money to spend on electronic gadgets; he encouraged Neil to use his new toys in his bedroom, as Mr. Strand and his mother like to have chats in what used to be his mum and dad's bedroom. He was also bizarrely encouraged by Mr. Strand to go out and see what his friends, Alan and Steven, may be up to so he could have more special chats with his mum, especially on a weekend.

Mr. Strand was also a good friend of David Dawson, and they both occasionally went to the local public house that was situated two hundred yards away from Churchill Street, where they both had met. David Dawson used to go down for a quiet drink by himself and had got talking with Gary Strand when he had only been in the town for three weeks. Gary had now lived in Ridgeware for six months as he was originally from London, and told people who were willing to listen, that he decided to move away from the madness of city life and start afresh.

Although it had not taken him long to gain a reputation with the ladies, he seemed to have met his match with Neil's mum, and although the relationship was still in its honeymoon period, for Gary it was purely a physical relationship. This was Gary's ideal relationship, and decided to stick around until the sex got repetitious.

Neil Dawson was slightly heavier than the average child by about twelve pounds in weight, but was by no means obese. He had dark features, like his mother, and often wondered, despite the excitement of the arrival of his new stepfather, how his alcoholic father was doing. Although visiting his dad was something he deemed as important, it began to become a bit of a chore and would rather of spent his time with friends, Alan and Steven, during the holidays.

His dad didn't seem to mind that his son's visits had started to become less and less, as he understood that his son wanted to be with his friends, and it also now allowed his dad more drinking time.

His dad, Malcolm Warner, used to be the owner of a modest pet shop in Ridgeware's town centre where Neil, every lunchtime, used to visit his dad during school days. The visit became less frequent as his dad was seen at the shop less and less, until eventually the shop had to be closed down due to bankruptcy, which Malcolm Warner had nobody but himself to blame.

When his marriage began to break down, he used to go for the odd drink in his afternoon breaks until his disappearance stretched to two or three hours, he would then come back in a stupor. Although he was the boss, many a times his assistant had to send him home because he was too drunk to stand up, let alone serve customers.

A few weeks later, Malcolm got so drunk, he threw his assistant out of the shop one day and took out his frustration on the shops premises and products. Many passers by witnessed this act of madness, and it wasn't long before customers started to avoid his shop, which led to his immediate downfall and this increased his drinking habits.

Neil's average visit to his dad on a weekend, would usually consist of being dropped off at Malcolm's apartment in Lochfield by his mum in the morning on a Saturday, where Neil would spend hours sitting watching television until his dad decided it was time to go shopping.

Shopping was a regular thing for Malcolm Warner and the whole episode would start with father and son in the supermarket, emptying the groceries into the boot of the car, and Malcolm telling Neil to wait in the car as he needed to see someone at The Feathers pub, which was the nearest pub to the supermarket. An hour or two later, his dad would come out of the pub remorseless, with the unforgettable alcohol smell on his breath and then drive back to his place.

After many of these weeks and months had passed, Neil had mentioned his routine Saturday adventure with his irresponsible dad to his mother, which filled her with enmity, and she had words with his dad. She also threatened to report him to the police over his behaviour, and told Malcolm that Neil had decided that he would like to visit his dad only once in a while, when he felt like it, which was agreed by his father as on a weekend his son was getting in the way of his father's one true love, and that was alcohol.

*

It was Friday, and Neil sat nonchalantly on the chair in the living room watching a children's television programme. Slurping on a glass of lemonade that he had made for himself, he could hear the clamour once again. There was a thudding noise that was resurgent, which occurred every second, and occasionally got louder and louder coming from upstairs. He reached for the television remote, and turned up the volume by five notches to drown out the noise.

The thudding noise was joined in by a creaking noise that had now started to irritate Neil somewhat. He sighed and put the volume up by another ten notches, which was ear splitting for the youngster's fragile ears. Sometimes he could hear the occasional groan from Mr. Strand coming from his mum's bedroom.

God knows what they must be chatting about, the innocent child thought.

Not before time, there was a rap on the front window, and Neil looked to his left and saw a smiling Steven Dawson. With a fraction of excitement, Neil turned off the television and went immediately to the front door to let Steven in.

"What are you up to?" Steven asked.

"Nothing really," Neil responded.

"Fancy coming out? We'll go and get Alan and go up to the common."

"Were always going up to the common," Neil moaned.

"Not always," said Steven, sounding saddened, his hands on his hips like a Shakespearean actor.

"Wait there," Neil insisted, "I'm just gonna get my trainers."

The disgruntled Neil reached for his trainers and put them on, tied his laces and stood up straight and said to Steven, "Hold on, I best write my mum a note to tell her I'll be back by tea time, it won't take long."

"Where is your mum?" Steven questioned his flustered friend, who was searching for a pen or a pencil in one of the kitchen cupboards.

"She's upstairs with Gary. They're having one of their chats again." Neil scribbled a few words on a notepad in the kitchen and looked at Steven. "Right, let's go and get Alan," he said. "But tomorrow we'll do something different, I'm getting bored of the common and the playing fields."

"Well, what else is there to do?"

"I've got an idea," Neil said, wearing a mischievous grin.

"What?" Steven became curious lowering his faint eyebrows. His curiosity was broadening and didn't appreciate Neil's teasing.

"Let's go and get Alan first and then I'll tell you. I'll tell both of you." The boys shut the door behind them and made the short journey a few yards walk along Churchill Street to reach their young friend, Alan.

*

Neil's mother, Susan Warner, slyly opened the living room door looking for any sign of her son and smiled to herself. *He must have gone out.*

Wrapped in just a light blue silky dressing gown that clung for dear life around her legs, she approached the kitchen door and went to the sink and poured herself a fruit juice, and read the note that Neil had left her.

With Neil now out of the house and probably out for the rest of the afternoon, she was now glad that Gary had called in sick for work on the last day before the weekend. She took a sip from the fruit juice and proceeded to go back upstairs into her bedroom. She entered the stifling hot room, and walked over to the window with one hand holding the fruit juice and opened it, letting in the faint breeze from the outside world.

"What are yer smiling for?" Gary asked, who was covered from the waist down by only a thin sheet, he looked very smug.

"Neil has gone out for the afternoon, which means," she said giggling to herself, "that we have got another three hours, at least, to waste."

"Sounds good to me, babe," he said, grabbing for her fruit juice, he took a sip and gave it back to her. "So what d'yer wanna do now?"

"I dunno," she replied. "Maybe go downstairs, watch a bit of telly and...come back up here and get ourselves warmed up for tonight."

"Tonight?" He started to frown. "Why, what's happenin' tonight?"

"I just thought, maybe, you could stay the night again."

"What, two days in a row?" Gary said uncomfortably. "A bit soon, innit?"

"You're only staying the night, Gary. I'm not asking you to marry me."

"I'm not too sure, Susan," Gary said shaking his head.

"Don't worry about Neil." She began kissing his naked shoulder. "He'll be too busy on his headphones."

Gary turned his head slightly away from Susan and sighed profoundly, and started to stroke his chin. She knew that sigh. She hadn't been dating Gary for very long, but she knew that sigh.

"What is it?" She put the fruit juice onto the side table and folded her arms, glaring at Gary.

"I'm going out tonight," he said tensely.

"Oh," she spoke "I see. Where are you going?"

"Well, I promised David that I would go out for a drink with him—just for an hour or two though. Is that alright?"

"I suppose it'll have to be."

The disappointment was too much for her face to hide. "I mean if you would rather go out with David Dawson than spend an evening with a beautiful blonde, then that's up to you."

"It's not that," he tried to explain. "It's just—"

"Wait a minute." She stood up straight with her left forefinger pointing towards the ceiling. "Is that what this *day off* is all about?"

"Wha-what d'yer mean, babe?" he said, trying to look confused, unconvincingly.

"London's ladies man, Gary Strand, decides to have a day off work, spends all afternoon with his new woman, and then goes to a bar bragging about it to David Dawson."

"Look!" Gary's impatience started to show. "I took this particular day off simply so that I could be with yer, and spend a little time with the only decent friend I've got in this dump, if you don't like it then fuck it, I'm still going. We've only been going out for a short time and already yer telling me what to do, where to go, who—"

"I'm not telling you to do anything," she butted in. "I'm just saying that, occasionally, it would be nice if we *both* went out." She sat on the edge of the bed.

"Okay, we will," Gary insisted. "We'll send Neil over to the Dawson's if it's alright with them, and we'll go out for a few drinks next weekend, what do yer say?"

She looked up at Gary with her sea green eyes seductively, and answered in a mock child's voice. "I suppose."

He smiled at her as her dressing gown fell slightly away from her chest.

"So is that alright, babe?" Gary satirized. "Am I allowed to go out?"

"You don't have to be like that, Gary."

"Be like what, for fuck's sake?"

"You know what," Susan yelled. "The sarcasm."

"D'yer want me to go?" Gary looked hard at Susan, she slowly shook her head.

"Why are we arguing over me going out for a few hours, Susan?" There was no reply, Susan stood and shrugged her shoulders. "If you want this to work Susan, we need to have our own space, especially in the early stages. It's not easy going out with a divorced woman with a child."

"I know," Susan at last spoke. "I just don't want you going off with someone younger, that's all. You haven't got the greatest reputation, Gary, when it comes to women."

"Maybe not, but we all have to settle down some time."

"I suppose." Susan managed a smile, and as soon as she smiled the mood in the room was lifted.

"Three hours did yer say?"

"What?" She was a little baffled now.

"Three hours," he repeated, "before Neil comes back?"

"Oh definitely," she replied. "At least."

"Right Mrs Warner," he laughed. "It's time for the Strand to show yer the time of yer life, girl. Get yer arse on this bed."

"I thought you already showed me the time of my life?" she mocked.

"You're joking, I was just getting warmed up."

He grabbed her by both arms and pulled her on top of him with the dressing gown now falling completely open, he then started to bite her neck as she responded with playful screams.

Chapter Five

Alan was, what people would call, a cute kid, with thick brown hair, big dark brown eyes and eyelashes girls would kill for. He wasn't too short or tall for his age, and was very lean. He was going to be when he grew up—in the words of his mother—a little heartbreaker, although it was never unusual for mums to say that about their only child.

Alan Miller, like Neil Warner, was an only child, and although didn't get everything he asked for, he did get mostly all his own way, and whether he was ill or even if he was in trouble at school, he would always be mummy's little golden boy.

Alan had now been without his dad for almost two years, and inconsequential memories of his father's presence seemed to become even hazier than a week old dream. As the months went by and as he got older, the recollections that he had of him, were fading faster than a chalk pavement drawing in a rainstorm.

The absence of his father was a psychological torture at the beginning, as it would be for any eight-year-old boy at the time. But two years on, Alan got on with it the best he could, although on some occasions he would reflect about what life was like with his dad for the first eight years of his life.

He occasionally thought about his favourite Christmas, his sixth Christmas.

He could still see the image of his father taking him by the hand outside, where Alan had thought all his presents had been unwrapped, and presenting his son with a new top of the range bike, which for the first six months after Christmas had the whole of Churchill Street, including the older boys, green with envy. Of course, after six months and eleven crashes later, the bike was virtually unrecognisable, but he could still feel the joy that he felt on that particular day when he was presented with the bike.

Another one of his favourite memories was when his dad had taken him on holiday to Weymouth; they had the best time and Steven could have spent a lifetime in those amusement arcades and he also developed a fascination for sharks. After constant questions from Alan, who kept on asking his father why his mother hadn't come with them, his dad finally mustered an excuse that their mum was staying with Aunt Pamela because she felt ill and she also hated the sea, which seemed a feeble excuse, even to a child.

Alan wasn't too convinced by this story by his dad, but nevertheless, had a fantastic time and Alan had found himself a new special friend, her name was Monique Ratcliff. He only spoke to her a few times and played with her in the sea, but to Alan, that was love.

Of course, like any child, not all his memories were good. One specific memory that haunted him and to a certain degree still confused him, was when Alan and his father had planned to go out for the day.

Looking back, Alan could still remember his mother being pleased that they were both going out to watch the local football match that Saturday afternoon. The day out to the football match was short lived, and due to an overturned lorry, they had to make their way back home, as the match would have been over before they could even get there because of traffic congestion due to a bad car crash on the motorway.

Thirty-five minutes later they were home. Alan had jumped out of the car and left his dad to lock up and went straight into the house. He went up the garden path where, at that particular moment, abnormal movements could be heard upstairs. Alan decided

to go upstairs, convinced that his mother was cleaning the upstairs rooms, and was dreading seeing what she had done with *his* room, yet again.

As he looked into his bedroom, he was relieved, as his mother hadn't touched his room but it sounded like she was still cleaning *her* room. Alan decided to walk across the landing towards his parent's room, where the noises were getting louder, and carefully opened the door ready to surprise his mum that they had returned early. But there was no cleaning taking place, his mother was doing something that confused the young child, the kind of things he had seen on the odd occasion on television that his parents didn't like him to watch.

His mum was kneeling on the bed facing the bedroom wall, wearing only her bra, and moving rapidly in a manner that confused him. Alan heard a familiar voice crying out. "I'm nearly there, baby. I'm nearly there."

Lying underneath his mum, looking like he was in excruciating pain, pulling faces as if he had eaten a slice of lemon, was a man. But as he got a better view of his face, he realised that this was not just some man, this was one of dad's friends, and before Alan could do or say anything, he felt the company of his father creep up behind him.

"Go to your room, Alan," his father commanded.

As Alan slowly walked to his room—slowly on purpose, as he wanted to hear what was going on—he could hear the voice of his frightened mother.

"Bill, you're early," she said trying to catch her breath back. "Where's Alan?"

Then as Alan shut the bedroom door behind him, Alan heard his father shouting and then another man's voice yelling, and then his mother screaming. After another five minutes of shouting, yelling and screaming, a number of thuds could be heard at the right of Alan's bedroom wall, which was near the stairs. Then only his mother and father's voice could be heard from the downstairs living room, still shouting, which eventually ended in muffled voices and then there was a stillness.

It was another forty minutes before Alan was asked to leave his room by his mother; it was clear that she had been crying and had a huge red mark under her left eye the size of an apple, it was starting to swell. Alan reluctantly went downstairs with his mother, and as soon as he entered the living room, his mother sat him down onto one of the chairs.

His mother had told young Alan that his father was gone and wasn't too sure when he was coming back. As soon as this remark was made, she faced several hours of tearful questions from a confused child wondering why his father had left when he hadn't done anything wrong. Most of the questions that Alan fired at his mother were not easy to answer, but she had done a very satisfactory job by answering them all. She also told Alan that his dad's friend was also *her* new special friend as well, and asked would he mind if occasionally he could still pop round to visit.

After his father's departure, it took Alan weeks to forgive his mother, and once the rift had healed, most of his nights on holidays and during schooldays always consisted of him and his mother sitting and watching the television. He would sometimes just stare at the television, as he could not understand half of the programmes. But it made his mum happy, and she was never always happy unless she was sitting down watching the television with her second bottle of red wine of the night, this was a regular occurrence when her special friend wasn't there, but when he *did* turn up, Alan would be sent to his room.

On some occasions she would just sit and look at the family album or go to bed early, which Alan loved, as he could watch pretty much whatever he wanted and could go to bed whenever he wanted, but he still missed his father so much and would

do anything to have him back. His mother missed him, too. He had noticed that she spent many evenings trying to hide the fact that she was crying for his dad.

She must miss him, Alan used to think. But as the months went by, and the more extreme his mother behaved, the boy grew suspicious. He even began to assume that there was something else she knew about his father, something she was keeping from him, but he decided never to raise the issue.

Alan was sitting on the living room sofa where a strident chap was heard at the door.

“Alan, it’s for you,” his mother announced.

Alan walked to the door and was greeted by two mischievous grins belonging to the faces of Steven Dawson and Neil Warner.

“Coming out Alan?” said the youngest of the three, Steven.

“Erm...yeah I suppose, I’ll see you later, mum!” Alan shouted from the kitchen through to the living room.

“All right then, Alan. But don’t be too long,” she quietly said, just loud enough so he could hear. “Make sure you’re back before your dinner.”

Alan reached for his shoes and ran out the door along Churchill Street, with Neil and Steven following.

The door was closed by Steven as the other two progressed along Churchill Street without him, Steven ran up to his friends before they disappeared completely. All three of them headed past the streetlights and turned left at the end of the road and headed for the playing fields, plotting their next adventure.

Chapter Six

Nick Wilkes was a huge size of man, a broad figure with a height of six-foot four inches and was well respected around the area of Ridgeware. It had been half an hour since Nick Wilkes had finished his final shift of the week and was relieved, as he was looking forward to the weekend. With Nick, however, a vicious circle would always be present. When he was at work he couldn't wait for the weekend, and when the weekend finally arrived, he was ready to go back to work to get away from his tiresome, uneventful life.

His wife, Fiona, was a modest looking woman for her age of forty six, but no matter how old she became, the most attractive part of Fiona would never die; the one thing that made Nick attracted to her in the first place was her piercing sky blue eyes, which for a long while hadn't done anything for Nick at all, due to Fiona's frustration, but she understood. Although her patience was wearing a little thin, she knew her husband was a mentally tortured individual.

Nick, without uttering a word to his wife, walked straight past her in the kitchen and went straight upstairs, desperate to get out of his sweat stained shirt. The temperatures at his work had soared all week and he was convinced he was rapidly losing weight, and was looking forward to a hearty meal, steak or maybe roast chicken, or so he hoped.

Nick trudged up the stairs, destined for the shower, stripped bare and climbed in. Fiona was hoping that the events that occurred the day before with the young man in the town centre had all been forgotten about. So far, her overprotective husband hadn't mentioned him.

"Nick!" came Fiona's voice from the bottom of the stairs, he heard her voice but wasn't in the mood to answer, so just continued to shower.

"Nick!" Fiona repeated, with her voice a little more raised.

"What!" Nick angrily replied from the bathroom.

"Doesn't matter." Fiona slammed the door shut, aggrieved by her husband's impatience.

Maybe he is still reeling about yesterday's events? Not my problem, I didn't do anything wrong.

Nick turned off the shower, and stepped out to dry himself with one of the towels that was hanging over one of the brass hooks. He looked in the mirror and didn't like what he saw; the grey hair was sneakily burrowed under his dark hair. His eyebrows were also getting thicker, sitting over his eyes like two obese caterpillars, and his ears seemed larger than they did the week before.

He was resigned to the fact that he was getting old. He shrugged his shoulders and proceeded to walk to the bedroom to get into a change of clothing. After the change of clothing took place, he could feel the rage boiling up inside him, which wasn't for the first time. He didn't know where it came from and it was something that he increasingly found tough to manage. He began to pace up and down the room like an aggrieved Colonel and began to mutter to himself, which was becoming a regular occurrence.

"I'm losing control, I'm fucking losing control. My daughter ignores me and does whatever she wants. My wife has now started to flirt with other men. Respect! There's no fucking respect for me in this house anymore; they don't know I exist half the

time. Lee gave me respect; you can always rely on your son. But the women? They don't understand me, I don't belong here anymore. Fuckin' family's falling apart."

Nick continued to pace up and down in the room, feeling the blood rise to his face, the heat in his cheeks was intense, his fists clenched tight and his heart ready to explode. He briefly raised his fist towards the wall, and then lowered it immediately changing his mind in a split second. He unclenched and clenched his sweaty hands rapidly, and sat down on the bed and continued to mutter to himself.

"What's the point? There's no point anymore. I go to work five days a week spend the weekend bored to tears and the whole fuckin' cycle starts again. If I'll kill myself then the bitches will soon notice me, yeah, they'll be fucking sorry if I was dead."

"Nick!" came Fiona's voice from downstairs.

"What." Nick's voice was more unwearied, but it was only for the benefit of his wife, as his waywardly rage was still aching to explode from inside of him.

"Dinner will be ready in an hour."

"Right," he said with gritted teeth. "I'll be down in a minute."

Nick continued to sit on the bed and lowered his head. He tried to concentrate on his breathing to control his unwanted and uninvited anger, he knew it would only take a second to punch the wall and the rage would die off, but it would take fifteen to thirty minutes to repair the wall and would have to give a reasonable, convincing explanation to his wife on how and why the damage was done.

"Right, Nick," he spoke, disgusted with himself, yet again, that he referred to his wife and daughter as, bitches. "Calm yourself down, man. What happened those years ago wasn't your fault, it wasn't your fault. Who am I kidding? A father should be able to protect his family, shouldn't he? I let him down. I let everyone down, what's the point? Nothing can be as bad as what I'm feeling now, Fiona's all right, she's stronger than me mentally but I can't take it any more, I can't take it any more."

Tears started to well up in Nick's eyes and became embarrassed that he could let himself get into such a mess yet again.

They'd all be better off without me, he thought, and wiped his eyes and sniffed hard. *They have to understand that I'm only trying to protect them, I couldn't protect Lee but I have a duty to protect my wife and only daughter. I'll do anything for them. Maybe killing myself is the wrong decision. After all, if I go through with it, then they'd be no one here to look out for them.*

He stood up.

Right you fuckin' idiot, stop this suicide talk you selfish bastard, stop it, now!

Nick headed back to the bathroom, ran the cold tap and splashed his face on a number of occasions; he looked in the mirror and could still see the redness in his eyes, and he splashed his face once more. Feeling calmer and refreshed, he dabbed his face with the hand towel and walked slowly down the stairs, feeling a lot calmer and looking forward to his steak or roast chicken dinner that was sixty minutes away.

Nick could not understand where all this rage came from. Was it because of what happened to Lee? Or was it something that had been passed down from his family?

He tried to cast his mind back to the days when his father was present—when he was a child—and scrolled through his childhood memories. Like any normal man, Nick's dad did have a temper on him, but most of the time he was a calm, patient and loving husband and father, which frustrated Nick even more, as he didn't really have an excuse for all this unwanted anger.

Maybe it was because of what happened to Lee? Nick had always had a temper, but since Lee went away, he had become snappish, minatory and a lot more unpredictable. It must be wrong to have loving affection for your wife one day, and

then wanting to smash her head against a wall the other, simply because she had been innocently talking to another man? It could be anyone, the postman, a work colleague in the town or just a normal guy holding the door for her, anything like this enraged Nick.

Surely these are not normal feelings.

Nick also had visions of him being dead, Nick was convinced these were normal feelings and that most people have visualised what their funeral would be like, who would be there, would anyone be really upset or would the church be full? Nick would have loved to have died, watch his funeral and then rewind life and go back to normal, but of course, this was impossible. But although Fiona was forty-six years of age, he was convinced that if anything did happen to him, she would no doubt find somebody else in time, after all, despite her age, Fiona was still an attractive woman, very loving and still had an appetite for sex, although Nick's appetite had vastly diminished over the last couple of years. If sex was food, Nick Wilkes would be an anorexia nervosa sufferer.

Chapter Seven

The three boys started walking round the desolate field, although they were not doing anything in particular, and were finding it very difficult to find a cure for their boredom that had now started to bring on a level of aggravation. Alan sat by the edge of the field, and looked at the back of the houses that created half of his street with his back to the common hill.

He continued to stare, bemused why he left the house in the first place, as all Neil and Steven were doing was walking back and forth in a wearisome manner. Alan clasped his hands to the back of his head and lay down on the dry grass, blanking out his friends that were probably talking about nothing of his interest, and just lay there staring at the one solitary cloud that crawled across the blue background with malcontent, desperately looking for its peers.

The chatter of the other boys started to drift away, and all that he could hear was the snickering of two birds, and felt the occasional rush of wind over his face that was very welcome indeed. His eyelids reluctantly became heavy, and could still feel the heat of the sun beating down, burning his eyelids. He took a deep breath in, and could smell the unmistakable odour of freshly cut grass.

Despite the fact that this was one of the hottest summers for twenty years, Ridgeware never saw much of the sun, even in the summer, but Alan was dreaming of the day when he could go out in the autumn nights and play without having to consume a litre of water whilst doing it. Slowly, despite his eyelids feeling like they were being melted by a blowtorch, he drifted off into another world, but only briefly.

"Alan! Alan!" Neil stood over his friend's tired and dazed look.

Alan put his left hand half over his eyes, annoyed that he had been brought back to the real world so soon, and squinted through the burning heat and replied. "What?"

"Sit up," Neil said in military fashion and sat next to his weary friend, with young Steven sitting next to Alan. Alan sat up, rubbed his warm eyelids, and then yawned out loud, slightly exaggerating the noise.

"What is it?" he questioned.

"Right," Neil started. "We're only halfway through the holidays and we are all bored, right?"

"Right." Alan and Steven said simultaneously agreeing with Neil.

"And all of the kids at school will probably bore us three to death and brag to the others in our class about their holidays, right?" Neil questioned again.

"Right," again they both agreed.

"That's right," interrupted Steven, squinting whilst he was speaking, "Gary Knight and his mum and dad are off to Florida to Disney World, and Fiona White told me that she and her brother are going to Spain for two weeks, and—"

"Hang on, Steven, let me finish," Neil said holding up his right hand. "So why don't us three do something exciting, something that'll get them all jealous when we get to high school."

"What do you mean?" Steven confusingly asked.

"Half the kids in our class are going abroad for their holidays, so what could we do to make them jealous?" Alan impatiently asked. "And anyway, what if we're all in different classes when we go to the big school?"

"Never mind that," Neil waved. "We'll worry about that if it happens."

"So, what do you wanna do?" Alan questioned the excited Neil.

“Well for a start, we can go up the common,” Neil began.

Alan looked disappointed and went back to his horizontal position; he folded his hands behind his head.

“I thought you said you was bored of the common,” Steven interrupted again. “You said we were always going up the common.”

“We can go up the common,” Neil patiently started again, ignoring Steven’s interruption. “And go up to Kelly’s house.”

“Been done a hundred times before,” Alan said with displeasure.

“Yes I know,” Neil continued. “But has anyone actually been *inside* his house?”

“What?” Alan sat up straight away. “There’s no way you could get in that house, he’s always in there. He never goes out.”

“Okay, maybe not actually *in* the house, but in his garden. We could climb that rotten fence of his, hide in some of his trees, maybe even behind his shed.”

“But who’s going to believe us if there’s only us three going up there?” Alan questioned. Neil started to scratch his head as if he had never thought about that.

“Well,” Neil paused. “We could steal something, and take some photos with our phones.”

“Steal something?” Alan mocked.

“I dunno, whatever’s lying in his garden or...” Neil snapped his fingers. “In his shed. We pinch something from Kelly’s shed and show it to the boys. We can take photos outside *and* inside the shed. Nobody’s been in the killer’s shed before.”

Alan looked at Neil still unconvinced, and shook his head.

“Come on, Alan. I’m bored stupid. If we’re not playing football, we’re walking round the playing fields, doing nothing, sliding down the common is boring even going into the woods is boring these days. Come on, let’s do something different for a change.” Neil spoke pleadingly.

“I love the woods,” Steven said. Innocently smiling to himself.

“What do you think?” Neil asked, looking at Alan’s reaction, there was a silence.

“When do you want to go?”

Neil looked up to the sky and thought for a second. “Tomorrow, we’ll go tomorrow afternoon or evening.”

“We’ll go tomorrow afternoon,” Alan said.

“I’m not too sure,” Steven spoke. “What happens if we get caught?”

“We won’t get caught, he’s an old man.” Neil said, assuring Steven. “We’ll go up to the house, if he’s outside, we wait until he goes back inside and... I don’t know, steal his axe or something. There must be something worth nicking.”

Alan stood up and immediately felt the adrenaline rushing inside of him, and smiled to the two boys and started to bite his lower lip; he released his lower lip with his teeth and began to speak, “Well, anything’s better than nothing, let’s do it.”

Steven, looking a little frightened, reluctantly nodded his head in agreement to Alan and Neil, not wanting to show the other two that he would rather not go.

“I-I’ll-I’ll stay by his fence and keep watch while you two go into his garden,” Steven stammered. “You two can run faster than me. I could film it on my phone—if my dad will let me take it. I lost the last one.”

Alan and Neil looked at each other and began laughing, Alan now started to laugh uncontrollably, clutching his stomach with both hands.

“What?” Steven asked. “I’m not scared, I’m not. But it’s best if someone keeps a look out, isn’t it? Alan? Neil? Isn’t it?”

“Okay, okay Steven,” Neil said in a mocking voice. “You keep a look out while we go in, and I s’pose your right, we *do* need someone to keep a look out, and filming it is actually a good idea.”

“Right I’m going back home,” Alan said. “There’s nothing to do until tomorrow. I’ll see you in the afternoon, my programme’s on soon.”

Steven and Neil waved Alan goodbye and remained sitting on the freshly cut grass, and carried on discussing tomorrow’s adventure. Neil discussed the events with dauntless excitement, and Steven, however, spoke about it with flagrant anxiety, even just thinking about it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, but he couldn’t let his friends down. It had taken Steven years to get over the fear of walking by the house to get to the woods, but actually going *into* Kelly’s garden, made him shudder with fright.

Alan and Neil were Steven’s only close friends, and if the pair of them went by themselves and got Kelly’s axe or something else belonging to Kelly without Steven’s presence being there, it would be humiliating. How embarrassed would he be if Alan and Neil told everybody in Churchill Street that he chickened out? And they *would* tell everyone. Steven had no choice, and finally walked home with the excited Neil walking beside him, still talking about what would be their latest adventure.

Chapter Eight

"You said what?" Jason Barry heatedly asked his wife.

"Go on, Jason. It'll only take about ten minutes," came the reply from his desperate wife, Margaret. "She won't be any trouble."

"That's not the point, I don't do the Samaritans anymore. I want to spend my weekend in peace after work," he angrily reacted. "I want some time to myself."

"Well, I already told her to pop round."

"You shouldn't have done that, Margaret!" he bellowed at his wife, and not for the first time.

"Oh why not, Jason? Why not?"

"You should have consulted *me* first before inviting half the street round."

"Stop over reacting, Jason," Margaret said calmly. "Fiona, is a friend of mine."

"Well, I've never met her," he rudely interrupted.

"Fiona, is a friend of mine," Margaret continued. "And I told her that you used to work for the Samaritans—just give her a few minutes. It took me ages to persuade her to come round."

"Can't she just give them a call, for fuck's sake?"

"Well, I told her you used to be very good, and that you were very highly thought of, anyway, just think of the difference you could make, I think she needs someone to listen to her, rather than just her friends all the time. I think it'll do her good to talk to a stranger face to face, rather than speaking to someone over the phone. I just hope you're a lot more polite to her than you are with me."

"When's she coming round?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, sometime," Margaret replied. "I'll stay out of the way and do some shopping or something."

"Well it's a bit bloody awkward, Margaret, don't you think?"

"What d'you mean?" his wife whined.

"Well, I don't even know the woman."

"You've done it before, surely you haven't forgotten already?"

"I used to do it over the phone, not face to face."

"If you really can't be bothered with her, then I'll tell her you're too busy."

Jason knew it was inane quarrelling with her, what Margaret wants she usually gets, and if she didn't get it, she would make his life hell for weeks.

"Just tell her to come round," he sighed in defeat.

"I knew there's still a good man underneath that hard exterior," she said teasingly.

"Can't the shopping wait," Jason's moaning had begun to debilitate. "Can't you stay while she's here?"

"I think she'd be a little uncomfortable if she had an audience, don't you?" What Margaret had just said made sense, to Jason's annoyance.

"Well, as long as she doesn't stay too long. I want to go for my run."

"I don't know why you bother." She looked him up and down.

"Because I'm fat," Jason said bluntly. "And when you are fat and it's a hundred degrees outside, it becomes a little uncomfortable. Well, no more! This is my last year of being a jelly belly."

"At our time of life, I just don't see the point."

“At our time of life?” Jason screwed his face. “What are you twittering on about woman, *at our time of life*? I should be in my prime. Do you realise, people my age drop down dead because of coronary heart disease?”

“Well, what’s that when it’s at home?” she shrugged.

“It’s when, my dear,” he said sarcastically. “Men, like me, who are married to women like you, end up with blocked arteries for eating the shit that their wife has been cooking for them over the years.”

“You don’t have to eat my cooking.” Margaret sniffled, sounding a little wounded by the remark.

“I just want to lose a little weight, that’s all,” he said more calmly. “I just want to be around for my fiftieth, which is only three years away.”

Margaret bent over to pick up the remote and Jason looked over at her almost in disgust, he pulled a face that could only be described as the same face a child would make, if it was given a mouthful of hot curry. He sat there shaking his head, with uncomplimentary thoughts racing inside of him.

Despite Jason’s good nature in work and around Ridgeware in general, there was a side to him that was very unhappy. His work was fine; his relationship with colleagues was fine, his marriage, however, was stone cold dead, with no chance of resuscitation. His Samaritan work had also given him a good guy reputation within the workplace, but leaving the place was inevitable.

Working on the three evenings, after leaving work, had become too much for him, mentally and physically. Originally, although he did want to help others in need, the main reason for joining was so that he didn’t have to look at his wife lazing on the couch, watching TV, chewing on chocolate bars and slurping her tea every damn night of the week. Working three evening a week would give him a break—or so he thought. Although Jason stuck with the voluntary job for a good while, he found that his mood over the years became intolerable.

Jason wasn’t happy with his life, but knew there was no going back at his age. No self-respecting woman would go for a slob like him, and he did worry about the stash of pornography he had in his attic. Whenever his wife left the house, he would use that time to sexually relieve himself, using the pornography. If she did find out, he knew the abnormal material in the attic would upset her.

“So, when is she coming round?” he asked his wife after giving in to her demands, he adjusted his specs and rubbed his bald head.

“Tomorrow afternoon. Don’t worry, I’m sure she won’t stay long.”

“Okay,” he sighed. “I’d still prefer it if you were here, though.”

“Be nice with her Jason, she’s having a tough time of it.”

“I’m always nice to people, I’m Jason Barry remember.”

“You’re never nice to me.”

There was self-pity in Margaret’s tone, but she was correct in what she was saying about her unceremonious, sexist husband.

Despite their playful arguments, which sometimes snowballed into full scale warfare—depending on Jason’s mood—Margaret was enjoying her indolent Friday afternoon with Jason, who always finished early on a Friday. Now that their daughters, Alison and Sarah, had both left to go to work in London, and their son, Francis, who had moved to South Africa.

The pair of them began watching a gardening programme that Margaret was interested in. Although she never did any gardening in her life, her plan was to watch the programme whilst making sure her husband watched it with her, and then suggesting to him afterwards, that they should have *this* done and *that* done to their

own garden, just like how it was on the programme. This actually meant Jason cutting the grass, planting in new flowers or fencing the garden, while Margaret stood and watched, telling him what to do and where he was going wrong.

"I think I'll go for a walk." Jason lifted his heavy body out of the warm crumpled seat.

"A walk?" Margaret looked disappointed. "Where?"

"Anywhere woman, haven't you noticed it's a hundred degrees outside!"

"Okay Jason, you don't have to shout."

"Right, I'm going."

"When are you going to be back?" she asked.

"Why?"

"Because of dinner."

"Oh, what are we having today? Let me guess, burnt chips with charcoal chicken, or boiled to death potatoes with shrivelled up steak."

"You don't have to eat it, you know."

"I'll be about an hour and a bit."

Jason walked out of the house into the tropical heat with his frustration getting the better of him, he turned left passing a couple of streets until he came to Churchill Street. He then turned right and was tempted by the public house, but he passed it, as the smell of alcohol on his breath would only give Margaret something else to moan about. He continued to walk, and decided that his destination would be the town centre.

Chapter Nine

David Anderton was a man in his mid-forties, and although he looked it, he wasn't short of admirers, especially with some of the female staff in Rosewood. Even the cleaners went all bashful when the powerful looking Dr. Anderton strolled through the corridors of the mental institute. He treated the cleaners like any normal member of staff, as other doctors tended to look down on them.

Dr. David Anderton was relaxing in his chair in his home, glad of the solitude that his wife had left him with, as she had gone away for a break. He opened his paper out onto the chair, looking at some research for his next appointment. Anderton scratched at his grey hair and mulled over the paperwork.

Anderton looked at his watch, knowing that he had still had half an hour before his appointment with his next client, and began to scribble some questions down in pencil preparing himself for his next encounter. He put the rubber end of the pencil into his mouth, and rolled it around in his mouth from side to side across his teeth and put on his thinking face—the kind of look a child would make whilst being constipated—and then suddenly the doorbell rang. Anderton put his papers away and placed them onto the coffee table, walked to the door and opened it to be greeted by the face of Cara Anderton, his daughter-in-law.

"Anything wrong?" he asked, before giving her a chance to speak. It was very rare that Cara visited the Anderton household, especially on her own.

"Charming," she replied. "I come round to visit my favourite father-in-law, and this is the welcome I get."

They both embraced, and Anderton kissed his son's wife gently on her left cheek.

"Did you get that message I sent you guys?" Anderton quizzed.

"No," Cara sounded distracted. "I haven't used the computer for ages, your son's always on it, he didn't say anything about a message though."

"Well, if it's still on there, you should read it," Anderton smiled. "It's quite funny."

"Right," came the uninterested response, "I'll do that."

"Oh man, what's my son done now?" Anderton teased. "You seem a little bothered about something, Cara. What is it?"

"Nothing." Cara walked in as they both went into the living room. "We just wanted to ask you a favour, that's all." Cara's cheeks went rosy with embarrassment.

"We?" Anderton laughed. "You mean my son wants a favour, and he's sent his lovely wife round to make it impossible for me to say no."

"Something like that," Cara smirked.

"What is it?"

"Well," Cara began, sitting on the comfortable chair. "It's a little embarrassing."

"Come on, Cara. What does he want?"

"It doesn't matter." She stood up, ready to make her way out of Anderton's door.

"Is it money? Do you want to lend some money?"

Cara nodded shamefully and sat back down.

Anderton loved Cara like one of his own, and knew that his son had done himself proud by marrying her. She was a beautiful young lady with blonde hair and reminded Anderton of someone he once knew, someone who meant a lot to him but couldn't pursue the relationship further as she was a lot younger than him, and there was also a small matter of him being married.

"How much do you need?"

"I don't know, we haven't found a house yet, so I don't know how much down payment we have to cough up. We can afford a house, don't get me wrong, it's just that we don't have any savings at the moment for the deposit."

"Have you been looking anywhere?"

"Well *I* have, but your son is snowed under at work, so I've been looking on my own most of the time. I looked at a house recently, but the estate agent was a bit of a creep, so I didn't bother, but we'll get something eventually."

"Listen, Cara. I don't mean to be rude, but I need to be at Rosewood soon," Anderton said apologetically. "But I'll give you guys the money, no problem."

"Oh right," Cara walked to the door. "I'll see myself out and thanks, David."

"Wait a minute," Anderton said. "Exactly how much do you need?"

"Not too much."

"Okay," he nodded. "As soon as you both see something you like, give me a call and we'll go over the details, Cara."

"Thanks, David," she said, approaching the front door. "I'll see myself out."

"No problem." He winked. "And tell that son of mine to come round, me and his mother haven't seen him in ages."

"Will do, bye." Cara shut the door and set off in her car

*

Dr. David Anderton's BMW rolled up onto the car park that belonged to Rosewood's hospital, and waiting on Dr. Anderton's arrival, was a clearly nervous seventeen-year-old young man, his hands slightly trembling and his jeans had moist patches on the thigh area, where the youngster had clearly been wiping his sweaty palms in the blistering heat.

The engine of the car eventually died with one last splutter, and the young man waiting, composed himself ready to greet his future mentor. Anderton exited the car and took one glancing look at the strange behaving young man, and proceeded to walk to the entrance of the clinic, walking past him.

"Dr. Anderton?" came the young voice. Anderton stopped dead in his tracks, and turned to the apprehensive young man.

"Yes," came his short response.

"My name is Greg Johnson." He walked towards the doctor, holding out his right hand that was preparing itself for a sticky handshake. "I spoke to you at the office last week."

"Sorry, man?" Anderton looked puzzled. "Greg...Greg who?"

"Remember," the youngster said tautly. "I am interested in becoming a psychiatrist. I called you the other week."

"Oh, that's right," Anderton clicked his fingers. "You wanted to sit in on one of my clients, and I wasn't too sure about it."

"That's right, Dr. Anderton." Greg felt relieved. "You took some persuading."

"I'm sorry, Greg. I had forgotten all about it." Anderton put his arm round Greg's shoulder. "Come in, and if there's any questions you want to ask, fire away."

"Well actually—"

"But," Anderton interrupted holding his index finger in the air. "Don't ask me anything when I'm actually *with* the client. You do realise that this is not common practise, you do know that? And the hospital took some persuading?"

"Yes sir, I do," said the jumpy teenager. "I really appreciate this."

“Just don’t be a pest when we get in there.” Anderton said firmly—but in a friendly manner.

“That’s fine,” Greg pulled out a pencil and a small pad of writing paper. “Do you mind if I take notes? I promise I won’t make any noise.”

“Not at all, we’ve got about seven minutes before we go in.”

Greg nervously wrestled with his notepad and wiped his slippery pencil against his jeans, preparing a written answer for his first question.

“I know I’ve only just turned up, Dr. Anderton, but can I ask you a quick question—if you don’t mind?”

“No, of course not,” Anderton opened the passenger side of his door and pulled out his briefcase. “Fire away, Greg.”

“Could you tell me, Dr. Anderton, how you got into psychiatry?”

“Erm.” He gave his head a scratch, whilst trying to think of an answer to an easy and obvious question. “Well, Greg, I studied for seven years and got myself a doctoral degree. That’s pretty much it, Greg, pretty basic stuff.

“Then what?” Greg asked without looking at Anderton, furiously scribbling away at his notepad.

“Then after I got my degree, I taught psychiatry at college for a number of years.” Anderton paused for an uncomfortable five seconds. “Became bored with teaching and decided to work freelance where you have more freedom. It beats standing in the same class, five days a week, teaching to a group of students, when you’ve got half of them not even interested in the subject. That’s the most annoying thing, Greg. When you’re passionate about something and people don’t listen, it pisses you off.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Anderton. I had a list of questions in my head but my mind seems to have gone blank,” Greg said. “That’ll do for now.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he assured his new student beaming that this young man was in awe of him. “I’ll do all the talking when we get inside, you’ll have to keep mental notes, however. They’re not going to allow a pencil in a mental institute are they?”

“Of course not,” came the voice of the young, eager apprentice.

“If you think of any questions afterwards, you can ask me when we leave, it won’t take too long.” Anderton fixed his glasses and pushed his fingers through his short grey hair. “Let’s go inside.”

They both went inside to the reception area, where Dr. Anderton announced his arrival. After they both had taken a seat, he was told by a member of staff that, although the room was ready, it would be another ten minutes before he could see his patient, as he was still being fed.

Anderton and Greg were the only individuals waiting in the reception and Greg was agitated that he couldn’t think of any more questions, as Anderton—as Greg quickly found—wasn’t the best of people to make small talk. He had to think quickly; otherwise, this would turn out to be the longest and most uncomfortable seven minutes of his life.

“How did you get involved in psychiatry?” Greg tensely asked.

“Well, didn’t I just tell you that outside?” Anderton looked puzzled.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Anderton.” Greg’s face was scarlet. “I meant, before you went to college, how did you become interested in the subject?”

“I suppose,” Anderton paused, tapping his forefinger off his lip trying to think, “I’ve been into psychiatry since I was a kid. Since I was a kid I wanted to devote my life to helping individuals, does that sound over the top?”

Greg shook his head at his question.

Anderton continued, "There were things about society which anyone could agree were false, sick, and immoral, but people had a talent for ignoring the connection between these things and the social phenomena which were generally admired."

"Right." Greg nodded, wondering what this mad bastard was talking about.

"You see, Greg," Anderton continued. "I grew up in a family in which there were high levels of hate and anger in the household. My father was an angry man and my mother a good hater, but she was lost when angry, as my father became irrational when hating. Although I did not really understand the basis for this kind of polarity in those days, I found it possible to accept the fact that there were valid reasons for these negative reactions to the world they lived in. I noticed all this when I was growing up right through to my teenage years, and it fascinated me watching these people, I suppose my parents were my main influence."

"Right." Greg nodded again, fascinated with the reason why this man took up psychiatry, which made Greg's reason for his interest in the subject pathetic.

Why does Greg want to be a psychiatrist? Er...because it sounds interesting.

"Tell me Greg," Anderton spoke. "What do you know so far about psychosis?"

"Does it mean a person with psychosis is mad?" came Greg's response without any hesitating.

"That's one way of putting it." Anderton chortled, unknowing that his laughter had hurt Greg's feelings, and the young man was now feeling like he was six years old again, which was a time the kids in the playground for months use to call him 'dick face.'

Greg looked hurt and knew he should have done some research before making the appointment with this man. The doctor turned to his young apprentice and picked up on his dented confidence, which reduced his laughter to an uncomfortable silence.

"Whatever you hear in there," Anderton spoke before the silence got any longer. "I'm not too sure it will be of any help, but it'll be good experience all the same."

There was no response from the hurt youngster.

He looked to his student and gave him a reassuring wink, now feeling twinges of guilt for accidentally ridiculing him. Anderton had a tendency of making mistakes and knew there was nothing he could do about it, as he was convinced it was a family trait. Greg's head was slightly lowered and seemed a little less uncomfortable of the silence than before. Anderton was convinced that his laughter had not only dented Greg's confidence, but in a matter of seconds, may have diverted Greg's career plans.

"Let me tell you a story, Greg," the doctor began.

Greg sat up straight and looked at the doctor with a little forgiveness in his eyes.

"A man who had been in a mental home for some years, finally seemed to have improved to the point where it was thought he could be released. The head of the institution, in a fit of commendable caution, decided however to interview him first.

"Tell me," said he, *"if we release you, as we are considering doing. What do you intend to do with your life?"*

"The inmate said: *It would be wonderful to get back into real life and if I do, I will certainly refrain from making my former mistake. I was a nuclear physicist, you know, and it was the stress of my work in weapon research that helped put me here. If I am released, I shall confine myself to work in pure theory, where I trust the situation will be less difficult and stressful.*"

"*Marvellous,*" said the head of institution."

"*Or else,*" ruminated the inmate. *I might teach. There is something to be said for spending one's life in bringing up a new generation of scientists."*

"*Absolutely,*" said the head of institution."

"Then again, I might write. There is considerable need for books on science for the general public. Or I might even write a novel based on my experiences in this fine institution."

"An interesting possibility," said the head."

"And finally, said the inmate, if none of these things appeal to me, I can always continue to be a toilet brush."

Greg laughed quietly, to Anderton's joy, which immediately seemed to have lifted his mood. As Greg began to recover from the amusing story that had just been told, a member of staff came into the reception area where they both were sitting, and told Anderton that his patient was waiting for him in room C seven. Greg's sniggering stopped as soon as it was announced that they were ready to go. They both stood to their feet and walked through the clinics' corridors, with Anderton leading the way.

"What's this person's name?" Greg curiously asked.

"He's a regular of mine. His name is Robert, he's in his early twenties, and he suffers from psychosis, hallucinations and delusions, that kind of thing, and that is all you need to know. This really should be confidential, but you were a stubborn little bugger on that phone, besides, your kind of passion reminds me of *me*, when I was younger."

"It's just that my brother knows someone in here," Greg panted, trying to keep up with Anderton's lengthy pace along the corridor.

"That comes as no surprise," Anderton responded. "Half of the patients in Rosewood come from Ridgeware, the rest are from other areas of the West Midlands."

"My brother said this guy he knows is a psycho, but I can't remember his surname."

"Let's get one thing straight." Anderton stopped walking to face his immature student. "If you're interested in being a psychiatrist, great, I'll give you help and advice. But if you're using me to see a disturbed patient so you can brag about it to your brother and your other friends, then leave now. I'm sorry if I sound short, Greg, but I am doing you a favour here."

"I know you are," Greg responded. "It's just that it's the first time I've been in one of these places, I'm a little nervous to tell you the truth."

"Well, there's no need to be. It's a good hospital, with good security, we'll be perfectly safe, there's nothing to be nervous about."

"Sorry, Dr. Anderton, just getting a little over excited."

"This is our room." Anderton pointed towards the end of the corridor. "Remember, you stay in the corner of the room, sit still, be silent at all times, and don't make any sudden movements."

"Okay," Greg took a long hard gulp. "Don't make any sudden movements?"

Anderton approached the door and knocked on the glass. A tall stocky man, who looked like a power lifter and had been eating steroid sandwiches, opened the door.

"Anderton," came the chirpy response from the big man. "How the hell are ya?"

"Not bad, Brian, not bad," Anderton said. "Are you looking after my patients?"

"Of course," Brian replied with a sly, disturbing grin. "He's waiting for ya."

Anderton walked into the room with Greg hesitantly behind him. Big Brian closed the door, and menacingly stood by the door inside the room with his arms folded. He looked like the kind of guy that loved his job. A bully maybe?

The walls and ceiling of the room were decorated in brilliant white, the floor was covered with a dirty brown carpet, and all that was in the room, was one desk and a chair on either side of the desk with no windows present. Anderton pointed to the wall on *his* side, and Greg positioned himself against the wall and sat on the carpet with his

legs crossed, as visitors to a meeting was practically unheard of, so it was imperative that he was as far away from the client as possible.

Brian held his position by the door that Greg and Anderton had just come through. On the right side of the desk sitting up straight in the chair, was the client, Robert, with both hands placed on top of the desk.

Robert had dark features, and looked like a regular guy. He was clean shaven, had dark brown eyes, short dark hair and was reasonably attractive. He never once looked to see who was entering the room, and sat with a glazed look on his face, as if he was trying to see through the wall with his dark brown lifeless eyes. Anderton took a seat on the left side of the desk and crossed his legs.

"Hello, Robert." There was no response from the doctor's cold client.

"Is there anything interesting that has happened, Robert, since I last saw you that you would like to talk to me about?" There was still silence, this was becoming monotonous for Anderton as his client rarely spoke, but it was easy money nevertheless.

Robert's stare carried on without almost blinking, and looked through Anderton, not making any acknowledgement that there was someone in the room trying to make a conversation with him. The silence had lasted almost two minutes, and Greg's brain was still waiting to receive some interesting information. He breathed out a loud sigh, letting Anderton and Brian know of his boredom and his disappointment so far with the session.

"You can go if you want, Greg." Anderton said reacting to the sigh, still facing towards Robert.

"No I'm-well-er-fine- honest," came the blathering nervous voice from the back of the room.

Anderton's attention turned back to his shy client and sat there in further silence, but his face was showing signs of frustration. Robert, so far, had been his hardest client to crack and thus far had only managed to get the occasional mumblings from the man, which is why Anderton for the last six months hadn't bothered recording the sessions.

"So Robert, is there anything you want to tell me? Are you still hearing voices? Are you still hallucinating?"

Still nothing.

"Okay, Robert." Anderton rubbed his hands up and down his sweaty face, and was feeling the strain of a long hot day. "If you've got nothing to say to me this month, I think it's best if I go. Is there anything you want to tell me?"

Robert grunted at the bothersome doctor, he turned his head away and gazed at the door, which led to the corridor.

"Well at least that's a start," Anderton said, responding to Robert's rudeness.

"About six months ago, you was very chatty Robert, but for the last four or five sessions you've hardly spoken to me. Have I done anything to upset you?"

Robert's bestial eyes had the look of a baleful individual, and his presence was redoubtable, Anderton was aware of that.

Anderton rose from his chair. "Okay, Robert, have it your way. I'll see you next month or maybe before then, if you misbehave again, that is."

The disappointment on Greg's face was all too clear as Anderton pushed the chair back with the back of his legs, and started to walk towards the door with the unopened briefcase in hand. Greg stood up to do the same, when a quiet voice cut through the room.

"How is the place?" Robert had at last spoke in a whisper that could just be barely heard. Robert faced forward once again, staring at the desk with those black devilish eyes.

Anderton turned around facing away from the door, and went back to the chair, delighted that for the first time—apart from the month before—in many months, his client was talking again.

"The place, Robert?" Anderton answered Robert's question with another question.

"The place," he whispered quietly once again, hissing the words.

"You mean, the woods, Robert?"

"The woods." Robert nodded.

"It's still there, Robert, if that's what you mean."

"Not for long." Robert spoke again with a captivated Greg in the background, sitting with his brain in gear, waiting for something more substantial to come from Anderton's client.

"What do you mean, not for long, Robert?"

"They'll destroy it."

"*They* Robert?" Anderton confusingly asked. "You mean men will destroy it? Is that what you mean, Robert? Builders?"

"They always do."

"No one is going to hurt the woods, Robert."

"What do you know!" he growled, slamming the desk with his right fist. Anderton and Greg simultaneously jumped. Brian made his way from the door to the desk, but Anderton raised his hand to the big man, signalling to him that everything was fine and he was still in control of the situation. Brian went back to his original position, this time he stood with his hands behind his back.

"You have nothing to worry about, Robert, the woods are gonna be fine."

"They're not," Robert spat, as saliva from the left corner of his mouth rolled its way to his chin. "I know they're not going to be fine."

"How do you know that, Robert?"

"They told me," he hissed.

"Who told you, Robert?"

Robert slumped in his chair and began slowly to rock back and forth, becoming anxious to the barrage of questions coming from the persistent Anderton.

"Who told you, Robert?" Anderton repeated the question.

"*They*," whispered Robert, and looked up at Anderton with his menacing doll eyes that showed no sign of life. Greg felt a shiver down his frame, resulting from Robert's sullen and disturbing manner. Robert began to laugh menacingly; the laugh sounded out of place like it didn't belong to him, and Anderton, for a minute, thought that there may be something more to Robert than psychosis, he sounded like he was possessed and this unnerving laugh surely would have made Lucifer proud. Anderton also felt the shiver, like icicles pressed against his spine, as the malevolent laughing withered.

"When you say *they*, Robert," Anderton began. "You mean the voices in your head? Is that what you mean, the voices?"

"Need to get out." Robert ignored Anderton's question, and continued to rock back and forth, this time the momentum increased. "Need to get out."

"Why, Robert? Why do you need to get out? Talk to me."

"Need to get out." Robert's rocking became more erratic, as Anderton was convinced that the chair could give way at any moment.

"I don't understand Robert, why is it so important for you to be out?"

“YOU NEED TO LET ME OUT YOU BASTARDS! YOU NEED TO LET ME OUT!” Robert screamed.

Again, Anderton raised his right hand towards Brian’s direction, noticing that the guard was—for the second time—coming towards Robert and the doctor. Anderton kept his hand raised for a few more seconds, letting Brian know that he didn’t feel threatened and he still felt in control of the situation. For the second time, the big man returned back to the door, but this time with his hands by his side, he was now expecting the unexpected.

“What would you do, Robert?” Anderton quizzed, but there was no response from his patient, Anderton tried again. “What would you do if we did let you out?”

“They want me back there,” Robert growled, ignoring Anderton’s question once again, he continued to rock back and forth. Anderton looked to the side of the desk, concerned that the legs of the chair were about to break.

“You’ll have to stop that, Robert.” Anderton pointed towards the chair. Robert continued to rock, but this time a little harder just to annoy the doctor.

“Robert, you’ll have to stop that.” Anderton’s anger was apparent in his voice. “You’re gonna hurt yourself if you carry on doing that, Robert!” The rocking continued, but this time Robert was rocking so hard the doctor was convinced that the chair was about to give way. Anderton rubbed his head in frustration.

“For fuck’s sake, Robert, stop it!” he yelled.

Immediately, the rocking stopped dead, and Robert assumed the same position he was in when Greg and Dr. Anderton first arrived.

Anderton was pleased, yet surprised that his most difficult client had actually had done what he was told, and began to feel a little calmer. There was a quietude period in the room, but it did not last long as Robert spoke once more, this time in a whisper and a lot more controlled:

“I will not let them down. I can’t let them down.”

“Let *who* down, Robert?”

Again, there was no answer from Anderton’s question.

“Robert? Answer my question.” The doctor looked into his lifeless eyes. “What would you do, Robert, if we let you out?” Anderton’s voice had risen an octave in the incommensurable room.

“Got to go back!” Robert furiously spat, avoiding the question to Anderton’s anger, he was now talking, but he wouldn’t answer any of his questions. Saliva, again, left Robert’s mouth, this time not only dribbling down his own mouth, but he had managed to hit Anderton in the face when he had spoken.

“What would you do, Robert, if people walked into your woods?” Anderton, changing the question, reached for his trouser pocket and wiped his face with the handkerchief from his trouser pocket.

“Let me out,” Robert’s voice tone had changed and was tearfully begging Anderton. “Let me out,” he repeated.

The tension in the room was incredibly suffocating and Anderton, Greg and Brian all shifted uncomfortably, Anderton, however, had to at least look composed, as he was supposed to be the professional after all.

“What would you do, Robert, if someone walked into your woods?”

Robert lowered his head and placed it face down onto the desk with his hands over his head. Despite the adrenaline that was furiously pumping inside of Greg, due to a mixture of excitement, tension and anxiety, he would have been very grateful if this chilling interview came to a rapid close as consternation shrouded his fragile body.

Robert still had his face against the desk and there it was again, that laugh, which was slow, deep, lingering, and evil.

“What would you do, Robert, if people walked into *your* woods?”

“Kill them!” Robert smiled lifting his head, looking at him with those black eyes. “I’d kill them all!” And spat directly in Anderton’s face.

To his credit, Anderton didn’t react, flinch or move in any way, he just stared back at Robert pointlessly trying to beat him at his own game. The saliva dripped from his left cheek where it originally hit, and dribbled to the left corner of Anderton’s mouth where he slowly wiped away the unwanted liquid with his handkerchief once again, showing no signs of repugnance or resentment, his equanimity had to be applauded.

Anderton rose from his seat and walked towards the door where Brian was still standing and beckoned over Greg, who immediately got up and half jogged over to Anderton, trying to avoid eye contact with his unpredictable client.

“See you next month, Robert,” Anderton spoke with fake civility; he looked to the direction of Brian. “He’s all yours, I’ll fill in the necessary paperwork.”

The door was shut firmly as Anderton and Greg wandered down the corridor away from the room, away from the madness and back to normality, to Greg’s relief. They both approached the reception and turned to face the exit where they were greeted by the warm inviting sunshine. Anderton took a long deep breath in and turned his attention to his pupil.

“What do you think?” Anderton asked, throwing his handkerchief in the outside bin.

“It was different to what I was expecting,” Greg replied.

“I’m sure it was,” Anderton smiled. “You see, Greg, psychosis disorders include severe mental disorders which are characterized by extreme impairment of a person’s ability to think clearly, respond emotionally, communicate effectively, understand reality and behave properly. Robert has the classic psychosis symptoms of delusions and hallucinations, the paranoia, the hearing of voices and the rapid change in personality.”

Anderton looked at his watch knowing that his day of working would come to a close in a matter of hours.

“I’ve got five or ten minutes to spare, Greg. Is there anything you want to ask me?”

Greg thought for a moment, still waiting for his heartbeat to return to normal.

“What causes psychosis?” Greg quizzed.

Anderton thought for a moment and pointed to the wall outside of the reception where they both walked to and leaned up against to take some of the pressure away from their feet.

“What cause psychosis, Greg?” Anderton said, tapping his left index finger against his left cheek. “To be honest, nobody knows.”

Greg look baffled with Anderton’s answer, ‘nobody knows’ was not quite what he was looking for.

“Every possible suggestion has been made throughout the years but we do know psychosis can be brought on by the use of drugs, head injuries, epilepsy—that kind of thing.”

“What about Robert?” Greg asked. “What do you think happened to him?”

“Man, I think in Robert’s situation, he may have a chemical imbalance in the brain or what we call a wiring problem, which basically means his brain is working but it is not one hundred percent. But saying that, it could be a mixture of things; we know he doesn’t have a family history of psychosis, which can be passed on. For all we know, Robert could have developed the way he did through family problems, anxiety or stress.”

"Is there any treatment you can give him?"

"Psychosis has been shown to respond well to treatments but traditionally they are considered by a lot of people as potentially harmful. Social skills training and, occupational therapy can help some psychosis sufferers and current thinking reckons that if you catch psychosis at its early stages -

"Prodromal," Greg interrupted.

"Very good, Greg," Anderton acknowledged. "If psychosis is caught at an early stage, then they reckon you have better prospects in treating it. In Roberts case, we were a little too late."

"Did he ever harm anyone?"

"Robert has never killed anyone. But I'm pretty sure he's capable, if given the chance." Anderton stroked his chin. "Robert's fascination started with killing a few creatures that lived in the woods, who, according to Robert, had no right being there. There was a report that he apparently shot at a few people also, and finally he attacked a member of his family. They put him away and moved away from Ridgeware, but obviously I can't give away any personal details"

"Of course," Greg acknowledged. "Do you think he'll ever recover?"

"In a word, no," Anderton answered. "I think it may be too late for Robert, I mean, you've seen for yourself. Some people who experience psychosis may only experience it once throughout their whole life, which is what we psychiatrists call, a single episode, but other people may have it for the rest of their lives."

"Okay, Dr. Anderton," Greg held out his hand. "Thank you for your time."

"I hope it's been of some help, although it was only a short meeting, remember to e-mail me about any questions that you have." Anderton shook Greg's hand.

"Definitely. It was some experience"

"Yeah, Robert is one of my livelier clients, I'll see you later, Greg." Anderton waved. "And good luck with your career."

"Thanks again, Dr. Anderton." Greg waved, and remained stood in the car park.

Anderton returned to his BMW, started up the ignition and gave a Greg another friendly wave as he sped out of Rosewood's car park. Greg stood smiling to himself knowing that his brother would never believe who he saw at Rosewood. Greg was slightly disappointed that Anderton never offered to take him back into town.

He put his hand in his pocket to check for change for the unpredictable bus service, and took a look around at the beautiful day, drenched in rays. He decided to walk home in the glorious sunshine, which would only take about twenty minutes to walk if he hurried, and he smiled with satisfaction about the client he had seen and had heard about for years.

Robert Decker.

*

Richard had just finished work and parked his black Ford outside his parent's house, and was enjoying his two weeks of freedom while they were on holiday. He tried the door of his parent's four bedroomed house that was situated on the eastside of Ridgeware and found that the door was locked, telling him that his brother had either gone out for the night, or he hadn't returned. Richard had been in a short relationship lasting only seven months, and decided that he was far too young to settle down just yet. After only two weeks of being a young free agent, he managed to get himself a date with a pretty sixteen-year-old that he met at a party the previous weekend.

At the house party, Richard kept himself sober, only drinking a few bottles of beer in case he managed to strike it lucky with a female that particular night. He did have his eye on one certain female, her name was Rhonda who had very short blonde hair, not the kind of girl Richard would normally go for, but her red skimpy top had convinced him that she was the one. Two hours into the party, he managed to find the courage to talk to Rhonda and found that she was a little tipsy, which pleased Richard a little, making the challenge less challenging. Richard got chatting with her and everything seemed fine, he flirted, and she flirted—maybe a little too strongly—and they had a raunchy dance. As the night progressed, he noticed a change in Rhonda; she began to sway a little and slur some of her words when they were chatting.

When Richard had come back from the toilet, he found her kissing another guy, which infuriated him, but it was his comeuppance, considering his attitude towards girls in general. Eventually, he caught the eye of a brunette stunner, holding an empty glass in the corner of the room, looking round as if she had lost someone, her name was Layla.

With more drinks in him than he had planned, Richard wasted no time by approaching the girl, and found that they hit it off almost straight away. After chatting for half an hour and arranging to meet up for a drink the next weekend, some guy had interrupted their conversation by telling her that her friend had passed out in the garden.

Layla who was concerned for her friend, and Richard who was concerned that Layla would have to leave early, both went into the garden to find Rhonda lying on her back, unconscious. A taxi was called, and Richard and another guy grabbed one arm each to help her to her feet. Rhonda looked like she had a tin of vegetable soup massaged into her scalp, but to Richard's abhorrence as he got nearer to her head, the stench that was coming from her hair confirmed that the vegetable soup was in fact, human vomit.

Although Layla refused Richard her number because of problems at home, she did get *his* and phoned the next day to Richard's delight, who was now getting ready to meet his date as another weekend arrived.

For a nineteen-year-old young man, his track record with females, according to the average male, was quite impressive and Layla, he hoped, would eventually be his next victim. After showering and ironing his Friday clothes, Richard stood in the mirror approving his short blonde hair, where he heard the downstairs door open.

Greg was his younger brother, who he occasionally tormented when he felt it necessary to do so. Fully dressed and ready for his first date with Layla, Richard had time to kill, so he descended into the living room where his younger brother was sitting reading a book.

"Friday night and you're reading," Richard acerbically commented.

"What's wrong with that?" Greg replied, trying to make a start on a fresh chapter.

"What's wrong with that? You should be out looking for a woman, virgin boy."

"We can't all be *you*."

"No that's true." Richard was now vainly adjusting his shirt collar in the mirror.

"What is that?" Richard grabbed the book off Greg.

"Give it me back," Greg demanded.

"*Inside the human mind*," Richard laughed and threw the book into Greg's lap.

"It's interesting."

"You're wasting your time."

"You'll see," Greg said. "In seven years time, you'll see."

"What's gonna happen in seven years time?"

"Well," Greg paused. "I want to be a psychiatrist, don't I?"

Without looking whether his brother was joking or being serious, Richard laughed out loud, ridiculing his brother once again, still looking into the mirror.

Richard said, "You haven't got the brains."

"Dr. Anderton seems to think so," Greg remarked, knowing that Dr. Anderton said nothing of the sort.

"Who the fuck's Dr. Anderton? Is that your new bum chum?"

"Dr. Anderton is someone I met up with today."

"I knew it."

"What?" Greg became agitated with his older brother's teasing.

"You're a homosexual, there's no other explanation for it."

"I'm interested in being a psychiatrist!" Greg said boldly, trying to defend his sexuality. "I called Dr. Anderton last week, to ask him whether I could shadow him with one of his client's."

"So where have you been with Dr. *Love*?" Richard sniggered.

Greg smiled to himself and said gloatingly. "Rosewood."

Richard sniggering had congested and looked at his brother with revelation, his eyebrows lowered; Greg was smiling back knowing that he had finally grabbed his brother's attention. Richard sat next to his brother.

"Which client did you see, can you remember?" he said excitedly.

"I don't know." Greg began to tease.

"Was it Lee Wilkes or..." Richard paused for a moment, "Rob Decker."

"I tried to ask Dr. Anderton about someone you knew, but I forgotten his name."

"So who was it?"

"What?" Greg said, knowing what the question meant, but he was having fun now and it was his turn to have a little power over his supercilious brother, who was now becoming cantankerous.

"Who was the client?" Richard sighed. "Who was the fuckin' client?"

"I don't know his full name. But Dr. Anderton called him Robert."

"And what was his story?"

"I don't know, he had some kind of obsession with the woods, y'know, the woods over the common hill, over that way."

"Christ."

"What is it?"

"That was Rob Decker," Richard looked with zing. "You've met, Mad Rob."

"Really." Greg was trying to sound unimpressed.

"What was he like?" Richard quizzed.

"He was scary." Greg began losing self-control as the excitement took over. "He just sat there rocking on his chair, back and forth, back and forth."

"What else? What else happened?"

"Well, Dr. Anderton talked to him about the woods, and at one point this Robert guy started laughing."

"Laughing? Is that it?"

"It was no ordinary laugh though, Richard."

"What do you mean? What kind of laugh was it then?"

"There was something really evil about it, there was something really evil about him. I was actually quite scared." Greg admitted to his brother.

"You were always a sad little bastard though, weren't ya?" Richard began to taunt Greg once again to his little brother's annoyance.

Greg had lost his brother's respect within a second and needed to get it back straight away. "Anyway," he thought for a moment. "After the laughing stopped, this Robert went mental and ended up trashing the room."

"What!"

"Yeah." Greg was now starting to enjoy himself as he regained power over his older brother.

"What happened? What happened next?" Richard yammered.

"He grabbed Dr. Anderton and tried to stab him with a pencil, Dr. Anderton tried to fight him off but he was too strong. Then Robert grabbed him pulled his head back by his hair and went to bite a chunk out of his neck, and then about five or six guards burst into the room and managed to wrestle him to the ground."

"Fuck! You saw all that? You lucky bastard."

"Robert also said," Greg was now running out of ideas. "That he wants to get out so he can settle some scores with some old enemies. I didn't know what he meant by that, he was probably just talking rubbish."

"Old...old enemies?" Richard gulped. "Well he doesn't mean me, I was alright with him." Richard shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"I'm just telling you what he said."

"So what else happened?"

"That was it."

"Are you going again, do you think I could come?"

"My appointment with Dr. Anderton was a one-off. Besides, despite telling me a joke, I got the impression that he would rather I hadn't turned up, he completely forgot about me arranging to meet him, it was quite embarrassing."

"So no more trips to Rosewood then?"

"No," Greg responded. "No more trips to Rosewood."

"Right, loser." Richard fiddled with a strand of hair. "Enjoy your book, I'm off to get laid."

Richard looked at the clock, and decided it was time for him to leave to meet his date. Greg continued to read his book, hoping that he would get a little bit of respect from his brother from now on since his visit to Rosewood, but he wasn't holding his breath.

The door slammed shut and Greg was left in peace. The heat had been stifling all week and for the first time in its history, most of the people who lived in Ridgeware, were praying for rain. But Greg was quite happy to read his book inside the humid house, so long as Richard was out the way, the heat never bothered Greg, neither was he jealous of his brother's lifestyle. Eventually, he knew his time would come, but at the moment, Richard had a hunger for girls, and Greg had a hunger for knowledge.

Chapter Ten

Mark Pembroke was a tall, dark haired thirty-one-year-old estate agent, who worked in the Ridgeware town centre in one of the four estate agent offices. He lived in the Northwest part of Ridgeware—four streets away from Churchill Street. Mark had separated from Nancy, his girlfriend of three years, after she had confessed to having a drunken one-night stand with another estate agent from one of the other offices. Her one nightstand was a guy called Gary, who she met in the Waverley Arms public house on a girl's night out.

A couple of weeks later, she had turned up at Mark's modest two bedroomed house and broke down, claiming that it had all been one stupid drunken mistake. Mark had told Nancy that he would think about taking her back, but needed at least a week to think about it. Four days later, Mark had found out from his friend, Derek, who was a reliable source of information, that Nancy's affair with this man had taken place for over three weeks, and the man had ended the affair once he had found out that Nancy was actually bisexual.

Derek had seen the couple kissing outside the Waverley Arms, and he was spotted staring at the couple when Nancy looked up and noticed him, which forced her to confess to Mark almost immediately, but without confessing the whole truth. According to Derek Collins, Nancy was ready to leave Mark, despite the immediate confession, and wanted to start afresh with this new man. Unfortunately for her, it had only taken a few days for this man to end up with a new woman, a single mother of one that lived in Churchill Street.

This story had ruined any chance of Mark and Nancy getting back together, and although it hadn't been that long since Nancy left—or was forced to leave—Mark was actually enjoying the bachelor life. He had plenty of future plans outside his work with his work colleagues, which mainly consisted of getting drunk and trying to get laid.

He sat in his living room all alone, but very content with his company and his new found freedom, but cursing, however, the chance he had with Vicki James who was a five foot eight beautiful brunette.

Six months ago, Vicki James had seductively asked Mark out for a drink, which he had to politely decline and also reject Sarah Thorne, a cute short blonde trainee who was ten years younger than Mark, who, on a works night out, started groping Mark in a way that, if the roles were reversed, the sexual harassment book would have been thrown at him along with a police fine.

He sat there laughing on all the fun that he had planned for himself. He turned the television off in his room, as it was disturbing his wild fantasies. He sat back on the couch and heard the whimper of an animal. With a groan, he rose back from out the chair, passed through the kitchen to open the back door and let Sheeba into the garden, his black Labrador.

He sat on the doorstep while the dog was relieving itself and looked out into what was a surprising desolate street, despite the weather and it being the holidays. Mark looked a little confused and told himself that half of Ridgeware were probably in Spain as *he* usually was, but not this year, after all, it wouldn't be much fun going on his own and with women practically throwing themselves at him at work—two approaches in six months to be exact—he didn't see the point, as all that he needed was right on his doorstep.

He gazed at Sheeba crouching in the corner of the garden, and was really optimistic about the weekend; he had nothing special planned, but was looking forward to having two days off work. His work opened on a Saturday, so he had to book the Saturday off. His plans were to mull about the house, take Sheeba for walks all over Ridgeware and get drunk on the evenings, starting with this evening. It was Friday night, after all, and he was officially about to rejoice his freedom.

Mark looked at his wristwatch and cursed it as he took a look at the face. It was 6:46pm. It was a birthday present from Nancy from the makers of Gucci, so it wasn't a cheap offering.

Maybe it was guilt present? Knowing Nancy, she had probably slept with the paperboy and was overcome with guilt. Come to think of it, that little bastard did have a smile on his face when he came round for his money the other week.

Mark sniggered to himself, and knew that loneliness was messing with his head already. He looked at his watch again with only a minute passing, and decided to start the party by going into the fridge and pulling out a can of beer. He sat back on the step, looking at the slightly abandoned garden.

Sheeba was still in the corner, this time lying on her side with her right back leg up in the air, caressing her under carriage with her tongue, Mark screwed up his face in disgust and took a drink from his can of beer.

"Dirty bitch," he snickered.

He had made up his mind about tomorrow and told himself that he and Sheeba will most definitely take a walk up to the woods, as he admitted to himself that the dog had been badly neglected of any exercise over the past few weeks, which wasn't healthy for the poor neglected animal. Mark felt guilty.

He himself, had a few demons to exercise, it wouldn't be easy, but this was probably the right time to do it. It had been years since he walked through the woods, which Sheeba used to adore when she was younger.

The garden would have to be on his list of chores, also. Over the past few months it had overgrown grass, weeds and the garden was now malodorous, stinking of dog faeces and if he did eventually get round to mowing the garden, the last thing he wanted was old, dry hidden bits of excrement flying into his face and all over the side of the house, as the blades touched the old faeces.

His neighbours weren't too pleased with the neglect of his garden, either.

About a month ago, Bill Hart, Mark's next door neighbour, had graciously asked Mark to clean up his garden as it was making the street look untidy, and Mr. James who lived two doors down, who was trying to sell his house, had blamed the appearance of Mark's garden for the reason why potential buyers hadn't put in a bid for his house. This advice fell on deaf ears, as Mark was going through his break up.

Fucking nosey bastards!

But this time he knew it was time to tidy it up, not because of what Bill Hart or Mr. James had said to him, simply because he thought it was time to take responsibility for his modest patch of land.

I'll give it a week. Take the dog for plenty of walks, she can take most of her shits then, and then at least then the remaining faeces will be almost like powder, so I won't have to do the garden covered from head to toe wearing a bin liner.

He took another drink and squinted up to the unusually looking orange sun, with its flame leisurely dying out before Mark's very eyes. The more he looked up, the more bright hexagon shapes appeared in front of his eyes. He knew he was in for another sleepless sweltering night, which gave him a bigger incentive to get drunk—not that he needed one.

Mark stood and reached for his book that was lying on the kitchen shelf, and began to read his book about the English civil war that he had studied at college; he had already read the book once, but was fascinated about British history. Including his faithful Sheeba, it was one of his loves.

Mark dropped his book from his eyes and tossed it onto the kitchen floor, as if he had immediately lost interest during the reading. He wasn't in the mood; he just wanted to get drunk and then drunk some more. Mark wasn't depressed, at least he *thought* he wasn't, he was celebrating freedom. His attention turned back to Vicki James, but not for long. His mischievous grin slowly descended into an atypical grimace, and all of a sudden, without any warning, he seemed to be sitting under a black cloud of melancholia.

Over the six-foot wooden fence that surrounded his garden, he could see the unusually looking oak tree that stood in the next garden that belonged to Mr and Mrs McFadden, as Bill Hart lived on the other side of Mark's house. The McFadden's were a quiet and pleasant young couple and had two young twin boys aged seven. The boys were no trouble at all, Mark never had any qualms with the McFadden's as they never really exchanged words, apart from the odd *good morning* and *beautiful weather we're having*. Mark had noticed that the children must have been playing in the tree, or swinging from the tree, as there was a blue coloured rope hanging about eight foot from the ground on one of the sad, weary looking branches that was ready to detach itself.

The tree had never bothered Mark before, but then again, he never spent that much time in his garden because of the effluvium coming from week old dog faeces in the garden—and the fact that the weather was usually dire. This was the first time that he saw anything hanging from his next-door neighbour's tree, as Mark could occasionally hear the overprotective parents shouting at the twins, "to be careful" and "don't touch that." By the sounds of things, they idolised their kids and certainly wouldn't let them swing from a tree at that height.

For the first time since Mark had moved into his two bedroomed house, he noticed that the tree looked unusually threatening, as if it was towering over the garden, ready to take a giant leap to confront him, and as he looked closely, he could see that it had two huge branches on each side of its trunk, looking like giant with outstretched arms.

Has this always been the shape of the tree, or is my mind messing with me?

Mark looked at his can, his first one, and put his wild thoughts down to stress, heatstroke, and lack of sleep. How he needed to bring back a level of sanity back.

After a second or two, reason had managed to resurface and normality had once again been restored, for the time being anyway.

The blue rope that hung from the oak tree, still chiselled away at Mark's mind, and the horror that he had encountered two years ago came flooding back instantly like a burst dam. The humid evening, despite its heat, did not prevent the cold shiver that rapidly went through Mark's vertebrae and although his evening had started on a positive, optimistic note, during a one-minute period, he witnessed five quick, yet very familiar, bright flashes before his crestfallen eyes.

FLASH ONE. He could see himself buoyantly walking through the woods, swinging the leather dog lead with his right arm, creating an imaginary circle to the right of him, until the lead eventually wrapped itself around his outstretched hand. There was Sheeba, playfully galloping across the path to the left and then to the right, in and out of the trees, trying so hard to impress her master with her athletic ability.

FLASH TWO. The dog stopped dead, about ten yards away from her master, and stared at him, scowling and raising her nose towards the sky inquisitively, sniffing the

air as if there was a sudden lack of oxygen. She then galloped away from him, uncharacteristically ignoring her master's calls to return back.

FLASH THREE. Sheeba had now disappeared, and Mark had started to become a little anxious with his dog's unusual disobedience. He became even more concerned that straight ahead of his path, the dog had reappeared one hundred yards away from its master, facing right towards something towards the trees. As Sheeba started yelping and crying continually, Mark's pace began to accelerate until he could hear a faint rustling in the trees as he reached the same destination as his companion; as the rustling grew with bustle he turned to face right and looked on with his disbelieving eyes, feeling unreservedly rudderless.

FLASH FOUR. About ten feet from the ground was a pair of legs desperately kicking out, and as Mark's eyes climbed further up the legs, he saw a man hanging from one of the strong looking branches, which was about sixteen foot from the ground, by a piece of rope that had securely tightened itself round his neck.

The man's eyes were filled with enormous regret, and he was desperate to free himself from the rope, by grabbing for the rope that became tighter each time he struggled, his legs, helplessly kicking out.

Mark desperately looked around to see what he could find or how he could get the poor man down; he was overcome by consternation and confusion, which resulted in his disinclination. He helplessly searched the area looking for something to help the man, but at the same time, didn't know what he was looking for and he didn't know what he was doing. It was a short pathetic attempt to save this man's life, but he was far too late.

The man's eyes were now pleading for help and bulging, as if they were about to pop out any minute. The distressing eyes looked at Mark one last time, and for a short few seconds, the man coughed violently and so desperately tried to take in some air through his crushed windpipe.

The rope was obviously burning and bruising his fragile neck; he raised his tired hands one last time to free himself, but he knew it was hopeless, and then there was that distressing sound which sounded like freshly chopped wood burning on a fire crackling away, which was the rope pulling the bone and tendons in the neck slowly and grotesquely away from the rest of his body. Then a few seconds passed and the man began to swing gently, like a tired pendulum, with his head now lowered. His deathly gaze watching the ground, and his heart produced one more beat before he retired from the world.

FLASH FIVE. Mark sat with his dog facing away from the suicide scene, overcome with astonishment, but he still managed to partially subjugate his unwanted emotion, and called the police on his phone. The police had taken twenty minutes to get there, as their vehicles had to be parked to the left of the woods in Red Hill, as there was no other possible way of getting to the scene. Even the ambulance helicopter would have been a waste of time, as the woods was so condensed with trees, there would be nowhere to land.

Those harrowing scenes that Mark had experienced on that fateful night, would be there until his dying day, he knew that, but he had a great deal of sympathy for the man who took his life. Mark had once saw a documentary that claimed that individuals who participate in suicide attempts, tended to regret their actions once they got to the point of no return.

He read once, that a man from Denver, Colorado, had a mental breakdown due to financial problems and threw himself off a twelve-storey car park. By some miracle, he landed in a skip, full of unwanted house contents including a couple of old

mattresses that had cushioned the impact, the man survived. Although he had broken both legs, seven ribs and fractured his left wrist, he claimed while he was getting interviewed for the documentary, that as soon as he jumped, he regretted his decision and was fortunate to be given another chance in life. This must have been what it was like for that poor man. As soon as he started swinging and could feel his neck getting tighter, he must of wished that he could turn the clock back. Because from what Mark could see, his facial expression told him that his misbegotten suicide plan, was a rash and enfeebled option to relieve his tempestuous torment.

Shaking off the macabre image from his brain, Mark had got up to get himself another beer and was preparing himself for a drunken evening, he was looking forward to it.

Chapter Eleven

The Wilkes family had just sat down to their evening meal, consisting of jacket potato and tuna salad. The mother and father had only come in from work two hours previous, and was glad to see the back of their week and was looking forward to a relaxing weekend.

Their daughter, Layla, had shoulder length straight brown hair and was trying to eat the piping hot potato as quick as she could, as time was progressing towards seven o'clock and she had a date with a certain Richard Johnson at seven thirty, at The Bald Buck public house. It was a risky date for many reasons: her date was three years older, she would be drinking underage, and more importantly, her overprotective dad would most probably kill Johnson if ever he laid a finger on his precious little daughter.

Like all fathers with their special girl, Nick Wilkes had a certain right to be protective of his only girl due to certain events that had happened four years ago that rocked the family. These events had made him more interested and obsessive with his daughter's welfare.

Her father, Nick, and her mother, Fiona, still displayed pictures of their son in the living room. One frame sat on the television, one on the fire mantelpiece and another picture—their favourite—on the wall leading up the stairs. Even without her brother's presence in the house, Layla still couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy as they both pined over him. It had been four years since he had gone, and he was still getting more attention than she was.

Leaving her half eaten dinner, she rose from the table, still chewing the dry potato, which was refusing to go down, no matter how much mastication was taking place.

"Where are you going, princess?" her dad asked enquiringly.

"Oh I..." she paused. "I promised Rhonda that I'd go round and show her some fashion websites." She smiled to herself. Genius, she thought.

"What kind of websites?" her inquisitive father questioned. "I don't want you on these web chat thingies. Whatdyacallit?"

"Dad, they're fashion websites." She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, "I'll be fine; you don't want me to stay in the house for the holidays *every* night do you?"

"Just be careful," he said pointing his fork at her.

He carried on eating the salad, what *he* called: rabbit food. Fiona was on another one of her diets again; once Fiona was on a diet, the whole family were on one, whether they liked it or not.

"What time do you think you'll be back, love?" her mother Fiona asked.

"Well I was thinking about staying at Rhonda's, if that's alright, mum, dad?"

Fiona looked over to Nick for his endorsement, and he nodded back in approval to his wife to tell her it was okay.

"Just make sure you're back first thing," he spoke categorically without lifting his head, and continued to munch on the rabbit food with contempt.

Layla picked up her ready packed bag and said cheerio to her parents and the sixteen-year-old, occupied with merriment, slammed the door behind her. Nick had placed his knife and fork onto the half eaten plate and slowly pushed it away from him.

"Not hungry, Nick?" quizzed Fiona. "What's wrong?"

Not hungry? Not hungry? I've spent ten hours in a sweltering factory dismantling car alternators where it's about ninety to a hundred degrees outside and one hundred and ten inside, where for the past week the ventilators have been broken due to a technical fault. Each shirt that I've worn for work has been saturated in sweat before the lunchtime break, which doesn't make comfortable driving once you've finished the shift and then I come home and I end up with a "surprise healthy" meal, which consists of jacket potato and salad that even Bugs Bunny would have trouble eating. No I'm not hungry Fiona, my sweet. I'm fucking starving! I'm dehydrated and I've lost seven pounds of weight in one week.

"Nick!" she repeated.

"What?" he asked, realising he was back in the real world.

"Are you not hungry? What is it?"

"Just worried about our daughter, she's growing up so fast."

"Well she *is* sixteen," she said, knowing this is not what he wanted to hear. "Girls these days can legally get up to all sorts."

"For fuck's sake, Fiona, cheer me up, why don't you!" he snarled.

"She's growing up, Nick. Accept it."

Nick put his hands over his face and rubbed his face up and down against them, and took a long deep breath, haunted by tenebrous thoughts, after all, Fiona was right, she was sixteen now. He knew she was right. But he couldn't help but feel anxiety every time Layla left the house on a night, or when she never called when she said she was going to, or turning up late after a night out with her friends, he felt like he was losing control of her and the frustration was insupportable.

She was sixteen, not old enough to vote, not old enough to drink alcohol, but she was old enough to have sex. He could handle his daughter voting, he could even handle his daughter drinking alcohol—although he'd rather she didn't—but not the other, not his little girl. Just the thought of his little Layla having her thigh groped by some horny teenager disturbed Nick, as well as the thought of some randy, spotty boy unbuttoning her shirt infuriated him, or even worse, some guy perverting his little girl by rubbing his hands up and down her backside, the same backside that he used to wipe when she was a baby. It made his blood boil.

He had already lost one child; he couldn't bring himself to have another one taken away from him by some guy. He wasn't ready for that. Not yet.

Of course Nick knew that eventually, Layla would fly the nest, whether the reason was university or moving in with a boyfriend, but not at sixteen, she was still a baby, she was still *his* baby. Almost as if she could read his thoughts, Fiona interrupted them.

"You have to put the past behind you, Nick, we have to let Layla get on with whatever she wants to do—within reason, of course." Her voice was strong and direct.

"I know, girl," he said reluctantly. "It's been four years and I still can't get that picture out of my head, what must he have gone through, and the blood..."

Nick could feel the tears welling up in his eyes and felt a large protuberance in his throat.

"That's enough!" she bellowed. "That's enough! Do we have to go through this every other month? I'm sick of it, Nick. I'm sick of it. If you miss him that much why don't you go up to visit him, you're not the only one hurting in this house. Go and visit him!"

"I can't, girl." He sniffed hard. "I just can't. I'm not ready."

"Well I'm sorry, Nick, but I can't do anything for you," she spoke, with the ire now diminishing from her voice. "We have to move on, for our sakes and for Layla's."

"You're right," he agreed wiping each tearful eye with each sleeve. "I'll go up and visit him next week, we'll *all* go up and see him next week."

"Are you serious, Nick?" Fiona looked stunned by her husband's immediate turn around.

She had spent years trying to convince her husband to see their son. Was this the day he would finally make the right decision? Or was he just saying it to bide time for Fiona's sake? She thought that if he started visiting Lee, then they could somehow move on, allow Layla more freedom, get their marriage back on track, and maybe dilute his anger that had got worse by the year. She was scared that he was eventually going to give himself a heart attack.

"You'll feel better, Nick, once you visit him," she reassured him, still in a state of shock and actually believing that he *was* serious. "I know we've talked about moving away and starting a fresh, but you cannot get rid of the memories, no matter how hard you try. It's just something we're gonna have to live with."

He nodded in agreement once again, and walked to the kitchen sink and slowly started the dishes with his mind elsewhere. Fiona was becoming increasingly concerned about her husband.

His erratic behaviour over the years had now become unbearable. She loved him, she felt sorry for him, but she was sick of him trying to ruin what was left of the family, although she was sure that he didn't realise he was doing it. Nick was practically drinking himself to sleep every other night, Fiona could just about handle that, but two months ago he had crossed the line. After a row over their daughter, Nick grabbed Fiona by the throat and had pushed her against the wall, he started screaming at his wife that he was going to kill himself as nobody ever listened to him anymore.

She desperately wanted to help him, but leaving him certainly was not the answer, she could never leave him after what he said to her on that night. She suggested the Samaritans and he laughed in her face, she suggested that he should see their local doctor or a psychologist and again, he laughed in her face. What could she do?

She needed to do something; that's why she had arranged to go out on Saturday afternoon to see one of her friend's husbands who used to work for the Samaritans, hoping that he could give her some helpful advice as her options were deteriorating fast, although she was pretty sure it was medical help he needed as he showed signs of being a manic depressive.

She preferred to speak to someone face to face rather than over the phone. Even if her preference was to use the phone, she wasn't too sure if phoning the Samaritans would pop up on their itemised phone bill. How would he react to that?

She started with sympathy for Nick despite going through hell herself, then after a couple of months, the sympathy had worn off, so she resorted to spoiling him, cooking his favourite meals, buying him new clothes giving him her constant undivided attention, which was accepted by their daughter, Layla.

As most of the plans to get Nick back onto the road to recovery were devised by Fiona and daughter, Layla, they were both sick of living with Nick who was becoming more unpredictable by the month. All three of them were going through hell, but Nick Wilkes was on the verge of a breakdown and the girls recognised this. They had both talked about it and could see it coming.

"Why don't you go down to the Bald Buck for a drink, Nick?" his wife suggested. "You know, just have a few drinks and chill out."

"I don't know, girl," he muttered.

"Oh, go on, it'll do you good."

“It’s Friday night, the place will be busy especially the beer garden outside, especially in this weather. It’ll be full of idiots.”

“Well maybe most people have decided to go into the town or sit in their garden for a drink, one drink wont kill you.”

“I think I’ll have a nice quiet night in.”

“If it’s too busy, Nick,” she continued to pester her husband. “Have one, then come straight back home, it might help you relax.”

“Oh, alright,” he gave in. “I’ll finish off these dishes and take a walk down. Do you fancy it yourself?”

“After the week I’ve had?” She smirked. “I think I’ll settle for a nice long soak, and crash in front of the telly.” She walked over to him and pecked him on the cheek.

“You go out and enjoy yourself, love.”

Chapter Twelve

There were five quick sharp knocks at the Warner's back door and a half naked Gary Strand answered the door in just his trousers.

"Ready then, Gary?" asked David Dawson cheerily, whilst scratching his left ear unabashed.

"What are you so happy about?" Gary responded.

"It's the weekend, isn't it, look if your gonna go out with a face like a smacked arse, I don't think we'll bother." David joked.

"Sorry, Dave. Come in, I'll just throw a shirt on."

Gary opened the back door wider to allow David through to the living room; Gary went straight upstairs to leave David alone with Susan.

"Hi Susan," David raised his arm as a greeting. Susan glanced over to David's presence, nodded her head to welcome his company, looked away and carried on watching her soap opera.

"Hello, David," she sullenly said. She was still down about Gary's surprise night out, and sat in a tank of self-pity.

David sat down without asking and pretended to watch the television with Susan, which made her feel a little uncomfortable. She looked over to David once again to check if he was still there.

"Hot night," he nervously said over the volume that was coming from the box.

"I know," she sighed.

David looked around the room awkwardly, trying to think of something else to say to the woman that was full of ignorance. *Hurry the fuck up, Gary!*

"How's your Steven and Alice, David?" she asked without interrupting her fixed gaze at the TV.

"Yeah, they're doing fine," he said with some surprise. "Alice is a little angel, and Steven's a little you-know-what. But that's kids for you, I suppose."

"Just buy Steven a gadget or something, that's what Gary bought Neil, he's been as good as gold ever since."

"Yeah maybe, it only keeps them happy for a short while though, doesn't it?"

There was no response from Susan, but to David's relief, he could hear the loud thudding of Gary's feet making their way downstairs to the living room. The opening of the stair door pleased David, as Gary entered the room like some film star.

Thank Christ for that.

"What do you look like, Gary?" Susan remarked, whilst scowling at his appearance. His hair was slicked back, he wore a purple shirt, black shoes and trousers.

"Yer wont understand, dear," he said as he pecked her on the cheek. "It's called fashion."

"Really," she said looking unimpressed. "And what's that horrible smell? It smells like the back garden."

"Don't be ridiculous," Gary patiently responded, knowing that deep down she was still angry about him leaving her on her own on a Friday night—he fixed his collar in the mirror.

David stood up, desperate to escape the room that possessed an anxious feel to it, he was hoping it wasn't contagious.

"Goodbye, my love." Gary waved sarcastically.

"Bye Susan." David waved politely.

"How long you gonna be?" came the question directed at Gary.

"Not too long, love."

"No," David reacted. "Just a couple of hours at the most, don't want to be too late, Mary hates the sight and smell of a drunken man."

"At least you've got some respect for your other half," Susan audaciously spoke.

"I know, dear," Gary reacted. "But David's a married man, he has kids, he has responsibilities. I, on the other hand, don't."

Susan glared at Gary, and David looked desperate to get out before a pestilent domestic argument took place. Susan, to Gary's surprise, never responded to his comment, but knew there may be trouble when he returned. Both men for the second time said their goodbyes to Susan Warner, and eventually left the house.

She never responded to any of the men's goodbyes and slouched in her seat, looking extremely bored and feeling sorry for herself.

She was sitting in the house on her own. Neil was in his own little world upstairs, and her new man going out having fun. She pushed herself up from the chair and went to the kitchen to put the kettle on.

"Some Friday night this is," she said aloud, and slammed the kitchen cupboard shut, once she took out a teaspoon.

*

David and Gary ebulliently walked along to the end of Churchill Street in the humid night, they turned right at the end of the street away from the path leading to the playing fields, and walked down the road. As they progressed further, they could hear the chatter of people drinking and having a good time in the Bald Buck's beer garden.

Once they got into the garden they looked around for a table, and with luck, spotted a couple getting up ready to leave. They went over to the table as soon as the couple left, Gary insisted on staying by the table as David went inside for the first collection of drinks. Some five minutes later, David returned with a bottle of beer in each hand and sat down, placed Gary's beer on the table, and raised his own bottle to his new friend.

Gary had started off the night with a string of jokes, and to David's delight, his new friend was coming towards the end of his slapstick routine.

"So," Gary said chirpily, his cabaret act nearly finished. "There's this man and this woman getting dressed to go out. When suddenly the woman starts to look in the mirror and starts to complain to her husband, *I'm depressed, just look at me, this dress doesn't fit me, I'm starting to go grey, I'm beginning to grow a moustache on my upper lip, I've started to get a double chin and my stomach is getting fatter by the month.* There was silence from the woman's husband, which made her angry and she responded by saying: *Well, say something positive to me, something to build up my self-esteem,* and the husband sat and thought for a while and said to his wife: *Well there's fuck all wrong with yer eyesight.*"

Gary roared with laughter, and David politely smiled back responding to—what David was hoping to be—the concluding joke of the night.

"Cheers, Gary," he said. "Let's hope your stay in Ridgeware is a long and happy one, until you finish getting through Ridgeware's female population."

"No, David," he laughed. "Susan's the one for me—for now anyway."

They both smiled at one another, although David Dawson's was a false one. Being a through and through family man, David wasn't best pleased with Gary's sexist comment, but knew from the start that the pair of them were like chalk and cheese.

"Bit different to London though eh, Gary, the big smoke an' all that?" David said in desperation hoping to start off the night without any uncomfortable silences.

"It is, Dave," Gary agreed. "But I like being with Susan, Neil's alright, too, and it'll make a nice refreshing change living in a sleepy town. When yer in London, all over the local papers yer got rapes, murders, drugs, you know, all the glamorous things that yer associate London with. Ridgeware's local papers consist of: *Molly the cow found dead in field*. And what was that other headline last week." Gary became lost in thought. "Oh yeah," he snapped his fingers. "*Black Panther spotted on outskirts of Ridgeware's woods*." He began to laugh. "Fuckin' hilarious."

David looked at Gary and when their eyes met, David gave off a mysterious smirk.

"What?" Gary asked, looking a little confused.

"Nothing, Gary," replied David; the alcohol was beginning to loosen his lips. "It'll keep."

The first hour of the night was a success. They had consumed four beers each so far, and exchanged pleasant stories, which included sexual tales.

In the sex department, David was feeling a little uneasy and inadequate that Gary had slept with thirty nine women, which was thirty seven more than David had. David, however, was interested in Gary's stories from London, although he was convinced each story was largely exaggerated, but they were entertaining to listen to all the same.

A little time later, Gary looked at his watch; it was 8:23pm.

"Do you have to go back?" David asked, reacting to Gary's time watching.

"What? Oh no way," Gary took another swig of beer. "This night belongs to us." He said with his arms outstretched, clumsily spilling some of the beer down his shirt.

"Susan seemed a little down tonight, don't you think?" David quizzed.

"Yeah, she is, never mind, eh."

"You don't seem bothered, Gary."

"That's because I'm not," he said bluntly. "Yer see, David, women are from a different galaxy than us men, d'yer know what I mean? They love shopping, we love sport, they want a hug after sex, we want to sleep. Don't get me wrong, David, I love women, couldn't live without them, I mean they're very considerate beings compared to us men."

A car pulled up in the already busy car park that was situated on the Bald Buck's property. Stepping out of the driver's side of the car was a young man about five foot nine, reasonably dressed with short-cropped blonde hair. Stepping out of the passenger's side of the car was a very young, pretty girl with brown shoulder length hair. After the man put the alarm onto his car, they both walked hand in hand inside the bar. David carried on staring until they both disappeared into the crowd inside.

"What is it?" Gary asked.

"Oh nothing," David said, taking another drink from his bottle. "I was just looking at a dead man, that's all."

"Explain," Gary insisted. "I'm new here, I need to know *everything*."

"That girl that we just seen—"

"That young sexy brunette," Interrupted Gary. "Yep, she's a looker."

"Yeah, keep your voice down. Her dad is no other than, Nick Wilkes."

Gary shook his head, as if he hadn't a clue what David was talking about.

David continued. "Nick Wilkes, is a big monster of a man, let's say, he is a little overprotective with his daughter."

"Isn't every father?"

"No, I mean *really* overprotective of her."

“So what makes her special to any other daddy’s little girl?” asked Gary, whose eyes were wondering around the beer garden, as he was losing interest in a story that seemed to be going nowhere.

“Well there’s a story behind it,” David said raising his eyebrows.

“I’m listening, I’m listening.” Gary became solicitous, with his eyes now facing David’s.

“How long have you lived here, Gary? Six months?” Gary responded to David’s question with a nod. “And you’ve never heard any stories about this place yet? About Ridgeware?”

“No,” Gary answered. “Why don’t yer enlighten me.”

David looked over his right shoulder, then looked over his left shoulder, and shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. Forget it, I’ve had too much to drink.”

“No way,” Gary protested. “If I’m gonna live her for a few years at least, then I should know the juicy gossip, come on David, spit it out!” Gary demanded, with his voice a little louder than David would have liked.

“It’s too busy,” David whispered. “Keep your voice down.”

“What are yer talking about? And why are we whispering for Christ’s sake?”

David said. “There may be people around here, behind us, or across the table that may overhear?”

“I thought everybody knew each others business in this town.” Gary responded.

“Well they do—”

“So what yer being so paranoid for?” Gary shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t want people thinking I’m some kind of gossip. Anyway, there may be friends or relatives of some of the people I may mention in the stories that I’m about to tell you. And I don’t want to offend anyone, or get on the wrong side of them.”

Gary’s patience was wearing a little thin at this stage, and took a drink from his beer bottle emptying it, and stared hard at David.

“I tell yer what,” Gary suggested, “I’ll get another round of drinks in, and we’ll go over to the playing fields with the drinks, sit on that grassy bank and yer can tell me all about it, what do yer say?”

“Maybe another time, Gary,” David insisted, “I’m not in the mood.” David looked over to his right and saw a huge figure of a man walking into the garden entrance of the Bald Buck.

“Nick Wilkes.” David pointed. “Shit. Here we go.”

Gary looked over and saw the colossal frame of Nick stomping his way into the bar. Thirty seconds had gone and nothing.

One minute passed and nothing.

Two minutes were nearly up, when Richard Johnson and the sumptuous Layla Wilkes, ran out of the pub heading for the young boy’s car; the boy was holding his left eye and seemed to be in some amount of pain. As they got inside the car, the huge fellow of a man in the shape of the now splenetic Nick Wilkes, came darting out the bar heading for the car, before it sped off. With the tyres almost screaming in pain, the car headed towards the town centre.

“Layla! Layla!” Nick shouted with venom. “Layla!”

Gary immediately recognised Nick’s face and burst out laughing, leaving David confused and a little nervous.

“Shut it, Gary,” David insisted. “Be quiet.”

Nick still standing where the car was with both fists clenched, glared at Gary and started to stomp his way to their table. The eyes of the thirty or so people sitting followed Nick’s movement.

“Oh shit,” David muttered, as Wilkes was now only ten yards away from their table. Nick stood right next to Gary with both fists clenched and leaned over.

“You got something to say, boy?” Nick vituperatively bellowed.

“No sir!” Gary mockingly replied, trying to hide his nerves in front of David, “Just sitting here enjoying myself.”

“Don’t get smart with me you piece of shit, or I’ll fuck you up big time, got it? I’ll fuck you up big time. Boy!”

“Yes sir.” Gary mockingly saluted feeling some of the effects of the alcohol.

“I’m sorry about this,” David intervened.

“Stay the fuck away from my family, London boy, or I’ll kill you.” Nick pointed, he stared at Gary for a few long seconds and left their table and proceeded to go back inside to the bar. Gary was visibly shaken and felt even more uncomfortable knowing that not for the first time this week, Nick Wilkes had made him look like a clown in front of a dismayed audience.

“You idiot,” David shook his head disapprovingly.

“What?” Gary laughed falsely, still feeling his top lip quivering with fright.

“What the hell are you playing at?”

“Nothing,” Gary insisted. “It’s just that I recognised his face from yesterday. I didn’t realise *that* was Nick Wilkes.”

“You recognise his face? What have you done, Gary?”

“Nothing.” Gary continued to giggle to himself nervously.

“What did he mean by *stay away from my family*?”

“Oh it was nothing.”

“What was nothing?”

“Forget it, David, it doesn’t matter.”

“Spit it out, Gary,” David insisted once more.

Gary eventually managed to control his laughter and held both hands up to his inquisitive friend.

“Okay, okay,” Gary began, “Yesterday, I was in town coming back from an appointment with a client. I can’t remember too much about it, but this woman dropped some of her shopping along the pavement, and I decided to help her, that’s all.”

“What has this got to do with, Nick?”

“I haven’t finished yet,” Gary continued. “So there I was helping this woman, who I have to say wasn’t too bad looking for an old ‘un, and we had a bit of a laugh about the whole thing, when suddenly this lunatic came over telling me to leave his wife alone.”

“And that was Nick Wilkes who yelled at you?”

“Yes, David,” Gary confirmed. “But I hadn’t done anything, the guy’s a jealous prick, he’s obviously got some mental problems.”

“Now you definitely didn’t do anything to antagonise the man?” David said, with a little hope in his voice.

“Definitely,” Gary said looking slightly offended, “Although...”

“Oh what?” David put his head in his hands.

“I was trying to chat up his wife,” Gary smirked. “And I did give her my business card before that lunatic came over.”

“Christ, I don’t believe you.” David slammed the table with his left fist.

“Relax, relax,” Gary assured his drinking partner. “I didn’t know she was fuckin’ married, she probably didn’t even notice it was there, she probably threw it away with the rest of her shopping bags or something.”

“What about Susan?” David was now starting to sound like a member of the Spanish inquisition. “You carrying on is hardly fair on her.”

“What about her?” Gary shrugged his shoulders. “Three’s a crowd, innit.”

“You’re fucking unbelievable.”

“I know.”

“I think we should be leaving,” David said disapprovingly.

“I think yer right, dad.” Gary mocked his friend. “I’ll just get two more beers.”

“What?” David looked baffled. “With Nick inside the pub, and the mood you’ve put him in. I don’t think that’s a good idea do you, Gary?”

“Maybe not,” Gary said, starting to think straight to David’s relief. They both got up and walked away from the Bald Buck and exited out of the beer garden, and headed home.

“Tomorrow then?” Gary asked.

“Tomorrow?” David asked confusingly.

“Tomorrow night, David,” Gary said. “We’re coming back down here, and yer can tell me all about Ridgeware, what d’yer reckon?”

“Maybe,” David replied, and turned into Churchill Street with Gary, and they parted company leaving David Dawson still angry about Gary’s immature behaviour. David was disappointed with their unpremeditated leaving of the pub so early, but Gary, with a few drinks inside of him, was snappish and strident. It was a poor way to end the night, but all the same, David was glad to be on his home to his family.

Chapter Thirteen

The black Ford had just entered Red Hill and continued to purr up the long, narrow winding road away from the outskirts of Ridgeware. It was going at a reasonable speed and turned right into a secluded wooded area, which was used for families in the summer for picnics, boys who just wanted to get away from their parents' eyes and get drunk or stoned, and young couples looking for some privacy. Also, if an individual strolled through the small gathering of trees to the right of the area, it would lead to a dirt path that led to the entrance of the woods.

The car pulled up and the lights and engine were temporarily switched off.

"I'll open the window," said Layla. "I'm melting in here."

"No don't bother," Richard said, reaching for a button on the dashboard. "I'll put on the air conditioning. I don't want all kinds of insects in the car, I only cleaned it yesterday."

They sat quietly in the somnolent darkness for a moment, not knowing what to do, not knowing what to say. Layla teasingly played with her hair, wrapping it around her finger, and looked over to Richard. Richard started to giggle a little, desperately trying to break the ice with any kind of conversation.

"So that's your old man, I take it?" he somehow said through his uncontrollable giggles. "Seems a nice guy, when will I be invited round for dinner?"

"He's not *that* bad," Layla tried to defend her dad's violent actions. "He can be quite sweet sometimes."

"Tell that to my left eye," Richard said gently, prodding underneath his eyes swollen socket.

"We should really get you home and put some ice on the swelling, Richard," Layla insisted. "It looks real sore."

Richard started laughing again and Layla looked at him humorously.

"I meant the swelling on your *eye*, you pervert."

"I'd rather be here with you."

Richard unbuckled his seatbelt and leaned over to Layla and placed his hand on her left thigh. Layla slowly pushed him away.

"It's too early for that," she insisted. "Anyway, I hardly know you."

"Okay," he sighed moving back to his original position. "What now?"

"Well, let's talk for a while."

"Talk?" Richard queried disappointingly. "About what?"

"I don't know," she shrugged. "Work? School?"

"Okay then, Layla, are you looking forward to going to college?"

"Well I don't know, it'll be strange not to have all my friends there, but I'm sure I'll make new ones."

"What friends are you going to miss?" he questioned, as he started tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, wishing now that he had gone home to attend to his eye. It was beginning to throb. The throbbing was so uncomfortable, it felt like someone was continuously pinching the skin.

"Oh, you wont know them."

"Try me," Richard sighed, checking the time, by pressing the night light on his watch.

"Well there's Vicki Chabowski; she's going to another college. Lisa Decker; her family moved to Manchester months ago, there's—"

"Decker!" Richard interrupted. "Lisa Decker?"

"Yeah, why? Oh you haven't..."

"No, no, no," Richard protested waving both arms in the air. "I haven't."

"Then why the interest?" Layla asked suspiciously.

"I used to be in the same year as her brother, Rob Decker."

"Oh him," Layla said. "Oh, she doesn't talk about him."

"I'm not surprised," Richard laughed. "The guy's a fucking nut."

"Yeah, Lisa told me Rob was in the mental hospital up the road."

Richard shifted in his seat and began to speak with interest, now that a subject that interested him had turned up.

"Do you know what he used to do?" Richard began. "He used to go up the woods on his own and shoot squirrels with his dad's pellet gun, and the ones that were still living, he would torch them on the paths and just watch them die. He tried to take a shot at me once, when I was walking the dog. I ran my arse outta there. Anyway, Monday at school after the weekend, I asked him what he was playing at with that gun of his, and you know what he told me?"

Layla shook her head.

"He said that voices in his head wanted him to guard the woods whenever he could, and to protect it from anything or anyone who dares to do it any harm. Can you believe that? Anyway, a couple of days later, one of the boys told Rob that they were going up the woods to burn down some trees, as a joke. Rob pulled out a kitchen knife that probably belonged to his mother, and ran after one of the boys, stabbing him in the arm. That was the last we ever saw of him."

"Of course, there were stories circulating round the school that another dog walker had been shot in the leg while investigating a burning in the woods, which turned out to be another squirrel smouldering on one of the dirt paths. Don't know whether it's true or not."

"Eventually, he completely lost it by refusing to go to his new school. He spent three weeks in the woods going back and forth to his house for something to eat. Then he was whisked away to the hospital, when he tried to strangle his sister."

"I know," Layla nodded. "If his mum and dad hadn't been there, Lisa would have been killed, without a doubt. But to be fair to Robert, I think he was diagnosed with some mental illness, so to a certain degree it wasn't his fault."

"He's just one of these guys that doesn't get on with people. He's pretty much always been like that. I've known him since Primary school." Richard gently touched his eye with his index finger, and winced slightly. "I tell you what, Layla, is it alright if I *do* take you home now, because my eye is really starting to ache?"

"No, of course not," Layla said a little disheartened. "I'd rather be home before dad gets in anyway, that is if he *did* stay at the pub."

There was a brief silence between the two youngsters, as Richard gazed up into the murky azure night and noticed the moon shyly exposing only half of its body, the stars were also starting to put in an appearance, slowly, one by one.

"Did you hear that noise?"

"What noise?" Layla looked over her shoulder. "Stop it, Richard, this place is creepy enough. I don't even know why you brought me here in the first place."

"You don't?" Richard quickly raised his eyebrows.

"Don't even think about it," Layla said sharply. "I'm not gonna sleep with you on our first date."

"There it is again." Richard quickly moved his head from side to side.

"You're making it up." Layla sounded sceptical. "I didn't hear anything."

"No honestly, I'm sure I heard something."

"It's probably your imagination. Or an animal."

"Or..." Richard looked across to Layla, with his eyes wide open. "It could be a ghost."

"No such thing."

"What?" You don't believe in ghosts?"

"No, Richard," Layla spoke with little interest. "I don't believe in ghosts."

"Then I take it you've never heard of the Keeman family then?"

"The Keeman family? Who are they?"

"In 1919, this place, this whole car park, never used to be here."

"Well," Layla said. "There's a strong possibility that you're right."

"Please," Richard held out his hand. "I'm being serious."

"So what used to be here?"

Richard folded his left leg onto his seat to get himself comfortable and looked across to Layla. "In 1919, an inn used to be here, a married couple by the name of Les Keeman and Lisa Keeman used to run the inn. The couple had spent their savings trying to keep the inn going throughout the Great War, and had just about managed it."

"What's this gotta do with anything?" Layla asked.

"Let me finish, Layla, please."

Layla sensed Richard was being serious, and decided to let him carry on with his story. "There were other tragedies to the Keeman family." Richard continued his story. "Their only daughter had run away to Bristol when she was sixteen, and became a prostitute. Their youngest son at the age of nine, Nicholas, had also ran away from home, after Les Keeman whipped him for getting bad reports from school, and their other two sons died in the war.

"During the late depressing thirties, just before the Second World War, the Keeman's were struggling financially once again. They were now approaching their fifties and discussed the hopeless years that lay ahead of them, when they had both decided to murder people for profit."

"Where's this going?" Layla once again interrupted.

Richard jokingly glared at the sixteen-year-old.

"Okay, okay." Layla held her hand up apologetically. "I'm sorry, carry on."

"Carefully," Richard continued, "they prepared for the killings. Les dug a long trench up into the woods, and Lisa brought home a small brown sack filled with strychnine crystals. She told the storekeeper that they were going to use it to poison foxes. Over a two-year period they killed ten people, but they only targeted wealthy people. They used to serve their guests with wine, but this vintage was heavily laced with strychnine.

"The Keeman's grew more cautious as their stolen wealth increased, and decided that there must be only one more victim, as they knew they wouldn't be able to get away with it for too long. On September 18th 1938, a bearded man in his late twenties arrived; his suitcase was so heavy, that the Keeman's were convinced it was full of money.

"He had been a salesman for years and was now looking for good land, in which to invest his money. When Lisa cooked the evening meal and Les served it, the visitor insisted that they must be his guests for supper, and should call him by his nickname Diddy.

"Throughout the two-hour meal, the guest refused to talk about his past, but the Keeman's liked him so much, they were reluctant to kill him. But it had to be done,

and at last, Lisa brought in the “special” wine. Their guest raised his glass and told the Keeman's that after he had finished the glass, he was going to give them the surprise of their lives. Within a few seconds, the glass had been drained and their guest died straight away.

"In Diddy's bedroom they searched his bag, and saw at once they had been right. There was a fortune in gold coins. His hands shaking, Les pawed through the dead man's clothes and then saw something else; it was a snapshot of the Keeman's themselves! The couple looked at each other with horror and grief.

"They had murdered their long lost son, Nicholas. Before Nicholas died, he told them that he was going to give them the surprise of their lives; the surprise was going to be Nicholas announcing that he was their son, but this time he was there to stay. The Keeman's left the gold and went back to the dining room."

"What had happened?" Layla quizzed, giving Richard her undivided attention.

"Where Nicholas was slouched at the table, they wrote a short confession and then sat down with him. Three days later, the villagers found them, all dead from strychnine poisoning. During the years that followed, few ventured inside the empty house, those daring to stay two or three nights with a view to buying the place, were always frightened off by the same grisly sight."

"And what was that?" Layla spoke transfixed.

"The sight of ghostly figures seated around a dining table. Each figure had its lips peeled back in a ghastly strychnine grin. Anyway, in the early sixties some kids during the school summer holidays decided to set fire to the place, the inn burnt to the ground and this place turned into a car park.

"That story is in the old Ridgeware newspapers archives from the library, if you don't believe me." Richard nodded. "There's many other stories, but that one's my favourite, I know that story practically word for word."

"Shall we go home?" Layla spoke affectionately.

"Yeah," Richard replied, "I'll just—"

Richard cut his sentence short and stared menacingly over Layla's right shoulder. Layla could see and hear Richard's breathing becoming increasingly rapid, while his wide disbelieving eyes continued to look at something or someone behind her.

Layla's smile slowly descended into a confusing frown, as the sudden change in Richard's facial expression began to unnerve her, whatever it is, whoever it is, she could simply tell by Richard's face that he wasn't joking.

"What is it, Richard?" Her head started to glance towards the left of her shoulder.

"Don't..." Richard paused trying to catch his breath "Don't turn round."

"What... what is it, Richard?" she nervously asked again.

"There's somebody standing by the car," he said, feeling his clammy hands almost sliding off the steering wheel.

"What?" she whispered. "Where?"

Layla could see that Richard had now started to perspire from his forehead.

"Right behind you."

Layla shook her head hoping this was all some sick frightening joke, but Richard nodded back to her as if to tell her, this was no joke.

"What's it doing?" she asked desperately, hoping that Richard would just put his foot down and get the hell out of there. Richard shook his head in confusion.

"Just standing there?" he answered in a whisper, and exhaled long and slow.

"Have you locked the doors?"

Richard's mouth dropped and his eyes widened even further, which gave Layla the impression that the answer to her question was, no.

“What’s happening now?” Layla asked, terrified that there was something behind her that she couldn’t see or didn’t want to see, and was hoping whoever it was, would not try the door. Richard could see that the figure was dressed all in black, and all that could be seen as the night was slowly changing into a duller colour, was this person’s body against Layla’s passenger side. Richard slowly raised his left hand off the steering wheel, and moved his elbow to the lock button that would lock all doors. The figure continued to stand there, motionless.

Richard’s elbow was now hovering over the button, like a viper waiting for its prey, and suddenly slammed the elbow on the button locking every door; he turned the ignition key furiously, released the handbrake and sped off without looking back. The car skidded along the dirt, and as Layla looked back for a brief second, she could see the solitary figure with arms by its side, dressed all in black and its face practically faceless, which was caused by the blanket of darkness.

Then they turned the corner heading out of the secluded area, and back onto the road that led into Ridgeware, they both looked at each other and breathed a sigh of relief. They looked at each other again and smiled, the relief was incredible and the journey back into Ridgeware, was a very welcome one.

“That was crazy,” Richard broke the tense silence.

“I know,” Layla said. “Who do you think it was?”

“Probably just some peeping tom.”

“Peeping tom? He was right by the car, you said.”

“I don’t know, but I’m shaking like a leaf.” Richard admitted.

“I thought it was quite exciting.”

“Really?” Richard sounded surprised. “You looked pretty fuckin’ scared to me, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“I was, but it was still exciting.”

“You’re crazy.” Richard’s perspiration was still visible, and still continued to lazily roll down his forehead. “Same time Sunday then?” He joked.

“Well,” Layla said looking a little anxious. “As long as we’re not the only ones there, and this time, you keep the doors locked.” Richard turned towards Layla and realised she was serious; maybe the whole event in some kind of perverse way turned her on? It was an opportunity he wasn’t willing to miss out on.

“You *are* serious, aren’t you Layla?”

“Yeah, why not? You only live once. Don’t you?”

“Well I’m up for it if you are.”

It was almost as if the young couple were daring one another, and there was no chance Richard could back out of it now. If he wanted to be a ladies man, he couldn’t have the “coward” label attached to him. It would kill his image.

“Well then,” Layla began twisting her hair round her right index finger. “It’s a date.”

“Can’t wait.” Richard looked pleased with himself, as his sixteen-year-old companion may just go all the way with him on only their second date.

Chapter Fourteen

It was Saturday, and Alan Miller, Neil Warner, and Steven Dawson all made their way to the playing fields in buoyant mood on another hot day in July, with the exception of Steven, who looked apprehensive and would rather have gone straight past the wooden shack and up to the woods. The not knowing what would happen when they went to Kelly's house, was torturing him inside. The idea of being confronted by an old killer with long straggly hair, a beard, and a mouth full of rotten teeth, terrified him.

Some of the boys had told him that Kelly had died years ago, but some swore they had seen him in the house; others claim that on the way to the woods they had heard the sound of Kelly chopping up his firewood in his garden outside. That frightened Steven even more; if Kelly was indeed dead, then his ghost still vacated the house.

Every child in the Churchill area always used to get teased, when they told others about their passing of the shack to get to the woods for adventures. They would tell them made up stories about Kelly, and sing—to the already frightened boys—that terrible rhyme.

*Killer Kelly, Killer Kelly chopping up his wood.
Killer Kelly, Killer Kelly looking for some blood.
He killed his wife and family.
He'll kill again some more.
Killer Kelly's everywhere; you better lock your door.*

Of course, now it was their turn to tease the younger boys in their school, before they left for high school; but Steven was still a little unsure, maybe because he was a little younger than Alan and Neil and his child imagination was more alive than theirs.

The boys were walking along the field, the grass still smelling fresh after its cut as Neil beckoned them over to the grassy embankment.

"So what now?" Alan approached Neil.

"Now," said Neil. "We work out a plan."

All three sat down unsure what was about to happen next, which included Neil who was the making the whole thing up as he went along.

"We do what we agreed yesterday," Neil replied. "We all go up to the house. Steven, you stand watch in case anything happens, you may need to run for help."

Steven nodded in agreement, breathing a sigh of relief, almost feeling the tension filtering out of his young shoulders.

"Alan and I will go into his shed and get something, I dunno, his axe maybe, he may even keep a gun of some kind, y'never know. One of us could take a photo outside his shed holding the axe." Neil could no longer hold his excitement for this new adventure.

"What happens if he comes out of the house?" Steven began to squint.

"We run," Alan and Neil promptly spoke together.

"Well, if that does happen, Steven," Alan said, with his right arm reassuringly on the youngster's right shoulder. "At least then we'll know if he really is still alive or whether he's a ghost."

"But if he's still alive—"

"If he is alive," Neil interrupted. "Then we have been lied to, which means, people, for some reason, are trying to scare us away from the house."

"So there must be something else up at the house that people don't want us to find." Alan said, with his young mind concocting all kinds of visions.

"Exactly, Alan." Neil nodded. "There could be anything up there—I don't know. Money or something?"

"But how can you tell if it's really him or his ghost?" Steven mumbled, whilst meticulously chewing the ends of his fingernails.

"Because." Alan shook his head in disbelief. "You can see through a ghost, stupid!"

"Who's gonna keep the axe?" Steven continued to squint.

"What?" Neil shouted, as if he had been asked the most ridiculous question ever.

Alan lowered his head and muttered. "That is actually a good question, Neil, who is going to keep the axe? I can keep it in my dad's shed if you want, I'm sure my mum won't notice."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure." Alan nodded. "Since my dad has gone, my mum hardly touches the garden, let alone the garden shed. She's always too busy at work, and she spends most of her time with Mr. Fitzgerald from Flaxlow High."

"Right then," Neil commanded. "Alan keeps the axe, or whatever we can manage to steal, and when we come back, I'll spread the word around our street what we've done, which should make us the envy of Ridgeware. Also, we need to take photos so I can put them on Facebook."

"I wonder if Kelly really lives in that house?" Steven looked to be half daydreaming. "I wonder if Kelly is really real?"

"Of course he's real, dumbo." Neil shook his head. "You've seen the smoke coming out of his chimney, haven't you?"

"Yeah, but it could be anyone living there."

"I'm telling you, if it's not Kelly, it's definitely his ghost."

"Most of the people in our class reckon he's still alive," Alan joined in.

"Well I've been told he's dead," Neil spoke. "And his ghost haunts the house; some of the kids in our class say that they've seen him chopping his wood in his garden, but I don't believe them. Nobody uses the common more than us three, and I hardly see any of the boys from our class up there."

"What actually happened up there?" Steven quizzed.

"You know what happened," Neil snarled impatiently. "He killed his family."

"I know that." Steven squinted. "But *how* did he kill them?"

"He strangled his wife and son in their sleep," Alan intervened. "Then he was arrested by the police and was let out of jail twenty years later, and went back to live in the house."

"That's not what I've been told," Neil remarked.

"What have you been told, then?" Alan folded his arms waiting for his friend's response. "How did he kill them?"

"I overheard my Mum mentioning it to one of her friends last month, and she reckons he shot his family, walked into his garden, poured petrol over his body, and set himself on fire."

"That's horrible." Steven screwed his face.

"Horrible." Neil nodded in agreement. "But it might have happened. Some people have actually walked past Kelly's house on a night over the years and have heard screams coming from the garden." Neil looked over to Steven. "Some say the screams

are from when he burnt himself alive, and he still haunts the place to this day. That's why no one else has bothered to live there. They're too scared."

"Are we ready to go up then, Neil?" an agitated Alan asked Neil.

"Yeah, lets go."

"What if anything goes wrong?" Steven jumped in.

"Nothing will go wrong," Alan said adamantly.

"What could go wrong, Steven?" Neil interrogated.

"W-well," Steven stammered. "What if one of us g-gets caught?"

"No one is going to get caught." Alan laughed, ridiculing the youngster.

"But what if they do?" Steven persisted. "One of us could get killed."

As soon as Steven had finished his concerning question, there was a brief silence filled with self-evident uncertainty amongst the three of them.

"We wont get caught," Alan reiterated, trying to convince himself and the vexatious Steven.

They all looked at each other, all with a seed of doubt planted in their minds, especially Steven, who had never wanted to go on this adventure in the first place. Neil then got up and brushed some of the grass cuttings from his tracksuit bottoms, that were sticking to him like starved leeches. Alan then got up and did the same, and looked at Steven who was obviously still edgy about the whole thing.

"Right," Alan commanded. "What are we waiting for, let's go?"

Alan led the way as they made their way up the grassy embankment onto the dirt path, they continued on the dirt path until they had to make a right turn, and twenty yards later, they had reached the bottom of the common hill and slowly started to climb the hill with their feet and backs hunched over—like old men climbing stairs—to prevent them from falling backwards.

Chapter Fifteen

The wind howled its way angrily through the unsettled trees; bracken surrounding each tree responded to the light wind, by waving from left to right every time a rush of air had filtered its way through the woods, and the day itself had almost decided to come to a close, with the sun slowly sinking after another long shift.

Sheeba playfully made her way in and out of the bracken, occasionally crouching to urinate on the grass as Mark walked around on one of the dirt paths in the woods. He continued to walk along, kicking the occasional pebble that was in his path, and felt a weight of tension. He looked behind and stared along the winding path, he then turned around and continued to progress forward.

To the left, about one hundred yards away at the edge of the path leaning up against one of the trees, Mark could see a white rectangle sign. He squinted and tried to focus, but he could not read the red letters that were on the sign, so he continued to walk forward. Sheeba had now progressed a little too deep into the woods, which was not to Mark's liking, but he wasn't concerned so long as he didn't need to go through the trees to look for his dog. Mark was now getting nearer to the white sign and could now see what was printed, it read:

Reality Homes: Making life better for you
Call: (0888) 587889 for more information

Kids, Mark thought. Nothing better to do, so they have to rip up the sign that belongs to the new housing estate that's being built in Red Hill.

He rubbed his temples with both index fingers, and thought to himself that it was time to make his way back home. He looked around to see if there were any other signs of life and went to the edge of the path and followed Sheeba's example, by urinating up one of the trees, this was not something he made a habit of, but was happy all the same that his bladder had been emptied.

As soon as he finished, he thought that it was time to get his dog, go home, and have a lie down. It would be a long walk after all, getting back out the woods then walking around the dirt track that surrounded the jungle of nettles, and then walking across the common to get back to the neighbourhood. But it was good exercise for Sheeba and it wouldn't do Mark any harm either.

He continued to walk along, and could see in the distance another white rectangle sign leaning up against one of the trees that had unreadable print on it. Mark was about a hundred and fifty yards away, this time.

Unconcerned about the sign, he continued to walk along, looking to his left deep into the woods, hoping to see a glimpse of Sheeba, but there was no sign of the bothersome bitch.

He looked to his right as he walked along, searching for the stupid mutt. He exhaled and could feel a little bit of the tension easing off. He looked straight ahead, getting closer to the sign.

"Little bastards," he muttered referring to the kid's vandalism antics.

Ignoring the approaching sign, Mark, was becoming a little annoyed with his dog's hide and seek game.

"Sheeba!" he called.

The canine never appeared.

“Sheeba!” he called again. “Come on, girl; come on Sheeba.”

“Sheeba!” he bellowed with a sign of impatience in his voice. “Come on, girl!” He tried to beckon the dog with some whistling, but still no sign.

“Come on Sheeba, you little shit.” There was still no sign of his companion. He approached near the sign and could now see the red print. It read:

You just stood there

Mark, angry and now confused, looked away from the sign and continued to entice Sheeba from out of the woods, then suddenly at last, the playful mutt ran across his path. She was about fifty yards away from on the right side of the woods.

In the distance, Mark could see yet another sign leaning up against one of the trees that was too far to read. Unconcerned about the third sign, he continued to call for his disobedient dog. Apart from the wind, the only other sound that could be heard, was the constant noise from what it sounded like an army of annoyed crows.

The gentle wind scurried over him yet again, and he had now started to feel a little uncomfortable, as the sweat from his forehead had finally began to make its way down to both sides of his face, whilst the rest of the liquid collected in and soaked his thick eyebrows. Although most of the salt water was in both of his brows, the odd one did managed to escape and run into his eye. The back of his T-shirt had a large diamond shape sweat patch, that looked to be getting increasingly bigger by the minute.

Where is that fucking dog?

As he walked further along the path, the sign started to become a little clearer but before he could focus on the sign, a constant crying could be heard, coming to the left of him. Mark, knowing that it was Sheeba’s cry, bravely stepped off the path and slowly and hesitantly, walked deep into the woods. He carefully brushed away the branches that were annoyingly trying to poke him in the eyes, preventing him to walk further.

His heart began to gallop, and the sweat ran a little more fluently that he would have liked. He was only about ten yards into the woods from the path, as he reached out to one of the bushy branches and pushed it away from him. The branch snapped accidentally, and as it fell to the ground—to his horror—he could see Sheeba lying on the ground, looking up at his master, still alive, still breathing, still crying for help as seven ravenous crows furiously pecked away at the dog's stomach.

The stomach looked to have been pecked so badly that there was a gaping hole with three of the crows almost inside it; the gaping hole revealed the half spilled intestines that caught the attention of the other four rapacious crows that furiously pecked away, as if they were possessed. The rest of the scavengers carried on pecking away inside her stomach, creating more indescribable pain for the poor canine that must now be close to death.

“Sheeba.” Mark stood in disbelief and ran over to her, the birds flew off frightened into the trees and cawed constantly, revealing their disgust at the large visitor who had just ruined their delicious blood soaked raw meat banquet.

He knelt down near the dog's stomach, and his knees made contact with the dark sticky blood that covered the dirty ground that had spilled out of the canine's belly. Mark put his left hand on Sheeba’s head; the tears welled up in his eyes as he stroked his poor dog constantly knowing that it would be a matter of minutes or seconds before his companion died.

Mark could not believe the extraordinary events that had just happened, and was lost in total confusion. Just as Mark had predicted, two minutes went, and Sheeba's breathing stopped, although her eyes were still open. Mark got to his feet, befuddled at what he had just witnessed.

He walked backwards, slowly, and turned around to head for the path. Mark staggered to the path, the lower part of his jeans covered in the dog's blood, and looked over to the sign that he had previously ignored, and it read:

Why did you let me die? Why did you let me die?

What is going on?

He looked over to his left where he had just witnessed the second most horrific site of his life, and suddenly, after hearing a branch crack behind him, in a split second he turned to his right. His breathing became more rapid and could feel his temporal pulse banging away in his head, he tried to slow his rapid and shallow breathing down, but it couldn't be done, it was as if his lungs had shrunk to a third of their size.

Thirty seconds had passed and he looked back towards the left of the path, where his beloved companion had been attacked in a bizarre fashion and decided to go back in. He couldn't just leave her in there.

In a matter of seconds, branches behind him snapped, the rustle of bracken was heard, which was instantly followed by hurried footsteps, Mark turned to find his throat covered by two strong hands that forced him against one of the trees. Mark struggled for breath and looked at the horrific face of his attacker.

The face was a mustard yellow colour, with strips of skin peeling away from its face, everything else looked intact apart from the mustard skin. One eye was missing, which left the attacker with one good eye and one black hole. The strong hands that were beginning to crush Mark's windpipe, were cold and stank worse than anything imaginable. Despite all this, this thing, this zombie-like-creature was dressed in a suit, although the suit, as well as the attacker's appearance, had seen better days and looked years old.

Mark tried to grab something, anything, to stop him being choked to death, he put his left hand onto the rotting man's face and tried to grab his cheek before he ended up dead like Sheeba. He grabbed the left cheek hard, which to Mark's disgust peeled easily away like cooked chicken off a bone, revealing a hole in the side of his face that was infested by the excited wriggling of the yellow and white maggots that started to spill out onto the path. A black centipede of some kind, crawled its way out of the attacker's empty eye socket in a split second and fell to the floor, the attacker began to speak.

"Why did you just stand there?" he spat, allowing spots of blood to hit Mark's face.

"What?" Mark somehow managed to speak as he could feel himself losing consciousness.

"Why?" the thing vehemently cried, with his now lower bottom lip peeling itself away from the rest of his face. "Why didn't you help me?"

The lip had fallen away to the floor, to the delight of the spilt maggots, by Mark's feet, and hurried their way along the path, excited by the smell and presence of more rotten flesh.

"Leave me...leave me alone." Mark whispered, now gasping for breath.

The thing raised its right hand, with its two fingers aiming for Mark's two eye sockets, whilst still holding Mark's neck with his left hand, and let out a horrific cry that was filled with pain and anguish. Mark stood there completely rudderless, as this

thing brought his arm forward rapidly, with the two fingers heading towards his eyes in order to push them straight through into his head.

Mark screamed, and felt his face.

He had completely saturated the bed in sweat, and his breathing and heartbeat began to slow down, once he had realised he was in his bedroom.

It was the afternoon, and Mark lifted his T-shirt up from the bottom and wiped his face. He looked at his watch and saw it was nearly four o'clock—another hour before his friend and work colleague, Tanya, would turn up at his door.

The bedroom door suddenly opened, and Mark became uncomfortable for a second until, to his delight, the familiar black figure of Sheeba made her way into his room, tail wagging and panting away after climbing the steep stairs, with her long pink tongue hanging out to the left of her mouth.

"Hello girl," came his warm salutation.

Sheeba responded by jumping onto the bed and licking her master's sweaty face, which was pleasant in a way for Mark, but her breath smelt like a dustbin. Mark screwed his face in disgust, and gently tried to push his beloved companion away so that the dog would not be offended. Mark rose from his bed and patted the dog's back as he could see she was waiting to be taken outside.

"Good to see you alive, girl," he joked. "Nasty birds." The dog responded with a bark as if she could understand her master.

"One hour," he pointed to Sheeba, "and we'll go for our walk with Aunt Tanya."

The dog barked once more, this time in a desperate attempt to tell her master she needed to do her business right now.

"Okay, okay," Mark gave in. "I'll let you outside, I don't want you pissing on the carpet now, do I?"

Mark, unconcerned about his sweaty appearance, walked down the stairs slowly like an old man with arthritis, taking a second to conquer each step, with his companion patiently following behind him.

Every step he took was followed with a crack, his bones felt like they should belong to a seventy-year-old. Mark was glad Tanya was coming round, although he wasn't in the mood for any company at the moment. Mark's original plan was to take a walk up to the woods to try and exorcise some ghosts.

Tanya, however, wasn't the kind of girl that liked dirt or mud; she spent a lot of time on her appearance, and exercise was certainly something that Tanya never participated in. Sheeba's trip up the woods may be thwarted if Tanya gets her way as it may be too far for her to walk. But with Tanya being a good friend, Mark was sure that just this once, she wouldn't mind going up, he needed some moral support, and this was important to him.

*

Tanya Roberts was born in Ridgware and had lived there for most of her life; she was two years younger than Mark, she was pretty with light blonde hair that stretched down to her back and was also an estate agent working for the same company as Mark Pembroke.

Tanya's parents were originally from Dumfries, and had moved down to Ridgware in order to find work, which worked out perfectly as her dad got a job as a labourer and her mother worked in one of the town's textile factories. Her dad worked until

they eventually closed the factory down, which put a strain on the family, until he managed to get a twenty three thousand pound sum for developing white finger, which caused him some pain, but didn't stop him working for himself as a plumber.

Tanya had worked at the estate agents in Ridgeware's town centre for ten years, she was studying psychiatry at a college before joining the estate agent game, but she had to leave half way through the course.

Her lecturer at the time, who went by the name of Dr. Anderton, had been giving her extra psychiatry lessons after class. She was found by another lecturer in an uncompromising position over one of the class tables *with* Dr. Anderton, which made it virtually impossible for her to talk her way out of being thrown from the course, and especially difficult for Dr. Anderton to hold onto his job.

It took the pair of them about thirty seconds to realise that the lecturer had been standing there, with his mouth wide open in disbelief, knowing that he had a surprising front row seat to their private sex show.

Soon after, Tanya Roberts felt that psychiatry wasn't for her, despite being thrown out anyway. She decided to pursue a career in one of the most hated professions in the UK. Ten years and twelve lovers later, she befriended Mark and thought it was fantastic that she could speak to her male friend about anything that concerned her, a break up, an affair, even her hair.

Mark was a good friend and a great listener. Tanya knew about Mark witnessing the suicide of some guy a few years back, and knew it still haunted him to this day and was generally concerned for him and urged him to have counselling to get rid of his insomnia.

She thought that his lack of sleep was because, when he did sleep on a monthly basis or every other week, he would have one of his nightmares.

Each nightmare was different, but the end result always questioned why Mark didn't help the unfortunate man; she knew that it was his guilt that prevented him from sleeping and when he could sleep, it was his guilt that was causing the nightmares.

Tanya's one year of celibacy didn't really bother her much, and always found time to fill in her free time; she had so many negative experiences with men that she decided to take a break. She was also especially delighted that Mark had finally broke up with that woman of his, not only did she treat Mark like dirt, Tanya could now spend more time with her male friend outside of work, without him receiving a barrage of jealous questions on his friendship with her by his girlfriend.

Now he was on his own, it was the perfect chance to strengthen their friendship. Although Tanya was well aware that her and Mark was just good friends, she did have the occasional fantasy about Mark. She never used to be attracted to him before, and was convinced that her recent feelings for him were purely physical and blamed it on a little frustration, which was caused by her twelve-month sexless period.

She sat on the couch and bent over to put her walking shoes on, as Mark mentioned something about taking a walk with the dog. Tanya joked with Mark the day before, that she thought he had got back with Nancy for a second and didn't realise the walk was for Sheeba. It did not go down too well, as she realised maybe it was a little too early for jokes as he was still going through the grieving period. But on the outside, he was telling his colleagues that he was glad of his new found freedom.

Once he got passed the grieving period he could then started to enter the angry period, which would then end with Mark not caring at all. During the angry period, Tanya could then be allowed to joke about his ex and Mark could have sick daydreams about kidnapping Nancy and one of her lovers, taking them up to Red Hill by gunpoint, and then tying her up to one of the trees so she could witness Mark

bludgeoning one of her lovers to death with a fine set of assorted ancient Japanese blades.

Tanya was no athlete, but had no problem with the walk that Mark had planned, although secretly she wasn't convinced that he would go through with it. Although walking wasn't her favourite past time, and Mark knew it, she saw that it was yet another beautiful day and spending time in the outdoors would be a good opportunity to tan her face. *Oh, thank you, global warming!*

She looked at the time, and realised she would be early but had nothing better to do on a Saturday afternoon, so she decided to leave straight away. She grabbed her car keys, as she lived in the south of the town, and shut the door behind her.

Tanya took her time with the two-minute drive in order not to get to Mark's too early, but she couldn't help herself. She had sat in all day despite the weather, and the boredom was killing her. Tanya's one-year break from men had made her realise that the spare time that she received was being filled, yet it was uneventful. She never really had any hobbies apart from sex, and the occasional drink.

She pulled up at Mark's house in at Royston Avenue and got out the car. Mark was standing on the doorstep, looking like he had been dragged through a hedge by his hair; he was watching his beloved dog making more of a mess of his malodorous garden.

What she loved about Mark was that they would—on some occasions—antagonise one another, like a brother and sister would, which made her attraction to him even more impossible of producing a result.

"You should really clean up after her, you know," Tanya commented as she walked through Mark's garden gate. "Otherwise, you'll never get that garden done."

"The garden is the least of my worries," he responded still staring over to Sheeba.

"Having a bad day?"

"No, I've just woken up. You're early."

"Woken up?" Tanya looked puzzled ignoring Mark's question.

"Afternoon nap."

There was strange tension coming from Mark, and Tanya was wondering if she should have just stayed home, as he was far from his usual self, even though he had only recently gone through a break up there was something else bothering him.

Tanya crouched to the floor beckoning over Sheeba, and with her first try, she succeeded. The dog sniffed all round her face investigating every inch of her skin, and then flagrantly letting her salmon pink tongue drop out of her mouth, and licked Tanya's face.

"Sheeba!" Tanya stood up and wafted her hand in front of her nose. "Your breath stinks, girl, what have you been feeding her?"

"So would yours, if you had been licking your backside for most of the day," Mark responded, unusually defending the dog.

Tanya started to feel uncomfortable, as if she had interrupted something. Maybe Mark was still tired after his afternoon nap?

"Anything wrong, Mark?" Tanya questioned. "Do you want me to go?"

"No I don't want you to go." Mark's mood had lifted by a fraction, and managed a welcome smile, "I'm sorry. I guess I'm still a little tired, I had one of my infamous nightmares again."

"At least you're sleeping," she said comfortingly.

"Anyway," Mark spoke. "I'll get myself cleaned up and we'll take this mutt for a walk. Come in." He beckoned Tanya into the kitchen.

"Where are we going? Are we going into the woods?"

“Not too sure, Tan.” Mark looked towards the ground, “I’m not too sure I can face it. Maybe next week.”

“Or the week after that, or the week after that.” Tanya mocked. “I hate walking myself, I only came up to keep you company.”

“It’s not easy, Tanya!” he snapped.

“I didn’t say it was going to be easy, Mark, but I tell you what, once you actually get up there, I’m sure it won’t be as bad as you think. If you want to go, fine. If you don’t, then enjoy the nightmares.” Tanya turned around and started to head towards the garden gate.

“I’m sorry!” Mark called back to Tanya.

Tanya stopped walking and went back over to her friend. “What are we going to do about this, Mark? I mean, you won’t see a shrink—”

“We’ll go up now.”

“You serious?”

“Yeah, fuck it. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Mark that’s excellent,” She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him.

“I’ll give it a go,” he said, with Tanya still latched onto him. “Maybe if I confront my fear, the nightmares will go away. I need to do something, Tanya, I can’t keep on getting drunk to get myself to sleep, and I can’t cope with staying awake for forty eight hours at a time or I’ll end up…” He stopped in mid-sentence, embarrassed, he felt his voice breaking up and that feeling in his throat, the feeling that makes the Adam’s apple feel like it has been replaced with a brick, and then after that, usually there is tears. Mark had stopped just in time.

“We’ll go up as soon as you’re ready,” Tanya gently spoke knowing that Mark’s tears were nearly on their way.

“Okay, you wait here and I’ll clean myself up.”

“Oh, just one thing, Mark.”

“What?” he asked.

“I am not walking over that big hill,” she said defiantly, folding her arms like a determined child refusing to go to bed.

“You’re not?”

“No.”

“Well how are we—?”

“We’ll take the car up to that secluded place in Red Hill,” she interrupted his question, knowing exactly what it was going to be. “I haven’t been up there since I was a kid, but when we get there, we’ll cut through the trees on that path, if it’s still there, and take a walk up that steep hill. I can just about manage the steep hill, but I can’t take the common as well. I’m not fit enough.”

Mark nodded in agreement and walked away from Tanya, ready to clean his body, which would only become hot and sticky again after walking in the heat.

“Won’t be long,” he said.

Chapter Sixteen

There was a gentle knock on Jason Barry's already opened door, a knock that he was expecting.

"Come in, Fiona," he spoke, without even looking who was by the door. Barry had just quit the Samaritans due to the extra pressure of his job, since he had gained promotion to Personnel Manager, at Daley's Textile factory.

Fiona had never met Jason, although she was friends with his wife, and responded to his call by opening their door carefully. She looked around inside the house and walked slowly into the living room, finding Jason sitting on his own. She was hoping that Margaret would also be there, as Fiona normally felt nervous talking to strangers, especially strange men.

"How are you?" She smiled nervously.

"Fine," Jason responded. "Please, sit down."

Fiona sat apprehensively on the edge of the seat, as Jason reached for the remote and put the television on to stand by.

"Drink, Fiona?" Jason questioned his nervous client.

"No, thank you," Fiona replied. "Actually, Jason, I feel a little silly being here, I'll think I'll just go." Fiona stood up.

"Nonsense," Jason spoke. "I've been listening to strangers' problems for years, now you have come here for advice and I'm happy to be of help."

Jason's attitude had changed somewhat due to the attractive presence of Fiona, and looked her up and down as she turned her head away to scratch the side of her neck.

"Thanks." Fiona slowly sat back down.

"Don't look so nervous, sit back in the chair and relax," he said taking control of the situation. "I'm no doctor and I'm certainly no psychologist, but give me a chance, Fiona. Right, where do you want to start?"

"I don't know really,"

"Just take your time, Fiona," Jason said reassuringly. "We have all afternoon. Just speak when you're good and ready." He began to eye the bottom half of her legs and could feel himself beginning to perspire.

"Well it's my husband, you see. Our son had gone through a traumatic time years ago..." she paused.

"Take your time." Jason raised his left hand.

"After the ordeal that Lee, my son, went through," she continued. "We were all devastated; a few days after the incident, my husband had come back from work where he found Lee. He had cut both of his wrists, it must have been terrible for Nick to see his own son..." she paused again and Jason passed her a tissue out of a box.

"I'm sorry," she wept.

"Don't be."

Jason decided not to ask about the details of her son. It seemed that this Lee had gone through *two* traumatic episodes that had affected the family.

"Anyway." She cleared her throat. "These last few years living with my husband have been hell. I'm afraid he'll harm me or my daughter, or even himself. He told me that he wanted to kill himself, but people who talk about it don't usually do it, is that right?"

"I'm afraid, not all the time, Fiona," Jason answered, taking a sip from his glass of water. "Studies have found that more than seventy five percent of all complete

suicides did things in the few weeks or months prior to their deaths, to indicate to others that they were in despair. If your husband is expressing suicidal feelings, he needs immediate attention.”

“But despite his erratic behaviour,” Fiona sobbed. “Nick is not crazy.”

“Most suicidal people suffer from the recognized mental illness of depression, which sounds like your husband, I’m afraid to say, but many depressed people adequately manage their daily affairs, the absence of craziness does not mean the absence of suicide risk.”

“But if Nick wants to harm himself, then nothing can stop him.”

“Not necessarily, the fact that Nick is still alive is proof that part of him wants to remain alive. The suicidal person is ambivalent, part of him wants to live and part of him wants—not so much death, but just the pain to go away.

“It is the part that wants to live that tells another, *I feel suicidal*, if a suicidal person turns to you it is likely that he believes that you are more caring, more informed about coping with misfortune, and more willing to protect his confidentiality. No matter how negative the manner and content of your husband's talk, Fiona, the fact is, he is doing a positive thing and has a positive view of you.”

“So what do I do? Just listen to him?”

“Be willing to give and to get help sooner rather than later,” Jason quickly responded. “Your husband is probably afraid that trying to get help may bring him more pain. Being told that he is stupid or selfish can worsen his state of mind. You need to do everything you can to reduce his pain, rather than increase or prolong it. Give Nick every opportunity to unburden his troubles and ventilate his feelings. You don’t need to say much and there are no magic words. Be patient with him, Fiona, avoid any arguments, and don’t give him any advice.”

“What about professional help?” she questioned.

Jason nodded in agreement. “Persistence and patience may be needed to seek, engage, and continue with as many options as possible. In any referral situation, let your husband know that you care and will stand by him every step of the way, whatever he chooses, whether it's professional help or just to get through this crisis as a family. Does your husband drink to excess?”

“Sometimes. Can that make it worse?”

“The conditions that are associated with an increased risk of suicide, can be a loss of job, or security, a broken down relationship, death or terminal illness of a relative, alcohol or drug abuse and depression.”

“But, Jason,” Fiona intervened. “Nick is not always depressed.”

“Depression that seems to quickly disappear for no apparent reason is a cause for concern. The early stages of recovery from depression can be a high risk period, recent studies have associated anxiety disorders with increased risk for attempted suicide.”

The mood had lifted and Fiona had become more comfortable, the more she spoke with the approachable Jason. They continued to speak for a further twenty minutes, moving away from the black subject of suicide, covering lighter subjects.

“I’m sorry, Jason,” Fiona went to get on her feet. “I’ve bothered you enough.”

“Nonsense,” he snapped, raising his right hand and waving it up and down beckoning Fiona to remain seated. “It’s been ages since I’ve had someone normal to talk to. I’m glad of the company.”

Their conversation eventually ventured back onto the original reason why Fiona was there in the first place; another question was fired at him and he tried to answer to the best of his ability.

"Your husband probably has a mixture of stress and anxiety," Jason remarked. "You see, Fiona, anxiety is a negative emotional state with feelings of nervousness, worry and apprehension associated with the activation or arousal of the body. Whereas, stress occurs when there is a substantial imbalance between the physical and psychological demands placed on an individual, and his or her response capability, and under conditions where failure to meet the demand has important consequences."

"So Nick definitely needs help?"

"In short, Fiona, if your husband is experiencing overwhelming pain, hopelessness, a feeling that the pain will only get worse, powerlessness, worthlessness, social isolation and a declining interest in sex, your husband needs help, whether it's family help or professional help."

"I think I will have that drink now, if you don't mind, Jason," she said, becoming more at ease with Jason's presence.

"Sure." He smiled. "What do you fancy?"

"Oh, anything."

Jason was out of the room for only thirty seconds, he returned with a glass of lemonade.

"Damn heat." Jason wiped his brow with his vacant hand. "I've never known Ridgeware to have a summer this hot before."

"No, me neither," Fiona remarked.

Jason handed the glass over to Fiona and for a second their eyes became locked with one another, this uncomfortable second seemed like a lifetime for Fiona, she could see lust in his eyes and all of a sudden, a cloud of anxiety began to hang over her. She was grateful for the advice, but she wasn't about to pay Jason Barry in kind for his services. Maybe it was her imagination? Maybe he was just being pleasant, after all? These days she wasn't used to any kind of friendly attention.

Jason's eyes, for a brief moment, were transfixed on Fiona's gently tanned legs and slowly made their way up from the ankle up to the knee. His eyes continued further until he saw the material of her dress three inches from her knee cap to Jason's displeasure, he became slightly aroused by Fiona's presence.

"So what do you do to relax, Fiona?" Jason questioned, getting back into his chair.

"What?"

"What do you do to relax?" he repeated. "I'm sure you don't spend all your time worrying about your husband."

Fiona shifted ungainly in her seat; Jason's sinister change of voice suggested that this creep was hitting on her.

"Nothing really. I spend the weekends doing the housework."

"Housework," Jason laughed. "You should come running with me."

"Running?" Fiona became a little baffled. "I don't think—"

"Oh come on!" Jason's tone became a little stronger. "It's great for stress, it's good for the heart and lungs—you should come with me. We could just start off by brisk walking."

"I'm not much of a runner," Fiona responded.

"And I am?" Jason laughed, patting his large belly. "It's mainly walking to be perfectly honest. I'll be off in a couple of hours. I sometimes go walking up the woods, but we can stick to the roads if you want. We don't want people talking about us now, do we?" He winked.

That last remark was the final straw, Fiona did not know whether she was overreacting or Jason was coming on to her, but either way, she had to get out of there.

"I've gotta go." She stood to her feet and walked towards the door.

"Gotta go?" Jason looked disappointed.

"I've got things to do," she lied unconvincingly. "Thanks for your time."

"Wait a minute, I'll see you out." Jason also stood to his feet with his semi-erection trying to push its way out of his trousers.

"Oh my God." Fiona clocked the vulgar site of his trousers, covered her mouth and headed for the door.

Jason followed her out and grabbed her left arm to stop her in her tracks; she turned around waiting for a verbal response but instead, to her surprise, he let go of her arm and put his left arm onto her left cheek on her backside and pulled her against him, whilst squeezing the cheek. Fiona just looked at him in despair as she felt his thing against her body, and couldn't believe what was happening. One minute she was having a discussion with this man, and the next he was molesting her.

"I'm sorry," he whimpered pathetically, with Fiona still pressed up against him and his stale breath becoming more rapid.

"What are you doing, Jason?" Fiona's voice was tremulous with angst.

"I haven't had it for two years, and I know you haven't—well, you know—for a while anyway, no one will know, Fiona, fuck 'em, fuck the lot of them. Talking is good, but I know a better way to get rid of all this tension you're feeling."

Fiona couldn't believe what she was hearing and slowly shook her head from side to side. "Jason?"

"Yes," came the reply.

"If you don't let me go in three seconds," Fiona calmly said. "Not only will I tell your wife, but I'll tell the police."

"I'm sorry." He sniffed her hair at the side, as she was trying to force her face away from his, and away from view, he gave her hair a gentle lick

"Let-me-go!" She quickly freed herself and ran for the door; Jason didn't chase after her and shouted as she left. "I'm sorry, Fiona."

Fiona walked quickly through the garden gate, which eventually developed into a light run and couldn't help the tears that were flowing. One of her shoes had escaped from her foot and as she went to bend down to pick the shoe up, there was Jason, staring at her from his window. Suddenly, there was a loud screeching sound coming from behind her. The set of wheels from the car behind her, quickly disappeared from view and Fiona couldn't get a proper look at the vehicle.

Without looking towards the Barry's window, Fiona desperately tried to leave the street with a bit of dignity, and walked past the house, dry-eyed, heading for Churchill Street, ready for a shower and a cry. Her mind at this point was performing somersaults, firing all kinds of questions at her.

What the hell happened there? Jason's reaction came from nowhere, was it something I said to make him react that way? Was it something I did? Did I dress provocatively? I think he was staring at my legs. Shall I say anything to his wife; after all, she is my friend? No I won't tell her it'll just cause trouble, anyway, he'll only deny it. But should I tell Nick, he has a right to know? No. The way Nick is behaving these days he would actually break his arms, anyway, the last thing this family needs is for father and a son to be locked away. Best to keep quiet on this one, Fiona.

Chapter Seventeen

The fragile, whining wind occasionally slapped Alan, Steven and Neil as they managed to climb the long steep hill of the common. All three sat on their backsides looking over to the vast amount of farmland that was separated by the main road, that took outsiders by Red Hill, straight through into Ridgeware.

To the boy's nearest side, the farmland only stretched as far as the wooden house, where it stopped due to the Red Hill car park and the woods. One mile into the woods at its end would lead a person into another stretch of land that went on for miles until the next town. On the other side of the main road were acres of land that also stretched to the nearest town, where there was no interruption, no woods, no car park, no houses, just miles and miles of farmland and greenery.

The boys continued to sit on the hill's highest point, which was usually used as a starting point for children's sleigh races. The boys were not exchanging any words as they were concentrating on getting their breath back. All three sat with their knees up and legs bent, resting their arms on their knees with their head lowered; it was a hell of a hill to climb and was not advisable for asthmatics or anyone over the age of fifty. Neil looked onto his right, trying to make out the accommodation that was situated behind the trees. Smoke, as normal, was coughing its way out of the house chimney, which for the time being, was the only part of the house that could be seen.

Without uttering a word, Neil threw his head to the right to tell his comrades that the mission was about to begin. Steven and Alan both looked at each other curiously and rose to their feet and started walking behind Neil, who was leading the adventure, plodding along in their usual preoccupied manner.

After walking slowly for about two minutes, they had now become parallel with the premises and were keeping a good fifty yards away from the trees that surrounded it.

"What now?" Alan looked over to Neil.

"We go in," came the voice.

"Just like that?"

"No point in wasting time."

"Where do you want me to wait?" Steven questioned, with a strong dose of strain in his speech.

"When we get to the trees we should get a good view of the house," Neil assured his comrades. "Through the trees is a fence. Steven, you wait by the fence while me and Alan go in."

"Go in, where?" Alan had begun to have a change of heart.

"We'll make sure the coast is clear," Neil continued making up his plan as he went along. "And then we enter the shed."

"Brilliant," Alan sarcastically replied. "And when Kelly comes out of his house, me and you will get killed and Steven gets away."

"Your not changing your mind, Alan, are you?" Neil looked with disappointment.

"A little."

"I thought we made it clear, me and you go in and Steven is the lookout."

"I'm not too sure now," he said shamefully.

"Great, then it's all off." Alan disappointment was all too clear in his voice.

Steven looked around, and although the thought of going in that place was terrifying, this was the chance for him to be taken serious and redeem himself.

He suggested. "I'll take Alan's place, if you want."

Alan and Neil both looked at Steven and was surprised by the young boy's piece of shocking, and totally out of character, bravery.

"Are you sure?" Alan breathed a sigh of relief welcoming the change of plan.

"Yeah, I think so." Steven was far from sure, but there was no turning back now, he had spoken.

"Okay, Alan, you keep watch," Neil remarked, and handed his phone over to Alan—as Alan and Steven were not allowed to take their phones up to the common, as both boys had a small history of losing their phones. "You take a video or pictures with my phone. Let's go, Steven."

"Wait," Steven announced.

"Now what?"

"What about a sign?"

"A sign?"

"We need a sign."

"Steven, what are you talking about?"

"If Kelly comes out of his house, Alan will have to make a noise or something, to let us know he's there."

"You're right," Neil was impressed with Steven's forward way of thinking and was beginning to redeem himself in spectacular fashion. "What noises can you make, Alan?"

Alan stood and thought for a moment, racking his brains on what he could concoct. "I can make an owl noise, I think."

"That'll do," Neil nodded and examined his associates. "Are we ready then?" They both nodded.

Neil led the way to the condensed trees, and as soon as they got nearer, they approached them hesitantly. Neil raised his hand up signalling that he would go in and check out the house on his own. He left the other two standing as he brushed his way past the awkward branches, making as little noise as possible—or trying, at least.

It was a short walk, only about five yards, as the trees that surrounded the house were only two deep. Neil approached the wooden fence and crouched to his knees, staring at the place that had haunted him for years. Everything that had been described was there; the shed on the left that had no padlock was there, and the stump by the house that was used for hours of wood chopping.

Overwhelmed by its eerie beauty, Neil looked on.

The wooden house had a heavy dullness with the roof wrapped in a delicate blanket of soot, and as soon as Neil had a good enough look at the house, he ventured back through the trees where his two assailants were patiently waiting for him.

"See anything?" Alan asked.

"No sign of Kelly, but the shed is unlocked."

"How do you know?"

"There's no padlock."

"So, what now?"

"We go in." Neil smiled excitedly.

Neil returned through the trees, being closely followed behind by Steven and Alan, and returned to the pathetic, sad looking fence. He waved his hand, beckoning the other two to crouch to their knees. The area where the house was situated, looked like it was situated in a different world, due to the surrounding of the high trees, little sun had managed to force its way through, and the house, along with its surroundings, was very dull.

"You wait there," he whispered to Alan. Alan nodded in reply, and Neil beckoned Steven to follow his footsteps.

"Don't forget the sign," Steven whispered to Alan. "And don't forget to record it."

"It might be a bit dark." Alan referred to the suffocating trees that bent over the house and the rest of the area, shielding it from sunlight.

"Try it anyway."

Neil easily climbed the run down fence, and although it was a little shaky, its fragility managed to withstand the weight of not just Neil, but his heavier companion.

As soon as they had crossed the fence into the unknown, Neil ran to the side of the shed, hiding his body from unwanted eyes. Steven soon repeated Neil's actions as they cautiously waited by the side of the shed. Noticing Alan was clearly visible, Neil signalled him to hide within the trees so that suspicions would not be aroused if Kelly did come out into the dreary and lifeless garden.

The venture into the unknown had caused a little tentativeness. Neil stood with his friend, and now feeling the anxiety of his actions thus far, he tried his best to hide his tension and they were not being noticed by Steven, who had his back against the side of the shed looking up to the blue atmosphere.

Steven was trying to control his erratic breathing. Neil put his hand on Steven's shoulder and put his finger to his mouth, telling Steven that his breathing was too loud.

Neil lifted his head up to Alan, who was now practically invisible to the human eye, wondering whether it was clear to enter the shed. Alan, from behind the branches, reached out his left arm and produced a circle with his finger and thumb, telling Neil that it was okay.

"Ready, Steven?" he gently spoke.

"Yeah." Steven nodded, still trying to control his unpredictable breathing, and wondering what the hell he had got himself into.

Neil sidestepped his way to the end of the shed and carefully poked his head round; Neil was right, there was no sign of Kelly. He grabbed Steven by the arm bringing the petrified boy closer to him. Neil checked one more time for any sign of a lock, and ran to its door, still grabbing onto Steven. He opened the shed door with much ease, and the pair of them quickly rushed inside and Neil closed the door behind him immediately.

Unfortunately for the both of them, the shed had no windows and it didn't take them long to notice that they were standing in absolute darkness. Steven was now grabbing onto Neil's arm, making sure his friend was still there, he felt fretful from the noise that was coming from inside the shed, which was just Neil's hand frantically searching for a light switch.

"What's that noise?" Steven quietly muttered.

"It's me," Neil confirmed. "I'm trying to find a light switch."

"Hurry," Steven urged his leader.

"I'm trying, I'm trying."

The boys' eyes greeted the light by squinting their way through its blind stinging glow, they stayed motionless until normal visibility had resumed.

Neil was the first to take a look around inside the modest shed, but to his displeasure, he found that everything seemed normal. In the left corner was an arrangement of garden tools, a fork, spade, trowel and a hand-mowing machine. In the right corner was one battered deck chair; a pair of shears, and on the floor was a neglected unhappy plant in a pot that was slowly dying in its tight claustrophobic home.

They now both walked around the shed with any kind of fear that they once had, now in the back of their mind. They were careful not to touch anything that would bring attention to an outside force, and Neil looked around the sheds clean environment, noticing that there wasn't even a cobweb in sight; the shed wasn't neglected and it was apparent that someone *did* live in the house.

"There's nothing here." Neil looked disgruntled.

"I know," Steven acknowledged, knowing that his apprehension was slowly returning. "Let's go back."

Neil said, with disappointment in his voice. "The whole thing was a waste of time."

"It doesn't matter, Neil. At least we tried, let's go back."

Neil took one more look around; there was no shotgun, no axe, no hidden body, no traces of blood, no gold, or any other kind of treasure. The whole exercise had been a disaster. "Okay, we'll go back," he said, with huge dissatisfaction.

"Good."

Steven tried to make his way by Neil to get to the door, but Neil just stood there shaking his head. He muttered, "I thought they might be at least something, you know, a weapon of some kind."

"I'm disappointed as well," Steven lied.

"Well there's nothing her for us; we'd better go."

As soon as Neil turned to face the door, a strange whining, creaking sound came from the outside, it sounded like a door crying its way open.

The two boys both looked at each other with horror on their faces and stood motionless by the shed door, not knowing what to do next. Steven's quick breathing had begun once again and Neil forced his hand over his mouth, forcing the noisy youngster to breath through his nose.

"Be quiet," Neil urged his cowardly companion.

"Who is it?" Steven managed to speak with what little breath he had left.

"Who do you think?"

Neil frogmarched Steven to the left corner of the shed and sat him down; he went back to the door to turn out the light and managed to sit next to his jittery friend. They sat in silence. With Steven almost too scared to breathe, he placed his shaking hand onto Neil's shoulder, making sure that his trusted friend would not leave his side.

They sat and listened to the sound of heavy boots clonking their way slowly down the three steps that led to the entrance of the house. These boots were not going into the house, they had just left the house and they continued to slink through the grass, creating a faint muffled sound.

*

The hidden Alan looked in surprise as he could see the full figure of Killer Kelly. He walked ponderously to the stump with the dull worn looking axe being held in his right hand. The man was about six foot in height, old looking, and slightly hunched over, wearing a large round hat that wouldn't have looked out of place in a western.

It was hard to make out the face in the dull environment, and his hat also sloped downwards, disguising his main features, but there was a definitely a grey beard present. It wasn't as long as some of the stories suggested, but there was definitely one there. As for the long straggly hair? If he did have that hair, then today he had tucked it into his hat as it looked remarkably short, but his presence was still frightening all the same.

Alan held his breath as the mysterious figure looked on in his direction; the figure's hunch disappeared as he straightened up his body, continuing to look in Alan's direction. Although knowing that his friends were still trapped inside the shed, Alan felt a big desire to flee from the area as the anxiousness, like some rapid cancerous disease, starting to spread throughout his body. It was becoming too much to take; his crouching position still remained, but his legs were shaking violently, as he looked on, waiting for some kind of reaction from Kelly.

Kelly, to Alan's relief, turned away and went to the right side of the house, away from the shed, inspecting some of the smaller trees in the corner. The trees were half dead on their knees, which was due to the lack of sunlight that hit the garden, and in an instant, there was an overhead swing from the figure who began to violently chop at his poor victims. Only a minute later, the corpse of the tree was picked up by the old man and placed onto the infamous stump ready for it's dicing.

The figure lifted his hat up by only an inch, and wiped his brow, then placed the hat back into its original position, hanging over his face. He proceeded to chop away at the wood, which would eventually become a substantial meal for the roaring hungry fire that burned away inside of Kelly's house.

Steven and Neil still sat helplessly in the darkened corner of the shed; they sat in a necessary quietude, holding onto each other for support while listening to the massacring of a tree. Neil had heard stories about his victims, the house; his wood chopping, but couldn't believe that they were only ten or so yards away from this violent monster. He knew one thing; no one was going to believe them about this story. What were they to do? Steal something? It was too dark for the phone to record this incident.

Neil was beginning to think that this was a bad idea, and that the boys would be ridiculed for the rest of their childhood life as the area was too dark once in, and putting the light on using the phone would just produce fatal results. If all they could provide was a darkened video consisting of silhouettes, he had come to the conclusion that no one was going to believe them.

Alan could see the figure had finished his short wood cutting exercise; Kelly went into the house pulling his heavy boots up each step, leaving the noisy door wide open, and within a few seconds he had returned with a glass of water. He raised the glass to his face and emptied it straightaway, placed it on the top of the wooden step and returned to the garden, by descending down the hollow steps once again. *Clonk, clonk, clonk.*

The figure picked up the axe that was left on the soft worn grass, and went to the corner of the house to find another 'victim.' Alan was beginning to feel the numbness in his legs and felt his balance slipping away. He panicked and grabbed a branch from one of the trees to keep himself on his two feet, there was a light rustle from the tree as he pulled himself back upright and thought nothing of it. He continued to watch out for his helpless friends.

The ghostly figure—with axe in hand—yet again, looked into Alan's direction, but this time Alan's nerves were under control, the rustle wasn't loud enough for a human ear to hear from that distance surely, and he was confident that the trees were doing a fine job in disguising his appearance. Slowly, the man took one step towards Alan, dragging the heavy boots, then another slow step, then another, and continued towards Alan's direction. Alan began to fret, as the huge figure got closer, every step became closer and closer until it stopped about ten yards away.

Alan was now convinced that he had been spotted, but thought to himself, if the old man made a run for him, he would first have to jump the fence that Alan was

crouching behind amongst the trees. But then he thought. *He's got an axe and I can't feel my legs.* He was feeling more than uncomfortable with the situation. The only thing that passed through Alan's mind was the smell and taste of his mum's roast potatoes, sprouts, pork chops, peas and gravy that would be waiting for him at home. Although the figure was closer than Alan would have liked, the shadows were doing excellent work by keeping Kelly's face unrecognisable.

Neil and Steven continued to sit huddled in the corner, waiting for every dragging minute to pass. They were also desperate to hear Alan's owl call to let them know that it was safe to get the hell out of there.

The young pair still held onto each other and Neil felt a tingling in his nose, suddenly without any warning, he threw his head forward and released a light sneeze, which even Alan could hear from outside. The figure turned around and faced the shed, still holding his axe; he shuffled to the shed throwing his axe from one hand to the other like a Roman Gladiator performing in The Coliseum.

Alan was torn in two; he was relieved that Kelly's attention had turned towards the noise in the shed, however, he feared for his trapped friends as against one large man and an axe, they wouldn't stand any chance of escape.

Still clutching each other and now shivering with fear Steven and Neil were waiting for their doom, although they couldn't hear anything they knew he was on his way.

"I don't want to die," Steven sobbed quietly. "I don't want to die."

"Shut it," Neil snarled.

"I want to go home."

Suddenly there was a horrific scraping noise along the side of the shed, as Alan could see, Kelly was slowly walking by the side of the shed heading towards the door with the axe in his left hand, the blade of the axe was against the wood of the shed, which scraped its way along as Kelly walked closer to the door.

There was no light in the shed; it was almost in full darkness apart from a small crack of light that appeared under the door. Neil and Steven were both gazing at the light, almost hypnotized by it, but the light had now vanished, as the man that had put the fear of God into many children for thirty years, was standing right behind the door.

Kelly reached for the door cautiously, and slowly the door began to let in some light, easily exposing the two boys. They were both convinced that this was the end and closed their eyes, with the pair of them drenching their innocent faces with fear filled tears.

The door was now open to its fullest, and from the bottom of the wall, a black shadow rose in stature growing larger and larger as Kelly's frame approached the door, then miraculously the door slammed shut, and the two boys could hear Kelly walking briskly past the shed away from his house, and all that could be heard was the yelping of a canine.

Kelly approached the right side of the bottom of his garden, his attention now fully focused on the noise coming from outside his premises, and was checking out where the noise was coming from, a voice suddenly materialised from behind Alan. "Ben! Ben! Come on, boy. Come on."

The longhaired Alsatian, fifteen yards way from Alan, not noticing him at all, ran from the edge of Kelly's garden by the fragile fence and back out of the trees to greet his master, they both continued to walk past the house and was heading for the curved path that surrounded the jungle of nettles, which led to the woods.

Kelly, at last, had made a sound, it was one grunt. He stomped his way back into the house, raising the axe one-handed and driving it into the stump, he then disappeared

into the house and shut the creaking door behind him. The axe stood alone, inserted deeply into the stump. Alan breathed a sigh of relief and as Kelly had now disappeared from view, he stood to his feet trying to bring the feeling and the blood back into his legs. He knelt onto the floor and took one last look at the house, placed his two hands over his mouth and began hooting.

“Did you hear that?” said Steven, feeling a sense of incredible relief, and went for the door.

“Wait,” Neil spoke; trying to make sure it was definitely Alan’s call. The hooting could be heard again, it definitely wasn’t an owl, it was Alan’s call. It’s not good enough to be a real owl, Neil thought.

Neil stood with Steven by the door, and Steven slowly opened it with the tips of his shaking fingers, letting the light roam inside the shed. He stuck his head out, left towards the house, and saw that the coast was clear and then turned to the right towards the trees where Alan was hidden, and was satisfied that Kelly was nowhere to be seen. Then, without warning to Neil, young Steven ran for his little life as fast as his legs would take him. Neil began to do the same and stopped suddenly in his tracks, gazed at the creepy wooden house for any signs of life, and as if nothing could stop him, he walked over to the stump, checked once again for any sign of Kelly and put both hands on the wooden handle of the axe and started to furiously lift it out of the stump.

“Come on, Neil! Run. Run. Neil. Run,” came the young voices from the trees.

Neil looked to his side and could see the hideous figure, deathly glaring at the young thief from his right window, then suddenly he disappeared from the window and Neil tried once more to remove the stubborn axe away from the wooden tree stump. His ears could sense the now familiar creaking of the door and he let go of the axe and ran towards the trees not looking behind him, but could hear the shuffle of wearisome old feet slowly catching up with him.

Alan and Steven had now disappeared as Neil came into contact with the fence, climbed over within seconds and as he was about to continue his run, a hand grabbed the poor boy by his T-shirt.

Without looking behind, he raised his hand, put it across his chest over his shoulder, and scratched as deep as he could into the flesh of the attacker. A loud croaky, gravel like cry was let out and the hand released Neil, who bolted through the trees, branches hitting him, stinging him, scratching him as soon as he managed to run on the grass of the common and was covered in sunlight once more. He could see his cowardly friends still running but were about a hundred yards ahead of him.

With the sound of hurried breath and hurried feet, Neil took one look behind him and was satisfied that there was no mad axe man following his trail. He still didn’t want to take any chances, and continued to run.

Taking one more look over his shoulder, the noticing signs of the smoking chimney was apparent, but the house itself was hidden away again by the trees. The run lasted up until the playing fields, where he met up with his friends and had a few harsh words to say to the pair of them about their cowardly behaviour.

He was not happy.

Chapter Eighteen

Tanya's car pulled up into Red Hill's country car park; it was the only car that was there, which was strange for a glorious Saturday afternoon. There was no picnickers, no dog walkers, no adolescents playing loud music from their car stereo, just Tanya, Mark and Sheeba.

They both simultaneously stepped out and Mark opened the back door to allow Sheeba to roam wherever she wanted, she immediately targeted a tree to empty her bladder. Tanya locked the door, switched on the car alarm and linked arms with her precarious friend.

"You ready to do this?" she asked.

"I think so. Are you? I know you hate walking."

"I'm okay. You sure?"

"Funny."

"What?"

"I thought it'd be harder than this." He smiled.

"We're not in there yet, Mark," she said, accidentally dampening his confident spirit, which was clearly shown from the expression on his face.

They both walked over the car park and cut through the trees and ended up onto the dirt path, they stood still for a while and could see the path curved to the right going past the nettles leading up to the common, and to their left, it curved its way leading to the condensed woods.

The woods, inside, consisted of dirt tracks. Some tracks were forked, some were straight, but others would bend to the right or the left, and one or two tracks just ended for no apparent reason. People using the straight or even forked tracks would have no problem getting out, children however—who preferred something a little more adventurous—liked to pick the paths that could lead to anywhere, in any direction.

"Ready for your walk?" said Mark.

"I can't wait," Tanya replied, looking at her boots, knowing that she should have brought a different kind of footwear with her.

They gently walked to the left of the curve, away from the common, as Mark constantly looked to his left into the woods, then to the right at the masses of nettle and thistle bushes that grew on the hill.

"Years ago," he began, breaking the silence, "you could run down that hill to get to the woods."

"What, through those thistles? You mad bastard."

"No, not through the thistles and nettles, they never always used to be there."

"What else used to be there?"

"Well, you see where that old house is, where that smoke is coming out from the chimney?" He pointed.

"No." Tanya looked confused and put her hand across her face, squinting into the sun. "I can see smoke but not a house."

"If you walk to the right on this path it takes you to the outskirts of the common, and to your left is that steep hill, which we used to use as kids to get to the woods, but before, it used to be covered in bracken. I don't know where the nettles came from, unless someone planted them years ago."

"You walk through there now, you can say goodbye to your future family," Tanya joked. "I'm glad we took the car."

The curve came to an abrupt end and became straight, with the woods noticeably on the left and the nettles to their right.

"Where do we get in?" Tanya asked. She was now feeling her boots rubbing against her heel.

"Another hundred or so yards yet," Mark answered.

"My feet are killing me already."

"I'm not surprised. What are you wearing them for anyway?"

"Dunno, wasn't thinking."

Mark could see the beginning of the steep path and was very pleased with himself that up until now, the walk had been psychologically unproblematic. He continued to walk as Tanya was playing catch up, trying to walk and adjust her boots at the same time.

"Where's Sheeba?" Mark turned around to look at his hopeless walking partner.

"If she had any sense, she probably stayed with the car," the disgruntled female voice replied.

In the distance, behind Tanya, the black Labrador galloped her way to Mark and ran straight past him, Mark continued the walk and then suddenly stopped to face Tanya.

"Here we are," his arms were outstretched.

Tanya occasionally dragged her feet, which marked her new boots, she stopped by Mark. She turned to her left staring up at the steep hill that was littered with dirt, pebbles, twigs and the occasional rock.

"I am not walking up that." Tanya had now begun to lose her sense of humour and was not impressed by the expedition.

"You won't have to," Mark said.

"Oh good."

"You have to run up it."

"Run! Why is the entrance so steep anyway?"

"If you try and walk up there, Tanya, it'll take you ages, and the reason why it's so steep, is because the woods are on a hill."

"I don't know, Mark, let's walk somewhere else."

"Like where?"

"Anywhere, but here."

Her voice had a serious tone and Mark picked up on it.

"It's not the walk, Tanya. What about what you said about me confronting my fears? If I'm gonna do that then I'll have to go inside. *We'll* have to go inside."

"Okay then, if that's what you want." She gave in. "But you have to go first."

Mark nodded to Tanya, acknowledging her request and faced the steep path leading into the woods. He got into a position with his left leg bent forward and his right leg behind him; he rocked forward then backward trying to build up some kind of momentum. Although his appearance looked comical, Mark was deadly serious and ran as hard as he could hitting the slope.

"Go on, Mark!" Tanya urged him on.

Mark's running had began to slow and he could see the brow of the path, which gave him that extra adrenaline push. He finally finished the path, that would normally take a child a minute to complete. He held his knees and bent over, hoping that normal breathing would quickly resume.

"Now your turn!" he shouted down to Tanya, noticing that somehow Sheeba had already made the journey to the top of the path.

"I'll never make it."

"Yes you will, just give it your all."

Turning away from Tanya, Mark knelt on one knee and stroked his faithful friend whose wet black nose smudged past Mark's cheek as they came face to face, Sheeba gave her master one lick on the face and they both waited patiently for Tanya to make an appearance. Mark could hear the sound of falling dirt and pebbles and they looked down to see Tanya panting her way up the hill.

"Give me your hand," Mark ordered.

Tanya reached the brow and managed to complete it without the help of her friend, who still stood with his hand outstretched.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Mark commented, knowing that Tanya was exhausted.

Tanya could not answer his question, she felt like her lungs had collapsed. She was wheezing like an asthmatic and decided to sit down onto the dirt, until eventually the wheezing had materialised into heavy breathing, and then finally normality had resumed. The whole event had taken about a minute, and Mark and Sheeba still stood patiently waiting for some kind of response from Tanya, a sarcastic one or an angry one. Instead, she straightened her back and looked over to the two figures. "So which way do you want to go?"

"We'll go straight on." Mark smiled. "There's too many winding paths, it's best to stick to the ones that I know—well, the ones I can remember anyway."

"You mean, the less adventurous ones," Tanya teased.

"Further up, this path forks off, but I've never taken the left or right one. I don't know where they lead."

"Well they can't lead very far Mark; the woods are only a mile or two deep, and the outskirts of these woods are surrounded by farmland."

"Still, I think it's best if we stick to the straight paths, we can take a walk up and have a sit down by the brook."

"Oh good," Tanya said. "I can bathe my feet then, 'cos at the moment these babies are on fire."

They walked north on the dirt path, and managed to gain at least fifty yards before any conversation intervened their comfortable silence.

"This is nice," Tanya broke the deadlock.

"I used to love it up here, it's dead peaceful and quiet."

"Maybe after today, you can come whenever you want."

"I might just do that."

The path dipped down and they descended. Up ahead, Tanya could see that the path continued, but another was connected to the straight path that headed in a two o'clock direction. She looked over to Mark and his facial expression told her that this walk had been easier to deal with than he anticipated.

"Straight on?"

"No," Mark answered. "Turn right, following that other path."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, it was up there where I witnessed the hanging."

Tanya had begun to feel tenser than her partner as soon as he finished *that* sentence.

She could only imagine how appalling it must have been for him, standing there, while a man slowly died in front of his eyes, helpless, nothing he could do but watch the man's slow agony. They took the two o'clock path and walked for a further fifty yards until Mark suddenly stopped.

"What is it, Mark?"

“It was about here when it happened.”

“Where about?”

“You know,” Mark smirked. “I can’t remember, exactly.”

Tanya placed her hand comfortingly on his shoulder and they just stood there, while Sheeba ran past playfully chasing one of the butterflies. Mark had a sense of déjà vu, it was like he was in one of his dreams.

“Where to now?” she asked him.

“The brook.” Mark’s mood began to pick up. “So you can bathe your feet and Sheeba here can get herself a drink.

As they progressed further, there was a faint hooting sound coming from the left of them and Mark held Tanya’s hand and came to a crossroads, they continued to go straight on until the sound of the brook could be heard. Tanya and Mark descended, yet again, and finally came to the brook.

“There you go, get your feet in there.”

He sat on a tree stump, and took a swig from his bottle of water. Tanya, now changing her mind about bathing her feet, sat on the dirt staring at the brook in front of him.

“Not much of a walk is it?” he commented.

“That hill was enough for me,” she said, turning her head over her right shoulder to make eye contact.

“D’yer want to go back then, already?”

“Maybe.” Tanya nodded.

“You could walk for hours in this place, the place is like a maze, especially if you take the wrong path.”

“*You* could probably walk for hours, but I think I’ve had enough exercise for one day.”

“I’m sorry, Tan,” Mark apologised still sitting behind her on the stump.

“What for?”

“I just thought with the nightmares and all that, it would be really hard for me today, but I can’t believe how easy it’s been, especially when we got to the place where it happened.”

“Just goes to show that maybe your torment was probably unnecessary. Maybe this is all you needed to do, visit the place where it happened, exorcise the ghost, so to speak.”

“Still, thanks anyway.”

Tanya changed her mind once again, and had taken off her socks and slowly placed her feet in the iced cold water as she let out a shrill.

“Cold?”

“Just a little,” Tanya replied. “But it feels good.”

“Where is that dog?”

Mark looked over both shoulders to see if there was any sign.

Tanya, now refreshed and relaxed, gazed into the glassy brook, which reflected the tips of the trees, the small plants around the brook leaned over reluctantly as if they were scared of their own reflection.

She looked at some of the older trees that were on the other side of the brook, and noticed that most of the woodland around her was desperate for the sweetness of a shower, desperate to feel the diamonds of rain once again. Tanya’s hypnotic trance was interrupted when starlings passed her overhead, as the birds swam like fish in the air, carefully dodging each tree to avoid a collision.

Now finding the green surroundings monotonous after five minutes, Tanya had decided that they should head back to the car.

"Fancy going back?" she asked standing up, brushing down her trousers.

"Yeah okay." Mark took a look at his wristwatch. "We've been out nearly half an hour now, maybe it'll probably take another half an hour to get back."

Tanya put her shoes back on and followed Mark away from the brook back onto the dirt path; the walk took them back to the crossroads and they both could feel the intense heat and only felt a light wind every other minute. Tanya was certainly no country girl; she didn't admire the country or appreciate it despite being from Ridgeware, she pined for the excitement of city life.

They approached the long straight path and knew that the exit wasn't very far away; they looked on as Sheeba entertained the pair by performing jump tricks, while trying to devour a defenceless butterfly at the same time.

The dog ran into the trees to the left of Tanya and Mark, and the noise of gentle rustling began to fade as she went further in. Sheeba could be heard in the distance, barking on a couple of occasions, but the pair of them continued the walk and Sheeba came pounding out of the trees in front of them. She turned one hundred and eighty degrees and looked into the woods, she started to show her teeth and was growling, snarling, and slowly paced backwards. There was something that had spooked the canine, and in turn, started to spook Mark.

"Sheeba? What is it?" Mark spoke with concern.

Tanya stood stationary with Mark, as they both gazed into the woods, wondering what may have unnerved the frightened canine, who continued to bark. Mark knelt down by his companion and gave her a few comforting strokes down her back, and looked again, finding it hard to notice anything as the condensed woods inside, especially as they were in full summer bloom. Mark knew that going inside would lead into darkness, and although he wasn't afraid of the woods anymore—if he ever was—he definitely wasn't a big fan of the dark.

"Shall we just go?" Tanya began to feel tense.

"What's wrong with her?" Mark continued to kneel by the dog.

"I don't know Mark," Tanya replied unconcerned about the dog, and more concerned for her own welfare. "Let's just go."

All of a sudden, Sheeba ran over to Tanya's direction, as the huge figure from the darkness of the trees, darted across the path about ten yards away from Mark into the right side of the trees.

Tanya let out a gasp and Mark, still on his knees, looked over his right shoulder, trying to follow the animal that quickly faded into the dark. A small cloud of dust appeared to rise in the air a few yards away from Mark, who now had restored his position to upright standing.

Tanya still stood with her hand over her mouth, her heart pounded, whilst sweating furiously due to the mix of the heat and the recent excitement. It was all too much for Sheeba though, who hid behind Tanya's legs waiting for another beast to emerge, Tanya half laughed and released her hands from her mouth.

"A deer," Tanya spoke out, relieved. "It was just a deer."

"I know," Mark acknowledged. "My heart's going crazy."

"Mine too."

"I don't know why I was scared?" Mark shook his head. "I mean what else lives in these woods apart from birds, deer and squirrels. A herd of elephants?"

"It's called power of the mind." Tanya began to walk in the direction of the exit with Mark by her side. "It's amazing how your mind can freak you out."

“Well I better stay sane tomorrow,” Mark said querulously. “Because it’s just me and Sheeba tomorrow afternoon, but you’re quite welcome to join us, Tan.”

“No thanks.” She held out her right hand as if she was about to stop traffic. “I’ve had enough excitement for one weekend, I need a drink.”

“Right then, let’s go back.”

Chapter Nineteen

Mary and Steven were nowhere to be seen, which suited David Dawson, as he enjoyed nothing more than spending his weekends lazing around. Although the tempting heat outside made him feel a little guilty for spending his time moping round the house, the couch was far too tempting. David's mind was racing and he couldn't really think straight, a lot of this was to do with what he had told Gary the other night. What he had told Gary had brought up some of the gloomy recollections that belonged to the town's history.

David was a big past thinker at the best of times, and always thought about his childhood, his mother, his father, his first job, or his first kiss. On this languid Saturday afternoon, he began to reflect about his final years with his father before throwing him out of the house. David was surprised that he had managed to get through his teenage years, without damaging himself psychologically. With the leaving of his mother and the abuse from his father, he was rather proud that his life was as normal as it could be. He had a loving wife, a daughter and a son.

During the final days before David's father left, he had lost his job over his drinking exploits. His father went into work two hours late and decided to punch the supervisor; he was dismissed immediately but wasn't too disheartened, as he had received a claim a week earlier for six thousand pounds for repetitive strain injury to his wrist. To David's delight, his dad disappeared for three days between Tuesday and Thursday and returned to the house on the Thursday evening, smelling of fusty alcohol and malodorous armpits. Without saying a word to his son or giving him an explanation on his disappearance, he went upstairs and fell asleep in the same clothes.

Friday evening was a completely different story altogether. A young David had just arrived to the house from work, beaming about his recent promotion, and found his dad fresh from the pub, asleep on the couch. David had been pushed too far this time and thought to himself that it was about time that he stood up to his father. He stormed up the stairs to his mum's old room and grabbed a suitcase from the top of the cupboard. Opening the suitcase on the bed, he screwed up his dad's clothes and threw them into the empty case—unfazed that his drunken father could have walked in on him at any minute.

The suitcase was full, and along with clothes, there were toiletries and three hundred pounds in cash stuffed in his dad's jacket from David's wallet. The case and David made their way downstairs and he opened the back door, and placed it on the garden with his jacket hanging over it.

David waited patiently on that particular night, and forty minutes later, his father's eyes opened. David just sat there, looking on at the wretched excuse for a man.

When his dad awakened, he got into a sitting position and lit up a cigarette.

"There's no smoking in here," David said firmly.

"Oh really," his dad snarled. "Last time I looked, this was my house, so I'll do what the fuck I like."

"Not anymore."

"What?"

Blue smoke gasped out of his father's mouth after he pronounced the word; the rest of the smoke slithered out of his nostrils.

"I said, not anymore," David repeated.

"Now listen here." As his dad stood to his feet, his knees buckled and he put his hand on his forehead wincing in pain, he quickly returned back to his seat. "Give me a minute and I'll show you who's the boss in this house."

"I'm taking over the house from now on, and you're leaving."

"If you want me to leave, you'll have to drag me out."

"Oh I will." David glared; his dad was becoming slightly agitated by the tenor in his son's voice.

"After all I've done for you."

"And what was that, dad?" David questioned, leaning over his dad like a headmaster reprimanding a pupil. "What the fuck have you done for me?"

"Don't you swear at me, young man." His father tried to get to his feet, but David immediately pushed him back into his chair. "You should respect me, I'm your dad."

"Do you know what you are?"

"What?"

"You're a piece of shit," David snarled. "You drink yourself stupid every night, you slap me, you punch me, sometimes you even kick me, you don't work, you do nothing round the house. I can't bring my girlfriend back here because you stink, you think that six thousand's gonna last you for the rest of your life? I don't think so—and another thing, I'll never forgive you for driving my mother away. How scared must a mother be to leave her own son behind?"

"Oh not this old record again. She wasn't scared."

His father successfully stood to his feet, face to face with his defiant son. "Do you want me to tell you the truth why your mother ran away?"

"I already know."

"Oh, do you?"

"She had enough of your put downs, the occasional slap here and there, your womanising—"

"One thing that I've never done to your mother, was to cheat on her."

"Somehow I find that hard to believe."

"The truth is, your mother was the one that cheated."

"Bullshit."

"The reason why you're still here is because she didn't want you."

"You lying bastard!"

"She didn't want me and she didn't want you."

"Lying bastard!"

David's minatory rage gave him more strength than he anticipated, and grabbed his father's beer stained shirt and threw him against the opposite wall. His father bounced off the wall and let out a pathetic cry. He looked up to his son lying on the floor, and tried to push himself to his knees at least.

"Your mother," he spat. "Your mother, was seeing some guy who worked in the town centre."

"That's not true."

"She had been seeing him for months, behind my back and behind your back. She made a fool of me."

"You're making this up." David couldn't hide his anger as his fists were clenched ready for the next confrontation.

"Eventually, she left us high and dry. I told her to take you, but she told me that you'd just get in the way."

"You're lying!"

David punched his dad's face as hard as he could, and felt the stinging sensation in his fist as he made contact with cheekbone. His dad fell back against the wall, holding his face.

"Me and you are finished," his dad spoke.

"I know," David said. "Your suitcase and coat are in the garden, there's money in your jacket, don't come back."

"You'll regret this, you bastard."

"Goodbye, dad."

"I'll make you and your future family a living hell, you mark my words. I'll get you, and I'll be watching you."

David grabbed the now frightened man under his right sweat stained armpit, escorted him out the door, and threw him to the ground. David had managed to stand up to his dad at last, and the feeling was indescribable, it was more relief than anything else. At least there would be no bullying, no arguments and no punches exchanged; his dad had money in his jacket, a suitcase full of clothes and six grand in his account. David's conscience was clear.

"So that's it son," his tone had dropped an octave. "Is that it, thrown out into the street?"

"That's all you deserve."

His father picked himself up and walked through the garden gate out into Churchill Street, his head lowered, looking dejected, and he never looked back, David was irate with himself that tears had started to form, tears for that waste of space. There must have still been some feelings for his father, but nevertheless, living with him had been impossible.

Chapter Twenty

Nick paced up and down the living room frantically, constantly mumbling to himself. Nick's blood pressure was hitting critical point, as he tried his best to wear out the carpet with his agitated shoes.

"Bitch. Fucking bitch. I knew it. I fucking knew it."

Nick disturbingly muttered the same words to himself over and over again, and sometimes spit would be released from his trembling lips as he was saying the words, his face was scarlet and his hands were twitching with the anger that was embedded in him. He then saw the figure of his wife passing by the window, he immediately sat down and turned the TV on with the remote and hopelessly tried to act normal before his wife worked out that Nick knew her little game, he knew what she was up to, and there was no way he was going to let it happen or let it continue further. Nick could hear footsteps clicking their way down the garden path; they belonged to the feet of his wife, Fiona.

The door—already opened, to let the fresh air in and circulate round the house—was pushed further as she stormed into the kitchen. The tap began to run and she splashed her face, trying to hide the redness of her eyes. She could feel eyes watching her, as she turned to her right to see the huge figure of her husband standing in the doorway.

"Where have you been?" he quizzed quietly.

"N-nowhere," she stuttered. "Just went for a walk."

"*N-n-n-nowhere!*" he exaggerated tempestuously. "A walk?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"What's with all the questions Nick, where's Layla?"

"Don't fucking change the subject, girl."

He approached Fiona in a threatening manner, towering over her, and she was convinced this lunatic who used to be her husband, was going to hit her at last.

"Nick, what's wrong?" Fiona looked alarmed.

"What's wrong?" he growled. "You're sleeping with another man and you ask me what's wrong."

"That was you?"

"What?"

"In the car?"

"Yeah it was."

"You-you *followed* me?" she said with dismay.

"What's his name?"

"I'm not having an affair."

"What's his name?" Nick shouted with eyes bulging and ready to pop.

"I'm not having an affair!" she screamed.

"What's his name?" Nick grabbed Fiona by the throat and squeezed for a brief while, but couldn't do it, as the surprised reaction on her face forced him to let go. He loved Fiona so much; he loved her too much to hurt her, to *really* hurt her.

They both stood facing each other in the kitchen teary eyed, one of them full of rage and the other full of fear. Fiona began to sob uncontrollably and lowered her head in her hands, trying to hide away from the frightening figure of her husband.

"I'm not having an affair, Nick." She continued to sob. "I went round for advice, the guy is called Jason, he's the husband of my friend, Maria."

"I didn't see any woman there, Fiona."

"I told Maria about our problems a week ago."

"What? You're telling the whole town about us?"

"Maria suggested that I talked to her husband, he's used to dealing with peoples' problems, so I decided to go."

"What for?"

"Nick, you've been under pressure the last four years, but the past couple of months you've been acting crazy."

"I haven't."

"Nick, you're threatening to kill yourself, you terrify me and Layla most of the time, you're too overprotective with the pair of us and you argue with yourself in the room when you think I'm not there. Does that sound like the actions of a sane man?"

Nick leaned against the wall rubbing his chin feeling winded; he bit his middle fingernail, stared at the floor, and looked back at Fiona's face.

"So why have you been crying, I mean before...you know...before I grabbed you?" he asked inquisitively, yet felt remorse for his previous reaction.

"I haven't," Fiona denied unconvincingly.

"Don't lie to me, Fiona, what did he say to you?"

"Okay, sit down," she pleaded.

"What did he say?"

Fiona kneeled down to her husband and held his hand with both of hers very affectionately, although both hands were shaking.

"He said you need professional help."

"Why have you been crying?"

"I just told you."

"Don't lie to me, girl, tell me or I'll go round myself."

"Okay, Nick, okay." Fiona patted his hand and began to tell him what really happened. "Promise me you won't get angry."

"I can't promise that I—"

"Promise me!"

"Okay I promise, what happened?"

"It's not what he said," Fiona sighed. "It's what he did."

"What did he do?"

"Oh, Nick," she said tearfully with her voice now breaking. "He violated me."

"Violated?" Nick looked confused. "What do you mean, violated?"

"He tried it on," she sobbed. "He pressed himself up against me. I felt sick, scared, angry, he said something about going for a walk or a run up at the woods after our visit, and insisted that I should go along with him."

"What the fuck are you talking about, girl? It's been years since you ran. You can't even run the length of yourself. Running?"

"Yes I know, that's when I became suspicious. But before all that, he was acting normal, I would go as far as saying he was quite helpful."

"And what do you think would have happened if you took him up on his offer to go *running*, Fiona? Rape?"

"It's the way he looked at me that made me scared—as for his invite, I dread to think what would have happened if I was stupid enough to go."

"Bastard!" Nick walked towards the door with Fiona still on her knees.

"Don't go!" she screamed. "If you go round there you'll kill him. Don't phone the police either."

“Kill him! That’s what I intend to do.” He hissed standing in the doorway, looking at his distressed wife.

“Don’t go, Nick, if you go I’ll never forgive you.”

“And let that bastard get away with it?”

“It’s not worth it, please,” she begged. “How can we be a family with you in prison?”

Nick knew she was right. Fiona was always right.

He sat back down where his wife was kneeling and wrapped his arms around her, the tears streamed down onto Nick’s shoulder as he stroked her hair.

“Feels like I’m losing control.” The tears began to run from his eyes as he continued to comfort his wife. “I should be protecting you all; you, Layla. Why does everything bad happen to this family, Fiona?”

“I don’t know, Nick, I really don’t know.”

Nick put each hand onto Fiona’s cheek and smiled at her comfortingly, the old Nick was coming back. He leaned over to her, softly kissed her forehead and carefully wiped the tears away from her cheek by brushing his thumb across, he leaned over and gave her another delicate kiss on her nose and she responded with a forced smile.

“You sit down in there,” he pointed to the couch. “You must be worn out.”

Nick ran upstairs and grabbed a cushion from their bed and made his way back down stairs, with the cushion in hand. Nick patted her knee; Fiona welcomed her husband’s affection—although she wished it were under different circumstances.

“You rest your head on that.” He placed the cushion on the end of the couch. “Have a couple of hours.”

Fiona nodded to Nick’s request, and lay on her side facing him, and with her legs curled up, she put her hands on top of the pillow and rested her head on them. Nick looked on and cursed the sick individual who had put his wife through this torment. Nick knew he had been no angel recently, but to abuse a woman sexually was inexcusable; he shook his head with frustration, knowing that he had failed his family once again and watched as Fiona drifted away into a surreal, yet, safer world.

The disappointment with himself spread throughout his body like a cancer. He had never hurt this bad before, not since...not since he lost his son.

Chapter Twenty One

The air had been hot and transparent throughout the day, and finally a herd of clouds had begun to emerge. A pack of white clouds, like sheep, were pacing hurriedly across the light blue background, scurrying to a designated destination by the orders of Mother Nature herself.

Ridgeware had not seen rain for weeks and hadn't seen that many clouds for days, any sign of a drop in temperature would have been welcomed, as the euphoria of the heat wave had declined as the days marched on. The farms around and outside of Ridgeware would also welcome the rain with open arms, but it wasn't to be as yet.

Jason Barry had locked his car in the Red Hill car park and walked through the small collection of trees, with a water bottle in his right hand and his car keys in his left. He reached the path that started from the common; it passed in a curve, down by the car park and the dirt path. It then straightened up and reached the outskirts of the woods. The path went by the entrance to the woods, meeting up with the start of the steep entrance and eventually finished at a dead end, where in the place of the path was a mixture of nettles and trees.

Jason made his usual trip around the path at walking pace with his white shorts and trainers, and a light blue vest that clung to his body that did not do anything to hide his overweight physique—which was the main reason why Jason ran in the woods. Most of the time, there was nobody there to point and ridicule him, which is exactly what he would get if he chose to exercise in public.

His walk finally took him to the steep entrance, where normally his run would begin; instead, he walked his way up—occasionally sliding back a yard—and reached the top within half a minute and pondered over his run. He needed to clear his head, his earlier actions with Fiona Wilkes were deplorable and the guilt was eating him up inside, as he was trying to conjure up an excuse for his behaviour so he could explain to her in person, on why he done what he'd done.

What could he possibly say to Fiona to excuse his behaviour? He read the wrong signals? He couldn't help himself? He thought that was what she wanted?

The fact was, Jason was extremely sexually frustrated, and found his wife unattractive, and this behaviour was a first for him. It even took *him* by surprise. Lust was a powerful emotion and over centuries, and even to this day, it drove people to kill.

Jason held one of his legs against his backside and leaned on a nearby tree to keep his balance; he started to stretch his quad muscles. He then swapped legs, and after he had stretched his hamstrings and calf muscles, he was ready for his run.

He began with a gentle jog and followed the straight path, and occasionally scraped the soles of his trainers lazily against the dirt track. He passed where the path forked and carried on straight ahead, descending down the track that dipped before reaching the two o'clock path. Like always, he turned right and followed the track ahead. He always stuck to the same route for fear of becoming lost.

The run had only taken five or six minutes so far, and as Jason came to another path, he veered left. Feeling adventurous, he decided turn right at the crossroad, and thought, what the hell.

After his actions today, he felt that a longer run would be more beneficial to reduce the stress and guilt that was plaguing him. The path began to narrow ever so slightly, and the dirt track began to go through a metamorphosis stage and turned grassy. The

practically unused path seemed more daunting than the normal wide paths, as the trees were closer as the path narrowed.

Jason continued his run, with his car keys down his right sock and his water bottle still in his hand, he began to feel a sharp stabbing pain in his chest on his right side and cursed the fact that he had only been running for about ten minutes and was experiencing cramp already. He tried to run through the pain, but every time he breathed in, the smarting became shoddier. He soon stopped and bent over touching his knees; the pain was unbearable.

Disheartened by the interruption, and still haunted by his advances towards Fiona—which occurred half an hour ago—he walked along the path, that was now bending to the left taking him further in. The trees were close together, letting in little, if any, light at all. It didn't intimidate Jason, as he thought that being attacked by a gang of grey squirrels armed with flick knives was highly unlikely.

His walk proceeded into a light jog and began to pick up the pace to his delight; there were no signs of the cramp reoccurring, as he followed the grassy path, brushing the odd branch away from his face. It felt like the trees had taken a couple of steps forward, as the outstretched branches seemed to have stretched further across the path, slapping him in the face to his annoyance.

The path seemed never ending, until he reached a point where the grassy path forked. The one leading left, led back to a dirt path. The one leading right, led deeper into the woods. The first fifty yards of the path was condensed with too many long branches, as if the trees on either side were reaching out to each other, if he had been two foot shorter he may have considered the path but opted for the dirt path and proceeded left. He ran with his head slightly lowered and spotted something in the distance, he raised his head to get an enhanced look.

There was a figure, all in black, standing on the dirt track and looking directly at Jason. It was about forty yards away and the face could not be seen clearly, as the figure had what looked like a thin black waterproof jacket, with the hood of the jacket over the individual's head.

Jason stalled his run and looked at the figure; it was motionless. Trying to get his breath back, Jason waved to the figure in a friendly gesture, a little unsure who it could be and why the figure was wearing waterproofs in one of the hottest summers Ridgeware has ever known. The man didn't respond back, and the sight of the shape made Jason uncomfortable.

The large figure started to walk slowly in Jason's direction, which made him even more nervous than before; he turned away from the approaching figure and jogged slightly away from him, taking the right path option after all. As soon as the figure was nowhere to be seen and Jason had turned the corner, he ran as fast as he could, running into the odd branch but he didn't mind, he needed to get away from this man who was spooking him.

Still brushing aside the army of branches away from his face erratically, the path became darker as the trees became thicker and bended to the right, in which he enthusiastically followed. His breath had now become practically non-existent, and he knew that if he continued with his sprint, he would collapse. He stopped, and was holding himself up against a tree with his left hand, and finally managed to consume oxygen as he coughed and wheezed, but was still baffled by the mysterious stalker. His day was becoming more resurgent by the minute.

All kinds of thoughts whizzed round in Jason's head like a merry-go-round, as he tried to justify what on earth was going on.

Maybe it's a dog walker looking for his dog, but why the waterproof jacket? Had the weather forecast predicted a shower in Ridgeware that the farmers so badly wanted? Or maybe some kind of pervert waiting for his prey, a female jogger or dog walker? Why didn't he speak or wave back? Why did he menacingly walk forward without uttering a word?

Jason became his own worst adversary; the more fanatical thoughts that flowed through his mind, the more fretful he became. He looked ahead and saw that the claustrophobic path leading deeper into the woods, would eventually lead back to the car if he went back the same way he came. But that's where the man was.

To his left, he heard the noise of disturbed trees getting closer and closer, the noise was very light as if someone was very carefully trying to make their way out onto the path. Jason tried to look deep into the woods, but could hardly see anything because it was so dark inside, and the trees were so packed together.

As one direction led deeper into the woods and the other led into danger, Jason was confused in where he should go. He constantly, frantically looked to his left, then into the trees and then to his right, and again to his left, into the trees and to his right. This pattern was repeated on another six occasions until he was disturbed by the snap of a branch to his left, but this time it was ten yards away from him.

Jason, now ignoring the path to the left *and* the one to the right, stared into the condensed woods, where the snap came from, and walked ten yards forward making him parallel to where the noise was heard.

He again looked hard through the trees, but could see nothing.

Wiping the drops of pearly perspiration from his damp forehead with his right forearm, he continued to look, but nothing could possibly be seen in the darkness and now nothing could be heard. The stillness was almost deafening, as there was no hint of a voice, an animal, the excited sound of a bird, or even a squirrel. It felt to Jason as if everything in the woods, every living thing that normally occupied the woods, had died.

Coming to a decision, Jason thought it would be advantageous to continue further into the woods. He began to lightly jog his way along the right path, knowing that he was going further in than he had originally planned.

As he restarted his run, his paranoia told him to look behind whenever he could—which he did. His pace began to pick up—despite the cluster of branches stretching across the narrow path—and he quickly glanced behind him, now suffocated by paranoia. There was nothing there to his relief and continued to brush away the wooden arms belonging to the trees, which were affecting his speedier than normal pace.

Jason took another glance over his left shoulder and progressed along the path. The path had now become a little steep, which made it harder for Jason to run, and used his arms to machete his way past the branches.

His breathing became heavier again and he took another quick look around; he felt a sharp stinging pain across his right ear and fell to the ground, clutching the wounded ear. Jason mentally cursed the solid looking branch, picked himself up, and inspected his throbbing ear; he moved his hand away and saw small drops of blood dripping onto his knee.

To his right, there was a distant sound of something making their way through the dark wooded area. Ignoring his stinging ear, Jason stood tall, puffed out his chest, and was ready to confront this pest, although this particular pest was succeeding in making him extremely agitated.

The rustling became louder as the presence got nearer, and although Jason still couldn't see anything heading towards him, he looked down and could see the side of his vest stained by five droplets of blood. He put his hand back onto the wounded ear to inspect the damage, and placed his hand in front of him to find more blood than he was expecting. Jason became heated to what had just happened, and decided to confront the individual who had made him into this nervous wreck.

"Come on then!" he bawled. "Come out and face me!"

Whether Jason had convinced the figure that he meant business, was another thing, but he hadn't convinced himself, he was petrified. The rustling grew a little louder, and although he couldn't see it, he could definitely feel the presence getting nearer and nearer.

Jason could see—about three or four trees in—the waving of the lower branches that had been disturbed in some way, the tension was now becoming unbearable as his hands that were clenched into a fist, were shaking with terror.

Suddenly, a figure burst out the wooded area and Jason released a frightened scream. As the fox, which was more alarmed than him, zoomed past and crossed the path with ferocious speed and went into the wooded area on the other side. Jason fell to his knees half crying and half laughing; he felt a mixture of relief, embarrassment and anger, that he could have been spooked so easy. As he got his breath back and wiped the one tear away from his left eye, he slowly rose to his feet brushing the dirt off his knees, then laughed for a second and turned around.

He felt coldness around his neck.

The coldness slowly started to burn gradually; he looked in disillusion to see the figure—with the jacket's hood over his head—standing only three yards away from him.

The hunter and victim were almost face-to-face.

Jason looked at the figure's right hand; as he tried to remove the soreness from his neck by massaging it, he saw that the figure was holding a knife that had fresh blood running from the edge of the blade and onto the grass.

Jason was now gasping for breath, but nothing was happening. He tried to speak, but nothing was happening. He began to feel dizzy and confused whilst staring at the motionless figure, and looked down at his light blue vest that had now turned to a claret colour.

He looked at his hands and saw, to his terror, that they both were saturated in blood; he turned them to the side and watched the blood run down onto the floor. He fell backwards a little, with the nearest tree cushioning his fall, and remained leaning helplessly, as he panicked and tried to find and assess the damage to his body.

He was now certain that the blood was coming from his neck, and made the cataclysmic situation worse, as he accidentally grabbed the flapping loose skin on his neck where the deep incised wound—four inches across—had been created.

As he grabbed the skin, he opened the wound even more and blood flowed out with every beat of his dying heart. Jason fell to the floor curled up, knowing that this was it. This was how he was going to die; alone in a wooded area where nobody went. He started to imagine lying there for months before anyone would find him, he would be rotting away whilst the ravenous foxes would see him as a hearty meal.

He could feel his heartbeat getting lazier and lazier, as the hooded figure moved closer, his chin and mouth could be seen but his hood made it impossible to work out who the cold blooded assassin was.

The large presence knelt down where Jason was, who was now losing his struggle for survival, and he placed the tip of the cold blade gently against the centre of the

wound. Jason couldn't say or do anything, but his eyes, as wide as saucers, were pleading to whomever it was, to help him.

The assassin had wrapped both hands around the knife pointing towards Jason's neck, and cruelly watched his victim, who was now engulfed in his own blood.

A few more seconds passed and suddenly the cold, motionless figure moved the tip of the blade about three inches from the centre of his victim's neck and drove it deep into the centre of the incised wound. Jason's body shuddered for a brief few seconds, reacting to the final blow, and with one quick twist to the right, the neck squished, and the knife was drawn away from the gaping hole that was left in the corpse's neck.

The blood ran off the tip of the blade, as the knife was pointing towards the floor, and was heartlessly wiped across Jason's scarlet shorts that were originally white.

The body lay curled into a ball around the small area of blood that had stained the grass. His mouth open, his eyes open, and his neck...open.

Chapter Twenty Two

The BMW was poignantly purring to perfection, and Anderton was pleased to have visited his last client, Mary Gellar, who was a patient at Rosewood, which was a couple of miles from Ridgeware.

The car was travelling on the open country road, and had one more mile before it entered Ridgeware. Anderton was looking forward to a well-earned drink and knew just the place; as soon as he had parked his car he would make his way for an afternoon drink at Gulliver's in the town centre.

Anderton was sick of the mush that was being played on the local radio, he reached for a CD and inserted it into the stereo. The works of Beethoven was one of Anderton's favourite CDs and had already memorised the track listing, and selected Beethoven's ninth symphony and pressed play.

The music began to play at high volume, which would take anybody's breath away, and now Anderton was in driving heaven. Further along, he had noticed that the roads seemed quite desolate for a Saturday, and although enjoying the freedom, he felt like he was in a car commercial, with the sound of classical music and the open winding road.

The car drove to a steady fifty, and with the windows down, he was looking forward to his short weekend. Anderton passed the farmlands and looked to his left, occasionally glancing at the woods in the distance; he kept on thinking of his appointment with Decker and that hellish laugh of his.

"Kill them, kill them all." Anderton laughed sarcastically, repeating what Decker had said. *Fucking nut.*

His final client of the day, Mary Gellar, like most of his patients, had issues concerning mental problems. Although her case was not as extreme as Rob Decker's, the usual symptoms of depression and suicide were all there. Not many patients spooked Dr. Anderton, but Decker's and Gellar's cases were a little too disturbing to completely blot out of the mind, which was another reason Anderton was looking forward to a couple of drinks.

The car pulled up at Anderton's modest three bedroomed detached home, and knowing that his wife was away with his sister in Edinburgh, he took advantage of his short-term freedom and progressed the half mile walk to Gulliver's for a few drinks before the mad Saturday night rush.

He walked into the air conditioned pub with a magazine rolled up in his hand, ordered himself a whiskey and coke, and sat down near the window. The air-conditioned establishment was very welcome, especially with the heat, as Gulliver's did not have a beer garden.

Anderton took a sip from his whiskey and coke and flicked through his psychiatry magazine until a page had caught his eye. The title read, Major Depression. Anderton knew most aspects of his trade but he always had a thirst for more knowledge and was interested in what other experts had to say. He began to get settled, forgetting the outside world for a brief moment, and began to read the basic article.

Bored halfway through the article, and only reading it because he was on his own, he flicked over a couple of pages and started to read another article, taking another sip from his delicious drink. The headline read: When to refer to a psychiatrist?

"Hello, Dr. Anderton," came the voice to his right side. David put the magazine down onto the table and tried his best not to look too surprised as he looked to his right, and saw the captivating Tanya.

"Tanya," Anderton said. "Fancy meeting you here."

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I've finished for the week so I decided to have a well earned drink."

"Mind if I join you?"

"Course not."

"I'll get myself a drink first."

Tanya walked over to the desolate bar, that only had a worn looking old man for company, and pulled up a chair to Anderton's table and sat on the chair placing the vodka and coke down onto the sodden drinks mat; she brushed back her blonde hair behind her ears.

"It's good to see you," she spoke warmly. "I don't normally walk into pubs on my own but it is so damn hot, and I saw you walk in."

"Following me then?" Anderton looked at her inquisitively.

"What?" she laughed.

"Nothing," Anderton shook his head. "I tell you what, you don't look any different than you did years ago."

"Is that a compliment?"

"No, it's an observation, *and* a compliment, of course."

"Well you've sure changed, what with those wrinkles and the grey hair, you've kept the weight off though, I'll give you credit for that."

"So what are you doing with yourself, Tanya? Psychiatry?"

"God no! I work in town as an estate agent, I'm doing okay, what about you?"

"I'm still in the game." Anderton took another drink from his whiskey and coke.

"Most of my patients are based in Rosewood. I work freelance."

"Oh excellent." Tanya seemed relieved that his career was still going strong, after what had happened in the past.

"So what are you doing down here, apart from following middle aged men? Where's your friends, boyfriend?"

"I fancied a drink after one of my friends had put me through torture on this horrendous walk of his. As for my friends? Well I don't know, I suppose Mark's my best friend, he's the one that I spend my time with, now that his girlfriend has dumped him."

"*You*, a man friend?"

"Yes!" Tanya seemed a little offended. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing." Anderton held his hands up apologetically and finished his drink. "It's just that male friends don't usually work, especially with someone like you."

"And what is that suppose to mean?" Tanya shifted uncomfortably.

"I don't mean to be offensive, Tanya, it's just that..." Anderton cut short his sentence.

"What?"

"It's just—well you're an attractive woman. I know *I* couldn't be your man friend."

"Well it's easy," said Tanya, feeling awkward after Anderton's remark. "There's no real attraction between me and Mark, and besides, I've been celibate for the past year."

"Really? I mean...that's great...I think."

"No it's not, it's hell."

Tanya let out a laugh, a joyous laugh that Anderton hadn't heard in years, and looked on affectionately at Tanya as she began to play with her hair.

Their conversation continued for another hour as men and women began to spill into the pub, they talked about their careers, Tanya talked about her ex-lovers—all twelve of them—and Anderton found it necessary to tell Tanya that she was the only woman that he had slept with, during his twenty-one year marriage.

Despite Anderton's older presence, there was still something about him that Tanya was attracted to. Or maybe it was just the celibacy playing with her feelings?

She spent the hour chatting, playing with her hair and touching Anderton's leg every time he made a humorous remark. It was so early in the night, but Tanya had managed to consume four large vodka and cokes while Anderton was still on his second.

"I need to go," Anderton said, looking at his watch to Tanya's disappointment.

"What, now?" Tanya sulked. "I thought you told me your wife was away."

"So?"

"So, Dr. Anderton," she said, playing with his loosened tie. "I think we should spend the night getting drunk."

"I'm not really a big drinker, Tanya, I think I'm getting too old for all this."

"Come on!" she shouted drunkenly.

"How much have you had to drink? You won't last another hour, never mind lasting the night." Anderton reprimanded her.

"I'm not one of your pupils now, Dr. Anderton."

"Okay." He stood up, disappointed that the conversation had turned ugly. "I'll see you around, Tanya, look after yourself." Anderton walked to the exit and a frantic Tanya scurried behind him and grabbed his arm.

"Take me home with you," she said, as they both walked into the bright evening sun.

"Tanya, if my neighbours see me walking into the house with an attractive woman like yourself, do you honestly think my wife will never find out?"

"So that's a *no* then?" Tanya smiled.

"That is a *no*, Tanya," Anderton spoke with seriousness. "It can't happen. It just can't happen."

"Why not?"

"I lost my job over you, Tanya, and thankfully my wife never got to hear the full reason why they fired me in the first place. I've been married for twenty one years, and there is no way I'm going to give up all that on a drunken one night stand."

"Fine," she said, lowering her head. "I don't think I'm in the mood anyway now."

Anderton looked around the town that was starting to buzz with pub goers, hoping that he didn't recognise anybody, and more importantly, hoping that nobody recognised him standing face to face with an attractive blonde.

"Look," he said. "Why don't you come back and I'll make you some coffee and then take you home."

"What about the neighbours?"

He gave off a sigh. "Fuck 'em," he laughed.

"But you're over the limit."

"I've only had two, and besides, I'll sober up quicker than you, what d'you say?"

*

Anderton ushered Tanya to his home, and looked around the street burdened with paranoia because of inquisitive neighbours, and opened the door and let Tanya

stumble into the room where she collapsed onto the couch. Four drinks may not have been enough to affect the average person, but the greenhouse heat outside had played its part in Tanya's inebriation.

Anderton gazed at his ex-student and ex-lover; how anyone so beautiful could be attracted to him, he just couldn't fathom. He watched her as she slipped into her temporary coma, her ruby lips pouted as she exhaled and her hair, like fine strings of gold, draped around her shoulders. He stroked her hair gently, she moaned and turned around facing towards the back of the couch, away from Anderton.

His hypnotic trance was suddenly interrupted when his phone rang out; he took the phone out of his pocket and three rings later, answered the call.

"Hello," he whispered, and went into the kitchen so he wouldn't disturb Tanya's inebriated sleep.

"Dr. Anderton?" came the voice.

"Yes," Anderton replied.

"This is Fred Houston, from Rosewood."

"Fred." Anderton sounded surprised, hoping that the Director of the Hospital—one of the top bosses—was not about to complain of Anderton's handling of his patients.

"What's wrong?"

"I've got some distressing news, David."

"Do you want me to come back up to Rosewood?"

"No, David, there's no need, it's just..." Fred Houston became silent for a few seconds and then continued his sentence. "There's no easy way to say this, but Decker's disappeared."

"What!" Anderton bellowed, forgetting about Tanya in the next room. He was suddenly pumped with anger and fear. "How? I mean, when?"

"About two hours ago, maybe more, one of the staff had taken him to the toilet and somehow he managed to escape from one of the windows."

"Impossible. Those windows are securely locked, there's no way he could have escaped through one of them."

"We've inspecting the window, David, and it looks like it has been tampered with, he must have been tampering with it for weeks. What with? I don't know, kitchen utensils maybe."

"Maybe? What do you mean, maybe?"

"The kitchen staff haven't checked their stock for days, David, I'm absolutely livid with them."

"What did security have to say about it?"

"Obviously, they're clearly embarrassed."

"So what now? What do we do now? The police?"

"No!" Fred cried in a panic. "If anyone finds out about this we could be ruined. We're a private company; our arses would be sued to fuck. Let's keep it quiet for a couple of days and if we can't find him, then we'll involve the police. The press would slaughter us. I'd never work again"

"Fred, you cannot let an escaped mental patient roam loose like that, we have to call the police."

"I'm begging you, David, no police. I've got four members of staff looking for him as we speak. I've got two plain clothes members of staff walking around the Ridgeware area hoping he doesn't go into town, and two members of staff driving round Red Hill, Lichfield, Kingsville—everywhere."

"What about the woods, Fred? Have you got anyone on the woods?"

"No, not yet."

“Well I suggest you do, Fred, if he’s in there and some dog walker crosses his path, I dread to think what’ll happen. What’s he wearing?”

“His normal patient clothes, black trousers, black T-shirt and a raincoat that he wears for his outside exercise session, depending on the weather.”

“Okay Fred,” Anderton sighed. “It’ll be getting dark soon, I’ll go up there myself when I can. Tomorrow perhaps? He’s dangerous, but I think he respects me in a weird sort of way, I’m sure if our paths cross, I’ll be fine.”

“Thanks, David. I’ll appreciate that.”

“One more thing, Fred.”

“Anything, David.”

“Forget the couple of days. If nothing is found by tomorrow night, *I* will phone the police! I’m not happy about this at all, but like you said, you’ll be history if anyone finds out. No longer than Sunday night, Fred, we can’t take the risk.”

“Thanks, David. I’ll call you if there are any changes.”

Fred hung up and Anderton in frustration threw his phone onto the dining table, which clattered off the oak and landed on the hard tiled floor.

“Fuckin’ unbelievable,” he moaned, and went back into the living room to find Tanya still sleeping. He sat down and sighed heavily fearing the worst, as Decker’s words came back to haunt him.

Kill them. Kill them all.

He got up from the chair and poured himself a straight whiskey and stood motionless, thinking of all the scenarios that could happen if Decker was in the woods. There’s no doubt his name and Fred’s name would be dragged through the local press, even the national press. And what about the people Decker could confront? Joggers, dog walkers, children, the thoughts were too unbearable to comprehend, and knew that a sleepless night would be in the post unless he finished off the half bottle of whiskey.

Tanya was already in dreamland and would probably stay for the rest of the night, so he finished the drink, and poured himself another.

Chapter Twenty Three

"Where the hell have you been?"

Fiona was incensed that after her ordeal, her husband had left her to sleep alone in the house.

"Just went for a walk, girl," came the soft reply. "I had my phone with me."

Nick Wilkes took off his black boots and placed them by the door outside. Nick approached Fiona, who had only just recently woke up, and caressed her forehead. He gently kissed her as she still lay on the couch; her eyes were all puffed up.

"A walk? Where?" she asked.

"Nowhere really, just around. Don't worry, I locked the door."

Her anger had dipped and half smiled at her new caring husband, she took his hand and gently kissed his palm, she sniffed twice at the hands.

"Your hand smells. What have you been doing?"

"Nothing," Nick said snappishly. "I just haven't washed my hands today, that's all."

"Are you all right, Nick?" Fiona said with concern.

"Yeah, of course," he laughed. "Why?"

"Nothing, it's just you look a little flustered, a little on edge."

"I'm fine, Fiona, trust me."

Fiona repositioned herself and sat up straight, she looked at her husband with sympathy and caressed his arms with hers.

"If you've got any problems," she said with concern. "You know, any kind of negative thoughts, I want you to talk to me about them from now on. I love you, Nick, I know we haven't said anything like that for a long time and I know we haven't been intimate for a while either, but I want us to get back to some kind of normality."

"We will," he said patting her knee. "We will."

He stood up and walked upstairs, and shouted down to Fiona halfway up the stairs that he was going to take a shower. She shouted back *okay* and stood to her feet and stretched, bending her spine as her arms reached for the ceiling. She yawned loudly—an exaggerated yawn—and went into the kitchen and looked out of the window looking at the beautiful late evening sky, and its blood red sun, that was now ready to end her shift once again.

Fiona sat outside on the doorstep staring at the front garden; she began to think about the future, just for a change it now looked optimistic.

Will Lee ever get better? Will Nick ever let his daughter grow up? Will he change? If not, can I live with it? Probably not.

Fiona knew it was best to take one day at a time, and today was very gratifying, despite her scare earlier with Jason. In an ironic way, Jason's harassment seemed to have brought the pair of them together, socially at least. It would probably still take a while before any physical activity would take place, but Fiona wasn't bothered, she was just glad to have the old Nick Wilkes back. Even if it was just temporary.

The phone rang and Fiona walked back into the living room to pick the phone up, it was Layla.

"Where have you been all day, young lady?"

"Mum, I'm staying at Rhonda's again tonight."

"No you're not, Miss," Fiona said stubbornly. "I've hardly seen you all weekend, you can come back now. I'll have your dinner on in a minute."

"But mum—"

“No buts, I want you home now! Do you hear me?”

“What about tomorrow night, can I go out tomorrow night?”

“Alright, I’ll have a word with your father.”

“No don’t,” Layla protested.

“What do you mean? What’s wrong?”

Layla began to tell her mother about the night before, about her father’s behaviour inside the Bald Buck public house. Richard had held his hand out to greet her father, who was surprised by their presence, and lashed out, hitting Richard twice in the face and giving him a black eye.

“What are you doing in the pub at your age, anyway?” Fiona asked, putting the story to the back of her mind.

“I was having a drink with Richard, just a soft drink.”

“Put yourself in your dad’s position, Layla,” Fiona tried to explain, understanding the actions of her husband. “You tell me and your father that you’re going to Rhonda’s, then he finds you in the pub with a strange man. You’re only sixteen for Christ’s sake.”

“I’m sorry mum, but I can’t face him right now. I’m definitely staying at Rhonda’s tonight though.”

“You better be telling me the truth, young lady.”

“I am. I promise.”

“Right, I’ll have a word with your dad and tell him, but he won’t be happy though.”

“Thanks mum, love you, bye.”

The phone went dead and Fiona placed the phone back onto the table, and looked to the ceiling where she could hear her husband thudding around in their bedroom. She wasn’t looking forward to telling him, especially as today he was temporarily a changed man—and why the hell didn’t he mention the other night to his own wife?

Fiona suddenly shuddered, thinking about her encounter with Jason. Her head was trying to throw off the thoughts of what happened in the afternoon, as she awaited Nick with trepidation as he made his way to the living room.

“Ah, that’s better,” he said, with his hair still damp from his recent shower. “Who was that on the phone?”

“Layla,” Fiona replied.

“Oh,” Nick sat down and let out a huff. “So what did she have to say for herself?”

“She told me about last night.”

“So she’s not talking to me then.”

“Not yet.” Fiona smiled. “But she’ll soon come round.”

“I s’pose you’re angry with me aren’t you, girl?”

“No I’m not,”

“What?” Nick looked surprised at his wife’s comment. “But I hit the lad.”

“I totally understand, Nick. I’m angry with her for lying to us I really am, but I’ve decided to give her a second chance, that’s why I told her she could stay at Rhonda’s tonight.”

Fiona screwed up her face ready for her husband’s eruption, ready for the angry Nick Wilkes to come back, but he just sat there in silence and nodded his head, agreeing with his wife. If there was any way he could reconcile his differences with his daughter, he would have to trust her and stop her from becoming a prisoner in her own home. It was the only way.

Suddenly the phone rang out once again, which made Fiona jump; she walked over and picked it up leaving her husband to sit in silence, contemplating how to build new bridges with his daughter.

“Hello,” Fiona answered. There was a brief pause. “No I haven’t.”

Nick, looking concerned, could see that Fiona’s hands were shaking, as there was another pause.

“He said nothing to me—oh wait, he did mention something about going for a run, but I-I don’t know then, Margaret.”

Fiona could see Nick looking over and he rapidly raised his nose once as if to say, who is it? Fiona put her hand over the mouthpiece, and told Nick that it was Margaret Barry and that she hadn’t seen her husband for hours. Nick immediately dashed out of his chair and grabbed the phone off Fiona, as she stood there while her husband began to rant over the phone.

“Margaret, this is Nick Wilkes here, Fiona’s husband. Shall I tell you why you haven’t seen your husband, Margaret?” There was a pause, as Fiona looked on helpless. “Your husband—after telling my wife that I was crazy—decided to fondle her before she left.” Another pause. “I’m not lying, Margaret, he abused my wife sexually this afternoon, and she’s been in tears ever since, but don’t worry he’ll probably be back in a few days, shamefaced no doubt.” Another silence occurred and Fiona could hear Margaret crying down the phone and she began to sob a little herself, which was being noticed by Nick. “No, you can’t speak to Fiona, Margaret, she’s too upset to come to the phone right now, I have to go now, keep your husband away from my wife in future and be thankful that were not getting the police involved.”

Nick turned off the phone and looked over to his traumatic wife.

“I’m sorry, love,” Nick said apologetically. “She has to be told what kind of man she’s living with.”

Fiona nodded and hugged her husband, staining her husband’s clean shirt with her salty, stinging tears. She was so proud of him.

Chapter Twenty Four

After having a few drinks at the Bald Buck, Gary and David, who were relieved that there wasn't a repeat of the incident that happened the night before with Nick Wilkes, had walked past Churchill Street and headed towards the playing fields. The orange glow of the final lamppost faded behind them as David nodded towards the grassy embankment. Gary followed David, and was intrigued to hear what stories David was going to tell, although Gary wasn't convinced David's stories would eclipse the one's he had from London.

They both sat on the grassy hill behind Churchill Street; to the right of them was the menacing presence of the common hill standing tall in the subtropical night, almost looking over their shoulders in the dusky evening.

"Okay." Gary grinned. "Tell me all about the dark side of Ridgeware that yer promised to tell me about last night."

"I don't really know where to start." David said with a frown, scratching his head as if he was trying to work out the square route of seventy-five.

"Well, go easy on me, Davy boy," said Gary, with his demeaning grin still present. "I don't want yer giving me any nightmares."

David looked at Gary, unimpressed with his new friends tone.

"Well, I suppose every town has their own tales of tragedy," David begun, scratching at his left earlobe. "But I only know about Ridgeware's. The first story that I'm going to tell you, Gary, happened thirty years ago when I was a kid."

"What happened thirty years ago?" Gary asked a little more serious, picking up on David's sullenness.

"When you're a kid, older boys tell you about certain events, and as you get older you hear about events on the local radio, television, gossip, people that have been affected by tragedy who you know or live nearby."

"What happened thirty years ago?" Gary repeated, with a sprinkle of impatience in his tone.

David's almost hypnotic stare, that was looking at nothing in particular, made Gary a little uneasy.

"About thirty years ago," David began at last, to the relief of Gary. "Children were playing up at the common hill on a summers evening, as they still do to this day without a care in the world, nothing to fear, no stress, everything seems so simple and perfect when you're that young."

"I know I wish I was a kid still," Gary intervened.

"Anyway," David continued. "While we were playing, a few loud bangs were heard in the distant and nothing really was said about it. Kids carried on sliding down the bank, racing with their friends and having a good time without any knowledge of what just happened then."

"Some time later, another bang was heard, but this time this was a lot louder, so a couple of the kids decided to investigate, the others seemed less interested. So two of the children walked over to the wooden house on the common hill where some family lived, and looked into the garden, there was nothing there. There was no sign of any disturbance or anything, so they decided to take a sneaky walk into the garden."

"They saw that the house door was open, but nevertheless, still had a look round. Anyway, a kid called Billy Painter decided to check out the house, he had already a story concocted if he got caught. He said he was going to pretend that he had lost a

ball, and was just looking for it—or something like that. It was *my* job to check out the shed.”

“You?” Gary looked surprised.

“Yeah, Gary, *me*,” David continued the story. “I slowly opened the already half opened shed, and saw a shotgun lying on the floor. I remember the shed smelling of something that was burning, and there sitting on a wooden chair in the seat, was this man with his body slouched, but his head was tilted up as if he was looking at something that was hanging from inside the shed roof.”

“So what happened? Was he dead?” Gary quizzed now feeling a strange mixture of excitement and nervousness.

“Oh, he was certainly dead, Gary,” David answered. “His face was all crumpled, looking like one of those accordions; there was this huge bloodied hole under his chin, and looking closely I could see that one of his eyes were missing as well as much of his face.

“He had put the shotgun under his chin and pulled the trigger, shattering bones in his face, disfiguring it, but strangely there wasn't as much blood as you would imagine there would be, but there was enough. There were also bits of skull, and the face was unrecognisable.”

Gary gulped, this was a story he wasn't expecting. “What happened?”

“Billy decided to be brave and go inside the house, he walked into one of the rooms where he could hear some music coming from a radio. He took a look into the music filled room, and saw a woman curled into a ball on the floor. She was motionless, and there was blood surrounding her body that had soaked into the carpet.” David gulped hard and rubbed his left teary eye. “Gary, she had been shot in the stomach twice. And the boy, who was just four years old, was lying face down near his mother, he looked untouched from the neck down. But when Billy got closer to the boy, he found that he had the top of his head blown off. You could imagine what state he was in.”

“Shit.” Gary looked on in disbelief. “That’s heavy. Who were they?”

“I can’t remember their full names, but the guy that shot his family and himself was called Jack Kelly, which the tabloids later nicknamed, Killer Kelly.

“Killer Kelly?” Gary rubbed his chin “That sounds familiar.”

“Yeah, after the events that had happened, we use to tease the younger ones and tell them that Kelly was still alive which used to frighten the shit out of them as you could imagine,” David half laughed. “A few of the kids today still talk about Jack Kelly, well, Killer Kelly anyway. Some parents have even threatened to take their kids up to Kelly’s house if ever they become a pain in the backside.

“Well that’s just sick,” Gary jumped in.

“I done it to Steven quite recently.” David shamefully lowered his head.

“What?” Gary looked at David astonishingly. “You of all people!”

“I know, I know.” David raised his hands in defence. “Steven had pushed me to the limit, I snapped and took him as far as this playing field, he broke down in tears and I’ve been ashamed of myself ever since. My dad was a complete bastard and I don’t want to go down the same road as he did, that’s the last time I’ll do anything like that again.”

“Who actually lives up in that house, do yer know?”

“No,” David snapped inexplicably. “I don't fucking care either.”

Gary looked down to his purple shirt looking away from his friend David, still feeling a little disturbed by what he had told him, not just about the killings, but pretending to take his own son up there and frightening the life out of him.

"I've gotta hand it to yer, David," Gary announced. "That's quite a story. So Ridgeware has had its very own serial killer?"

"No not really," David shook his head. "There's a difference."

"I don't understand," Gary looked bemused. "What do yer mean?"

David rubbed his damp eyes, which was a result of digging up parts of the past he would have preferred to have stay buried. However, his friend had a right to know, as most of Ridgeware knew anyway. Gary was a strange breed, many people left Ridgeware thinking they could get a better life, but there wasn't many who moved to the small town. David still didn't know why Gary had picked this town, of all the places in England he could go to, and he goes to Ridgeware?

David eventually decided to answer Gary's question, and looked at his new friend's confused face.

"You see, Gary," David started. "There are three types of multiple murder; you can have a single incident within one location, like a school or a factory, where a group of people are slaughtered, a kind of revenge against society, a personal cause homicide. These people are labelled as mass killers. Then you have the spree killer, who kills a number of people at different locations over a short period of time without taking a break, and then you have the serial killer."

"So what would yer class a serial killer?"

"A serial killer is someone who has killed at least three times over a period of thirty days. Serial killers usually have an emotional cooling off period between each kill, these periods could last weeks, months, years even, and they hunt other people usually for sexual thrills and will commit these crimes over and over again across long time spans, as they are in no rush, as they think that they'll never get caught."

"How come yer know so much about—"

"Books, documentaries, websites," David interrupted. "I think it's a fascinating subject."

"I suppose it is," Gary agreed, straightening his back, looking a little uncomfortable. "So how would yer label that incident?"

"Probably none of the three that I've mentioned," David answered, sounding like a criminal psychologist. "According to this book I was reading a couple of months ago, the Jack Kelly saga, according to this article I read, would be classed as a...family annihilator."

Gary stared at David, wondering if this was the same guy that he was having a few drinks with before, as not so long ago he was acting normal. Everybody had unusual hobbies. Sharks fascinated Gary; Susan had a thing for china dolls, but serial killers?

"So what's a family annihilator?"

"A family annihilator is somebody who kills his wife, children, parents, in-laws and pets or some selection of them, finally nine times out of ten they usually kill themselves. These kinds of people are usually male, middle aged, depressed or alcoholics or both."

"You see, Gary, these types of killers believe their actions are altruistic, correct, and strongly believe that their family actually would be better off dead. I think one day, Jack Kelly just snapped, and it was a spontaneous kill, a disorganised murder."

"Why kill himself?"

"Guilt, remorse," David guessed. "A realization of what he had done once the adrenaline had finally worn off."

There was a slightly stunned silence from Gary, as he noticed the night had craftily dimmed her colour to a deeper shade of blue, which made David's story more eerie. He looked over to his right and saw the now darker, menacingly looking common hill.

"Anything else I should know about?"

"There's a few others," David shortly answered. "If you can be bothered to listen."

"Yeah, why not."

"Just a few things really, some incidents have actually been fairly quite recent, stop me if you don't want to know."

"I *do* want to know."

"If Ridgeware is going to be your home for a while you may as well know its history, it's not all mining, textiles and sleepy weekend stories, though."

"Well, like yer said, I need to know." Gary agreed.

"About twelve years ago, two brothers aged ten and seven had decided to go for a stroll or an adventure in the woods, unfortunately the boys never returned home. John and Frank Gutterfield, do you remember them?"

Gary shook his head. "Should I?"

"It was on the news," David continued. "There was a massive manhunt for them but nothing was found, the police reckon they were probably going into the woods or coming back from the woods, and was probably dragged into a car near the car park area at Red Hill. It's on the outskirts of Ridgeware, do you know it?"

"I may have been up there once or twice with a certain female companion." Gary grinned.

"Anyway, two years later and no sign of the boys, their parents moved away to Birmingham, and nobody ever saw them again. It must have been terrible for them."

"The police found nothing?" Gary said, looking generally concerned.

"The police found nothing, Gary. About eight years ago, Gary, a policeman by the name of Steve Mason had found out that his wife was having an affair. According to stories, she had left him on a number of occasions and always managed to return whenever she got bored of her lover.

"Anyway he must have thought to himself, enough is enough, as he had found out for the fifth time she was seeing somebody else. Mason, then told his wife he was taking the kids to the park but ended up in the very same Red Hill car park, stuck a hose pipe to his exhaust, locked all the doors and killed himself and his three children, who were all under the age of ten."

"Punish the wife by all means," Gary stormed. "But killing the kids is unforgivable, I can't believe that."

Gary raised his eyebrows and puffed out his cheeks. He hated those stories, but it seemed to be quite regular. At least two or three times a year, the story of a father killing the wife and children would end up on the national news. It was something that baffled Gary Strand.

"Recently, Gary, it must be about four years ago now, a boy had been missing for the night after he had ventured up to the woods on his own. He told his parents he was meeting friends. But he probably wanted to get out the way and get drunk, or smoke pot. I've done it myself once or twice.

"So this eighteen year old's dad decided to look for his boy, as the police didn't want to get involved for two reasons: One: the boy had been missing just for one night. And two: he was now classed as an adult not a minor, so there wasn't much they could do.

"After about three hours of searching, his dad decided to go up to the woods as a last resort. He was only in there for five minutes and he eventually found his son, on the floor, curled up in a ball, sobbing like a baby." David paused for a moment and Gary's impatience got the better of him, and rapidly nodded his head towards David as if to say, so what happened next.

"The boy had been hit over the head with a large stone about five or six times, brutally raped, and was left there to suffer in the dark. I still remember it to this day, the effect it had on the town was incredible, everyone was in shock. Parents had kept their children indoors for a long time, as the person responsible was never caught, but you can't keep tabs on them and keep them in twenty-four hours a day. If they want to go to the woods they'll go, children don't really have that same sense of fear like us adults have."

"No, that's true," Gary agreed. "So what happened to him, the boy?"

"He went back to his parent's house," David continued. "After being quizzed by the police, and after weeks of the boy's silence, he just snapped. His dad found him in the living room one day with both of his wrists slashed. After taking him to the hospital, he was transferred to Rosewood."

"The mental hospital up the road," Gary nodded. "So who was the young man, I mean, what's his name?"

"The young man, well he should be twenty-two years old by now," David thoughtfully spoke. "His name is Wilkes, Lee Wilkes. Nick Wilkes's boy."

"Oh shit," Gary responded.

"Exactly," David agreed. "Which is probably the main reason why he doesn't want his sixteen-year-old-daughter going off with guys, who at that age, only have one thing in mind."

Gary looked around him, feeling a little spooked and stood up as his backside was becoming numb from sitting on the grassy embankment.

"Well, I think that's enough for one night," he said, still standing up, hoping to get some feeling back in his gluteus muscles. "Anything else, before we head off?"

"There is something else, Gary, if you can be bothered to listen. I mean, I know it's getting late"

"No, I don't mind, what is it?"

"About two years ago." David paused, waiting for his audience of one to sit back down and listen. "A teacher from one of the high schools had come home early with his son. I think they were on the way to a football match, but there was a crash on the motorway, which forced them to turn the car around and go back home.

"The guy went upstairs wondering where his son had got to; his son was standing by his dad's bedroom and when his dad investigated what his son was looking at, he could see his wife in bed with another man. This was no other man, it turned out to be his best friend, a teacher by the name of David Jenkins, a colleague of his at Flaxlow high school."

"So what happened to him?" Gary said, thinking that the night would never end.

"The boy's dad went up to the woods and hung himself."

"Fucking hell." Gary looked on in disbelief. "It's funny when yer think about it, yer never hear of women killing themselves, it's always the men. Why on earth would someone want to commit suicide anyway, especially over a woman? I'm sure he could have got over it."

"I think different social and psychological factors play a part," said David, trying to answer Gary's query. "Suicide was not only a tragedy for this man it also has a profoundly effect on the families and friends who survive the victim, often leaving them with feelings of grief, guilt and anger. I'm sure he didn't want to hurt his son, but he must have wanted to punish his wife for what she had done to him."

"Anyone we know?" Gary quizzed.

"Well, that's why I'm telling you, Gary. The guy that hung himself was a man called, Bill Miller."

David looked at Gary for a response, Gary sat shaking his head not knowing who Bill Miller was. "Alan Miller's dad, your Neil's friend."

Gary slowly nodded the once, trying to take in the macabre information he was being fed. After a slight pause, he asked. "Who found the body, David?"

"Some guy out walking his dog," David spoke. "Apparently, Bill Miller was just barely alive when the dog walker found him, but because he was so high up it was too late to do anything. The poor bastard had to just stand there and watch this poor man slowly die in front of him."

Gary nodded, and he looked at his watch, strongly hinting that it was time to bring this story telling to a close.

"Okay let's go," said David, responding to Gary's less than subtle hint.

The pair of them got up and brushed their backsides trying to get rid of the freshly cut grass, which would raise questions with Susan Warner and Mary Dawson, wondering if their partners had been getting up to any kind of mischief. David could be trusted, but Gary certainly couldn't.

They both walked into Churchill Street in an unpremeditated silence. David knew that they would never become great friends as their personalities were completely different. They were just drinking buddies. But he was glad to have someone to go out with and have some company for a change, even if the guy was a serial womaniser. It was a short satisfying escapism from the usual hustle and bustle of family life for David Dawson.

Chapter Twenty Five

The light wind fretted in the early Sunday afternoon, and three boys by the name of Neil, Steven and Alan walked along Churchill Street passing underneath one of the lampposts, and on top of the light, a thrush merrily twiddled his song.

The boys were in buoyant mood despite their recent scare. They had failed in borrowing a piece of merchandise belonging to Kelly, and the recording turned out poorly as well, but it was an adventure that they would never forget till their dying day. They, instead, decided to do something normal, something that most young boys did at their age. Build a camp.

All three happily walked along the street, and had taken the usual journey and headed towards the playing fields. There would be no football today, however; this day would require hard work to build the camp.

Nothing much happened on a Sunday normally, and today was no exception. Parents woke up far too late, spent most of their morning reading papers and listening to “old” music.

It was two o’clock in the afternoon and the boys were ready to put a full shift in. They even brought sandwiches and a bottle of water with them, brought in a plastic bag that was being carried by Steven.

The common hill, as usual, was a bit of a struggle, they also reached Kelly’s house and this time made no attempt to go near the place. Steven couldn’t keep his eyes off the bellowing smoke spewing out of the chimney and almost walked into a ditch. Alan and Neil were a few yards ahead, and Steven trotted forward to catch them up, as they approached the jungle of nettles.

“What do you think?” Alan asked Neil. “Shall we go through or shall we go round?”

Neil looked at Alan strangely, and gazed down at himself. All three boys were wearing shorts. The jungle of nettles would have to wait another day.

“I think we’ll walk round for a change,” came Neil’s sensible reply.

The heat didn’t seem too intense on this afternoon, and there was even a couple of threatening clouds in the sky, but it was still hot enough to wear next to nothing.

The boys walked around the nettles along the thirsty path, passing the chimney smoke and descended down, following the path until they reached half way. Steven walked through the trees to have a look in at the Red Hill’s car park area and saw one desolate car with no driver, he soon ran back through the trees when Alan called on him.

The three youngsters trudged along the straightened path, with the ferocious looking nettles to their right and the menacingly dark woods to their left. The boys approached the steep entrance and ran their way up in record time, with the exception of Steven, who slid backwards two yards before he reached the top. The three boys stood together and rested in order to get their breath back.

“Which way?” Alan asked Neil.

“Not too sure.” Neil scratched his head. “Straight up.”

They progressed to the first fork in the path, where straight ahead, the path descended down and revealed a path pointing at two o’clock, they went right.

“It’s gonna be a long day,” Neil warned his pals. “So we’ll take our time with the building of the camp, let’s go.”

The temperature was at a modest twenty-five degrees, as ten minutes later, they came to the usual sighting of a wide path to their left that headed towards the

crossroads, but this time they carried on as Neil had plans on building a camp in the shallow part of the woods. Rather than walking up to the crossroads turning right and then approaching the brook, they agreed with Neil, and continued for another ten minutes before they could hear the familiar trickle of the wide brook close by.

The youngsters never knew what was on the other side of the brook, as they never felt the urge to cross it. The main reasons why most walkers, children and joggers never ventured over the water was simply that it was impossible to jump, and although it was only half a foot deep, people were not prepared to wet their legs to find just another clump of trees. Also, there didn't seem to be any recognisable path on the other side, which would mean that if any person *did* cross, they would have to fight their way through the trees to make any kind of progress going forward.

One of the other reasons for neglecting the loneliest part of the woods, was because there was far too much of the woods that still hadn't been discovered. Alan, Neil and Steven had been going to the woods for years, and even *they* hadn't managed to walk the full length of the area, because the further and deeper an individual walked into the woods, the more smaller and wavier the paths were. They stuck to what they already knew.

It was almost as if the paths were put there on purpose to make sure people could not exit out of the woods on to the other side, which was the same for the left and right side of the woods; the steep gravelled path was the only proper way in and out of the strange place.

The boys stepped off the path, and walked through the unusually spaced out trees that were situated all along the brook. The boys stayed motionless, turning their heads from side to side, desperate for old bits of wood for their camp.

"There's nothing here." Steven looked dejected.

"We'll have to go further in," Alan spoke. "Are you sure you want the camp here, Neil?"

"Yep," Neil said quickly. "When we get the place built, we won't have to walk very far every time we want to visit it. What do you think?"

"S'pose," Alan agreed. "So what's the plan?"

Neil stood stroking his chin, knowing that the building of the camp was looking chimerical; he looked over Steven's way and pointed. "Steven, you stay here. Me and Alan will go looking for stuff for the camp."

"Me?" Steven now not only was dejected, but also looked rejected, "Why do *I* have to stay behind?"

"Because." Neil thought long and hard about his answer, "me and Alan are older than you."

"Okay," Steven reluctantly agreed without a fight.

Steven disappointingly watched his friends follow the stream and held his breath, as the stream bended towards the left and Alan and Neil disappeared from sight; Steven was now alone.

Steven sat jaded on the dirty bank with his feet inches away from the water; he didn't know how long Alan and Neil would be. Ten minutes? Half an hour? An hour? But knew that with only the company of passing birds, his company alone, would not be enough to make the time seem a little swifter.

Steven puffed out his chest and released a large groan, he was tired of his own solitude and upset that he would never have a major role to play in any of their adventures, because whatever happened, however old they became, he would *always* be the youngest of the three.

Steven searched through his plastic bag and had taken out one of his very own creations, a jam sandwich. He took a bite out of the sandwich, unbothered by the staleness of the bread, and washed the clingy ball of chewed up bread down his rusty throat with a gulp of tepid water. The sandwich only needed another four bites before it was consumed, and another drink of water later, helped the rushed sandwich to go down. Steven unselfishly placed the bag by the nearest tree to him, as his friends would be hungry after they came back with materials for the camp.

Staring at the stream of water in a mesmerised state, Steven noticed a droopy, sad looking flower hanging over the water. It looked like it was almost ready to jump in to end its uneventful life. He looked around for his friends and was surprisingly calm considering he could have been left alone for up to one hour. Dread did not play a part with Steven's feelings, but the clock watching was playing havoc with his intellect, he was already exhausted with his own company. At least if he had his phone with him, he could play games. But after losing the last one, he wasn't allowed to take it when playing up the common or the woods.

All of a sudden, from a distance behind him, Steven could hear the sound of dragging footsteps, unsure of whom it may be; he lay low and crawled to the bag that was sitting by the tree. He lay down with his stomach on the floor behind the tree, and heard the dim sound of an adult's presence getting louder. He lay low and could hear his fragile neck crack a little as he strained it to get a better look at the person.

The man approached the end of the path and was facing away from Steven, looking to the right. Steven wasn't going to take any chances, however, and made sure that at least two thirds of his face was clear of sight.

He looks like he's looking for something, or someone.

The man turned around, satisfied that there was nothing of any interest to him, he scratched the right side of his grey hair with his right hand and turned around and walked at a snail pace away from Steven.

Steven was relieved, as he was convinced the man might have attempted to walk along the bank, which would no doubt result in Steven being found and the camp being found before it was even built, and it would all be Steven's fault yet again. He did think that his bravery at Kelly's house may have earned him some respect with Alan and Neil, especially as Alan was too anxious to go in there after all his talk, but Neil still looked down upon Steven.

The grey haired man's body became smaller to Steven's eyes, as he went further along the path and then turned right heading towards the crossroads. Once the person had disappeared, Steven sat back up, brushing the dirt off the front of his T-shirt. He rose to his feet and stretched with his hands reaching for the sky, all this waiting was becoming too much hard work.

Chapter Twenty Six

Anderton, overwrought that the bestial Decker could be lurking in any direction, ominously strolled his way through the woods with malcontent, not too sure where the hell he was going. This was his first experience searching for a lost patient, and hoping it would be his last. Being a psychiatrist usually consisted of *helping* patients, not looking for them, and trying to keep incompetent people still in a job.

Anderton knew he had better things to do rather than looking for a patient on a Sunday afternoon, but had no option. He liked Fred Houston, and wouldn't want the old man to be out of a job. Also, Anderton felt partly responsible as, after all, it was *his* patient and partly understood Fred not wanting to involve the police. Decker may be mentally unstable and had threatened to kill people, but so far his psychotic curriculum vitae consisted of: two people shot at with a pellet gun, a few dead squirrels, and an attempted murder on his sister. It didn't make pleasurable reading, but he was hardly Jack the Ripper.

Anderton felt a twinge of culpability as he walked on the path kicking up dust; really he should have looked for Decker first thing in the morning, if it hadn't been for his greed for alcohol the previous night, he may have been able to do exactly that. He also kept the sound on his phone switched off, knowing that Fred would be pestering him every ten minutes, asking whether he had found Decker or not.

At least Tanya had got home in one piece, well, at least he thought she did. She wasn't there when he woke up at about ten o'clock with his pounding hangover, so she must have sneaked out of the house—probably embarrassed of her behaviour. Still, he was glad to have seen her, and was proud of himself for not taking advantage of a drunken, frisky, beautiful young woman.

Despite that nothing had happened, technically, a woman still stayed the night at his house, and he did feel a little guilty about this. His wife certainly would not approve, and he was hoping that none of his neighbours saw her sneaking out in the early hours of the morning. How suspicious would have that looked?

For the past couple of hours after he woke up, without participating in any breakfast, Anderton had consumed four strong cups of coffee to get him back to normality. He knew that that was probably one of the reasons why his hangover was still present. He knew that after consuming the amount of alcohol he had, he would be severely dehydrated, but instead of consuming pints of water—and maybe a lemon to help purify the liver—he stuck with the caffeine, which was why his head pounded and hammered away inside of his head.

Anderton had parked his motor in Red Hill's car park, he noticed there was another car there. Whether it belonged to a dog walker or a jogger, Anderton didn't know, as he hadn't seen a soul since he went into the woods.

He placed his hand on his thudding right temple, but he couldn't just go home. He had a responsibility for Decker's welfare, even though he felt physically terrible. Anderton decided to take a risk and turned on his phone awaiting Fred's call, knowing that it could be only a matter of seconds or minutes away. He was dehydrated, hung over, his head thumped and he was frazzled to the limit. He had a mouth that smelt like excretion, and promised himself that this would be the last time that he would forget to brush his teeth.

There was one thing that did worry Anderton, as he began to approach the crossroads, if Decker escaped by using kitchen utensils, what was to say that he

wasn't carrying some kind of knife or a piece of cutlery that had been sharpened against the wall in his room? Security was usually strict in Rosewood, and this escape must be down to incompetence or neglect.

How come the kitchen staff never noticed there was cutlery missing? They must have to do some kind of stock check on a daily basis, especially in a mental hospital? Why aren't patients using plastic utensils? And what about searching Decker? Staff searches mental patients on a regular basis, unless he somehow managed to put a utensil up his anus.

According to Anderton's studies, most murderers start off at a young age by being cruel to animals, Decker was known to set fire to squirrels whilst they were still alive. Maybe *now* he was ready to commence his chosen vocation?

Were the voices in Decker's head, real? Was he really trying to protect the woods, or were the voices a way of distracting people in thinking he was just a cruel bastard? Maybe the voices never existed in the first place? Maybe Decker wasn't crazy; maybe he just got an adrenaline rush from performing his cruel operations? He was a notorious bully inside the hospital, and eventually had to be segregated.

Whatever the reasons for his behaviour, Anderton knew that the clock was ticking and only had about six or seven hours before daylight would cease to exist. He came to the crossroads and could not fathom where to go. He thought the path to the right of him would lead to nowhere in particular, so he decided to go straight ahead.

He walked for another five minutes and decided to turn left along another wide path, although these surroundings were new to him, he thought it would be better to stick to the paths that were spacious, he wanted to find Decker but he didn't want to risk being jumped on in the process. Anderton also noticed that, although the paths were spacious and wide, if he was to go deeper into the woods, he would have to take the riskier and narrower grassy paths.

The dusky path had a left turning, but he decided to go straight on as he was convinced that the path to the left of him would eventually lead to the entrance. Although he could not see anything clearly, he trusted his judgement and continued further, ignoring the occasional narrow curvy path to the right of him, that would surely lead him into the middle of nowhere.

Anderton stopped and sighed, he turned back taking the path that would hopefully lead to the entrance. Along with his headaches, hunger pains had begun to take place and he needed to get home as soon as possible. His phone began to vibrate and he reached for his pocket to answer the call.

"Yes, Fred."

"Found anything?"

"If you mean Decker, Fred, then no."

"My staff haven't found him either, I don't know what to do, David."

"Nothing we can do, man, we just have to keep on looking."

"How long have you been looking?"

"Not long, but I need to get back. I feel like shit, Fred. I'll get myself a shower, something to eat and drink, then I'll come back up later on."

"Thanks, David, you didn't have to do this, y'know."

"Don't matter. I think I'm heading outta here, so I'll be back here in another couple of hours, y'never know, your guys might have found him by then."

"Bloody hope so, bye, David."

"See ya, Fred."

Anderton had guessed right, as he walked past a more spacious path to the left of him and descended down the straight hilly path, he could see the descending exit. The

walk back to his car felt like one of the longest walks he had ever endured, and was most definitely now feeling faint and a little nauseous. The heat should have been bearable today, but his head felt like it was on fire.

Still puzzled about the abandoned car—especially as he had never saw a soul when he was in the woods—he opened the BMW, sat inside the car, wound the windows down and pressed the button for the air conditioning, and just sat there with his head tilted back. His mouth was extremely dry and couldn't wait to get home, but thought that a short rest would do him the world of good.

His eyes began to feel heavy and could feel his unmerciful drowsiness creeping upon him; he opened his eyes occasionally, trying to fight off the tiredness. Noticing the trees in front of him at the Red Hill car park were becoming blurrier and hazier, he finally left normality, temporarily, and entered into dreamland.

*

What felt like a second, Anderton awoke to find himself alone in his car and shivered with the cold that was being produced by the car's air conditioning, which he immediately switched off. He rubbed his eyes trying to get out the irritating particles that existed in each corner, and gave off a loud yawn.

Anderton couldn't believe he had slept almost three hours when he looked at his watch, and knew that he was letting Fred down by doing very little to look for Decker. His mouth was extremely dry and gunk had formed on the edges of his mouth due to the increased dehydration.

Looking at his phone, he found four messages, all from Fred, asking whether or not the patient had been found. Luckily, for Anderton, the phone would only vibrate during incoming calls instead of ringing which enabled Anderton to sleep in peace. Nevertheless, he did feel incredibly guilty due to his lack of trying and told himself as soon as he got himself home, he would spend the rest of the daylight hours searching for Decker to help ease his conscience, even though Anderton wasn't completely convinced that Decker was hiding in the woods.

It would have been easier for him to just to tell Fred that he had searched for hours and he could not find anything. Anderton could argue that it was a big place and finding Decker with a search party of one, was almost impossible.

He started the car, feeling worse than he did three hours ago, and left the other abandoned car to sit in loneliness. He approached the exit and turned left, heading down the main road that led to Ridgeway.

Chapter Twenty Seven

It was ten to seven, and Nick and Fiona Wilkes were eating their late dinner without their daughter, Layla. They were having chips, peas, salad and a twelve-ounce medium rare steak, one of Nick's favourite meals—much better than the rabbit food he had to endure—and he was pleased that for one night at least, his wife had decided to have a day off with her diet. Nick had already devoured his garden peas, salad and potatoes as he always saved the best till last.

The salad had gone from Nick's plate within a minute, as he picked off one by one his least favourite food in order to finish the whole plate, which would delight his wife. The garden peas were next and these took a while to be consumed, as he was in such a hurry, most of the peas escaped by rolling their plump bodies off his fork by the time the utensil reached the hungry mouth.

The chips were a lot easier to digest, as the excitement began to build as the last chip was chewed. It was time for the juicy steak, and Nick was going to savour and take his time with the eating of the steak as if he was a prisoner on death row consuming his last meal.

"Did sir like his meal?" she said playfully.

"He certainly did, that was one of your best."

"Right, you have your drink and I'll get the dishes."

"No you won't," Nick said. "After the weekend *you've* had, you're putting your feet up, and that's an order."

"Sounds good to me." Fiona got up from her chair, stood by her husband and planted a kiss on his cheek; he looked surprised. "What was that for?"

"Doesn't have to be a reason."

"It was nice."

"There's more where that came from, a lot more." She winked. "Maybe tonight, we could have an early night?"

"Sounds like a great idea, seem as though we're on our own tonight."

Fiona picked up the plates and went into the kitchen, Nick watched her by the sink and was content that for the first time in a long while, he had become attracted to his wife again, and that she had put her bad experience with Jason Barry, hastily behind her. Nick sat there quietly as Fiona completed the dishes, and lifted his backside up from his seat and picked up the phone.

"Who are you ringing, Nick?" Fiona asked, from the kitchen.

"I thought I'd give our daughter a ring at Rhonda's," he said, checking in the phone book and started laughing. "I'm starting to forget what she looks like."

Nick punched in the numbers and waited and waited as the phone rang seven times, the phone on the other line had just been picked up.

"Hello," came a woman's voice.

"Hello, am I speaking to Rhonda?"

"No, this is Rhonda's mother speaking, who is this?"

"I'm sorry, I'm Nick Wilkes."

"Oh hello, how are you?"

"I'm fine. I was just wondering if it would be possible to speak to my long lost daughter, I'm just checking if she's still speaking to me."

"I'm sorry, Nick, I don't understand."

"Layla," he said with some concern in his voice. "Can I speak to her, please?"

“Nick, she’s not here.”

“What! She told me she was at *your* house.”

“Well she *has* been, but she left about an hour ago.”

“I don’t understand, an hour ago?”

“Hold on, Nick, I’ll have a quick word with Rhonda, she’s upstairs, maybe she knows something, wait a minute.”

There was a silence and Nick looked on in the kitchen where his wife—who hadn’t caught any of the conversation—was in ebullient mood, singing an old seventies song whilst play dancing in the kitchen. Nick could faintly hear two females on the phone in the background, although he could not work out what they were saying, it sounded like an argument. Another minute had passed, and Rhonda’s mum finally came back onto the phone.

“Nick?”

“Yes.”

“This is really awkward,” she spoke with a negative tone present.

“What is it?” Nick was beginning to feel tension building up inside him.

“According to Rhonda, Layla has gone out for the night with some boy called, Richard Johnson. Do you know him?”

“No, not really,” came his reply. “Where has she gone with this guy?”

“Rhonda doesn’t know, I’m sorry, Nick, that’s teenagers for you, but she’s definitely coming back here to stay for the night—unless you want me to send her straight home.”

Nick rudely put the phone down and sucked a long breath in, as his wrath began to stew, he was losing control yet again.

“That was quick,” Fiona said, popping her head from the kitchen.

“She’s not there.”

“What? Well, where is she?”

“She’s out with that guy I punched the other night, at least I think it’s him.”

“What, *all* night?”

“Just for the night, according to Rhonda’s mother, she’s still staying there tonight.”

“Well, when she comes back tomorrow, me and you are gonna have words with that little madam,” Fiona ranted.

“Okay,” Nick said, sounding and looking a little subdued, hiding his real emotions and spuriously showing a calmer side for the benefit of his wife.

“What does she think she’s playing at? She’s sixteen for goodness sake.”

“I don’t know, I really don’t.”

“Are you okay, Nick?” Fiona put her arm around her husband.

“I think I need a drink.”

“Good idea,” Fiona agreed. “Get yourself out for a couple of hours.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll do that.”

“But don’t come back drunk.”

“I’ll only be a few hours.”

“You better take a coat with you, Nick,” Fiona looked through the kitchen window out into the skies. “I think tonight were finally gonna get some rain.”

Chapter Twenty Eight

The murky clouds had returned after a long holiday, and gathered quickly together over the Ridgeware sky, as if they had a meeting. Above the potential storm, the heavens were ready to open and the self-centred clouds had brought a darker contrast to the town, as the latter part of the day was starting to be successfully muscled out by the night.

It was seven o'clock, and Mark Pembroke and his trusted companion had just gone by Kelly's house. The chimney coughed out black clouds of smoke. They both headed down the path, which curved its way around the mass land of nettles.

Mark looked up to the once blue sky, and cursed his luck that it had been hijacked by the dark cloudy bandits, and wished that he had taken the car to Red Hill so they had shelter to go back to, in case there was a downpour.

Sheeba was in her usual bouncy mood and was unaware of the changing weather conditions; she ran ahead of her master, as she already knew they were heading up the steep path.

Mark thought that Sheeba had the right idea, as if there was a downpour—and it looked very likely as the clouds bellies did look ready to burst—the trees could shelter them temporarily until the rain eased off. Walking back along the wide-open common would just lead into trouble for the pair of them, and would probably introduce pneumonia to the unfortunate adventurous pair.

Mark jogged slightly towards the path, having little confidence in how long the clouds could hold onto the rain, knowing they were ready to release the salty water. The path was completed successfully again, and as usual, Sheeba had beaten her master to the top, as she stood there waiting.

"How do you do that?" he laughed.

Sheeba gave him a polite bark and happily trotted her way to the forked path; she turned right and whizzed across the path in and out of the trees, which made Mark feel tetchy, as the behaviour of Sheeba had reminded him, yet again, of the dream he had a couple of days ago. They furthered their journey, by walking past a path that turned left and were approaching what looked like, a dead end. It seemed so much different than before when he was with Tanya, now the weather was changing. The place looked so much darker and intense.

Mark could hear the delicate running water coming from the brook, which put a picture in his mind, reminding him of Tanya sitting on the bank dipping her sore feet in the water in an attempt to cool them off. Although this time, they were further down than the day before.

As he got closer, he could hear children's voices and came across a well built wooden camp, half covered with an old dirty red blanket, where inside, the excited voices could be heard. Sheeba ran behind the camp and started sniffing round, she crouched and began to urinate on the camp and ran back to her owner.

Mark heard a young from voice inside the camp.

"Did you hear that? Something moved outside."

Mark stood in amusement, waiting for the bodies to come out of the camp and investigate the movement. He was slapped on the back of his neck by a cold wind; he observed the skies, as spots of rain began to make their way to the dehydrated earth.

"Who's that?" came a nervous voice, standing outside the freshly built camp.

"I'm Mark," he replied, "I'm just out walking my dog, I think it's gonna rain. Who am I speaking to?"

"Neil," came Neil Warner's reply. "Where's your dog then?"

Sheeba came pounding back down towards the camp, and playfully jumped up at Neil to his enjoyment, Steven and Alan had appeared looking confused, wondering what was happening.

"Here she is," Mark introduced.

"What's its name?" Neil shouted, Mark walked into the trees near the camp.

"It's a *she*, and her name's Sheeba, she seems to like you."

The three boys patted the dog and Sheeba playfully rolled around in the dirt. The rain began to beat down heavier, but in the trees it didn't feel too bad, as they provided some shelter.

"I think me and Sheeba best stay here until the rain dies off," Mark said to the boys. "You don't mind, do ya?"

"No," Alan and Steven spoke simultaneously, still rubbing their hands down Sheeba's black coat. "But Mister, don't tell anyone about our camp, you haven't seen us, it's a secret."

"Do you want to come inside our camp?" Steven asked innocently.

"No thank you, pal," Mark kindly spoke. "We'll stay here until the rain dies off, then we'll leave you in peace."

"What d'yer reckon to the camp?" Neil asked proudly. "We've spent all afternoon building it, it took us hours."

"Er...yeah it's great," Mark answered. "It's a good one."

Mark stood uncomfortably hoping the rain would die off soon, as chatting to three strange children was hardly going to be the highlight of his day.

"Listen boys," he spoke. "Shouldn't you be on your way home? I mean, it's getting late and it looks like it's gonna be an early dark night tonight."

"We'll go after the rain has died off a bit," came Alan's comment. "I should have had my dinner about an hour ago, my mum's going to kill me."

"Well, don't leave it too late," Mark wagged his finger, and looked pleased that the rain was no longer pouring.

It had been nothing more than a shower. It began to spit which would make the rest of their walk more pleasurable. Mark waved goodbye to the three young devils and called on his female companion, as they headed back down the path, turned right and headed for the crossroads up ahead.

The two went straight across the crossroads and turned left, to be confronted by a long straight path, which they headed down. The walk along the path had taken about five minutes to achieve; they passed another long path that was situated to the left of them that led all the way back to the entrance. Sheeba—to Mark's right—found the long path a little monotonous, and decided to explore the bendy narrow paths that were being suffocated by the overhanging trees to their right. Ignoring his companion, Mark casually strolled along, glad that the rain had continued to spit.

Another rush of wind hit Mark in the face, and he was convinced that at long last, Ridgeware's torturing heat wave could be coming to a close. Sheeba ran past her master and darted into another narrow path to his right, Mark felt a chill in the back of his neck, which wasn't a result of the unpredictable wind. The whole scenery of the bad weather and the woods had made him frightened, almost paranoid, as he began to look behind him every now and again. Maybe he was better off at the camp with the boys? Maybe he was better off going back home?

Mark felt lonely without his companion by his side, and wondered where on earth she had got to, hoping that he didn't have to go in there on the right to go and find her.

Another crossroads was ahead and Mark began to call on his dog. A minute had passed and there was no sign of her. He called out again, as he followed the path ahead on the crossroads, still no sign. He looked to his left and noticed the six-foot ditch where he used to play as a boy; the ditch was magic for hiding in, especially for playing armies, and remembered that on some occasions he and his allies used to use the ditch to detain POWs in, which usually consisted of younger, frightened children crying for their mums.

He leaned over the ditch and felt a bit disappointed, as it didn't look the same when he was a kid, it looked a lot smaller. The grassy ditch itself was six-foot in depth but was shaped like a crater and was quite easy to walk down to get to. The ditch looked like it hadn't been played in for years, as the bottom of the hole consisted of old magazines, and unused chopped logs that were cut by wood poachers.

Mark called out to his companion once again, and smiled when she walked out of the trees with a leaf hanging from her mouth. The dog looked amusing and Mark's laughter had temporarily eased off some of the nervousness that he felt a little earlier. He went over to pet his adorable canine and kissed her head.

"That's my girl. Ready to go home, Sheeba?"

The dog responded with a bark.

Mark's intention was to walk a few yards forward back to the crossroads, and then turn right and head down the long path that revealed the only way in or out of the woods.

Sheeba began to sniff round some of the trees to Mark's left and let out a ferocious continuous bark. Sheeba was slowly walking forward, toward the trees, and had done something completely out of character, and started to menacingly show her teeth. The vicious barking continued but in her ranting, Mark could see she was frightened. The dog was acting resilient to cover and hide her frightened state, in the same way a cobra would if it was alarmed, by raising its head off the ground, making itself to look more aggressive to warn off attackers.

"What is it, girl?"

Mark wasn't concerned and was positive that another animal, like before, would fly out of the trees any minute. The barking continued and Mark knelt by his nervous canine and tried to assure her that there was nothing there. After a couple of seconds, the barking became less continuous and less aggressive until they stopped altogether, to be replaced by pitiful whimpering.

"Silly girl." Mark patted Sheeba once again. "Right, let's go home."

With no warning, the huge splenetic figure raced out of the trees with arms outstretched and Mark felt the sharp blade slash across his right arm. He grabbed the arm and was punched in the nose; he quickly fell to the ground and was blinded by the constant running of tears that pissed out of his eye sockets.

Confused and frightened, Mark wiped his eyes and saw the black clothed figure boot the poor girl into the stomach. The dog let out a painful yelp and retreated; the figure, with knife in hand, ran towards the helpless Mark once again, and raised his hand with the knife to produce a slashing technique that this time missed. Mark gave out a distressed cry and saw Sheeba galloping behind the attacker, and jumped onto his back and started to rip her way through the attacker's left arm, tearing his black waterproof jacket.

Mark selfishly got up to run, clutching his bleeding slashed arm, and ran frantically ahead. He looked behind him to see if Sheeba was winning the fight and ran straight

into the solid oak tree's branch, he smacked his forehead against it and helplessly toppled over down into the ditch, and before he drifted off into unconsciousness, he could hear the helpless cry of his beloved companion.

The attacker had repetitively punched the canine and somehow, with its strength, managed to get the dog into a position that was similar in the way a mother would hold her baby, then rapidly and coldly brought his arms together and folded the poor dog almost in half snapping its spine like a wooden ruler. The dark figure walked over to the ditch with the dead dog still in his arms, and looked down on Mark's body, satisfied that if he wasn't dead, he would at least be no nuisance for the rest of the night.

The figure raised his arms above his head with the dog's hind legs dangling in the air and its lifeless tongue hanging out of its mouth, and threw the animal's corpse into the ditch to be with her unconscious master. The corpse hit the bottom with a deathly thud about three yards away from Pembroke, just missing him.

Chapter Twenty Nine

“Are you sure about this?” Richard asked Layla, as they headed towards the outskirts of Ridgeware.

“I think so,” Layla replied. “But this time make sure the doors are locked, Richard.”

“Don’t worry,” he tried to reassure his passenger. “It was probably just some pervert the other night, besides, it’s only eight o’clock and it’s not quite dark yet.”

Richard looked up at the sky trying to see through the black clouds that still managed to release the moderate rainfall; the wipers speeded up as the rain fell heavier. The black Ford braked on the desolate road, the car was shifted into second gear and the indicator was flicked upwards, giving off a right signal, and the car gently rolled into the car park for the second time this weekend.

“I mean it, Richard,” Layla spoke with conviction. “The moment I feel unsafe, I want us to leave.”

“No problem, babes,” Richard laughed, sounding unconcerned. “Nothing will happen, this is Ridgeware...I mean Red Hill, anyway, we’re not in New York or London, Layla. The streets aren’t roaming with lunatics—apart from your dad that is.”

They both laughed at Richard’s comment. Layla was starting to feel more comfortable even though they had parked in almost the same spot where the pervert first appeared. Nevertheless, she felt safe when she was with Richard, as a matter of fact, although this was their second date, she thought she was falling for him. Richard pointed over to his left and Layla saw that there was another car that was sleeping noiselessly underneath one of the trees, knowing that company wasn’t far away, she relaxed completely.

“Want some music?” Richard asked, turning the engine off.

“What have you got?” Layla enquired.

Richard sorted through some of his music on his iPod and began to show them to Layla, which she shook her head in disapproval every time one was shown; most of Richard’s collection was inspired by his dad’s taste in music, which Richard was brought up on, but Layla was a lover of dance music. Layla greeted each album that he showed to her, with a disapproving shake of the head.

“Okay, I give up,” Richard sighed. “Looks like it’s the radio then.”

Layla put her hand on Richard’s, who was trying to tune in a station, and smiled at him as if to say, that they didn’t need a radio.

Richard shrugged his shoulders agreeing with Layla’s decision; he released his seatbelt and leaned over to the brunette and kissed her softly on the lips, she smiled after his gentle kiss and felt very content within his company. Layla also unbuckled her seatbelt, and returned the compliment by leaning over to Richard and kissed him passionately. Richard, surprised at her reaction, ran his hands up and down Layla’s black jeans and could feel himself getting aroused.

The kissing continued and tongues were being furiously exchanged as Richard went for Layla’s shirt, slowly and carefully releasing each button and to his excitement revealed her black lacy bra, he gently squeezed her left breast when suddenly Layla pulled away.

“I’m sorry,” she said, looking embarrassed and uncomfortable.

“What’s wrong?” Richard looked dejected. “Am I coming on too strong? I’m sorry. I guess I was just getting carried away.”

"It's not that." Layla brushed her hair back with her fingers. "I mean...I want to do it, but it's not exactly dark, and it's obvious that there's someone about." She nodded over to the car.

"We'll just kiss then," Richard insisted. "There's nothing wrong with that."

So he leaned over and gently kissed her again, and to his delight, she responded. Layla asked Richard to put his seat back and when he did, she sat on his lap facing him and continued to kiss him. The outside world seemed oblivious to this young passionate couple, as they continued to kiss under a cloud of lust.

To Richard's surprise, Layla domineered the whole procession. She unbuttoned her shirt herself and allowed Richard's hands to squeeze the perked breasts; she unbuttoned his jeans, as he slipped his left hand underneath the bra feeling the silkiness of her skin, and she pulled Richard's jeans down with Richard helping her, by arching his back. His boxer shorts had also managed their way down to his ankles, and reached for the button under the seat and moved the seat back further. Layla had obviously changed her mind and the more she kissed, the more she got carried away.

Layla, looking stunning in her black bra, frantically took off her jeans and could be seen in just her matching panties and bra, with her shirt ajar. Richard couldn't wait any longer, and the physical proceedings began.

The car rocked back and forth gently and as momentum and excitement began to increase; it rocked furiously, the windows were steaming up and the loud pleasurable moans from both parties were there to be heard by anyone in a fifty-yard radius. Five minutes later, the car eventually returned back to her motionless state and the couple fell into each other's arms, their bodies almost gluing together with the perspiration.

Richard stroked the hair of his new lover and kissed her faintly on her salty forehead, she sighed, content and satisfied, and returned his kiss with a kiss of her own on his neck. Layla, still purring, sat up and managed to prise herself away from Richard's sticky chest; he lay there on the reclining seat with his left arm behind his head, still half naked, feeling very pleased with himself.

Layla got dressed and went for the door, and without exchanging any conversation; she stepped out of the car and was glad of the cool, crystal breeze that greeted her face.

Layla returned to the car embarrassed, the amorous adrenaline had worn off. Telling her friends that her first time with Richard was in a black Ford, was not every girl's fairytale dream. Richard, on the other hand, was not embarrassed at all; he couldn't wait to tell his friends about his little adventure with the Wilkes' daughter, and that his car had been christened for the fourth time this year. This episode was a perfect excuse to arrange a Thursday boy's night out, with bragging, being top of the agenda.

Layla sat in the passenger seat with the door wide open, allowing the cool air to Hoover up the condensation inside the car, now it was Richard's turn. He pulled his jeans up and fastened them checking that his phone was still in his pocket, winked at a flustered Layla and walked around the car bonnet over to one of the trees to drain some of his bladder, and carelessly threw his condom in the bushes.

He looked around trying not to be impatient with the stubborn urine that was refusing to come out, and noticed that the night was two-thirds the way of becoming pitch black at what was nearly half past eight, finally he was in full flow.

He buttoned his jeans back up and noticed a movement behind the trees, where the semi circle path was situated. Scowling through the trees, he couldn't see a damn thing, but his curiosity urged him to go in.

"Where are you going?" Layla shouted over to him.

Richard responded by frantically waving his hand over to her, whilst looking into the trees as if to say: for God's sake woman, be quiet. Not knowing whether it was an innocent walker or the pervert from the other night, he cautiously walked to the other side. Layla remained sat in the car with the door open and one of her legs hanging out, she was ready to go home. She got back out the car and walked over to the trees wondering what on earth her new lover was up to, then suddenly she heard the commotion.

It sounded like a struggle, but there were no voices. Layla became increasingly worried from the scuffling noises and shouted through the trees. "Richard!" There was no reply, and then she heard her lover scream out in pain, she frantically called out again.

"Run, Layla, run!" came the agonising instruction from her new lover.

Another scream rang out, the scream yet again coming from Richard.

Layla ran back to the car, panic stricken, and shut the passenger door firmly. She looked around, sobbing at the same time, desperately looking for his car keys, she couldn't drive, she was too young to drive, but she wanted to get out of that place, Richard or no Richard. She hit the dashboard with frustration and looked to her right, hoping that it was a practical joke and that he would walk back through the trees snickering to himself; but it wasn't happening.

Layla wound the window up and looked around in the car for some kind of weapon, any kind of weapon, but there was nothing. She suddenly noticed the door locks and slammed her hands on top of the one by her side, which to her relief locked the whole car.

Sobbing uncontrollably, she climbed into the back and sat between her seat and the seats in the back, trying to hide herself from prying eyes, and then she did something that she hadn't done for years, she prayed.

*

Richard ran along the path, huffing and puffing away from the psycho. He knew the only way back to civilization was to go back where he came from and drive back into Ridgeway, but this wasn't going to happen, he couldn't see him, but he could hear his attacker running behind him.

If Richard hadn't have kicked his attacker in between the legs, he was sure that he would be nothing but a corpse right now. Thoughts raced through his mind, including his childhood years. He thought how he would love to give his little brother a warm hug, which was totally out of character for Richard, he also wished he was in the company of his mum and dad, and he also feared for Layla's safety, although it was *him* being the hunted.

Pumped with adrenaline, Richard had gained reasonable yards ahead of his attacker and veered left and ferociously sprinted his way up the steep path, there was nowhere else to go and this was the best place to lose him.

He was entering the woods.

Richard reached the forked path and ran to his left, knowing that it had been years since he participated in any kind of physical activity, he continued on running until the path that he could just visibly see, started to straighten up. He looked behind him and was close to tears, as he could not believe what was happening,

Richard ran fifteen yards into the dark uninviting cluster of trees, in a desperate plea to lose his hunter, and knelt to the floor trying to regain his breath. He looked around, still breathing hard, unfathomed by the drops of rain that filtered their way

through the lanky trees, he was certain that hiding in there was a good move. Surely there was no way anyone could find him in the darkness.

He didn't care if it meant sleeping here, he didn't care. He was visualising walking out of the woods the next day in the Monday morning sunshine, and finding Layla safe and well, although a little petrified in the car—unless she managed to phone home. Did she have her phone with her? Richard tried to remain positive and remained on his knees, staying out of visibility.

As soon as his breathing and pulse rate reached a level where it would be considered normal, his thoughts went back to recent events and assessed the damage to his body. He grimaced with pain as he clutched his left hand that had been slashed between his index and middle finger down to the bottom of his palm, where he tried to protect himself from the second blow; the first blow that took him completely by surprise was underneath the left side of his chin, missing his carotid artery by an inch.

He could feel the warm blood running down his neck onto his chest where he knelt, and could feel the occasional trickle, dripping of his chest and hitting the bottom part of his stomach. His left hand was saturated with blood, hiding his palm and his fingers natural skin colour.

With his mental state returning back to normal, he took off his blood stained T-shirt, leaving him bare-chested, and wrapped it tightly around his wounded hand, clenching his fist hard and tight. The chin wound was bad, but didn't feel as deep as the hand wound, and if he was to stay in for the night then it was imperative that he lost as little blood as possible. He examined his chin and winced when he made contact with the wound, the slash itself was about two inches long, and with his fingertips examining the length of the wound, he accidentally smeared the blood across his chin underneath his bottom lip.

He knelt and waited patiently, as there was nothing else he could do, and could hear the movement of a small animal. This movement put disquiet into Richard, although he knew that the small animal, whatever it was, it was bothering him. *But what happens if the attacker is nearby and hears the movement of the animal, and thinks it's me?* After all, the movement was only yards away from him, and could lead the psycho to Richard's destination.

The whizzing thoughts around his head had returned, Richard rose to his feet and then knelt back down again in confusion, not knowing whether to move away from where he was situated. He decided to stay, for the time being.

The day had almost died, but the dark woods had seeds of light coming from the stars overhead. Richard waited with baited breath what conclusion would come of this unwanted adventure that he was experiencing. The words, thank you, left his mouth in a whisper, as the animal movements behind him had ceased and prepared himself for a long, cold, bitter night.

Sleep was completely out of the question, which was not a worry for Richard, as nobody in their right mind could sleep if the same ordeal had happened to them. All he wanted was a warm bed and a hot cup of tea—although medical attention may have to be introduced at some time.

Faintly, but not clearly, Richard started to hear footsteps on the path he had just come off fifteen yards away; the footsteps were to the far left of him and became clearer as someone was making their way down the path. Richard wasn't going to take any chances, if he thought that it might be somebody else, he would still be prepared to stay the night, he didn't want to take the risk.

In a perverse way, he was hoping that it was someone else so *they* could be attacked, then at least the psycho would be satisfied for the night and make his way home or

wherever this lunatic dwelled. Whoever it was, walking past Richard and going further into the woods, would enable the young man to make a run for it.

Richard began to mentally argue with himself, as the thought of making a run for it crossed his mind, confusion began to cultivate within him.

What if this person isn't the attacker and it is a lone walker, and the attacker is simply waiting for me in the deep woods off the path the same way you are hiding, or what if he is waiting for you by the entrance? No. Stick to your original plan, leave in the morning. What if you bleed to death? I won't bleed to death. But if you lose a certain amount of blood you'll begin to feel tired, pass out, and never wake up, and even if you do wake up it may be too late, he may have had you by then. Run for it Richard it's the only way!

Richard felt his pockets, where in the left pocket his phone was present, as well as his car keys. The footsteps had disappeared, which had ruined his plan. His plan was to wait for the man or woman to walk past him, wait about five minutes and then run like the wind and go down the steep hill back to his car.

He looked at his hand once again and could just make out that his T-shirt hadn't done its job satisfactorily; the shirt had soaked up the bleeding and the deep wound was not giving up easy, he tightened his fist and saw the blood run out like water from a dishcloth, he was still bleeding badly and had to get medical attention soon. He didn't feel faint, but had convinced himself he was on his way to losing his first pint of blood.

Without consulting himself, he tapped the keys for good luck and stood up and carefully made his way to the path. The path came closer to Richard as he stood only a foot away from the path standing behind the tree. He had noticed that the path had a lot more light than being inside the claustrophobic plantation, but nevertheless, he still had to make a run. He peered his head out from the tree, looked left and right and that was exactly what he did, he ran.

He knew he was making too much noise but couldn't stop his vivacious run. Thinking that he had lost him, all he could think about was the exit out of the woods. He followed the unclear path that was bending towards the left, another fifty or so yards and the forked path would be there, a left turn and the exit would be only yards away. The bend was coming to a close, as it began to straighten up where in the middle of the path, the large hooded figure stood in the now beating rain with his legs slightly apart. He was motionless, but looked threatening as Richard noticed the man holding a knife in his right hand, pointing towards the path.

All this happened in a couple of seconds and a terrified Richard stopped suddenly and screamed in terror and turned back on himself and ran; he ran for his life convinced he was being followed. As soon as he went by the bend, he frantically ran left into the cluster of trees, if he couldn't outrun the hooded figure, the least he could do was hide until the morning. Ten yards into the trees, and he stopped before any noise of his panicking run escorted the attacker in his direction.

He knelt on the floor, not noticing the rain seeping its way through the fully bloomed trees dampening his shivering body, which had more to do with anxiety rather than the sudden drop in temperature. Ignoring his wounds, he waited for his attacker, who he was hoping would pass his view so that he would be sure that it would be safe to make a run out of the woods.

One minute passed and nothing had been seen; the rain and the darkness did make it hard for Richard to see clearly, but it wasn't dark enough for Richard to see if the maniac had passed him.

A heavier breeze than normal squirmed its way through the cluster of trees, which smacked the terrified individual on the left side of his face, as he awaited his fate—or freedom—with trepidation. His thoughts, unselfishly, were filled with images of Layla.

After convincing himself that his new lover would be all right, his thoughts were now understandably turned toward his own welfare and he was being ambushed with an army of regrets. Richard began to mutter to himself in a low whisper about recent events, and was plagued by all the negative thoughts, and began to question and curse himself.

Why on earth did I take Layla up to the car park after what happened two days before? Why didn't I report the pervert to the police? Does he want me dead or is he just trying to scare me? Do I know him? Why would anyone go up to the woods and just randomly try and kill someone? Is he sane or insane? Could it be one of Layla's jealous ex-boyfriends? If only we went to the pub instead? If only I had disciplined myself and gave her time before we had sex this wouldn't be happening now, but then again there didn't seem to be any complaints on her behalf, as a matter of fact Layla was the one that took full control.

"Why couldn't I wait? Why didn't I just play by her rules? And why the fuck am I talking to myself?"

Dizziness had begun to introduce itself to Richard's head and he wasn't too sure whether it was a result of the anxiety he was feeling, the long day he had had, exhaustion, or the loss of blood that was running away from his hand and chin, especially from his hand. Or was it mixture of all these?

Whatever the reason for his giddiness, staying in the woods for the night was not an option, and all he needed was to see the presence of his attacker to walk past, give it five minutes, and then run like hell.

"Shit," he said in a loud whisper.

His phone was ringing audibly, the ring tone was a dance tune and he scrambled for it in his pocket. Richard lay on his back in a desperate attempt to make it easier for his hand to grab the phone from his tight front pocket, it worked, and another two seconds later he had managed to turn it off. He looked around in hope not to see the attacker approaching his way, but there was no sign of him. Richard had thought of texting someone, anyone, but was concerned that the light that came from the phone would give him away.

Back into his kneeling position, he quietly started to shed a few tears for himself, his nose also unblocked itself and he could feel fluid from both nostrils running down to the entrance. He leaned over, like how someone would pray in a mosque, and felt his whole body dripping with a mixture of fluids. Sweat dripped from his forehead, tears dripped off his bottom eyelashes, fluid dripped from his nose, saliva dripped from his mouth, and blood dripped from his hand and chin.

He looked up, still drenched in self-pity and froze.

Somehow he knew there was someone standing behind him. It was too dark for shadows, there was no noise created behind him, and he couldn't physically feel whoever it was, but there was somebody standing behind him.

He carefully and quietly lifted his right leg up from the floor and put it into a position, in the same way a sprinter would prepare itself. His left leg was still in the kneeling position and he breathed a few times trying to psyche himself up for the sprint of his life, and pushed himself off.

His sprint got off to the worst possible start, as he ricocheted off the first tree in front of him that was camouflaged by the darkness. He stumbled helplessly for a few

yards, and fooled by the darkness, he struck his right knee against the trunk of one of the solid looking trees that stood on the side of the path. Richard went down onto the path clutching his right knee covered in anguish and tried to pick himself up, the discomfort was insupportable, as if he had been actually shot in the patella. He pathetically tried to hop away into the darkness, sobbing, knowing that his heartbreaking escape was ineffectual.

He saw his hooded attacker emerge from the trees in a slow, calm, yet disturbing manner. He walked tranquilly over to the half naked Richard, who leaned up against a tree for balance, and began to plead with the hunter.

“Please. What have I done to you? Please. Don’t kill me. Please don’t kill me!”

His sobbing was unstoppable as he tried to look at the face of the figure, which stood only two yards away, but it was unachievable to see anything.

“I’ll give you anything,” Richard pleaded desperately. “Money. Anything. Just don’t kill me. I’m begging you. I’ll do anything you want.”

The unforgiving figure reached out with his left hand and grabbed Richard around the throat and smacked his head off the hard tree trunk. Richard looked dazed and confused, but not too stunned to see the knife being raised across his throat.

“Don’t. Whatever it is, it’s not worth it. Don’t kill me.”

Richard’s pleas were cruelly ignored as the first blow entered his stomach with a thud. He grabbed onto the sleeve of his attacker and looked traumatized, scared and bewildered, the pain he could not feel, but he knew this was the end when he looked down to see the whole blade had vanished into his bare skin.

He let out a gasp as the attacker pulled out the knife and felt the thud of the second blow. This time, nothing to do with pain but the sheer horror of the attack, Richard let out a blood-curdling scream as the blade entered the same area, except this time, one inch to the right of the first wound.

Still clinging on to his attacker, Richard began to cough and could taste salty liquid in the back of his throat. The knife was pulled out for a second time, which Richard reacted with a quieter gasp, and his grip began to loosen on the figure’s sleeve, which didn’t make any difference, as he was pressed up against the tree with the powerful hand around his throat.

The knife went in for a third time, this time puncturing his liver and the helpless victim stared into space, as if he was in a stupor. He didn’t gasp this time as the knife was pulled out, his body just jerked. Another thud hit his stomach, then another, and another, and all this time Richard looked on helplessly as his body was being ferociously mutilated before his very eyes.

The stars above, coldly watched the whole event as Richard could feel thud after thud after thud into his body, until he drifted out of consciousness as the attacker carried on with his butchery. After a while, the figure stopped and looked at his victim, satisfied that after seventeen ferocious stab wounds around the midriff, Richard Johnson was no more; he let go of his throat and watched the body fall sideways to the right onto the path, with a deathly thump.

The man in black grabbed the hair of the body and started to drag it into the deep woods, being careful not to let any blood on the black clothes. He walked, dragging the bludgeoned body by the hair, and disappeared into the trees.

*

“What was that?” Alan bolted out of the camp as they were all prepared to make their way home. “Did ya hear that, Neil?”

“Yeah,” came the reply. “What was it?” They both looked at each other in confusion and neither one of them had an answer to their questions.

“Sounded like a scream to me,” Steven remarked, stepping out of the camp and began chewing on a fingernail.

Steven was strangely unruffled by the sound that had just pierced the night, and all he could think of was the lecture that he was going to receive off his dad. He had been this late before through the holidays, but it had never been this dark before.

The three boys looked bewildered in what to do next; originally they were about to depart for home, knowing that a severe reprimand from their parents would be on the menu, not necessarily because of the time, but because of the early darkness that covered the Ridgeware skies due to the bad weather.

“Shall we go home then?” Steven asked his companions, knowing that going home was the last thing on their mind despite the reduction of visibility.

“Let’s just see where that scream came from,” Alan said, slowly taking away Neil’s leadership position. “Someone might be in trouble.”

“I’m not too sure,” Neil commented, animated, but edgy about Alan’s idea of an investigation. “It’s getting too dark, in another hour it’ll be pitch black.”

“The sooner we investigate, the sooner we can get home,” Alan spoke back with authority, enjoying his new power of leadership and trying to erase the memory of refusing to enter Kelly’s garden the day before, because he was too petrified.

“What do you think, Steven?” Neil asked a surprised Steven, who never of thought that any of the boys would ask for his advice on any situation.

“I think I’d rather go home,” came the response of the youngest member.

Neil looked at the disappointment on Alan’s face, which was the same disappointed face that he must have gave Alan back at Kelly’s house, before the ill fated axe theft. Neil felt a little sorry for Alan, knowing that he was desperate to make up for his deserting the other day, and smiled at his brave friend.

“Okay,” Neil said. “Twenty minutes to investigate and then were all going home, agreed?”

They both nodded their heads and Alan led the way onto the path where a little more light had crept in, not too much, but enough to see where they were walking.

All three trudged along the path in a horizontal line, keeping silent, and waiting for Alan’s signal on what to do next; this was now was *his* mission. It was a hell of a walk, as they all knew that the sound that they heard could have been at least a quarter of a mile away, but despite the faintness of the sound, it most definitely sounded like a scream coming from the voice of a distressed male.

Alan pointed straight ahead and they both followed him; Steven looked to his left looking for the exit as he wished to get home soon, take his punishment and then have some dinner that probably had been in the oven for the last three hours, his stomach growled in agreement to this idea. Nevertheless, he followed Alan and Neil on the path that curved its way around to the right, just a few more yards and the curve would come to a finish as the path began to straighten up.

Alan, who was in front of the boys, held out his right arm horizontally signalling to the other boys to stop, he turned around to face the boys and put his forefinger to his lips signalling them to be quiet. Alan sidestepped to the right of the path and hid behind one of the trees, where the other boys followed and did the same.

“What’s going on?” Neil whispered gently.

“I thought I heard something in the trees,” Alan gently whispered back. The boys remained crouched behind the trees just off the path, when a huge dark figure emerged from their side of the path from the trees, about twenty yards away. Steven

gasped a little too loud for Alan's liking, and put his own hand around his mouth as they watched the black solitary figure slowly walking, but thankfully walking away from them and eventually disappearing as the strange figure followed the bend to the right, out of sight.

"I don't believe it," Alan gasped, and now slowly rising to his feet.

"Killer Kelly," Neil and Steven said simultaneously, now rising to their feet.

"What's he doing in the woods," Alan said to himself. "I thought he never went in the woods." He looked round to his startled friends and stepped back on the path.

"I think we should go now," Steven spoke with trepidation in his voice and Neil nodded in agreement and looked over to Alan for his response.

Alan walked along the edge of the path, heading towards the very same area where the black clothed Kelly had just left and urged his companions to follow him, they reluctantly did, and as soon as they met up together, Alan decided to walk inside the condensed wooded area to see what Kelly had been doing inside—if he had been doing anything at all. He yet again urged his friends to follow him inside, and again, they unenthusiastically did. Neil and Steven, at this point, were desperate to get home but if Neil was brave enough to follow Alan in, then Steven could hardly refuse to go in.

Ten yards or so into the woods, where visibility was practically non-existent, a clamour that sounded like feet being dragged across the path, could be faintly heard getting louder and louder with each lazy step. Without being told what to do, all three knelt on the floor and hid behind a tree each for extra security. As the figure approached the edge of the path it tried to look into the trees, where the petrified boys hid staring back, hoping, praying that Kelly wouldn't decide to come back inside.

The figure still stood glaring into the darkness, which caused young Steven to hyperventilate; his hand was covering his mouth preventing him from giving away their destination. Of course, Steven didn't want to die from lack of oxygen but he didn't want his short, unfulfilled life to meet a bloody end either.

His breathing became heavier, to Neil and Alan's despair, who were shushing Steven to be quiet. His chest began to wheeze and all three thought that this was the end, as Kelly took three steps forward into the trees. He stood large with his left arm resting against one of the trees; he was a huge figure of a man, much bigger than the boys anticipated, and noticed that there was no trace of his beard and he wasn't carrying any axe. Nevertheless, even with his bare hands, they were sure Kelly would have no problem snapping their scrawny necks with one quick twist.

Steven, still terrified, couldn't shake that damn rhyme out of his head, as he was staring death in the face. It just wouldn't go away; he mentally pleaded for his mind to stop, but the rhyme continuously repeated in his mind.

*Killer Kelly, Killer Kelly chopping up his wood.
Killer Kelly, Killer Kelly looking for some blood.
He killed his wife and family.
He'll kill again some more.
Killer Kelly's everywhere; you better lock your door.*

Miraculously, what seemed like a lifetime, the dark figure released his arm from the tree, turned around and wandered back to the path where he couldn't be seen. He could have turned left or right at the path, but they couldn't see anything. He may have walked into the left side of the condensed woods, but again, they couldn't see

anything. For all they knew, he could have been standing there, waiting for the boys to come out.

They looked at each other as if to say “what do we do now?” and all three shrugged their shoulders, confused in what the next step should be.

“Alan,” Neil whispered. “What are we gonna do?”

“I dunno,” came the useless reply, with the fear written all over Alan’s face. This had been a bad idea.

Steven’s breathing had begun to return to normal, but physically shivered with fright due to the event that he had just experienced.

“I want to go home,” the fragile Steven tearfully pleaded. “I want to go home to my mum and dad, and have some dinner, and get into a nice warm bed. I don’t want to be here anymore. I want to go home.”

Neil and Alan agreed with Steven, but were too stubborn to admit to each other that they have never been more scared in their lives; it was clear that all three looked shaken and anxious. Alan, who had taken on the responsibility of being leader of the group, could feel their eyes on him, waiting for a positive reaction.

“We’ll give it ten minutes, okay? Then, no matter what, we’ll make a run for it. We can’t stay here all night and we don’t know if he’s gonna come back.”

“Why don’t we go now?” Steven asked frightfully.

“Because,” Alan began. “He could still be out there, on the path, waiting for us.”

“Can’t we make our way through these trees?” Neil pointed deeper into the woods.

“No.” Alan snapped, letting the responsibility of being a leader and the anxiety, getting the better of him. “If we go deeper into the woods, especially in the dark, we’d make too much noise, then Kelly would definitely find us, we can’t take that chance.”

“Ten minutes?” Steven quizzed helplessly looking at the other two. “I don’t think I can wait ten minutes.”

“It’s either that, or you go now on your own,” Alan said harshly, losing patience.

“We’ll all go in ten minutes,” Neil stepped in, slightly threatening Alan’s leadership position.

The boys sat on their backsides with their legs crossed and their elbows resting on their thighs, waiting for the longest ten minutes of their life to pass by, in order for them to escape to freedom, sanity and survival.

Chapter Thirty

Johnson's car sat sullenly under the battered and bruised sky, and with all doors locked from the inside, Layla sat curled in a ball, shivering like a leaf. She was confused, terrified and praying that what was going on, was simply a dream that she was about to wake up from at any moment.

She looked round in the car, double-checking that there were no windows open and if the doors were properly locked. She sat tearfully in the passenger side in between the passenger seat and the front seat, staying well clear from view.

What the hell's going on? Why isn't Richard back? Is he dead, alive or lying somewhere injured? Who is it out there? Was it the same man we spotted the other night?

Layla rocked gently back and forth in the little space she had and wished her dad was here, he could fight off an army with his huge build and strength, but not Richard. Richard was a nice guy, but he never came across as the fighting type.

Cursing herself that her phone was left at home so her parents could not keep a track of her whereabouts, the fear began to mix with frustration, which was an unhealthy cocktail of emotions in this particular situation. The early night silence was less comforting more than ever, as time passed. Layla was desperate to get out. She needed to escape, not just for her own sake, but to get help for Richard.

She began to calm down slightly, despite the hostile predicament she was in and the fact that staying in the car hardly made her unassailable, her murky thoughts had begun to clear.

She took a deep breath, grabbed the passenger seat with her left hand and tried to pull herself up, but the numbness in her legs were making the task a lot more difficult than she had imagined. Finally, she made it, and lay face down on the back seat, still paranoid of being seen by whoever was out there. She placed her hands on the seat, palms facing downwards, and pushed herself up as if she was trying to perform some kind of yoga technique. She peered out the car window and saw nothing.

She returned back to her original position and was satisfied that there was nobody out there—in the car park at least. She sat up in the back seat, looking around her, and questioned herself whether it was the right thing to do, to get out of the car and search for Richard.

Layla took one last look around into the dull car park area, put her hand on the handle of the passenger door, exhaled slowly three times to calm her nerves and then opened the door letting in the cool air. She stepped out of the car into the gentle rain, and left the door open as she tip toed her way to the trees, where behind her the incident with Richard and his attacker took place.

She took another look behind her, riddled with doubt, and continued to tip toe her way to the trees; she tried to stare through the plantation to see the path, but the dull sky was making it impossible. She knew there was a small chance Richard could be on the floor in need of help, which urged Layla to creep her way into the shallow wooded area, brushing the occasional bendy branch away from her face. She was trying to make as little noise as possible.

She stepped onto the path, frantically looking round, searching for Richard, and could see nothing of her new boyfriend, the place was too dark to see. Looking to her right, up the hill near the common, she could just make out the chimney of the old wooden house spewing out its smoke. To her left, was the familiar eerie site of the

woods. She liked Richard, she liked Richard a lot, but there was nothing that could tempt her to go around, or even go *into* the woods to look for him, besides, she wouldn't know where to go. She had never been in the place before, and she wasn't prepared to go in, especially with the darkness creeping its way into Ridgeware, and a small matter of there being some psycho out there.

Standing stationary, Layla felt hopeless and was thinking whether she could call out to Richard.

But what if the attacker hears you?

A cold wind threw itself at Layla, which put some uninvited particles in her eye; she rubbed at her eyes and could feel the water being produced, helping her to wash the particles away. She rubbed them again, wiping away the helpful tears, and could see spots in front of her eyes. She looked to her left and could see a blurry black figure pacing its way towards her.

Layla let out a pleading cry and ran through the shallow wooded area, aching to be back inside the car. She frantically smacked the branches away from her face, with one of them hitting her in the forehead, and took a quick glance behind as she ran into the car, she locked all the doors and sat huddled where she had been sitting before.

There were no tears, no sobbing whatsoever, but Layla was curled up shaking violently, as if she had just been parachuted into the Arctic wearing nothing but a skimpy bikini.

The paranoia got the better of her as she started to imagine all sorts of macabre scenarios. It felt like she had jumped straight into a horror movie and the clichés swirled around her head. A young girl trapped in a car on a night, no car keys, no weapon, what chance would she have?

Layla wished she could go into a deep sleep.

She could hear the patter of tiny footsteps on the roof of the car, which did not alarm Layla too much, as she knew it was actually the rain outside getting heavier and heavier. Looking up through the passenger window, she could see that the sun had finished its shift and had now been replaced by the half moon.

For some reason, whether it was a way of beating the tension or accepting that death was lurking around the corner, Layla thought back to the days when she and her parents and her brother, Lee, all went on holiday to France.

She was only twelve and it was the last holiday they had as a proper family before Lee went to Rosewood. She thought about the laughs they had, her dad getting up to sing old seventies songs with one of the bands in the local French bars, he was terrible, but everybody cheered anyway as he entertained the small crowds with his manic dancing during the instrumental breaks. Deep down they probably just thought, crazy English bastard!

One of the downside to the holiday at that time, although they laughed about it afterwards, was when her dad had punched a German tourist and spent a night in the cells.

They went to a family bar where the usual tourist entertainment was provided, and her mum went to the bar with her dad to give him a hand with the drinks, two coca colas, one beer, and a Jack Daniels and coke for her mother. Her mum sat on one of the barstools waiting for the barmaid to serve the drinks, when the German stood next to her and looked at the vacant barstool and tapped her on the shoulder, with her dad standing next to her with his money out on her other side. Her mum turned round and said to the German *yes*. The German asked bizarrely. *Can I sit with you?*

Thinking that her mum was on her own. Her dad being Nick Wilkes, heard what had been said, and within seconds the tourist was on the floor with a broken nose. Her dad

told the French police that he thought the German had said to his wife, *Can I sleep with you?* and was released in the morning with no charge.

The holiday afterwards was their last since Lee went away. Maybe her dad thought that it wouldn't be the same, going on holiday without Lee, it wouldn't be a proper family holiday. Or maybe he felt guilty going away into the sun, while his son was stuck in a mental institute. Whatever his thinking, he never visited Lee, it was too painful for him, so the honours went to her and her mum who made the occasional visit, which didn't do a lot of good, as the real world had been cruelly snatched away from Lee.

He was living in another world, a world that he had created for himself, a world where he was safe, a world where no one could harm him anymore, or where he could harm himself.

Layla's thoughts were intruded by the noise of the dirt being crunched outside; she couldn't tell if it was the attacker walking round, or a car that had just entered or was just leaving the car park. She didn't hear any engine being started and she couldn't hear any car engine due to the noise of the bad weather outside with the heavy rain and the increased wind, but she heard the ground being crunched and that was enough to spook her even more.

The fright that she received when she went looking for Richard, kept her in the same frightened position, and whatever it was outside, she had already convinced herself that she would be staying put till the morning. If she made it to the morning.

Chapter Thirty One

"Where the hell is he?" Mary Dawson demanded.

Her husband responded by shrugging his shoulders.

"We'll give him another half an hour," David Dawson said, trying to appease his wife. "Then I'll go looking for him."

"David, he hasn't been in all day, he hasn't had his dinner, he can't manage all day with no food, something must be wrong."

"He's just a young kid that's gone out with his pals," David responded. "He's got carried away, forgotten to take his watch with him, noticed that it's getting dark and is probably on his way home as we speak."

"*Probably* David?" Mary reacted angrily at her husband's serene manner. "I knew we should have let him have his phone. What if he's probably *not* on his way back home and has had an accident somewhere. He could be lying in a ditch, he could be dead, he could be—"

"Mary!" David yelled. "You're getting yourself into a state, this is Ridgeware, not the Bronx. Steven is doing exactly what I used to do when I was his age, he'll be back, and besides, our Steven's the youngest of those three. I'm sure staying out late wasn't his idea, so just calm yourself down. And the last time he took his phone up there, he ended up losing it in the woods."

He kissed his wife and helped to sit on the couch where she nibbled disquietly at the skin around her fingernails, like a ravenous mouse with a fresh piece of cheese.

"How do you know that he's out with Neil and Alan?" she asked.

"Come on, those three are like hinge and bracket, they're inseparable, aren't they?"

"I s'pose so," she nodded in agreement, feeling a little better knowing that Steven wasn't out on his own. "Maybe if you give Alan's mum a call, y'know, just to make sure that he's out as well."

"If you want. What's her number?"

Mary frowned and put on her thinking face, then shook her head and put it in her hands. "I can't remember."

"What if I give Gary a call? See if Neil is out with Steven."

"Yeah," Mary agreed. "Do that for me would you, I know I'm probably overreacting, but he never usually stays out when it starts to get dark."

David walked over to his phone and looked up contacts, and pressed the name, Gary Strand. He waited for the phone to be picked up, he looked over to his hysterical wife and gave her a reassuring smile.

The phone was picked up by Susan, as Gary must have left it lying about. "Hello Susan, it's David here, listen, have you seen our Steven today, it's just that he's been out all day and we—"

David had paused as if he had been interrupted; the silence continued for a minute. "Okay. Tell Gary to pick me up. Mary is in a bit of a state herself. Okay Susan, don't worry, the little sods are probably planning on staying there for the night, I'll speak to you later Susan, bye."

"Well," Mary spoke with fretfulness. "What did she say, David?"

"They went up the woods in the afternoon to build a camp, believe it or not. Alan had mentioned it to his mum, she's just rang Susan asking for Alan."

"So all three of them are out?"

"Yep," David said rapidly. "You know what I think?"

"What?" Mary scratched the side of her head, feeling a fraction of relief.

"They've gone up to the woods, took some food with them and are planning to stay the night in that stupid camp."

"Well you'll have to get him back, David, he's not sleeping in that wood, no way. Besides it's pouring down with rain, he'll get pneumonia. No, you get hold of him David and give him a damn good talking to."

"If it's any consolation, Susan and Alan's mum are in the same state that *you're* in. Alan's mum was in tears over the phone when she rang Susan, I mean, her husband hung himself in that wood, so she must be beside herself."

"When he gets back, he's grounded for the rest of the holidays."

"Come on, Mary, that's a bit harsh isn't it? He's only a kid?"

"A bit harsh? You were going to take him up to Kelly's house in the middle of the night. I just want him back home. Bring him home, David, bring him home."

"Gary's picking me up in a minute, were gonna go up to Red Hill car park and take a walk into the woods, but there could be a chance that they're probably on the common, making their way home."

"Take your phone with you, and I'll give you a call if he does come back."

"Okay, love." He kissed her on the cheek and heard the tooting of a car horn coming from outside. "That's probably Gary, I'll see you later."

"Take care."

David disappeared out of the house, shutting the door behind him; she peered out of her window and saw her husband get into Gary's car and watched as the car sped off—a little too quickly—and turned left out of Churchill Street. Feeling more annoyed than saddened, she went upstairs to see how her little angel was getting on, at least her daughter wasn't a handful—for the time being anyway.

*

"Fucking kids!" Gary snapped, as he entered the town centre with David by his side. "I've only been with Susan for a short while and already she's got me playing fuckin' daddy."

"You'll probably understand if you have any of your own," came David's defensive reply.

"No, not me," said Gary, while turning right at the town centre's roundabout.

"There's no way I'm having any brats. Too much trouble for my liking."

The car picked up to fifty miles per hour and Gary began to brake gently due to David's request, as he was twenty over the limit and was heading for sixty.

"Did you bring anything with yer?" Gary looked to David.

"What like?" David confusingly frowned back at Gary.

"A torch, or anything like that."

"Shit no," David put hands to his face. "I've got one on my phone, but it's crap. Fancy going back to get one."

"No, we'll be all right, it's not that dark, not yet anyway."

The car went under the railway bridge and entered the open road, the open road that led to the Red Hill car park. Cautiously, Gary stuck to a suitable speed limit going round the snaky roads and looked to David, who quietly stared out of his passenger window with a huge weight on his mind.

"Don't worry David," Gary glanced to his passenger. "They'll be fine."

"I hope you're right."

"We're nearly there." David pointed up ahead.

"I do know, I have been up here before." Gary cheekily winked. "Listen, after all those horror stories you told me the other night, if we don't get outta here alive, tell Susan it was good while it lasted."

"Shut up, you psycho."

"I just wanna tell yer, David, you're a good friend." Gary giggled to himself, "And if we were on a boat in the middle of the Atlantic, and the boat began to sink, and there was only one life jacket left, well, I would really miss you."

David chuckled and thought to himself that maybe Gary wasn't as unpleasant as he first thought, after all, he was trying his best to ease off the tension that David was feeling. He was a womaniser, but it seemed he had a good heart.

The car approached the final bend and Gary switched on his right indicator, slowed the car down and turned into the car park and pulled up where another three cars sat.

"Busy tonight," David reacted.

"Sunday night. Must be shag night." Gary joked, and turned off the engine.

They both got out of the car, preparing to walk through onto the path. Gary looked around and noticed there was no sign of any life, he couldn't see any people in their cars and the windows were certainly not steamed up with what he called, passion condensation.

"Isn't that the same car that was at the Bald Buck the other night?" Gary pointed.

"What car?" David could hardly see the black Ford.

"That car, the black Ford. I recognise the plate; that was the same car that Nick Wilkes's daughter got into with that young guy."

"So it is." David stared hard at the car, although he never took much notice of the licence plate on that Friday night. "Come on hurry up, it's getting dark."

"Hang on." Gary held his hand out, ushering David to be quiet. "I thought I heard something, I thought I heard a noise."

"Of course you did, it's probably an amorous couple having the time of their life."

Gary approached the black Ford carefully to the passenger side and peered inside the window.

"Oh fucking Christ!" Gary yelled. "Get here!"

"What is it?" David walked over to the car and heard a female voice screaming from inside the car.

"GO AWAY, LEAVE ME ALONE. LEAVE ME ALONE YOU BASTARD!"

David looked inside and saw a petrified Layla curled inbetween the driver's and the back seat, she was sobbing with her hands over her face.

"Open the door, Gary!"

"I can't"

"Open it!"

"I can't, it's fuckin' locked."

Gary punched the window trying to shatter it.

"Don't!" David held out his hand. "You'll frighten her, let me talk to her."

David gently knocked on the window. "Layla! My name's David Dawson. I've come up here to look for my son, we're not here to hurt you, I kind of know your dad, Nick Wilkes, come out and talk to us, tell us what happened."

After a brief pause, Layla reached for the door lock and jumped out of the car into David's arms and wept uncontrollably, immediately staining the shoulders of his jacket. He patted the young girl's head, told her everything would be all right and promised to take the distressed young woman back home. Eventually the weeping ceased and she leaned against the car, where the two men were staring at her.

“What happened, Layla?” David asked, as Gary looked on. “Was you with that young man tonight?”

She replied with a nod.

“What has he done to you?”

“Richard hasn’t done anything to me,” she cried. “Nothing.”

“Then what’s wrong?” David looked confused. “Why are you hiding in the car, and what got you into this mess, where is this Richard?”

“He’s gone, I don’t know where he is, he-he-he just disappeared.”

“Gone? Gone where? I don’t understand what you’re saying, what do you mean?”

Layla broke down in tears again and grabbed the sleeves of David’s jacket, almost tearing the fabric. “Please take me home, I want to go home. I need my mum and dad.”

“Whoa,” David kept his arm round her shoulder. “What has he done to you?”

“There’s someone out there,” she cried. “I don’t know who, but Richard was attacked. I think he might be dead. I don’t know.”

David and Gary looked at one another; eyes wide open, shocked at what Layla had just told them. David gently and considerately pushed Layla away from his grasp.

“The boys are up there,” Gary said, stating the obvious.

David nodded his head, and put his hands on Layla’s head to talk to her face to face.

“Right, listen to me Layla, we can’t take you back just yet.”

“But you must,” she pleaded. “He’s out there, he’ll come back.”

“Layla, listen to me!” David raised his voice appropriately to get her attention.

“Listen to me. There’s a good chance that my son may be up in those woods with two other boys, and I have to get him back. I have to go and get him *now*. Now, did you see this man?”

“No,” Layla shook her head. “But I heard Richard in pain, I think the guy might have some kind of weapon, I don’t know.”

“Right Layla, do you have a phone?”

She shook her head.

David put his hand inside his pocket and reached for his phone and placed it in her hand. “Use this phone, phone your parents, phone the police and stay in that car at all times until someone arrives, and make sure the car’s locked.”

Layla nodded and put the phone into her pocket. “I’ll phone as soon as you leave.”

“Right Gary, lets go, we need to take a detour.”

“Wait a minute,” Gary’s bewilderment was evident. “Shouldn’t we wait for the police? I mean, there’s a guy out there who could have us cut up.”

“For Christ’s sake, Gary, my son’s up there! Neil’s up there as well, you can come with me or you can act like a pussy, your choice.”

David stormed off into the trees and Gary followed, leaving Layla all by herself once again. She sat back into the car and locked the doors, switched on the phone and dialled her home number. Four rings later, the answer machine came on to Layla’s annoyance.

They must have switched the phone off.

She tried again, and again the answer machine picked up the call.

“Mum it’s Layla, something terrible has happened, I’m at Red Hill car park. Please come and get me or get dad to pick me up, I love you.”

She ended the call and began to phone the police, nothing. She punched in the number once again where two sounds rang out from the phone and in black letters it flashed: *Battery Low. Please Charge.* She threw the phone at the dashboard in frustration, immediately feeling guilty because it wasn’t her phone. She inspected the

useless device, relieved that there was no damage done. She went back to her original position between the seats out of sight and hoped that the two men would be back very soon.

Layla, dishevelled with the stress, could feel her eyes getting heavier and heavier and tried to fight off the sleepiness as best she could, but the sleep would eventually win, it always wins.

*

“Where are you going?” Gary quizzed David, who was heading away from the woods towards the common hill.

“There’s something I need to do, are you coming or are you gonna wait for me here?” David looked towards a baffled Gary Strand.

“What about the boys? What’s up there?”

“I haven’t got time to piss about,” David snapped. “I’ll see you in five minutes, tops.” He started to run up the path to the right.

Gary followed. “Wait, I’m coming. Why are we running up to the place where you saw that massacre when you was a kid?”

They both ran up the path where David—who didn’t have time to answer Gary’s question—made a detour through some bushes, and came across a wooden gate. Gary caught up with David and looked around him and noticed that the gate led into the garden of the wooden house, the very same wooden house that constantly belled smoke from its chimney, the very same wooden house that children of Ridgeware feared, the very same wooden house where David witnessed the massacre of the Kelly family all those years ago.

“What’s going on?” Gary’s lip trembled in the rain.

David looked to his partner. “There’s something I have to do.”

David pushed open the neglected rotten gate that for the past number of years had been the victim of wooden famished insects, and was surrounded by overgrown bushes and trees. He ducked his head and entered the garden and Gary reluctantly followed behind. David looked across the garden to the shed, although the garden was covered in a dusky sheet, he knew that it wasn’t the same shed that he found Kelly in when he was a child all those years ago, it was a different shed but it was in the same place as the old one.

It was the first time he had been back at the place since the incident, and he strangely felt nothing. It had been so long ago, it was nothing but a distant memory.

There was an icy feeling flowing down his spinal column, and he couldn’t make out whether it was the drop in temperature or the apprehension enshrouding him. He walked across the garden opposite the house that had one solitary light on, and walked up the wooden steps to the front door and banged on the door repetitively with his open hand.

Gary was clearly spooked and overwhelmed by the unease that was being created just by being present; especially now he knew the history of this hellish place. He looked up at the house roof and noticed there was no telephone connection or nothing.

David hammered the door once again for a few seconds, which was more successful than the first attempt, as a light came on in the hallway. Gary held his breath as the large bearded figure approached the door; the old man reached for the doorknob and opened it, the door letting out a long whiny creak.

The old man didn’t say anything; he just stood with his straggly, grey unwashed hair, and glared at the two of them with his lifeless eyes. His teeth were rotten and his

unusually large nose almost hung over his top lip, his paper pale face sagged and his skin looked like old porridge.

"What the hell do you want?" came the gravelled voice belonging to the old man.

"I need a gun and I need one now," David said snappishly.

"A gun?" Gary looked bemused. "What's going on? A gun? Why the fuck are we here and who's this?" He pointed to the old man.

"Don't tell me you haven't got one," David raged, ignoring Gary's comments.

"I don't need to give you anything," the old man growled with stale cigarette breath. "Now get off my land or I'll go to the police in the morning, the pair of you, go now!"

"Come on, David, let's go," Gary tapped his shoulder. "We're losing light."

"I need a gun!" David's rage had toned down and there was now a plead in his voice. "You use to shoot, years ago, and I know you took it with you when you left."

"Leave this land right now!" the old man snarled. "Or else..."

"Or else what?" David questioned the old, yet powerful figure. "Or else you'll shoot me?"

The old man didn't answer and grabbed the doorknob and went to shut the door, which was prevented by David's foot, the old man glared menacingly once again.

"Look mister," Gary intruded with bravery. "I don't know who you are and I don't know how David knows yer, but we've just come across a very frightened young girl who's just told us that her boyfriend has been attacked, he may even be killed, we don't know, we can't find him. There's a psychopath lurking somewhere in the woods, and that's why we're here. There are three boys up there, we don't know where they are, but one of them is David's son and it's too dangerous to go up there empty handed."

There was no response and Gary threw his arms in defeat. "I tell yer what, forget it, if anything happens to those boys, I'll hold you partly responsible." Gary pointed, but not sounding threatening as his voice quivered with every word he pronounced.

"I'm not asking you do this for me," David spoke with more calmness. "I'm asking you to do this for those innocent boys out there—one of them being your grandson."

"Grandson?" The day was getting stranger by the minute for Gary Strand. "Oh fuck." Gary looked on in disbelief.

He looked at the pair of them, who looked nothing like father and son, but didn't bother to ask any questions, there was no time. David knew that his dad lived in the shack.

Ever since the Kelly family massacre, nobody had wanted it. His father, when he left David, decided to take it on. It was cheap, and was away from people, it was perfect. Despite the small town, this was the first time David had seen his dad, he was too concerned for his son to worry about his emotions towards his dad, he didn't have time for it right now.

"Wait there," the old man said in a calmer manner. Moments later he returned with the long shot gun. "Okay men, let's go."

"No wait," David said, trying not to sound too detrimental. "Don't take this the wrong way, but we need to get up there as soon as possible, and I think you'll slow us down."

"Fair enough," the old man said, with a look of hurt in his face, but knew that David was talking common sense.

He passed the gun to David with his arms outstretched, as the gun slept on top of his arms. "It's loaded, two cartridges, all you have to do is pull the trigger. I haven't been into town for months; the two cartridges are the only ammunition I've got, you know,

for burglars and that. Haven't used it in years to be fair. Always point the gun downwards when not in use, the trigger's not that hard to squeeze, now go."

The two men ran out of the grounds.

"Bring my grandson back in one piece!" the old man called out, as the two figures evaporated into the darkness.

They both jogged their way down the path, with Gary feeling assuagement that they were now going downhill and away from that house. They took the bend right past the trees that separated the path from the Red Hill car park. Gary was out of breath and asked David if he thought Layla would be okay, David replied positively as they followed the path that straightened up, revealing the woods to their left.

"Can't we just run up through the trees?" Gary yelled, feeling his lungs ready to surrender.

"No," David replied, struggling to talk and breathe simultaneously. "It'll take too long, there's a path up ahead."

The two men reached the steep path and Gary screwed his face. "That's some fuckin' hill."

"Come on," David urged his unfit companion. "Before it gets too dark."

They both ran at the hill and surprised themselves by making it without falling over, especially as David was carrying the gun; Gary took a little longer and was wheezing when he managed to reach the top as if he had an eighty a day cigarette habit.

"No more speaking from now on," he said to an exhausted Gary. "Only if it's absolutely necessary, we can't call out for the boys either, we'll attract unwanted attention, if you know what I mean."

"Well, how are we gonna find them?" Gary asked the question, and David couldn't give Gary an immediate answer, he thought for a moment.

"We'll have to rely on luck, Gary, hopefully we'll bump into them, the best thing to do is to look for that camp of theirs and see if they're in there."

"What happens if they've bumped into the psycho? Then we walk past them and they're hiding somewhere, but they won't come out because they think *we're* the psycho?"

"Apparently there's one guy out there, there's two of us and the boys hopefully haven't crossed paths with whoever it is, so there shouldn't be any reason for them to hide from us if they see us both." David spoke with conviction.

"Have yer done this before? You seem rather, I dunno, focused, calm even."

"Gary, my son may be in here, I hope to God he's not, I hope he's on the common as we speak, making his way home, but if he is in here, I will do anything to protect him, anything. There's no time to be panicking, let's walk."

The men walked in a straight line until they came across a fork in the path, one path stretching to the left, the other stretching to the right and one big long path that they were already on that seemed to go on forever. David nodded to his right and they paced quickly down the path trying to make as little noise as possible, but in the eerie silence of the darkened woods, it seemed impossible to be completely silent.

They passed a path on their left and continued to proceed, with both men looking to their left and to their right constantly.

David stopped dead in his tracks as he came near a set of trees that were spaced out, and could hear the gentle sound of a brook. Gary stood behind him and saw a strange large object inside the wooded area. David looked at Gary and whispered that it must be the boy's camp.

They both entered the area getting nearer to the water, which they couldn't really see as the trees were blocking most of the little light that was left in the sky, but they

could hear it and they approached the camp and stood at the side of it. At first they were both understandably reluctant to go in. Without saying a word, David took out his phone and used the light to take a look inside and immediately came back out. It was empty.

“Where to now?” Gary sighed frustratingly.

“I don’t know. I really don’t know, just walk and hope for the best, but we’ll stick to the main paths. These paths disappear when you go further into the woods, and are replaced with narrow bendy ones if I remember rightly. If we take those paths we’ll never get out; it’s like a fuckin’ maze in there. I don’t think the boys are stupid enough to go that route, besides, their camp’s here, they mustn’t have gone too far.”

“What happens if they come back to the camp? We won’t be here.”

David stood with the gun still pointing to the floor. “You’re right.” He nodded.

“Gary, you wait here and I’ll go and look for them, if I’m not back in an hour, go back to Layla, she should have called the police, so they should be here very soon. I just hope the boys have seen sense and they’re on their way home. They may be on the common, heading for Churchill Street as we speak.”

“Hope so. Look, I’ll stay only if yer sure.” Although he had more misgivings than his compatriot, Gary looked generally concerned about his friend going alone, even though it was David who had the gun.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” David responded. “You’re probably better here, and if they do come back, try not to startle them, take them to the car straight away. Don’t go looking for me, Gary, don’t put their lives in danger.”

Gary felt guilty about the new role he had been assigned to, but knew it made sense and held out his hand to David and wished him good luck.

David touched by the serious and gentler side to Gary, shook his hand, patted him on the shoulder and walked away with the gun tucked in his arm by the side of his body, the way a farmer would carry one. David was soon swallowed up by the darkness and faded from Gary’s visibility.

Chapter Thirty Two

Anderton dropped his car into second gear, turned off his headlights so that he wouldn't disturb potential lovers that were maybe in Red Hill's car park, and let the car creep into a space that was a fair distance from the other cars that he had spotted. He turned off the engine and grabbed his torch, refusing to turn it on until he got onto the path.

If amorous couples reported that there was a pervert with a torch up at Red Hill trying to get a look at them having sex, my reputation would be in tatters. I've already made one mistake that nearly destroyed my career.

Walking through the trees, he stepped onto the path, checked his phone was turned onto silent, and followed the path around to the left, leaving the torch off, as there was just enough daylight to see where he was going. Saving the batteries in the torch, he decided to use the device once he entered the woods where it would be much darker.

Anderton had already told himself that he would give the search one hour, then call it a night. He didn't know why he was there in the first place; it was virtually impossible to find Decker in the darkness, and if he were hiding in the deep woods, then even a team of expert searchers wouldn't have been able to find him. Decker knew these woods better than anyone, he'd spent enough time in them.

The torch was switched on as soon as Anderton reached the top of the path, and he walked, not knowing where to go. He went straight ahead, went past the fork in the path and on forwards. The path took a descend and Anderton kept his torch radiating, dazzlingly straight ahead of him, and giving an exceptional examination of what was up ahead. A grey squirrel zoomed over the path about ten yards in front of him, Anderton wondered humorously whether the squirrel had found out about Decker's escape and had gone to tell his friends to leave the woods immediately or suffer being shot, roasted alive, or both.

For Anderton, it would have been much easier to have gone back to the car, tell Fred that he had searched most of the land and let the police get involved before it got any later, but Anderton had a soft spot for the old guy and wouldn't want to see him end up on the scrap heap.

He knew that if Decker could not be found, then Fred would have to tell them that Decker had escaped on the Sunday, otherwise the police would have been annoyed that they weren't contacted earlier. And if they asked to see the CCTV pictures the day Decker escaped, the footage would have revealed in the corner of the screen the real day and date that he escaped. "What a mess," Anderton muttered out loud.

Fred had took a huge chance by not reporting Decker's disappearance, but his job would have been in serious jeopardy and Anderton knew that if he was in Fred's shoes, he would have probably had done the same.

Kill them! Kill them all!

The words swirled within Anderton's skull. He thought that maybe the only reason why Decker hadn't killed anyone, was because he hadn't been given instructions to harm humans just yet. Or maybe in the past he wasn't quite ready to make that step, but now he was.

Anderton was becoming progressively more apathetic with the whole expedition. He went by the path on his right, that led to the crossroads and walked on, and his torch revealed up ahead that there could be a dead end. As he got nearer, he realised it wasn't a dead end and that the path split into two straight ones, one going right, the

other going left, he chose the left trail and gazed up at the stars and the half moon knowing that minute by minute the contrast of the night was getting duller and darker, almost with each step he took. As the path bended to the left, a crossroads appeared in the torchlight. Anderton chose to go left and made his way back to the entrance, the whole search felt meaningless, a complete waste of time, no one could be found in this obscurity and it was going to get darker.

With his heart in his mouth, he felt his left shoe being tugged and shone the torch across his boots and saw that his shoelace was undone. Putting the torch down on the path, he bent down to tie it where he heard a faded groaning coming from his right side.

What the hell's that? Was that my imagination, it could be an animal like a deer, maybe it was the wind or...a person? Decker maybe?

The grousing was heard again, and the doctor immediately shone the torch where the faint voice was coming from, he could see nothing but masses and masses of trees. He walked forwards gripping the torch with his clammy hand and noticed there was a gap in the woods, as if a space had been created for something; the gap—Anderton soon found—was actually a hole, a ditch that he suddenly tumbled into.

He fell head over heels, until the bottom of the hole stopped his unexpected plummet.

He rubbed his eyes that had filled slightly with flying dirt, got to his knees and rubbed his neck, which had the same feeling when he was involved in a car crash seven years ago.

Anderton was relieved to see his torch by the right of him still shining, and picked the thing up with his right hand, still rubbing the back of his throbbing neck with his left. He put his hand onto the ground where he felt the soft fur on his palm. *Shit.*

He panicked and shone the torch where he had just felt and saw what looked like a dead animal; he ran the torch up and down the body, which revealed the black Labrador lying in a U-shape, its eyes closed, its breathing non-existent, its body, now a cadaver.

The whining, loud and clear sound, came to the left of Anderton where he immediately shone his torch. There, was a white male lying on the ground with his face in the dirt, arms outstretched above his head. As the torch revealed his face Anderton could see the huge bruise on his forehead, and dry blood that had once ran from his nose.

"He's here," Anderton whispered to himself, referring to Decker. "He's actually here."

The torch also revealed that the man's right outstretched arm had been cut, as the bicep and triceps area was completely stained in blood and had soaked through his shirt.

"Shit," Anderton whispered. "He's got a knife, the crazy bastard's got a knife."

Anderton put his hand on the victim's head, who if was any colder, he could have been mistaken for a dead person. He looked back at the dog and then back at the victim, he looked back at the man's slashed arm, and couldn't fathom what had happened.

Why didn't he kill you? Why just slash the arm? Why didn't he finish you off?

Those words entered Anderton's head once again, and he could visually see Decker glaring at him over the desk.

Kill them! Kill them all!

He shook his head in puzzlement, but after a few moments had passed, Anderton gave off a rue smile; another supposition flirted with his mind.

You couldn't do it, could you? You couldn't actually kill another person. Maybe you're not as mad as people make out. After all, it's a big step up from killing squirrels to people. Not that easy, is it, you mad bastard?

Anderton took his jacket off and put it over the victim's back, and contemplated on what to do next. The victim had been slashed and was severely concussed. May even have damage to the brain, he thought.

If I leave him on his own he could probably catch pneumonia or Decker may defy my theory, come back and finish him off. I could ring the police, but then I would be stabbing Fred in the back, I suppose I could take him back to the car and take him to hospital, but how the fuck am I gonna carry him all the way back to my car to the Red Hill car park?

He pulled out his phone, turned it on, searched through the menu section and pressed 'call' as soon as Fred's number came up, the phone began to ring.

"Where is he, have you got 'im?" came the crackly voice of Fred on the other line, without a word of hello.

"No," was Anderton's response. "Not yet, but listen to me Fred—"

"I don't know what to do," Fred said anxiously. "None of my staff have had any luck, I'm hours away from losing everything, d'ya hear me, fuckin' everything!"

"Listen to me, man," Anderton repeated. "I'm in the woods and Decker's definitely here. He's attacked someone, a guy, he needs medical assistance, I think he may have some kind of brain damage."

"Oh dear God, no," the voice said on the opposite phone. "Is it bad?"

"It'll get worse if he stays here any longer, I think we should get the police involved Fred, I really do." Anderton waited for a response, as Fred seemed to have mislaid his voice.

"If we involve the police now," he broke the silence. "They probably won't search the woods till the morning because of the dark. Is there any chance you could get him to the hospital yourself David, and I swear, I swear I'll call the police first thing."

"There's a fuckin' man here half dead, and you want to involve the police once the body's out the way, you selfish bastard! Fuck your job! There's a man injured due to your hospital's negligence. I tell you what, Fred, forget it! I'll ring them myself!"

"David!" Fred pleaded. "You call them now, and you'll ruin me—okay we've got a victim on our hands, but he doesn't know it's Decker, he doesn't know that it's someone from my hospital. Don't do this to me, Anderton, it's not just my life you'd be ruining, what about my wife? I'll call them in the morning, I swear, I'll come up myself right now, I'll give you a hand, we'll both take him to hospital."

"You're an old man," Anderton snapped. "You wouldn't even make it up the path, besides, if Decker sees you he'll cut your throat. I'll wait and see if he comes round, and if he doesn't, then I'll have to carry him myself or stay with him here for the night. I'll speak to you later, and get in contact with the police first thing in the morning. If you try and cover this up for any longer, and if anymore people get hurt, it's more than your job you'll be losing, do you understand?"

"Yes, David. Thank you, David."

Anderton switched off the phone, still bewildered on what to do next; he took one look at the body. "Looks like it's just you and me then, kid."

He leaned over not knowing whether to touch him or not, originally he wanted to turn the body on its back so that the man could breath more easy, but Anderton wasn't too sure if he had sustained a neck or spinal injury.

“I’m sorry, pal,” he whispered. “If it wasn’t for loyalty, you’d be on your way to hospital. I’m not too sure how the paramedics would get you up and down that entrance, though.”

He stood up trying to bring a steady flow of blood back into his legs, as they were getting numb, he knelt back down.

Fuck it!

He grabbed the guys sleeve with one hand and the leg with the other, and carefully rolled the guy over who was now facing the raven coloured sky. He rubbed the dirt off the man's face, checked his breathing and his pulse rate, which were all fine.

He clapped his hands together, removed his jacket from the body and grabbed the man's left arm and put it around his shoulder, he then knelt up feeling the weight of this young man and put his right arm around his waist. In a crouching position, Anderton bounced a couple of times, ready for take off. He knew this guy was at least the same weight as he was, and needed all the power he could get, to get them both standing.

Anderton was now standing with the man by his side, like a drunk flopping away from him; the doctor was out of breath already at this point and looked up to where he had to climb to get out of the hole, he sighed, dropped his head and placed the loose body gently back onto his back.

Who am I kidding, I'll never make it to that car park.

He adjusted his glasses, straightening them up and sat down next to the unconscious man, he was a little uncomfortable with the dead dog behind him and even more uncomfortable sitting in a hole in the middle of the woods. He felt like a fly trapped in a spiders web, knowing that the spider was roaming around somewhere in the woods.

He shook the body with both hands, in a desperate way to wake the unconscious guy up, but was wasting his time.

“One hour,” he whispered. “One hour and I’ll bring in the cavalry. Fuck Fred, he’s had enough time, but you, my friend, I don’t think you’ll last the night if you stay here, and I don’t want that on my conscience for the rest of my life. Besides, you’ve got my jacket and I’m fuckin’ freezing.”

Anderton rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, and was resigned to the fact that this would probably be one of the longest hours of his life; he was waiting for a response, just one response. He shook the body again but there was no sign of this man waking up, and thought to himself whether he should just go and get the paramedics.

He decided to stick to his original plan and was prepared to wait the full hour, if he had not woken up by then, then the paramedics would have to be called and awkward questions would be asked afterwards. If he miraculously woke up within the hour, not only could they have both walked back to the car, it would also have given Anderton a chance to explain to the victim about his predicament, his loyalty to Fred who wanted the whole escape hushed up, and how if this whole episode was reported to the police or made it to the local press, livelihoods would be affected.

Then it would be in the victim's hands, and if the emotional blackmail worked and the guy decided to stay quiet, then great!

However, if Anderton’s story angered the victim, knowing that Rosewood staff knew that there was a psycho loose in the woods and it was their fault that he was attacked in the first place, then whatever happened afterwards would have to be taken on the chin.

Anderton was hoping that with him nursing the victim, it may hearten the victim to keep quiet for his sake at least, but he wasn’t holding his breath. He tried to put

himself in the man's shoes and admitted to himself that this story would seriously piss him off, and was wishing that he had called the police as soon as Fred called him. It was too late; he was in it up to his neck and just hoped that the whole sour episode would have a positive end result.

The night sky looked darker than before and was a lot more gloomy; he shook the man for one last time with his patience now diluted and slapped his cheeks gently, but still had no response.

He sat with his legs crossed, he had past caring in what state his trousers would be after sitting on the dirt, he had a lot more things to worry about. His career was on the line yet again, only this time he was only roughly thirty percent responsible for this one.

Since he had discovered the man in the hole, Anderton had realised that it had been a while since the man had made any noises; he put his hand around his mouth and nose and was fulfilled that the man was still breathing, or at least he thought he was. He may have been a doctor, but he wasn't a doctor in the medical term, and looked at his watch, distraught that only two minutes had passed. He looked up to where he fell and had a horrendous image of Decker walking towards the hole and standing over him from the top of the ditch, holding the sharp cold steel in his hand. *Now that would be a frightening scenario.* Anderton was certain that Decker wouldn't do any harm to him.

Despite their usual lack of conversation, there was always a strange sense of respect that Decker had for his shrink. Of course, if Anderton thought that he would be in danger, he wouldn't have gone up in the first place, not unarmed anyway.

Typical of Anderton, the psychiatrist whose arrogance made him think he was invincible, who thought he could even talk his way out of a public hanging. Anderton classed himself as a non-violent law abiding citizen, and often told people his cringe worthy catch phrase: Words are my weapons.

Decker may not have killed anyone, yet, but he did have an edge to his personality and if Fred was here, Anderton was sure that Decker more than likely would make *him* his first kill.

There was no love lost between those pair. Decker had tried to attack Fred once when he went for his throat during exercise classes, the result ended with Fred keeping close tabs on Decker and made sure that staff members had him watched at all times, which annoyed Decker, who felt claustrophobic and paranoid—not that he needed any more paranoia in his head.

Decker reacted by head butting his room wall continuously, until he finally knocked himself out. The staff rushed into his room to find him out cold, with a fractured skull and some damage to the wall, which Fred Houston was more fretful about.

Anderton contemplated about trying to fall asleep, which seemed impossible under the circumstances, but he did feel a yawn coming up from the back of his throat and his eyes were burdensome to keep open than they were before. But anyone falling asleep in that situation must either be mad or very, very tired.

At least if he *did* lapse in a dauntless dormancy, the hour would fly in, although he wasn't looking forward to his long walk back to the car, especially with Decker around. Anderton switched off the torch and rested his head against the slope of the dirty ditch, he wasn't going to go to sleep but he should get some rest before the hour was up. The only positive out of the episode, was that the trees that hung over the ditch provided excellent shelter from the bad weather, which made Anderton temporary more calm.

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David could have sworn he saw some kind of flashlight a little earlier as he wandered down the path; it felt that the trees had eyes and were watching his every step but he felt safe with the gun by his side, and was more concerned about the boy's welfare, especially Steven's.

The woods, at last, broke its silence, and began to come alive as the hooting of owls could be heard in the far distance, the wind picked up a little and although it was still raining, it started to ease and became a lot less harsher than it was before. The flapping of small wings could be heard above his head, and his eyes looked to the sky to see four small bats flying in a frantic and undisciplined fashion making no sound, they flew inside the trees to the right of him and vanished into the shadows.

David, feeling naturally tense, walked on and came to a place where a decision had to be made. The path split into three. To his left, was the entrance but it was too early to go that way, to his right, was the long path that looked very uninviting, and ahead of him, was the other path that curved round to the right.

He chose to go straight ahead and grabbed the gun with both hands, his right hand on the trigger, his left hand cupping the middle of the barrel. He proceeded to walk forward. The hooting of the owls had died down and he was left with the nefarious silence once again; he followed the path curving to the right where it eventually straightened up.

Having an uneasy feeling about his particular path, be it intuition or paranoia, with every step he took, he tried to make as little sound as he could, trying not to drag his feet or kick any large pebbles that could attract unwanted attention.

His breathing became more rapid as the night sky plunged into a deeper shade, and felt that his early courageousness was slipping away from him as the early evening aged. A rustle to the left of him immediately forced David to spin round and point the gun into the trees. What he was pointing at? He didn't know himself.

The company of the gun became less appealing as time wore on. If a dangerous situation arose, would he really be brave enough to use it?

What happens if I shoot the wrong person? An innocent late walker or a lost deer. Don't be ridiculous. Who on earth would go for a walk on an evening, in the woods, in the pouring rain?

David knew that if he did let out a shot, not only would it bring attention to his whereabouts, it could also lead to catastrophic events, and he would only have one vital shot left.

What happens if the gun jams?

His hands shook with tremulous tension, which was all his own doing. The frightening power and intimidation of the woods began to play with his mind. He lowered the gun, half-satisfied that there was nothing there, probably just a burst of wind, and continued along the path monitoring each step as he went forward.

The unpredictable weather began to change once again, and Ridgeway was now paying dearly for their heat wave, as the droplets of rain multiplied and fell to the ground with more flagrant ferocity.

The drops were quickly soaked up by the ground, bouncing off David's jacket and hitting his already sodden hair. He had a hood, but he thought it would be wise to keep the hood down so it wouldn't impair his visibility, as it was hard enough to see as it was.

The gun remained lowered in order not to get any water inside the barrel, whether it would make a difference or not, David didn't know. He thought he saw it in a war

film once, a wet barrel could harm the guns chances of firing; it was probably nonsense but he didn't want to take the chance, he had never fired a gun in his life and was hoping that he wouldn't need to. It was nerve wracking enough just holding the damn thing.

The deafening silence was disturbing and David was fighting a losing battle by trying to calm his out of control tension, he became distressed that his reactions had changed from being bold and brave, to down right terrified. The negative effect that was happening also made him irate with himself, which didn't do much to reduce the physical shaking.

He placed the handle of the gun carelessly under his armpit, with the barrel pointing straight at his foot, and held out his shaking hands and took a few deep breaths to calm his frame down. If ever he was approached by the psycho he would most probably have missed, he was quivering that much.

David was hoping that this was no psycho, he was hoping that it was just a jealous ex of Layla's who had lost the plot when he found out that she had started to see someone else, if it was a crime of passion then there should be no alarm for the boys, but if it was some psycho, then David hoped that the boys were well hidden or on their way home, and was praying that he wouldn't come across any young casualties, his son especially.

There was another unsettled sound in the trees, this time to David's right. Again, he pointed the gun into the trees and anxiously waited for some kind of response. Into the wood the faint sound of a branch or a twig snapping was heard, and David kept the gun raised, trying to keep it as still as he possible could.

"Who's there?" he whispered loudly. "Come out where I can see you."

David waited for a while and heard the immature familiar voice, the voice that he was desperate to hear on this eventful night.

"Dad? Is that you?"

The running of feet came towards David as he tearfully replied to his son's question. "Yes son, it's me."

Steven ran out from the trees, ran at his dad and flung his arms around his body. David hugged his son hard with his right arm, holding the gun behind his back with his other hand; he saw the other two boys run out from the trees looking more relieved than *he* was. Steven sobbed, and David could see that the other two looked severely shaken.

"Where the hell have you been?" he asked his son, who was still clinging onto his hero.

"We were hiding from Kelly, he's in the woods, dad," Steven spluttered. "We thought we might have to stay here all night, we were too scared to come home."

"It's okay, son," David reassured his son, and didn't mention Kelly. There was no time to explain. "You're safe now, kid." David looked at the other two boys, who were remarkably dry, considering the weather. "And how are you two?"

Alan was shivering with the cold air that had made its way to the night. "Not bad, we just want to go home, Mr. Dawson," he wept. "I want to see my mum."

"Poor soul," David said. "Right boys, listen to me, we're going home, but you have to be very quiet, okay?" The three boys nodded, with Steven now standing with the other boys, drying his eyes. "Don't drag your feet, walk in front of me and no talking."

"Where did you get that gun?" Alan pointed.

"It doesn't matter about that now," David said, who was clearly in a rush to get back. "Just do everything I tell you. Remember, no talking."

David ushered the boys to walk in front of him and they carefully did what they were told, delighted that they were in the presence of an adult, an adult who they knew, and more importantly, an adult with a gun.

The bend curved to the left and they followed the path round, with David constantly looking behind him and to his left and to his right. The fear was still there, as a matter of fact, the fear was even stronger now, as he had the responsibility of three young lives to take care of as well as his own.

Still walking along the curvy path, it eventually straightened up and even though it was getting dark, the boys knew where they were. Without speaking, they turned right and walked to the top of the path where the steep path descended.

"Wait," David ordered in a whisper, the boys stopped at the brow of the path and turned their attentions to Mr. Dawson. "Wait there a minute, boys. Shit."

"What is it dad? What's wrong?"

"Neil," David began. "Your mum's boyfriend's here, in fact, Gary is at the camp, I really should go back and get him. I can't ring him, Layla has my phone."

"Who's Layla?"

"I'll explain later."

The boys responded with all three of them shaking their heads and started to speak at the same time with raised voices that were thickly coated with fear. They continued to protest about David's idea, but he shushed the boys seeing the fear in their faces.

"Okay, we'll get back to the car, but I have to come back and get Gary, don't worry, the police should be on their way anyway."

The boys, one by one, descended down the path, which felt a lot easier to do than normal. David followed behind and all four of them ran to the Red Hill car park. Alan and Neil were in front and ran around the curved route and ran past the car park area.

"Where are you going?" David beckoned them back; Alan and Neil came back to David, confused why they weren't heading for the common hill. David pointed to the trees on his right side. "Right through here."

The boys followed David through the shallow line of trees and entered the car park where the four cars idly slept, which reminded David that Gary had drove there, *and* Gary had the car keys. He approached the black Ford and saw Layla was in the same position where he and Gary had originally found her, curled up in between the seats like a foetus.

"Right boys, be quiet," David said, although the boys were already silent.

David gently tapped the passenger window, which startled Layla as she looked up and smiled when she saw David peering in. Layla got up straight away and opened the door for David and the boys.

"You got them back," she said joyfully. "That's great." She scanned the car park and looked back at David. "Where's your friend? Is he all right? Where did you get that gun?"

"Listen, Layla, me and Gary went our separate ways to look for the boys, I need to go back for him." She nodded in agreement to David's surprise, as he was expecting her to break down again. "Now, have you rung the police?"

"The phone was flat," she sighed. "There was nothing else I could do."

"Right," David rubbed his hands over his face, feeling the stress but trying to be as calm as possible for the sake of the boys and Layla, who had already gone through a traumatic experience. "Gary has the keys to his car. So the boys are getting in with you for now. We'll be back as soon as we can, lock the doors."

David watched Layla get back into the car and slammed the door shut, David waited for the sound that would tell him that all four doors were locked. Satisfied that they

were, he ran back through the trees and headed back towards the woods, carrying the gun in his left hand. He didn't want to go back to the woods, but he couldn't leave Gary in there on his own.

He puffed and panted his way along the path and stopped as soon as he got nearer to the entrance, David bent over, exhausted by everything that was happening, and held the right side of his chest where a sharp shooting pain halted his plans to run straight up the path.

Knowing that Gary was still in there waiting for *him*, he darted up the path with gritted teeth, wincing with the agony that was being inflicted inside his body. When he reached the top, he had no choice but to stop, the pain was excruciating and stabbed at his chest every time David inhaled. He held onto the gun with his left hand, the barrel pointing towards the sky and the gun was also keeping him stable as he was almost using it as a walking stick. He walked on, veering to the right along the long stretched path that would take him to the boy's camp, where Gary was waiting.

Chapter Thirty Three

Gary Strand had just about as much as he could take. The rain continued, it was dark, and he was sitting inside a damp den that was built by a bunch of kids.

He took care, as he lowered his head out of the exit of the wooden camp, and could see nothing but darkness that was accompanied by the intimidating size and appearance of the handful of trees, that were dozing by the brook. Knowing that he was under strict orders not to go anywhere, he paced up and down along the edge of the brook, occasionally glancing at the long path in from of him where David had disappeared to find the boys. He was hoping that his companion would make a speedy return.

The temperature had dropped again and Gary rubbed his hands together trying to generate some heat. He walked around the camp that the boys had made earlier in the late afternoon, and inspected it by pushing the side of the camp with his hip, the camp didn't budge.

"Good, very solid." Gary muttered to himself, and put his hands on the archaic, mangy, malodorous blankets that were thrown on top of the camp's wooden roof, they were placed there for insulation and more importantly, to keep the rain from running into the camp, which Gary knew first hand that it wasn't working to any effect.

An old piece of rope had been loosely tied around some of the wood and Gary shook his head with disappointment, at the young boys' shoddy workmanship.

"Boys, boys, boys," he said. "It's things like this that'll make the whole thing collapse."

He took the loose rope from the camp, preparing to finish off what Alan, Neil and Steven had neglected and held out the rope, which looked to be about three foot in length; he looked to the long path once again.

"Hurry up, David," he sighed. "Some people have got work in the morning,"

Having the Friday off sick didn't bother Gary at all, what he was slightly concerned about, was whether his Thursday client, Cara, had made a complaint about him.

Although he never physically touched her, he wasn't too sure if his behaviour was enough to terminate his job, but he was sure if there was a serious problem, they would have given him a call at his apartment. Unfortunately though, Gary had spent most of his weekend with Susan and hadn't had a chance to get back to the apartment and check his messages, so Gary wasn't entirely sure that, on Monday, he had a job to go to.

One thing at a time, my first priority is to get out these woods in one piece.

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a strong hand turned Gary around and wrapped itself around his throat and forced him up against one of the trees. Gary desperately tried to punch and kick his way out of the grip, wondering at the same time what was happening, but there didn't seem to be any letting up from what he could now see, a tall, stocky, hooded figure, dressed in black, who almost seemed invisible to the night.

Gary reached out for the overhanging hood, but was thwarted as the long blade made its appearance and plunged into his right eye socket. Gary let out a short painful, panicking scream, which was short lived as the dark blood, under the watchful eye of the half moonlight, spilled and gushed out onto the attacker's blade and hand.

The blood spewed down the right side of Gary's face, like a running tap, and the figure ferociously twisted the knife left, then right, causing Gary's body to convulse

until his body eventually died. The long blade was quickly removed from his eye socket, leaving a black, bloodied hole with the remains of the fragile eye itself, minced and diced at the back of the socket where his brain had also been damaged.

David, hearing Gary's desperate short scream, ran with the gun towards the brook, which was about another fifty yards away. Fearing the worst, his right forefinger was already on the trigger of the gun as his pace picked up as well as his breathing, which wasn't just a result of his running, it was a mixture of panic *and* the aerobic conditions he was putting his body through. He had never done so much running in one day and could feel his lead legs tiring as if his shoes were made of lead, he finally made it to the area where the camp stood.

"Gary," he whispered, he didn't get any response but tried again. "Gary, are you there?"

David raised the gun, hoping that there was nothing untoward and walked into the wooded area where he could just about see in the darkness, the silhouette of Gary standing against one of the trees. David shook his head and became a little agitated. "Was this your idea of a joke?"

He walked towards his friend, upset by what David thought was horseplay. His son and friends had been in danger, a psycho was on the loose and the pair of them were still in the woods, but Gary had still found time to have his fun and play a practical joke. Gary had always cracked jokes in the short space of time that David had known him, but this behaviour could not be condoned.

David's mouth and the barrel of the gun dropped simultaneously as he got nearer to Gary's lifeless body. The victim's back was against the tree and his head was lowered, he wasn't standing at all, as he sat slouched.

It may have been dark, but David could clearly see the blood covering half of the unrecognisable Gary.

Oh, Gary. David put his hand under Gary's bloodied chin and tilted it upwards to reveal his right eye missing, and his left eye wide open with terror etched onto his deceased face.

Behind him, he could hear a disturbance in the woods and David let go of Gary's head, leaving it to drop quickly, spun round and fired a shot into the night. The gunshot was deafening as David almost dropped it onto the floor. He banged his left ears with the palm of his hand straight after, to try and get rid of the ringing in his ears that was occurring due to the horrendous noise.

"Who's there?" he asked in desperation, knowing that whoever it was, were not going to answer back. "Who's fuckin' there? Come out, you bastard!"

His aggression was not convincing, as even *he* noticed the terror in his voice.

The panic-stricken Dawson, not taking another look at his friend's body, ran through the wooded area back onto the path and ran like hell. Fuck the chest pain, fuck the breathlessness, fuck the tired legs, there was a killer right behind him and the only place he was heading was towards the exit out of the cursed place and he continued to run with the gun in his left hand and refused to look behind him.

The exit must be near.

It felt like David had been running for ages; he tilted his head to the left as if he was about to look behind him just to see if anyone was following him, but continued to look forward as he knew that looking behind him could slow his pace down and may cause him to trip, which would be disastrous under the circumstances he was now in.

The attacker may not have had the advantage that David had in the weapon department, but it was David that was scared, it was David that was running.

He could see the paths up ahead, one straight ahead, one right and one left, it was the left one he needed and could see a strange light filtering through the trees, but ignored it and ran for the exit turning left. As soon as he did this, a blinding light hit his body from behind him and he gasped that he had ran all that way, and the killer was waiting for him all that time.

David let out a terrible, petrified cry filled with a cocktail of angst and distress, blinded by the flashlight; he immediately pulled the trigger and blasted the gun into the unknown. The yellow light fell from his body and he squinted continuously in order to get his proper vision back, trying to shake off the annoying yellow and orange spots that were flashing in front of his eyes.

His vision had been restored and he saw that the light had come from a torch that was lying on the ground, pointing towards a squirming body, releasing anguish moans, drenched with pain.

David was all confused; he walked to the body and noticed by the groans that the body was a male, who yelled out to David.

“What the fuck d’ya think your doing, man?”

David Dawson didn’t answer, he picked up the torch and noticed the shot had penetrated the guy’s left shoulder, he shone the torch on to the face of Dr. Anderton, whose face was screwed up with the pain from the gunshot wound.

David pointed the unloaded gun at Anderton and asked him who he was and what was he doing up here?

“What the hell are *you* doing up here?” asked the shocked psychiatrist, which was a fair question, considering it was a rainy night and his assassin was holding a gun, the same gun that had damaged his severely torn shoulder.

“I’ve come up here to get my son,” his voice quivered. “My friend is dead and there’s a fuckin’ lunatic lurking around.”

Anderton sighed. *Oh shit! He's killed. He's actually gone and done it.*

“Well it’s not me,” Anderton tried to assure David, grasping his wound with fragility. David believed him and lowered the gun. “I’m a psychiatrist, the man you’re looking for is Robert Decker, he escaped from Rosewood a couple of days ago. There’s a man further up that I think Decker attacked earlier, he needs medical help, and thanks to you he’s not the only one.”

“An escaped mental patient?” David quizzed Anderton, who in turn responded with a nod. “An escaped mental patient? Where are the police? What are they doing about this?”

“They haven’t been called,” Anderton responded, but David frowned upon the injured victim. “Look, it’s really a long story, you have to help me back to the car park and get medical help, as well as the police.”

Anderton helped himself up from the ground and still clutching his shoulder, he announced. “I’m really sorry about your friend, if I could go back and change things I really would, but we need to get out of here and get medical assistance for the man, before Decker gets to him first.”

David agreed, and they left the torch shining across the path and proceeded clumsily down the path with Anderton. His glasses were still in place despite the shooting, but even his spectacles couldn’t prevent him from slipping on the steep damp descent, which he then fell banging his damaged shoulder onto the ground.

David helped the doctor up, who let out a wail as the pain from the wound intensified. David was in two minds whether to help him, or just leave the bastard to fend for himself. He threw the shotgun to the ground when they reached the bottom,

as it was not helping matters holding an empty gun whilst at the same time trying to help an injured man to the car park, an injured man that *he* had shot.

The night was flowering into an exceptional, surreal nightmare.

They walked through the small cluster of trees with Anderton still wincing with pain, and to his delight, finally entered the car park.

"You stay there." David pointed to Anderton. He went over to the black Ford, knocked on the window where four bodies spilled out onto the car park, with one of the youngsters giving his dad another hug. David Dawson kissed the top of his son's head and walked over to Anderton, who didn't know what the hell was going on.

"You see those three boys." David stormed over, feeling the rage boil up inside him. Anderton nodded.

David continued, "These three boys, one of them being my son, have spent most of the night hiding from this Decker guy, the same guy who escaped from your hospital, the same hospital that didn't have the common sense to call the police!"

"Look," Anderton said racked with guilt. "I'm really sorry, I really am."

"And that girl over there." David pointed over to Layla. "She has spent most of the night in that car scared for her life, her boyfriend was attacked tonight and is still missing."

Anderton couldn't believe how he underestimated Decker and knew that his career in Ridgeware, as well as Fred's, was well and truly over.

"Now give me the keys to your car." David furiously put his hands in Anderton's pocket and pulled out the keys and opened the door. He told the three boys and Layla to cram themselves in the back, the four of them did just that. David opened the passenger door for Anderton to get in, which he sheepishly did, and David finally started up the motor, as it took him a few seconds to get the key into the ignition as his hand was juddering that much.

"We're going straight to casualty," he told everyone. "There's someone still up there injured as well as this guy here," he said referring to Anderton. "I'll have to take you kids in anyway, for shock."

Nobody argued. As long as they were going, they couldn't care less.

David revved the engine and headed for the exit.

"Where's Gary, Mr. Dawson?" Neil tearfully asked.

He's dead Neil! A fucking psychopath, who's still roaming around the woods, has stabbed him through the eye. No more presents for you, kiddo.

"I don't know," David said, scowling at Anderton, not knowing what to tell the already distressed ten-year-old. "I'm sure he'll be all right."

David had opted for the easy route to Neil's question, and didn't want hear anymore crying, he had heard enough to last him two lifetimes.

The car turned right this time, away from Ridgeware and headed for Lochfield hospital.

Chapter Thirty Four

"There's somebody here to see you, Mr. Pembroke."

The nurse spoke with solace, as Tanya popped her head around the corner to see her wounded friend with his arm bandaged.

"I'll leave you for a while," the nurse spoke, and left the room.

"Hello Mark." Tanya's arrival was like a salt breeze, and seeing Mark lie there all bandaged up and bruised, twanged one of her heartstrings.

She gently put her hand on his head. "How are you feeling?"

Mark, looking lost and bewildered spoke, "Like I've been attacked and left out in the cold for most of the night. That's how I feel."

"Oh you poor thing," she said with concern.

"Tanya," Mark paused. "I lost her, y'know. I lost Sheeba."

"I know, babe." She caressed his hand. "Do you know how long you've been in here?"

He nodded his head, but wasn't really concerned how long he had spent in the hospital, all he knew was that his loyal and loving dog had been killed.

The police had informed Mark on everything that happened, as they asked him questions about the nights' events. He knew that a patient from Rosewood had attacked him, he knew about Gary Strand's murder, and he also knew about Anderton's involvement in the whole thing.

But from Mark's point of view, he was grateful that he had stayed with him for that time and was thankful that David Dawson had took the paramedics, who had a police escort, back into the woods to show them where he lay, which was thanks to Anderton's distorted, yet, helpful directions.

"I feel tired now." He yawned and scratched his head.

"Do you want me to go?" Tanya asked gently, Mark smiled and shook his head.

"The doctors told me if that psychiatrist hadn't have found me when he did, I could be sitting in here with pneumonia, or dead even." He chuckled to hide what he was *really* feeling underneath. "Can you believe it?"

"What was a psychiatrist doing in the woods at that time?" Tanya looked baffled.

"Looking for someone," he spoke. "The psychiatrist's down the hall, he was shot."

"Shot?" Tanya looked stunned, she was now sure that it was the concussion talking. "How?"

"Now, that is another story." Mark sounded quite calm, considering what had happened, and began to tell Tanya a summary of the events. "After I was attacked, a man called David Dawson and Gary...someone, went up to the woods. They found a girl at Red Hill car park called, Layla Wilkes. She was in a car saying that her boyfriend had been attacked, but they were going up there anyway, you see this Dawson guy's son was up there with two of his friends.

"Anyway, he found his son and his friends, but this Gary person was murdered by this Decker fellow, who had escaped from Rosewood. And that's why I'm here; it was him that attacked me. I suppose I'm lucky in a way, for some reason he spared me, unfortunately Sheeba wasn't spared. So far, they reckon she was killed by the killer using his bare hands, poor girl. She was only trying to protect me. She put up a good fight but I should never have left her on her own, I just panicked and ran as soon as I saw him."

"So how did the psychiatrist get shot?" Tanya quizzed.

"This David Dawson took his son back to Red Hill car park, and went back up for this Gary fellow, 'cos originally they split up to have a better chance of finding the boys. David found Gary's murdered body then ran away and as he was leaving the woods, he saw something and shot it, it was the psychiatrist.

"Apparently he got the gun from the old house on the common, the guy that lives up there is David Dawson's dad. This is what the police have told me so far anyway."

"So what happens now, Mark?" Tanya couldn't really take any of Mark's blathering story in, as in such a short space of time there was too much detail for her brain to soak up.

"I go home," he said. "Take a few weeks off work and then go back, simple as that."

"I can't believe it took the police so long to react. I mean, was this Decker in the woods when we both went up there the other day, and how come they didn't seal the place off?"

"The police were only notified two hours ago." Mark broke Tanya's momentum.

"What? I-I don't understand," she stammered.

Mark tried to make sure that Tanya was keeping up with the complicated story, because God knows, the police had to explain it to him on three occasions. "The psychiatrist who got shot, works at Rosewood and Decker is one of his clients. Now, he and the manager of the hospital had decided to keep things quiet about the escape, so they wouldn't jeopardise their jobs."

"The bastards," she cried.

"But now there's been a murder, another person is missing, and this Decker character is still out there, so that's their careers well and truly over."

"Forget their careers, a man has lost his life, thanks to them."

"I have to admit, though." Mark yawned once again—after all, it was nearly midnight. "Before he went to get help, Dr. Anderton stayed with me for a while when I was out cold. I know he's partly to blame. But I *am* thankful that I wasn't just left to rot in some smelly ditch."

"Anderton?" Tanya got to her feet hurriedly. "*Dr.* Anderton?"

"Yeah, d'yer know 'im?" Tanya responded slowly and nodded to Mark's question.

"I had an affair with him, years ago," she said unabashed. "As a matter of fact, I slept at his house the other night, but nothing happened, I just had too much to drink." She sighed. "It was after we had that walk up the woods."

"Oh right." Mark looked disappointed with Tanya's surprising announcement.

"Listen, Mark," Tanya walked towards the door. "I'm really glad you're okay, but I need to get going, it's midnight. I'll see you tomorrow night, after work. I'll tell the boss what's happened, take care babe. Bye."

Mark waved Tanya off and closed his eyes and slept almost immediately.

*

Tanya stormed into the ward where Anderton lay; he sat up to greet the unexpected visitor and smiled with delight.

"Tanya? How—what you doing here?"

"Visiting a friend," she snapped.

She sat on one of the plastic chairs, unconcerned that she had walked straight through the ward without asking anyone's permission to visit her ex-lover, but the nurses at the desk never battered an eyelid.

"What's going on? How did you know I was in here?"

"A little bird told me," she said, feeling disquiet. "I know *everything*."

"The police have been round," he said despondently. "Asking me all kinds of questions, and they'll be back as well, I can guarantee that."

"Maybe if you called them in the first place, you wouldn't be in this mess." Tanya spoke devilishly, using her fingers to comb her blonde hair behind her ears.

"What?" Anderton looked flabbergasted. "How-how do you know what's been happening?"

"I've just told you, David, I know everything. I've been visiting a friend, the same friend that spent most of the night lying in a hole because of your fucking hospital and that manager of yours!"

"Tanya." Anderton looked on in horror after Tanya's verbal attack. "I'm sorry."

A nurse came out from the desk and approached Anderton's bed. "You'll have to go now," she said in a timid voice. "Come back tomorrow, during proper visiting hours and when you've calmed down."

Tanya sneered at Anderton before she walked out of the ward.

She had left Anderton's feelings shredded the way she had turned on him, and left him fuming because he knew that one person, so far, had died and he had a share in the responsibility with that person's death. He was at least a quarter responsible, with Fred being the other quarter and Decker being the other half. Decker couldn't take full responsibility, as he was clearly insane.

He was thankful for something, however; he knew that if he hadn't had shone his torch in Dawson's eyes and impairing his visibility, then David would have had a better chance of killing him. At the time, as far as David was concerned, Anderton could have been the psycho.

Although technically, the torch was the main reason David turned round to shoot, the torch had thankfully blinded his view and David basically pulled the trigger out of sheer panic. A few more inches across his shoulder and Anderton would have had his throat torn apart instead of the top of his shoulder, which at that moment, the way he was feeling, would not have been such a bad thing.

He put his head back onto the soft pillow and closed his eyes in a hopeless attempt to get some sleep, but every time he closed his eyes, Decker was sitting behind a desk opposite Anderton, eyes blacker than a rotted tooth, saliva running down his chin and sneering: "Kill them! Kill them all!"

"Dr. Anderton," one of the nurses came through. "There are some gentlemen here to see you."

This was just what Anderton was dreading, more questions. But he noticed that these guys weren't in uniform, these guys were from the criminal investigation department. They were dressed in smart suits and looked like a couple of big time London gangsters. They both greeted him with a set of counterfeit smiles and scanned the room with their inquisitive eyes.

The guy on Anderton's left was dark and of a stocky build with a red birthmark down his cheek about half an inch away from his ear, he introduced himself as Detective Inspector Walker. While the other was a blue-eyed redhead, not as intimidating as Walker but looked like he could handle himself all the same, Detective Inspector Walker introduced the redhead as Detective Sergeant Jones.

"Do you mind if we sit down, *Mr. Anderton*?" Walker said, still wearing the artificial smile.

"No not at all," Anderton said tentatively. "But it's *Dr. Anderton*."

"Not after tonight it won't be," his voice darkened. His partner sat on one of the chairs next to Walker; he asked no questions and glared at Anderton.

"Listen Detective Inspector Walker," Anderton said with perturbation. "It's midnight, I've already been questioned tonight by the boys in blue, I really need to get some rest."

"I perfectly understand, Mr. Anderton," Walker said patronisingly. "Don't we, Jones?" Detective Sergeant Jones nodded in agreement. "We've come by not to ask you questions, Mr. Anderton. As you know, there has been a team with dogs searching the woods and further developments have taken place."

"Further developments? What kind of further developments?"

"Since finding Gary Strand, Mr. Anderton," Walker began. "Tied to that tree with his eye and brains all mashed up—"

"You don't have to go into detail," Anderton raised his hand. "I do feel bad about what's happened, and if I could change things, I would. But I know it's too late for all that now."

"Since we found Gary Strand," Walker reiterated. "We have found two more bodies within the last hour or so, and they've just been identified."

"Oh God." Anderton put his hand over his face and thought that this Sunday could not get any worse; he was defectively misguided.

"A Mr. Jason Barry had been found further into the woods," he read off his notepad. "He had had his throat mutilated, we've sent some uniforms round to break the good news to his dear wife, who had reported him missing."

Walker turned over the page and relished in watching Anderton squirm. "Nineteen-year-old Richard Johnson was also found. He had been stabbed repeatedly, his parents are away on holiday and a couple of uniforms had to break the news to his younger brother, Greg Johnson."

Anderton couldn't believe it. *Greg Johnson*. The very same Greg Johnson who looked up to and admired Anderton. Anderton felt sick that young Greg had also been affected by this whole sorry episode.

Walker continued, "Richard Johnson had been stabbed seventeen times, it's safe to say he probably would have been dead while the murderer continued his stabbing frenzy."

"I don't believe this," Anderton said tearfully. "I don't believe this."

"Well you better believe it, *Mr. Anderton*," Walker said coldly. "Because it's happening and you're stuck right in the middle, along with your other friend."

"What's happened to Fred? Where is that old bastard?"

"Now now, Mr. Anderton," Walker said. "Let's not get blaming other people, after all, the *pair of you* are in deep shit." Walker got up from his chair and Jones followed suit. "Right, Mr. Anderton, thank you for your time. I'll see you in the morning no doubt, for more questions."

"Is that it?"

"Just for now, Mr. Anderton. Just for now."

To Anderton's relief, the two detectives made their way out of the ward, his joy was short lived however, when Walker came back, this time without DS Jones.

"Just one more thing, Mr. Anderton." Anderton didn't reply, he didn't even make eye contact with the annoying detective. "We've found Decker."

"What?" Anderton's eyes became larger than saucers. "You found him?"

"Yes, Mr. Anderton," Walker said brashly. "He was found by one of our dogs hiding in a camp of some sort. Anyway, he wasn't carrying anything, and we haven't found any traces of blood on his clothes, which is a miracle considering the nature of the killings, so we've took him to the station for questioning—not that I think it'll do

us any good. Because if he does get charged with the murders, it doesn't make any difference anyway, he's already locked up.

"I'm under the impression that he's in Rosewood for life. He didn't go quietly though. The bastard had to be restrained. He was ranting on about being with his *master*, and that his *master* needed him."

"So you haven't found a murder weapon?"

"Give us chance, Mr. Anderton," Walker laughed mockingly. "Don't forget, it's pitch black out there. Besides, we could have caught him yesterday, if anybody had the decency to tell us."

"Right, it's my fault, I know, I'm sorry."

"Don't worry, Mr. Anderton," Walker spoke, sardonically. "There are only three innocent people dead, nothing for you to be sorry about."

"You bastard," Anderton snarled.

"Three people are dead because of you," Walker sneered, taking three steps closer to the injured man. "And you've got the cheek to call *me* a bastard. You think *I'm* a bastard, wait till you and your friend get to court and come across those prosecution lawyers. *Bastard?* They invented the fucking word."

Anderton knew he was correct and couldn't escape the fact that three deaths had occurred, partly because of him.

Good night, Mr. Anderton." Walker finally left the ward and he shouted down the hall. "Sleep well, Mr. Anderton."

Anderton has been in psychiatry helping people for all of his professional life, and in one weekend he was responsible for wrecking three lives as well as their families. In all of this, the one person that he could only think about was Greg Johnson. He fell into a well of pity. He had let his patients down; he had let himself down, and what for? Loyalty. Loyalty to somebody else's negligence.

He tried to look towards the bleak future that was ahead of him and had mental pictures of the disappointment on his wife, his son and Carla's face. His profession had begun to nose dive into a pool of excreta, if it wasn't already there. And what about the court fees? Or having to face the affected family members in the courtroom, having to deal with the local press, maybe even the national press? After all, this was three murders in one weekend. This was big news.

His name, not just in Ridgeware but in the UK, would be mud. His wife would probably leave him, unable to take the humiliation and the intrusion of the tabloid press. His house would be repossessed, the debts would be crippling, and the list went on and on and on and got more depressing for the poor and unfortunate doomed doctor.

He began to sob.

*

Layla sat up in bed whilst her mother, Fiona, consoled her distressed daughter, clutching her hand and rubbing her forehead. It had been a traumatic experience for Layla, an experience that she would carry with her to her grave.

She was clearly still shaken, not just by the frightening episode she had to suffer locked inside Richard Johnson's car, but the fact that he was murdered in such a brutal way, along with two other victims, Jason Barry and Gary Strand.

Fiona, of course, had met Jason for a brief and uncomfortable period, the name Gary Strand sounded familiar but couldn't put a face to the name, and Richard, who Layla

had grown fond of in their short space of time that they had spent together, she had never met.

Layla was pleased to see that the boys, Alan, Neil and Steven hadn't been affected as much as *she* had, and thanked David Dawson when he briefly visited her before he took the boys home who had had a real fright, according to the doctors, but nothing serious.

Her condition was passable as well, although she was suffering from psychogenic shock, which occurred when an individual suffered from deep emotional stress.

The police had called round as soon as she reached hospital with the usual questions, but had never bothered her since, only to tell her that they had found the murderer, who she later found out that it was someone that Richard had briefly known, as a matter of fact he had mentioned Rob Decker's name when they first went up to Red Hill. They had both talked about him, and Decker was also the brother of one of Layla's friends who had moved away.

She shivered to think, after the fracas with her dad, that Rob Decker had been standing right by her passenger door that was unlocked. But didn't the police tell her that it was *Saturday* when Decker escaped? So who was standing next to Richard's car that night? Just some random voyeur?

It was something she didn't mention during questioning. Thankfully for her, she lived to tell the tale, unfortunately for Richard, he didn't.

The two of them never spoke, just clutched others hands, with Fiona flashing the occasional comforting smile, while underneath she was almost as shocked as her daughter.

Three murders in one weekend! Fiona couldn't believe what had happened. It was beyond belief. There hadn't been a murder in the town of Ridgeware for fifteen years, and now this.

She thought of the name Gary Strand but still couldn't fathom who he was. She stared at the hospital clock nefariously and wondered what was keeping her husband.

Ten minutes had passed and at last, the huge, intimidating figure of Nick Wilkes bustled its way through the ward by the bed where his wife and his daughter were.

"Where the hell have you been? I've been texting you," Fiona raged.

"I just got back home from the pub," he responded calmly. "And I just got your message, it took me a while because I've had a little bit too much to drink, and my phone was off."

"I just hope you didn't drive," Fiona said sharply. Nick lowered his head looking sheepish. "Oh for Christ's sake, Nick, that's all we need, another member of our family in hospital, three down one to go," she said, referring to her son at Rosewood.

"Not in here, mum," Layla protested. "Not now, please."

"How are you, darling?" Nick walked over to his daughter and kissed her cheek.

"I'm fine, dad," she said unconvincingly. "I'm fine now you're here."

"So is someone gonna tell me what the hell happened?"

He sat down hard on one of the plastic chairs almost taking the legs of the chair from underneath it.

Fiona began to tell him the summary of what the police had told them, Fiona was hesitant when she told Nick that a Dr. Anderton was partly responsible for covering up the escape made by Decker, especially as he was in the next ward, as she knew that there was a chance Nick would storm in there and damage the doctor even more, gunshot wound or no gunshot wound.

She decided to tell him and he took it surprisingly well, he was very calm and collected and nodded though Fiona's summary of events.

Nick offered to get his wife a coffee and she accepted; he walked back out of the ward and placed his money into the vending machine and punched in for two black coffees. Nick walked back to the ward, handed one of the coffees to his exhausted wife and slurped away as he sat back on his seat.

"So when are you out?" he asked his daughter.

"First thing tomorrow morning," she answered.

"She's been told to get plenty of rest," Fiona chipped in. "Haven't you, sweetie?"

Layla said, yes, and Fiona turned around to her husband. "Listen, Nick, why don't you get yourself home, there's nothing you can do here."

"Thanks very much," Nick said, looking wounded by his wife's comments. "I've only just bloody arrived, girl."

"I didn't mean it like that, you've had a lot to drink tonight, get yourself a cab home and I'll drive the car back. Just hand me the keys. What do you say?"

"If that's what you want," Nick said. "I'll see you in the morning, love."

He bent over and kissed his daughter goodbye and stroked her face, he gave his wife a wink and walked out of the ward, leaving his coffee on the floor.

*

Nick, looking a lot more refreshed than he was in the hospital, took a cab home making no attempt to create conversation with the dauntless driver as he sat in the back.

The driver also made no attempt to make small talk, and Nick, not wearing his passenger seatbelt, never battered an eyelid as the suicidal driver continued to drive as if he was aiming for a qualification time at Le Mans. Nick shook from side to side in the back of the car as the driver recklessly took each bend sharper than any normal driver should, he finally made it to his home in one piece.

When the cab became stationary, the driver rudely demanded his fare, which niggled at Nick. Nick leaned over from the back and gazed belligerently into the eyes of the middle-aged man.

The man's face was ragged; he wore thick brown-rimmed glasses and gulped hard the moment that Nick's colossal body got closer to him.

"It's a good job for you, I'm in a good mood tonight," Nick spoke, unnerving his driver. "Keep the change."

Nick gave the driver a more than generous tip and casually whistled his way back to his door, unlocked it and went to empty the bin in the kitchen, leaving his distressed driver speeding off in the background.

Nick took out the lining of the bin that was full, grabbed the long brush that Fiona often used to sweep the kitchen floor and walked outside. He lifted the outside bin's lid and before placing the rubbish inside of it, he prodded the rest of the contents hard, as if he was trying to make space for the rubbish, which was strange, as the bin was only half full. He continued crushing the contents, and then put the rubbish on top of the flattened contents. He walked back to the house and shut the door behind him.

Nick poured himself a neat scotch and slumped into the chair, with only the one solitary lamp for company. He took a sip from the scotch and began to take his shoes and socks off. He scrunched up his toes and was relieved to get some air to his unusual, fingery feet. He smiled to himself waywardly and took another sip. His smile slowly went into a metamorphosis state and created a frown. A look of regret, perhaps?

He was hurt that his daughter, his only daughter, had gone through an experience that would live with her for the rest of her life. He was hurt that she had spent hours of terror, unknowing and unbelievable panic locked in a car for all that time, feeling vulnerable, scared, lonely and fearing for her young life.

He *was* sorry.

He was more sorry than she could ever imagine, but something needed done, someone had to protect the family.

He had failed with his son, Lee, and he was never going to make the same mistake twice. He also felt for Fiona, he hadn't been the easiest person to live with those past few years, but he felt that everything was going to be fine, everything was going to be back to normal—well, as normal as they could be.

The only thing that was missing was Lee. In a few years time, if progression on his mental state improved, who knows? He could be out soon. He was no harm to anyone apart from himself, and maybe with more counselling and regular visits from his father, things could develop.

Nick was feeling very optimistic about the future and laughed to himself in an almost demonic way. He took another gulp from his scotch, which had now been finished by the thirsty Wilkes.

There was a warm glow inside of Nick Wilkes and it wasn't just the effects from the scotch, it was a feeling of contentment, relief and calmness. There was no rage building up inside of him, no reason to lash out at anything or anyone, and no creative arguments that often built up inside his head.

Despite the trauma that his daughter went through, this was the calmest he had been for a long time, as he knew in the long-term, things would turn out just fine.

He got up, getting greedy with the scotch, and poured himself a more than generous amount and stared out into the cold, tranquil darkness, taking a light sip from the glass this time. He re-checked his face, using the kitchen mirror and was satisfied he was clean. He had a shower straight after he found Fiona's message on his phone, which was something he didn't mention, and he had also binned his jacket.

Nick was no normal father, or normal husband for that matter, but he did love his family so much that he would do anything for them. Absolutely anything!

He cherished Fiona, although he would be the first to admit that he had been a complete bastard to live with since that cruel day, the day when Lee attempted suicide, the day he cut his wrists, the day Nick had felt he had not only let his son down but the rest of the family, and had punished himself ever since.

How could any father live with that torment? For a mother, it must have been hard, but Nick was mentally weaker than Fiona. She hardly lost her temper, never fretted about paying the bills and tried to face the world everyday with a smile, be it false or genuine.

Nick was brought up in an old fashioned environment. As he grew up, he watched his father leave in the morning to go to work, his mother would take him to school and be there when he came back with, and two hours later at six o'clock on the dot, dinner would be served, which at that point, his father would walk in after a hard days graft and sit down to eat with the rest of the family.

Unfortunately, his mother had an affair with her next-door neighbour, a mechanic by the name of Alex Calderwood. When the truth came out, it destroyed the family and his father was never the same. Nick had to painfully watch, for seven years, his broken father, slowly drink himself to death. He didn't want history to repeat itself.

Fortunately, for Nick, potential threats that were brewing to break up his family had at last been dealt with accordingly. His daughter was too young to have her heart

broken at such a young age, and as for that pervert, he enjoyed watching him squirm before he reprimanded him in the cruellest way possible.

Fat dirty bastard!

He felt for the other guy walking his dog; they were at the wrong place at the wrong time, but he had to lash out. The dog was giving him away, and it made him feel incensed with rage. He couldn't help himself. At least he didn't have to punish the dog walker too much, and as for the dog itself, *Fuck it. It's only a mutt.*

He was desperate to get home from the woods, but it took longer than he had anticipated, as he had to hide most of the time, as the woods were unusually occupied by a number of people. It was a place he knew like the back of his hand, he had been going up there since he was six years old. Nothing had changed.

It was a strange night.

Trying to make his way home along the brook, out of sight from the paths, he couldn't believe his luck when he saw the slimy idiot who mocked him in front of revellers from the Bald Buck, and who was all over his wife in the town centre. He was going to be punished anyway, but this was a perfect opportunity for Nick to seize the moment and delete all the threats from his family in one weekend.

After dealing with the guy that was chatting up Fiona, Nick's plans were almost blown apart when he came across a young man.

The thought of killing the young man crossed Nick's mind, but when the young man saw Nick, he fell to his knees and referred to him as "master." He kept on blathering about saving him, and continued to talk nonsense. "I've been protecting your home from the evil ones, but the bastards put me away." The young man told Nick. "I'm here to serve you, master. Let me roam with you and we'll protect this place together, from them!"

What a weird fucking night!

Nick chuckled, shaking his head in bewilderment, at the ramblings of the young boy, who was clearly insane. Lee wasn't insane, he was suicidal.

He had plans for his future family when he was young, boring maybe, but it was a simple and quiet life that he wanted. Of course, it never worked out that way, although it started off promisingly when his son arrived into the world, and then years later he had himself a daughter, it was perfect at that point. He had a simple job that didn't involve a lot of stress, or business meetings all over Europe, staying in hotels thousands of miles away from his family. Just a simple job, a perfect wife and two point four children.

The whole incident with Lee had rocked everyone, Nick especially, and the day he was sent to Rosewood, he found it too hard to see his son, which infuriated Fiona and Layla who visited Lee whenever they could.

For the first three months, there would be heated confrontations with Fiona and her husband, and on a number of occasions, Nick would tell Fiona that he didn't want any memories of his son being stuck in that place.

Nick scratched his left arm and winced in discomfort, completely forgetting that he had a wound there. He grabbed his sleeve with his left arm and carefully rolled it up to his elbow, he looked at the damage to his forearm but there was no need for him to panic.

As long as I'm careful, the damage should be gone by the time Fiona decides to get her claws into me. I would also have to start wearing my pyjamas again until the wound disappears. With the temperature now dropping I could get away with it, without Fiona asking awkward questions.

Everything would be all right, the dangers to his family had been erased, he had his daughter back, properly, and the arrest of the escaped mental patient at Rosewood was perfect timing and a perfect distraction to the police investigations. It couldn't have worked out better.

Nick took one last drink, satisfied that the damage to the left arm was not as severe as he first thought. He slowly rolled his sleeve covering up the bite marks, which could have been a lot more appalling if it had been a Doberman or an Alsatian, rather than a Labrador.

He sat holding the glass full of scotch and grinned menacingly at his wound.

Damn dog.

The End

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COMING SOON

Black Hour

It is April 30th, and on a sunny Spring day, the Head of Sports lecturer, John Boardman, decides to take his sleep deprived body to his office during lunchtime and goes for a nap before his next lesson.

After losing his son six months ago in a car accident, which led to the break up of his marriage, John Boardman has been in a state of turmoil and is now introduced to another nightmare in his life.

He wakes up in his office to find his school building in the middle of a shooting spree. After waking up and leaving his office, he witnesses a fellow lecturer being gunned down by a masked perpetrator. Due to an avalanche of panic, he becomes undecided on what to do next.

Does he run for his life, or does he feel it is his duty to stay behind and search for fellow pupil survivors? The nightmare has just begun.

Not for persons under the age of 18.

Snatchers

Snatchers, is an apocalyptic horror, which sees the slow destruction of mankind, due to an unknown virus that is sweeping the globe.

This novel tells the story of four sets of characters, trying to survive and coming to terms with the 'new world.'

The story focuses on a variety of individuals, including the Pointer family, Nurse Karen Bradley, Jack Slade who is searching for his son, and prison officers and inmates who have been released, who come together to survive the pandemic.

These set of characters, who are worlds apart as far as personality are concerned, are brought together, and find that as time goes by, their quandary becomes tougher by the hour.

The book ends with an explosive climax. Who will survive?

Not for persons under the age of 18.

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