

CRUEL WORLD

John R. Morgan won the 2005 annual NaNoWriMo competition with the novel Cruel World. His prize was a certificate, which he had to print out himself, and write his own name on. It was the pinnacle of his career, which spans ghost tour guide, composer of children's musicals, and, most terrible of all, computer programmer.

He lives in York, England, with his fabulous wife, and gorgeous two children.

CRUEL WORLD

John R. Morgan

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To Alison

Part 1

Flight

Chapter 1

She is suspended several thousand feet in space, and she is terrified.

Maddy clutches at the cobalt blue armrest next to the plane window, digging her nails deep into the fabric, trying not to let out a squeal, trying not to give out any sign of abnormality.

She has been scared before, sometimes the lads at Black Street could be intimidating, but she has never felt this fever, this monstrous overbearing that is striking her now. Even when she had been mugged for her laptop passing through Charing Cross, she had felt more bewildered and tinged with sadness.

She can hear the air steward passing down the aisle, dispensing G and T's to the gaggle of harridans sat a few rows in front.

I must pretend to be asleep.

She forces her eyelids together, and twists her head towards the window. She can feel her chest panting and cleaves her tongue to the roof of her mouth to slow the intake of breath.

"Would you like a drink? Sir? Madam?"

NO THANK YOU.

The voice scrapes and forces its way into her head, a screeching, violent cacophony that makes her gums bleed. She clasps her lips tightly shut and prays, *prays* that nobody notices her discomfort. *It isn't him*, she tells herself, not coherently but with a pressing force. *That is not the man I am sat beside.*

She remembers what he looks like, or what he looked like, she dare not look at him now. She hadn't really paid much attention to him when she boarded, her mind was still spinning about the dem', but he had graciously stood to let her into her seat, and she exchanged pleasantries with him as she sat.

He reminded him of her uncle, who was a vicar in the Black Country, a great arc of baldness with wisps on either side, and a square, but lean face, accommodating a wide, conciliatory smile. He even had the same dent on his nose that suggested the pinch of reading glasses. His voice had been high pitched for a man of his build, not the throaty roar that she has just heard. Above all, he had been *ordinary*. Well, ordinary for a New Yorker.

There is something else occupying that space now, something she cannot comprehend, as if the spectre of death has lowered himself into the body of her neighbour.

She can feel her left hand scratching her wrist, peeling away at the skin, exposing the red raw flesh underneath. She hears the rub of fabric, and knows he is shifting in his seat.

He is turning.

Turning to her.

Please don't ask me if I'm all right, she silently begs of him. She hears the steward moving further up the aisle and knows there is nobody to help her, to protect her from this *thing* next to her. The back of her shirt is caked with sweat, gluing her to the seat behind, and she knows she cannot even move.

Maddy hears this noise, a high pitched, keening wail in her ears, and for a moment thinks it's coming from the cabin, before she realises its coming from her own lips. She is hissing through her tongue, her vocal cords involuntarily loosening. *Help me*, she wants to shout, but she doesn't want him to hear her, she doesn't want him to touch her.

Focus.

This is all in her mind. It is simply a strange reaction, a combination of jet lag and New York liquor the consultants had plied her the

previous night. What she ought to do is fetch her laptop down from the storage bay, and write up her report. She will be going to Black Street tonight, and won't have any more time before she has to present it tomorrow morning. Greg is not one for a temper, but he has this calculated glare as if to say, "You do not live up to my standard of excellence, Maddy. Must try harder". She hated him for that glare, that presumption of power. She is not a drone, she was not born to work.

And he is still turning towards her.

She can feel his caustic breath across the top of her shirt, cloaking her chest in its foul odour, and she continues to scratch away at her wrist scraping away layers until she is sure she can feel the bone underneath.

Her eyes are still shut, and she her head pressed away. She wonders if she simulates snoring whether he would finally ignore her, but she seems to have lost control of her throat. She can feel sweat dripping down the side of her cheek onto her lapels.

Maddy wishes for turbulence. Any outside motion that will drive this man away from her. She prays the plane will drop out of the sky, and they would be swallowed by the ocean.

Then she feels the fingers.

Slowly, gently lowering themselves onto the fabric of her sleeve she can feel then, sharp bony points, hundreds of them. These are not the fingers of the man she sat beside, she remembers them on his coffee, hairy and meaty. These skeletal knives cut through the fabric, and the pinpricks press into her skin.

EXCUSE ME.

The voice is louder now, burning her ears, and she yanks her arm away clutching it to her stomach.

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

"Just – ", she manages to whisper, but it is the only coherent word she can manage. She knows she must bring herself back to reality.

How to do it? How can she shake this horror that is going round her head? She knows it cannot be real, and yet those fingers had felt so visceral, and that voice hurts her so much. She needs all her senses she needs to see the truth.

She opens her eyes.

The cockpit is on fire.

Great fireballs are blowing out across the cabin of the plane, warping the walls, twisting the plane like an Escher carving searing Maddy's eyes. She blinks in the light, and looks down at her feet. The floor of the plane is swarming with locusts, their black and yellow legs flashing as they leap over her fake leather shoes.

In her peripheral vision she can see the hand of the demon beside her, his chitinous fingers clasped on the edge of the seat. There is more, a shiny black carapace that stretches across the aisle, that must be the body, and legs, she cannot see how many. She tries to scream but her throat is so constricted all she can do is open her mouth and gasp. *Help me!*

The passengers ahead of her have turned into hairless wolves, their grimaces peering over the seats, sniffing each other, blood dripping from the corners of their mouths. A few of them leap down into the aisle, and she sees the flesh has been seared from their legs, their bones and cartilage scraping against the metal at the base of the chairs.

Two of them are toying with the moon, tearing it up with their elongated fangs, its rocky face smeared across the carpet of cockroaches.

Then silence.

All she can hear is the whirl of the engines, and the sounds of distressed wailing from the headphones of a discarded i-pod. The wolves are still, their heads turning as they sniff around the cabin seeking out... Maddy.

She is shaking, her whole body screaming with pain as the adrenal fluids coarse through her body like acid.

Then the flood, then the blood, then the earthquake and the screaming, and the wolves are boiling over the sides of the seat coming for her yelping at her, shouting for her skin, ripping and clawing.

She reaches her hands to her face, and bats and flails and curses, and flings the beasts away.

STOP.

The voice is everything. It fills her pores, tearing away her fear, and leaves her floating. She looks around her, and the world is pure white, almost too bright to see, and in front of her is the Dragon.

He has legs stretching all around his carapace, under and over, with spindly digits sharp and clawing on each leg. His soft underbelly is covered with mouths, all spitting and biting, and cussing, whispering of their desire to taste her.

As they hang in space, the Dragon unfurls his wings, and they are beautiful. Delicate as a butterfly, they shine with a range of impossible colours, silvery-red veins running along their length. They are moving so fast they appear to be still, a kaleidoscope of crystal eyes.

Then the Dragon turns his face to her, and all the joy is drained from her. There are beetles, worms, maggots moving across the surface, forming and reforming noses, ears and mouths. The only constant is the Dragon's eyes, which are pearly black, steely, and they are pulling her down inside him.

The Dragon wraps a pair of legs around Maddy's waist and sucks her towards him, the mouths shouting with glee as she closes.

BELIEVE

Part 2

Descent

Chapter 2

Sobbing, constant uncontrollable sobbing coming from deep down in her stomach awakens Maddy. She can feel the arms around her, and fears to look, but she knows the Dragon is gone.

“There, there”, says the man holding her, and she recognises the high tones as the New Yorker sat beside her on the plane. He feels awkward, as if he doesn’t want to hold her too close, but she wants him to hold her close, because she wants to know his arms are real, and she wants to know she is safe.

“Thank you thank you thank you,” she finds herself murmuring, not quite knowing what she is thanking him for.

“You’ve had a bad dream, that’s all,” he says and she wishes she could believe him, “My wife used to be the same. She doesn’t fly any more, god bless her.”

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, so sorry.”

“Shh. You’ll be tired, try get some sleep,” and as he says the words she finds them true. She curls up against the side of the seat, and drifts away.

The seatbelt indicator jolts her awake, and its not long before they land with stomach lurching bump. She lifts up the window cover to see the sun drifting down behind the terminal and curses herself for sleeping so long.

“How you feeling?” asks the New Yorker.

“Like I need a drink,” she replies with a smile, but without conviction.

“My wife... she once screamed for so long they had to sedate her. I asked if I could take the sedatives home with me,” he chuckles, and she laughs politely. He looks into her eyes and can see she is still worried. “Don’t listen to me, I’m full of shit. Say, have you got somebody to meet you?”

“I’m fine.”

“If you haven’t I’d be only too happy to give you a lift wherever you are going.”

“No, seriously, I’m fine. My fiancé is coming to pick me up.”

“Lucky guy,” he said, and looked her up and down. “Lucky guy.”

She is sitting in Caffè Nero at Gatwick, and she is thinking Damon is going to be far from lucky when he finally shows up. She has been ringing his mobile every ten minutes but either he has it switched off or he has forgotten to recharge it. He is a real sweetie, but horribly disorganised.

She almost wishes she had taken the New Yorker up on the offer of a lift, but then she remembers what he became, or what she had dreamt he had become or... she doesn’t know. She doesn’t understand. She doesn’t want to think about it, but she can still see those pearl black eyes, and she can still feel those mouths kissing her skin.

“There you are!” Damon springs up behind her and kisses her on the forehead. “I’ve been waiting over half an hour for you.”

“I’ve been sat here since I got back.”

“You said Starbucks.”

“I said Caffè Nero.”

“Starbucks? Caffè Nero? What difference? You look dreadful.”

“I... had a rough trip. I think jetlag is getting to me early.”

“No worries, babe. Let’s get you home.”

He picks up her suitcase. Something seems different about him, but she can't work out what it is.

"Have you had your hair cut?"

He runs his free hand through his floppy chestnut mane. "You're joking aren't you? I'm not due for at least another month."

"You look different, that's all." *Has he been drinking?* "Are you all right dropping me off at Black Street?"

He doesn't say anything for a moment, but she can see the lines around his mouth tighten.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Nothing is wrong."

They walk to the car park without exchanging words. She can see him bristling.

"The dem' went well," she said.

"I'm sure it did." Its dark outside now. She feels very uncomfortable.

"Look," Damon says as they drive out onto the road, "I haven't seen you for three days. Don't you think that going to Black Street tonight is a little bit... selfish?"

She feels herself burning with anger, but takes a deep breath before replying.

"We can go out tomorrow night, I promise, but my name is down for Thursday and I – Oh, Day, what's up with your hand?"

She knows now what has been troubling her. She forces herself to look again at Damon's left hand on the steering wheel, and focus.

There are six fingers on his left hand.

It's not something she could have missed and it is not a tiny flap of skin but a fully formed digit, an extra ring finger, a huge blot on his hand.

"What do you mean what's up?"

"You've got... you've got... six..."

“Oh give over, Maddy, do you not think I get enough of it down the club without you starting? That was a pretty lousy way of changing the subject.”

“Let me out here.”

“What? What are you talking about? We’ve not even left the airport yet”

“I don’t care, just let me out.”

“No!” he shouts, and she leaps in her seat. “Sorry, I mean I’m sorry. Jesus, Maddy, I don’t know what happened to you in America, but you’re really jumpy today. I’ll drop you at the centre, don’t worry.”

I hate it when you blaspheme, she wants to say, but she doesn’t want to talk anymore. She can’t stop watching the extra finger, moving down to the gear box, and back to the steering wheel in hypnotic motion.

Damon drops her off at the back entrance of the Black Street centre, and she waves to him as he drives off. She is stopping under the street light because there is something she wants to check, something she needs to check before she goes in today. She reaches into her handbag for her purse, and takes a good look at the photo booth picture, a picture she has stared at dozens, hundreds of times in the past.

There they are, Damon and Maddy, staring into each others eyes with smiles. And there is Damon’s hand, resting on her arm, in clear view of the lens.

One, two, three, four, five.

The thumb is tucked round the back. Five fingers and one thumb. How can she have missed it? Those fingers have been all over her body, *everywhere*, and yet she had never noticed he had six fingers?

Maybe Damon is right. Maybe something did happen to Maddy in America. Maybe she banged her head and all that’s left is a blank. It happened when she was younger. She was ice skating down the local Ice Bowl, when this idiot screamed into her and knocked her out. At least that was what she was told when she finally came too in the

hospital. She couldn't remember being at the rink, she couldn't remember what she'd had for breakfast that day. She couldn't even remember what month it was.

But it doesn't make sense. She is sure she can account for all of the two days. The only thing unusual that had happened was that nightmare on the plane and that was all it was, she is sure, just a nightmare.

Damon has six fingers. Damon has six fingers on his left hand.

She knows that soon the memories of conversations, the pictures of him she keeps stored in her mind, and the more solid images that are scattered around her flat will remind her, and soon this will seem like the joke of a fool.

She hears a cough behind her.

"I saw you lurking. You coming in?" Errol, the project leader stands on the back doorstep, the mist of cold air from his breath clouding his big black face like the smoke of a cigarette. He is wearing his giant purple bomber jacket and fingerless gloves.

"Thermostat gone again?"

"Yup. Silly fuckers won't fix it 'til tomorrow. Poor fuckers are freezing in there. There's not many in."

"Big Jake in?"

"Nope." It is bad news if Big Jake hasn't come in. He will have drunk too much, as in more than normal too much, and will be trying to force entry into every pub in Greenwich. If he doesn't end up in jail he will end up at Black Street shouting his mouth off. Errol squints and purses his lips when he sees her face. "You're fucked up, Maddy. Don't worry about tonight. We've got enough on."

She smiles at him, "Errol, you are a wag. Lead me to the fuckers."

It is after one o'clock when she gets back to her flat. Errol, ever the gentleman, has walked her to the door.

"Your man about?"

“Damon is not ‘my man’.”

“You had a row, then?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You *have* had a row.”

“Errol,” she grins at him, “Thank you for walking me home. I’ll see you on Saturday.”

She puts her key in the lock.

“‘Never trust the fucker with too many fingers.’ That’s what they say, ‘They’ll rob you fucking blind and leave you for dead.’”

“Who says that?”

“‘They’ do. ‘Night Maddy!’”

“Night, Errol,” she murmurs as she pushes the door shut behind her.

She can feel her heart pound as she climbs the stairs. *He has six fingers on his left hand.* She had almost forgotten, put it to the back of her mind, but there it is again. She rushes into her apartment, and is *so* pleased to push the door shut behind her. She bolts it for good measure, then heads to the bedroom.

She sits on the end of the bed, and gazes at the painting Damon has hung on the far wall. She gains no narcissistic pleasure from looking at her body, but he has captured her feel, the joy and longing she felt when they were first in love. She looks out to sea with such a serene expression it calms her.

Maddy had tried to persuade him to hang it in the exhibition, that it was one of the best works he had ever done, and he agreed with her. He did think it was the greatest picture he ever painted, and it was for precisely this reason he thought it would be wasted on the gallery.

His six fingers have been all over that painting.

Damon paints with his right hand, but that still won’t have stopped him touching, smearing the paintwork with his fingertips. *How can I know he is right handed, but not know the number of his fingers?* She looked at all the pictures around the walls of the two of them on holiday, or at

the club, or when they were painting the walks of the flat, and in each picture where his hand is visible she can see the extra digit.

Inspiration strikes her, and she pulls out one of his discarded sketchbooks from the bottom drawer of her bureau. She had no skill with the pencil, but when they had first met, Damon had convinced her to draw him. The book is filled with sketches she has done of poorly formed stick men, and faces with tiny features. And hands.

And his left hand with six fingers.

She had known, she must have known, she recognises the picture and doesn't recognise the fingers. She sits at the end of the bed, staring down at the hands and sobbing.

She hears the door knob turning on her apartment door.

Then a huge banging, a repeated kicking with a foot.

"Maddy! Maddy, let me in."

It's Damon, and he sounds paralytic.

"Damon!" she tries to stop it sounding like a shriek. "I was asleep."

"No, you weren't Maddy. I saw you with him. Please let me in."

"Have you been waiting for me to come home?"

"Yes Maddy, I wanted to apologise. I wanted to show you I was a reformed man. Now let me in."

"Damon, please go home, I'm tired, you're drunk, and I'll see you tomorrow night."

"Oh Maddy, I am sorry, really I am. I'll see you tomorrow."

She waits, holding her breath and watching the clock tick until she is sure he is gone. She lets out a long sigh, then with shaking hands begins to unbutton her shirt. She thinks maybe a shower would help calm her down.

Bang, bang, bang.

"I don't like Errol, Maddy, I think you should stop seeing him. Let me in, Maddy, we need to talk."

Maddy sits crouched up on the end of her bed in silence, hoping that Damon will leave, and each second seems to drag for ever.

Chapter 3

There is a man surrounded by light, and he is Damon but not Damon, he is not the beast, he is God-like. His arms are outstretched, and his head turned up, and there is a peaceful expression laid across his face.

And on his left hand are six fingers.

BELIEVE.

Maddy feels the peace pass to her.

“I do believe, I really do.”

And the Dragon appears before her.

She is still curled tight at the bottom of her bed, the duvet clammy beneath her face, and she has to peel her skin away from the fabric. She can hear the alarm is going off, and deep down Maddy knows it has been sounding for some time.

She is going to be late for work. She leaps into the shower, and scrubs until she is pink, then throws on a plaited skirt and blouse. She grabs the laptop case, then hurls open her apartment door.

Damon is lying like a door stop across her porch. She hears his gentle snoring, and quietly steps over him, shutting and locking the door behind her, then skips down the stairwell.

She scurries to the tube station, and only stops when she reaches the platform to catch her breath before the next train arrives.

She smells Big Jake before she sees him. He is slouched bear-like against the edge of an empty bench, flecks of sick mottling his clothes.

“Oh, Jake, Jake, Jake,” she tuts, “Why didn’t you come in last night?”

“Bad day yesterday, Maddy,” he mumbles into his beard.

“You and me both,” she fetched a fiver from her purse, and handed it over to him. “Get a coffee, and get yourself cleaned up. And I mean cleaned up. I’ve got to go,” she says. The tube is pulling in.

“Martha thinks the end of the world is coming.”

“Martha *always* thinks the end of the world is coming.”

“This time she means it.”

Greg is a big fat slug of a man with slicked back hair who slouches under his desk with his hands tucked between his thighs.

“Madeleine, you look like shit.”

As do you Greg. “Thanks.”

“You should spend less time at that doss house, Maddy. Know where your priorities lie.”

“I did my best. The dem’ went well. They really liked the new setting sheet, and the enhanced heat view had them clapping. I haven’t had time to write up –“

“We lost the contract, Maddy.” He doesn’t look up from the desk.

“How –“ Maddy takes a breath. “They were very enthusiastic yesterday. What went wrong?”

“You tell me, Maddy, you tell me.”

Maddy has not sat down, and now wishes she had. She doesn’t want to face this now with no support behind her.

“They called me last night, and said they were going to run with Menulaze. Aducare was worth a lot of money of money to us, Maddy, you know that, don’t you?”

They were worth a lot of money to you. “Yes I know that.”

“You know I don’t hold you responsible, no more than any one else. We’ve all put in a lot of hours. You know I did eighty hours of

overtime work last week getting the setting sheet finished. The dem' was in your hands. But you are not to blame, I know that. We'll touch base after lunch, okay Maddy?"

"Okay."

She turned to leave.

"Oh, and Maddy? You really aren't looking too great, why don't you take this morning off?"

"Will do."

"Go and buy some make up, sparkle yourself up a bit, and I'll see you after lunch. It's not the end of the world."

She resists the urge to slam the door.

It's Chipper who starts. A single hand clap, then again, and by the time she reaches the front door the whole office is slow clapping her exit.

She sits hunched over a cappuccino in Café Rossi hoping the staff don't notice the tears dripping into the saucer when the symphonic tones of her mobile ring out.

She wipes away her eyes and looks at the screen. *Damon*. He must have recharged his mobile, so he would hopefully be a little more human than last night. She doesn't want to talk to him, but she needs to talk to somebody.

"Hi."

"Hey, babe. I tried your office number, but they said you were out. Everything okay?"

No, everything is not okay. "Yes everything is fine. I've just gone to get some supplies."

"They shouldn't be sending you to do dogsbody work, Maddy. If you weren't a woman they wouldn't dare treat you like that."

"Leave it, Damon. I'm already out now."

"You're strong, babe. You don't have to stick for stuff like that."

"I know, darling, but I'm not feeling very strong right now."

Damon doesn't speak for a moment. "I'm sorry, babe. I acted like a pig last night."

"You said it."

"I was really looking forward to seeing you."

"I know, Damon. We'll see each other tonight."

"I'm going to take you out."

"Not to the club, Damon, I really can't face going down the club."

"Don't worry, babe, I'm going to take you somewhere nice in Covent Garden. You'll enjoy yourself. I promise."

Damon shows up on her doorstep with the largest bunch of roses she has ever seen.

"You wouldn't believe the number of graveyards I had to visit to get all these," he smiles.

"They are beautiful, Damon, really beautiful. Come in a moment, and I'll put them in water."

"Can't stop too long, babe. Table is booked for half seven. By the way, you are looking absolutely fantastic."

She is feeling pretty good. She is wearing a chiffon blue dress with a small sky blue jacket covering her shoulders, fishnet tights, and, yes, some of the make-up she bought earlier that day.

"You aren't looking too bad yourself."

"You like it?" He twirls in a new suit. "I sold one of the crimson cat pictures today, so I thought I would treat myself."

He grabs her hand with his. *His right hand.* She knows it's his right hand because their fingers interlock. Has he never held her hand with his left?

Big Jake is still slouched by the same bench when they reach the tube station. He must have taken her advice, because he doesn't smell anywhere near as bad, and his wool jumper isn't flecked, but she sees he has a bottle poking out the top of a plastic bag.

"Who got you that?" she quizzes scornfully.

“Some kind soul,” he grins back, showing off his tarred misshapen teeth. “Damon, sir, you wouldn’t be so kind as to loan a cigarette?”

“Last one, Jake, last one.” He pulls a packet of Camels out his inside pocket, and taps one out.

“I do wish you would give those up, Damon,” she tells him as they board the tube.

“It was you who got my started! Besides, I only smoke them down the club. You know that.” *And all the rest.* “How can I be a genuine Bohemian if I don’t smoke?”

“There’s not much here for vegetarians,” Maddy says scouring the menu.

This is posh, too posh for her tastes, the waiters vastly outnumber the diners, and they appear everywhere. The vast walls of mirrors leave no room for privacy.

“Here’s your opportunity to start eating meat.”

“Don’t joke about it, Damon. The starters don’t even sound nice. Cold asparagus soup?”

“I’ll get them to warm it up. Why don’t you go for the mushrooms. I rather fancy the Foie Gras.”

“If you order that, I’m leaving right now.”

“Kidding. Anyway, how was work today?”

“Awful. I’m thinking of going back to nursing.”

“Whoa, Maddy! It can’t be that bad.”

“It is. It is that bad. Greg can a right bastard at times.”

“He’s a bastard all the time. He can take one of his lasers and shove it up that fat arse of his for all I care.”

Maddy laughs. “Seriously, it’s not right for me. I’m not a salesman, and that’s what I’m being made to do. I feel like I’m a scapegoat for everybody’s mistakes, and I don’t feel appreciated for the things I do get right.”

“They do appreciate you, babe. They appreciate you by giving you money.”

"I don't know. I get the feeling I need to get out before they give me the boot."

"It's a come down. Maybe you could find something else in the private sector."

"I want to go back to nursing, Damon. You know its what I enjoy."

He sighs and appears thoughtful while they order their dinner.

"Babe, you do know you won't be able to keep the apartment."

"It doesn't bother me. I can go back to renting. Maybe we could go on a cruise with the cash I make."

"Maybe." His five fingers tap in a wave down the spine of his glass. "You could move in with me."

"Damon, we've been here before."

"Yes, but this time is different. We both get what we want. Maddy, next month we'll have been together a year. A year is a long time in a relationship these days. Hell anytime." *Don't blaspheme.* "It makes so much sense. Especially if you want to go back to nursing."

"I'm not sure I want to live with you after what you were like last night."

"I was deep in melancholy last night, Maddy. I wanted to talk to you, I wanted to tell you all the things I'm telling you tonight."

"You mean you had booked a restaurant without telling me."

"Maddy. Maddy, I want you to move in with me."

"No, Damon! I've told you, I won't live with you until we are married. We *have* discussed this."

Damon looks pensive throughout the main course, and her bass sits uneasy on her stomach. She knows where this is going. He excuses himself to go to the toilet, and she considers making a dash for it, but she knows she has to face him. All around her the waiters are smiling and staring, and she hears the maitre d' change the music.

When he returns, she can see the water on his hair line where he has freshened his face, and his grin is overpowering. *Oh please no. Not today.*

He comes close to her side of the table.

“Maddy. Maddy there is something I have to do.” He lowers down on one knee.

And the table cloth shifts across the table.

Immediately her wine glass tips over, drenching her lap in the thin red sauce. Next to go is the candle stick holder, the flame streaking in an arc down before fluttering past the corner of her napkin, setting the paper alight with a whoosh of air.

She leaps backwards, her chair crashing into the couple behind, and she trips over Damon’s arm in her rush to get away from the inferno.

The waiters are scrambling round, all descending on the table with ice buckets, water jugs and soaking teacloths, beating down the flames, and all the while Damon is laughing, giggling and whooping.

“If that’s not a sign,” he shouts, “I don’t know what is.”

She goes home.

Without Damon.

She told him she needs time to think. She needs to find time to think a way out of this mess, she feels like she has lost sight of the Damon she knew a few days ago. She goes home with her head spinning and her hands shaking. She’s soaked with wine drenched with rain, miserable and scared.

She fumbles her way into the apartment, loses the dress, and pulls on her thick dressing gown. She is stressed to the hilt, and feels she needs artificial stimulus to calm down. The thought of a drink after being soaked in wine makes her bile rise. *What I need is a cigarette.*

She goes to her wardrobe, and ransacks some of Damon’s old clothes, in the hope he has left a packet in one of his jackets.

She finds a slightly boxed, but nearly full packet of Camels in the front pocket of a donkey jacket, and hisses a celebratory, “Yes.”

She goes into the kitchen, uses the stove to light up, opens the balcony windows, and leans out.

The sweet nicotine rolls down her throat.

The rain is softer now, more of a fuzz, and she calms, resting her elbows on the railing.

She can see a few lights in the apartment opposite, and faintly hear the sound of laughter rising from a late night game show, but the backstreet below is quiet. The greatest sound is the wind blowing litter across the tarmac.

It's just bad timing. If Damon had proposed to her last week, she would have accepted, but over the past couple of days she has grown so increasingly uncomfortable, that she has become paranoid. *He is sweet. I had better not buy him gloves for Christmas!* There. She can make a joke about it. It's not his fault she has lost the ability to count.

Damon had reminded her they are due to visit his parents tomorrow. She likes his parents. They are as open and carefree as she is, and she is sure she can finally shake these jitters.

She stubs out the end of the cigarette, and places it in the kitchen bin.

Just one more This is how it starts isn't it? I mustn't tell Damon.

She lights up another, and leans back out of the window. It seems a little colder now, although it could just be the rain soaking the collar of the dressing-gown.

A movement, a drifting of a black shadow across an emptiness of darkness moves in the corner of her eye.

Somebody is watching me.

She traces the movement to a window on her right, above her eye line. There is a silhouette in the shadow, a space in an emptiness, a man standing in the dark overlooking the road.

Is it somebody I know?

She leans out, squinting, forcing her eyes to take in more darkness.

Then she sees them, leaping across the void between them until they are inches before her own face. The same shimmering black jade eyes that she saw on the man on the plane, and she catches the flicker of light on his back, the wings of a butterfly.

She slams the balcony door, wrenches across the blind, scrunches up the packet of cigarettes, and hurls them at the bin.

Chapter 4

“Maddy, Maddy, its fabulous to see you. You are looking fantastic!”

It's so nice to be with someone who can lie convincingly.

“Thank you Jackie. You are looking great, yourself. Is that a new top?”

“Harry's been treating me to a trip to Asda again,” she smirks.

“Hi mum!”

“Son! You've painted your mum some more pictures to put on the kitchen wall?”

“Not today. Next time.”

“Come on through to the living room.”

Maddy's heart stops.

Stretched all across the far wall of the living room is a banner proclaiming “CONGRATULATIONS” and in smaller letters underneath, “On Your Engagement”.

Harry fires off a cork at the ceiling and champagne gushes into four glasses on the table.

“You told them!” Maddy grimaces at her boyfriend wishing she could turn straight around and walk straight out.

Damon has the decency to look somewhat strained himself.

“I told them I was planning to. While you were out in America. I didn't expect all this though.”

“So where is it then? Show it off. Damon told us all about it!”

Damon looks decidedly sheepish.

"We had to take it back to the jewellers," says Maddy quickly. "It was too big for my chubby fingers."

"Your fingers are not chubby!" said Harry, "That's just Damon. Ever the flatterer, he'd think you were the smallest size."

Maddy takes a sip from her champagne. It tastes caustic down her throat.

"We've more good news as well. Maddy is going to move in, aren't you Maddy?"

Maddy shoots him a look. *We'll talk about this later.*

"It's not for definite yet. I need to find a buyer that I'm happy with. It could take months."

"More reason for us to celebrate!"

"Where's Baron?" asks Damon.

"He's out back feeling sorry for himself. I'll let him in if you like, but I do warn you, he looks a right state. Who'd have thought a dog could get alopecia."

Jackie goes to the back door and lets in the Golden Retriever.

Baron is no longer golden, but a sickly pale white, smeared with lines of pink. A few wisps of hair still hang off his haunches, there is blood staining his cheeks, and his fangs are bared. He growls and leaps at Maddy, knocking her to the sofa behind.

She yelps, pushing away his face, but he is only wanting to play. He jumps back down onto the wood floor, his nails scraping, as he raises back into the kitchen.

He returns with a dead rat, and shakes it at her.

"That's the third one this week," says Jackie, "You'd think we don't feed him."

"What's wrong with him?" asks Maddy.

"We don't know," says Harry. "He came out his kennel a couple of days ago, and he was half bald. The kennel was hairier than he was. Took him to the vets, and they said they'd carry out some tests, but apart from the hair loss, he's been fine."

Baron picks the rat up in his lean wolverine jaws, and shakes it at her.

Maddy slices into her nut loaf under the gaze of Damon in his graduation cloak, hands down by his sides, the six fingers of his left hand clutching onto the mortar board.

"I bet Father Michael is pleased," says Jackie, "Have you set a date with him yet?"

"Oh mum, I only proposed last night. We haven't had time to tell Michael yet, let alone set a date."

"He is such a nice man. You will give him my love when you see him next, won't you?"

"Yes, mum."

He flashes his eyes at Maddy in an accusatory manner, but she doesn't get his meaning.

Suddenly, Baron's head appears at the table, snatching at one of Harry's roasties.

"Whoa! Down boy, down boy. There's a good boy. There'll be plenty for you when we're finished.

Maddy watches Harry's hands caress the taut skin on Baron's head, and watches his fingers run down the dog's spine. *Fingers*. There are far too many fingers, on both hands, six, seven, eight, she can't see they are moving too quickly.

Her body flinches, and her chair scrapes back along the floor.

"Is anything wrong, Maddy?" asks Jackie.

"No, no, nothing," she says trying to look anywhere but Harry's hands.

"It's dad's hands," grins Damon. *Ever tactful*. "Maddy is having a thing about hands at the moment. She seemed to have forgotten about our condition when she went over to America last."

"Polydactyly," says Harry with a stern expression. "The blessing of a child with extra fingers. My dad had so many I believe he could count

to a hundred without stopping. It makes us popular with the ladies,” he winks at Jackie.

“To Polydactyly,” Damon toasts, raising his glass into the air, five fingers splayed visibly through the glass.

“To Polydactyly.”

Maddy doesn’t join in the toast. Chills are running all over her body as she shoves the chair out from behind her.

“Give me the car keys.”

Damon looks at her confused. “Maddy – “

“Give me the car keys now.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Now!”

Baron starts barking furiously, as she snatches the keys away from Damon.

“How am I going to get home?”

“I don’t care Damon.”

She charges out the house, leaps into the car and skids down the driveway with tyres screeching.

She had seen those fingers on the wine glass. She had counted them clearly, he was sitting right beside her. Five fingers and one thumb.

He was holding the wine glass with his right hand.

Her phone is ringing as she drives, almost non-stop, she can hear it in her handbag, and it is driving her crazy, but she doesn’t want to slow down to stop it. She wants to get home. *No, home isn’t safe, either.* She doesn’t know where she wants to go, but she knows above all she doesn’t want to speak to Damon, and she doesn’t want to stop moving.

Michael. I have to see Michael.

She pulls onto the hard shoulder, and puts her hazard lights on, then punches his speed dial number.

“Michael?”

“Maddy, can I call you back in a minute? I’m in the middle of something.”

“Michael, I – .” Already the phone is dead.

Her breathing is frantic. She tries to draw deep, long gasps.

Her phone starts to flash, and she answers it before the ring tone starts.

“Michael!”

“Michael? It’s me.” *It’s Damon.* “What’s going on?”

“Damon, I don’t want to talk to you right now.”

“I know what this is about. I know I shouldn’t have told them, but you know, they’re my parents. I tell them everything. I didn’t think they would lay all that stuff on.”

“Damon, I’m going to hang up now. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Don’t talk to Michael. He’s got a thing for you, Maddy, you know he has – “

She hangs up, and immediately the mobile rings in her hand. This time, she checks the name before answering it.

“Michael? Michael, are you able to meet me? I need to talk to you as soon as possible.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m just hitting the M25. I’ve been at Damon’s parents, I’ll be back home in forty minutes.”

“I’ll meet you at the Spread Eagle in an hour,” he says, and hangs up.

Again, the phone is ringing. This time it is Damon. She holds down the power button until the screen goes blank, and throws it on the passenger seat.

As she starts up the engine, the phone springs into life again, flashing Damon’s name on the screen.

She winds down the window as she accelerates away, and hurls it out in the path of the wheels of a truck.

“I’ll get these.”

“No, *I*ll get these,” Michael insists, his soft Glaswegian tones leaving no room for argument. “I’ve had two funerals today.” She notices his wallet is padded with notes.

“Now what is this about,” Michael says, smiling at her serenely. His blue eyes look concerned. *Come right out with it.*

“Michael... how many fingers has Damon got? How many fingers on each hand?”

Michael doesn’t answer immediately. He takes a large swig of his pint, leaving a trail of foam around his moustache and beard. He wipes it on the sleeve of his jacket.

“How many fingers d’you think - ?”

“Five,” she interrupts. “Five fingers on each hand. I know that’s right, we’ve been together almost a year, and I know how many fingers he has on his hands. I touch them every day, each and every one of them, all ten.”

“Calm down, Maddy, drink some o’ that beer, it’ll do you some good.”

“You’re no Methodist.”

“Thank God. I need to be able to sin occasionally otherwise there would be nothing to be forgiven.”

“He’s asked me to marry him. At least, he would have asked me to marry him if he hadn’t set the table on fire.”

Michael splutters in his beer, “What?”

“He knocked a candle over when he knelt down to propose.”

“How romantic. And how d’you feel about that?”

“That he’s the clumsy oaf he always has been.”

“Stop kidding, Maddy, how d’you feel about marrying him?”

“You’re always trying to analyse. Why can’t you just tell me what to do?”

“Don’t be silly, Maddy, answer the question.”

“How do I feel? If he’d have asked me to marry him last week, I would have said yes, no hesitation.”

“What’s changed?”

"I... I don't know what has changed. You know I went to America to demonstrate some new laser imaging software to some surgeons in New York. Since then I feel like I've lost control of my life. I'm seeing things, all sorts of things, and I know some are real and some are not, but sometimes I can't tell the difference."

"Examples."

"My in-laws' dog has lost all its hair. I know I should be sympathetic, but I'm not. It just scares me. It looks like one of those bald lab rats, but its face is like a wolf."

"Sounds scary."

"I know, but that's not it. Last night, I opened up my balcony window to get some fresh air and I could see a man watching me from a window across the way."

"You're an attractive woman, Maddy – and I mean that entirely objectively, of course – are you surprised that a man might look at you if you stepped onto your balcony?"

"But it wasn't his looking that scared me. I normally wouldn't be bothered by these things, Michael, but I'm getting really paranoid. I'm constantly panicking about everything, not knowing what's going to happen next. There are these holes in my memory about things I really ought to know well. I'm going to have to phone the doctors, I know, I'll end up on depressants, or counselling or something. I don't understand why this is happening, this isn't really me."

"I think it is time for a whisky."

"I can't, I'm going down Black Street tonight."

"You can and you will. Sleep it off this afternoon, that's what I always do."

He talks to her still as he returns to the bar. "How's it going at Black Street?"

"Not too good. A lot of people were out on Thursday night, and some that were in seemed a little spooked. The winter is coming on a little too quickly for my liking."

“Thursday was a rough day for me too... How d’you know these things are just in your head? How d’you know they aren’t really happening?”

She sips at the whisky. “Damon’s finger. Damon’s finger. I come back from America, and Damon has an extra finger on his hand. His *left* hand. I *know* it wasn’t there before I went away. Then today round the table, I looked at his *right* hand, and it had the extra finger. Fingers don’t just leap from one hand to another. There is a truth, a single truth. Either it’s on his left hand or his right, and I have no idea what that truth is. If he walked into this pub right now, I could not tell you where the finger would be. Left hand, right hand, on the end of his nose. I don’t *know*.”

Michael drains his whisky glass, and bangs the empty tumbler down on the table.

“I need you to come to morning service tomorrow.”

“I always come to church on Sunday. You know that.”

“No. Not any other Sunday, I’m talking about tomorrow. There’s something I need to show you.”

“I’ll be there,” she insists.

“Listen to me. A lot may happen between now and tomorrow morning. You must come, you must come, through earth, wind and fire if need be. Whatever happens, try to live life as normally as you can.”

“That’s a bit melodra – “

“I have got to go, I’ve got to prepare for tomorrow’s service.”

“Can’t you - ?”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Maddy. Oh, and by the way. Damon has five fingers on his left hand, and six fingers on his right.”

Maddy stares at him, eyes wide. “How long has it been like that?”

“For as long as he can remember,” says Michael, and disappears out the door.

Chapter 5

When she gets back to the apartment, the phone is ringing, and there are thirty four answer phone messages. She unplugs it from the wall, and lies down on the bed. She cannot sleep, she listens to the concrete creak in the gale outside, and the rain lash against the window.

There is the wind.

After a while, she gets up, and gathers up all the pictures around her apartment of Damon. She can't bear to see him on the wall. *Six fingers on his right hand.* She is about to pack away the sketchbook as well, when she changes her mind. She opens it up at her clearest drawing, the one where all his fingers are visible, and gets a black marker from the kitchen drawer.

Underneath the picture she writes:

Left – Five fingers

Right – Six fingers

Left and Right, Five and Six.

Both are in alphabetical order.

She leaves it open on the coffee table in her lounge.

“What are they talking about?”

“Fucked if I know, Maddy,” says Errol. They’ve been like that since I got here.

A group of about fifteen are huddled round a single table, talking in whispers as they sip their soup and crouch under their towels. The central heating had worked for two hours Friday night, before it conked out again. Tonight is not a good night for the heating to be off.

Maddy walks over to see if she can break into the circle.

“Si, have you been using that cream I gave you?”

The circle laughs. “Aye, its champion. Canne ye see I’m sittin’ down?” More laughter.

“So what are you lot gabbing about?”

“Can’t you guess, Maddy?” says Martha, “The end of the world is coming.”

Big Jake hoots.

“Tell me,” says Simon. “Have you ever seen the Devil, Martha?”

Shining black eyes. “The guy with horns and a pitchfork? Not since Hallowe’en.”

“Then fuck off and leave us alone.”

No laughter.

“Okay, fine. If any of you need me, I’ll be slitting my wrists with Errol.”

“Good.”

She sighs as she goes and stands by the soup urn. Errol hands her a cup of black coffee.

“Silly fuckers,” he says.

“They’re a morbid lot tonight, aren’t they?”

“Not much to be happy about.”

Somebody Maddy doesn’t recognise pushes through the glass doors, carrying a small box. He is smiling too much, and is too smart to be after soup.

“Hi there!” he says, looking over in her direction. “Is it possible I can speak to someone in charge?”

“You can speak to us,” says Errol.

The man with the box looks from Errol to Maddy and back again, trying to decide who is senior between the black man and the woman. He plumps for Maddy.

“It’s gonna be cold this winter, isn’t it?”

“What do you want?”

“I was hoping I could leave some leaflets with you. Just information really.”

“What are they?”

“Watchtower pamphlets.”

“We are a secular group. We don’t display religious pamphlets in here,” says Maddy.

The Witness looks incredulous. “Are you serious? We need to be helping these people find the truth, not restricting them.”

“We need to help these people find some food. They already know the truth, and that is they are cold, homeless, and don’t need to be proselytised to, thank you very much.”

“Well I might as well leave some, now I’m here.”

“No!” says Errol, and his voice is deeper than the ocean. “You heard what she said. Take those fucking leaflets out of our – “

He stops when they hear a banging from the middle of the hall. Big Jake is backing away from the table, blood soaking his right arm. Simon leaps away, a six inch blade clattering to the floor from his hand.

“I don’t need you! I don’t need any of you. I’m going to do this on my own. Just leave me alone, okay?”

He looks desperately about the room, as if there are ghosts crowding in on him, then turns and flees the hall. For a moment, everybody is still, staring at the blood dripping from Big Jake’s shirt.

“Look... if you need a witness, I – “

“We told you,” Errol growls, “We don’t need no Witnesses. Now fuck off, piggy.”

As he leaves, Maddy swears she can see his curly little pigtail poking out the bottom of his jacket.

“Jake, let’s get you into the sick room. Come on.”

He clutches his arm tightly as he follows Maddy into the Medical room, leaving droplets of blood across the chequered floor as he goes, then sinks down onto the end of the bed.

“What was all that about?”, she picks up a pair of scissors, and carefully cuts along the sleeve of his woollen jumper.

“Simon is an idiot. He doesn’t understand what is going on.”

“I don’t understand what is going on.”

“But you will, Maddy. You will soon.”

There’s no answer to that. She fetches some cotton wool and a dish of water to clean up the mass of blood and strands of wool on his arm. He doesn’t flinch when she touches the wound.

“It’s not deep,” she says, “but you ought to go to hospital to get it seen to.”

“Sew it up, Maddy. You know I can’t go there.”

She gathers up everything she needs, and dabs his arm with alcohol.

“I could do with some of that.”

“It’s neat, Jake, it would kill you.”

“But what a way to go.”

“You can have a cigarette afterwards” She threads up the suture. “Hold still.”

The room starts shaking gently, the bloody pot sloshing on the table, and there is a rumble, as if a train were passing the room.

“What was that?”

“Get on with it, Maddy. We don’t have long.”

Before what?

As she inserts the needle into his flesh, Big Jake starts to sing in a beautiful profundo.

“Swing low, sweet chariot, Comin’ for to carry me home!”

Again, the ground beneath them shakes, and she almost loses the needle as a car alarm goes off.

“Swing low, sweet chariot. Comin’ for to carry me home!”

She ties the thread and snaps it. A slither of blood seeps out the holes, and she starts to wrap the bandage round.

The bed bangs into the side table, knocking the pot on to floor, and suddenly the lights flicker off.

“Carry on, Maddy!” Jake urges in the darkness. “You can’t leave a job half done.”

She fastens the bandage, blind.

“I looked over Jordan and what did I see,

Comin’ for to carry me home!

A band of angels comin’ after me,

Comin’ for to carry me home!”

She gets home absolutely exhausted, and throws herself down on the bed.

The electricity had come back on about half an hour after the power cut, but the people at the shelter had been shaken up, and there had been more coming in throughout the night, and many were bruised and bleeding. There had been a few more minor quakes, but they had died away, and in the end Errol had to almost pick her up to get her off the premises.

She has no idea what time it is now, the clock on the bedside table is flashing all noughts, but still she can’t sleep.

She takes her book off the side, and stares at the pages a while, but the words are dancing meaninglessly. In the end, she gets up, and goes into the lounge.

Lying open on the coffee is the sketchbook.

It is not how she left it.

The drawing has changed.

It’s still the same Damon, with the same pinched face, but down at the end of his arms are a mass of strands, stretching from his hands to the ground like drying spaghetti.

And the writing underneath is different. Still in black marker, and recognisable as her script, but the words are not what she had written:

Left – Lotsa fingers

Right – Lotsa fingers

Lotsandlotsandlotsandlotsafingers!

She hurls the book across the room, runs back to the bedroom, and crawls under the covers.

Chapter 6

“Maddy, Maddy!” She jolts awake at the voice. “Babe, please let me in!”

“Go away, Damon. I don’t want to see you.”

There is a thin sunlight stirring up the motes in her bedroom, a vaguely crimson glow. She leaps out of bed, and grabs a bra and pants.

“We need to talk.”

“We don’t need to talk, Damon, I’m busy today.” She pulls on a pair of jeans, and a thick cotton top, and walks into the entrance hall.

“I’ve been thinking. We don’t need to get married right away. Hell, you don’t need to move in, if you don’t want to either. Let’s go back to how things were.”

I would absolutely love that.

“Damon, I have to go out.”

“You’re not still going to church, are you? I told you I don’t want you seeing Michael.”

“Don’t tell me who I can or can’t see!”

“Sorry, sorry, sorry! It’s your life, I can see that. I just care about you. Please let me in, babe, please.”

“I’m not telling you again, Damon. Go away!”

The letterbox flips shut.

Her heart is fluttering and she can barely breathe. She watches the front door without moving.

The letterbox opens again.

She sees a finger come through the opening.

Then another.

Then another.

Impossibly long they keep feeding through the letterbox, nine ten fifteen twenty thin reeds with pointed nails, like jellyfish tentacles, they pulse and twist and bend and glow, almost see-through. She steps away from the door.

His wrist appears, the centre of this mass of fibres, and the back of his hand turns upwards. Each finger starts wandering across the surface of the door, stretching independently of the others.

He's looking for the lock.

She picks up the unplugged phone, holds it firmly in her fist, and starts to bash it against the root of the fingers. Damon screams.

"Aah! Maddy, no!"

She ignores his cries, and slams the phone against the door, again, again again, and there are sounds of bones cracking. He pulls his wrist out, and the fingers follow, slipping through the crack like snakes.

Maddy, slips on a pair of trainers, and runs to the balcony window, throwing it open. She can hear Damon still screaming on the landing, as she hooks one leg over the bars, and then the other. She crouches down, and then lets her feet slip off the ledge, so she is hanging down from the first floor window.

"Maddy!" she hears him scream.

She lets go, and falls, how far she doesn't know, but she crumples her knees up when she lands. Her shoulder bangs against the wall, and her wind is knocked from her, but she's out of the apartment.

Then she gets up and runs like hell.

The sky is bright pink.

Everywhere, all around the horizon, across the great expanse of heaven the cerise stretches, even tingeing the cut out hole of the sun.

She stops to gain her breath, then pushes open the door of All Saints.

Father Michael is leaning over the lectern conspiratorially, his sermon in full flow. His eyes notice Maddy's entrance, and he nods his head to one side, indicating she should sit in the back pew.

"We are not sheep!" he decries. "We may be part of Jesus' flock, but we have our own paths to follow. Religion is a means, and not an end."

"Baa"

Maddy finally notices the other members of the congregation. There are fewer than normal, and they are all huddled in a group at the front.

They all have sheep's heads..

Little tight woolly curls frame their ovine faces, some black, some white, and some occasionally bleating in agreement. Their bodies are still human, still dressed in Sunday best.

There's Mrs Scully, and Mr and Mrs Peterson, and Fred and Sally and Mike and Fiona. She knows all these people.

"Oh, Lamb of God. That taketh away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.

Oh, Lamb of God. That taketh away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.

Oh, Lamb of God. That taketh away the sins of the world, Grant us peace."

"Baaa men."

Michael grasps hold of her elbow, and whispers into her ear, "Stay calm, Maddy, you are doing extremely well." She tries to smile as he moves on round the back of the church.

"You're looking well today, Mrs Scully." *Even though you have the head of a sheep.*

"Thank you my dear. Do you like my new hair do?" She pats at the wool.

"It's lovely. Nice... tight curls."

"We don't see Damon at All Saints very often anymore, are things still all right between you?"

"Things are fine, Mrs Scully. Damon has been busy with a new exhibition, that's all."

"Fingers in a lot of pies, hasn't he?"

"Yes, that's right, Mrs Scully. Lots of fingers, lots of pies."

"Goodbye, Michael. It was a lovely sermon today."

"Thank you, Mrs Scully. As ever, it is a joy to see you." He watches her walk away from the church, and once she has passed out the churchyard, he shuts the door behind her. "That was unpleasant," he says pulling across the great bolt.

"What's happening, Michael?"

"I'm making you a coffee, that's what's happening. Come through to the vestry."

"I thought you said the urn was on the blink."

"That was to get rid of those monsters. I don't really want ewe droppings all over the floor o' my church, thank you very much."

He unlocks the great oak vestry door, and pushes it open.

Inside is like an air raid shelter.

The vestment alcove is packed high with tins of food, candles, batteries, packets, tissue paper. Over in the far corner is a large bin, with an industrial sealing lid. Close to the door next to maybe a hundred bottles of water is a chemical toilet. The table has been piled high with books, and tucked in one corner is a television. She can see a mattress poking out from under the table.

"Are you planning to move in?"

"Soon, I should imagine." He plugs in the urn.

"How long have you been setting this up?"

"Since Thursday. Since I saw the Devil in Longwood prison."

He fills two plastic cups with coffee.

“Do you know what is going on?”

“It is purely conjecture, but I suspect it is Exit Mundi.”

“The End of the World. Four horsemen of the Apocalypse, plagues, that kind of thing?”

“So John would have us believe. He also writes about angels coming from the four corners of the Earth, that Babylon is to be destroyed and all the stars will be swept from the sky. He was something of a crackpot. I think it could be a bit more of a personal affair.”

“How long will it take?”

“Don’t ask daft questions, Maddy, they are beneath you. I don’t *know* how long it is going to take. If we believe everything we read in the Bible, we will have forty two months under the reign of the Dragon, and then things will get pretty hairy from then on in. On the other hand, if God can create the universe in seven days, can he not undo it in seven days? All I know is, if and when the Dragon makes his presence known, I want to be on this side of that door, and not the other.”

“And what are you going to do in the meantime?”

“Live my life as normally as I possibly can. Preach sermons, bury people. Maybe get into the exorcism trade”

“What about me?”

“I suggest you do the same, Maddy. We are different, you and I, Maddy, we haven’t become like those sheep outside. Whatever it is we are doing, we are doing it right, and we must carry on, because heaven forbid what will happen if we stray.”

She walks out under the pink sky. *Continue my life as normal.* What is normality for a Sunday afternoon? Shopping in the West End with Damon? That is not a prospect she desires right now. A long lunch in a wine bar with some old nurse colleagues. Lazing on the sofa with a Sunday paper and a few Kate Bush albums. All of that is normal, and she couldn’t face doing any of it.

She doesn't want to go home at all. She couldn't face it. Damon will almost certainly have made his way into her flat. He could be sat there right now, waiting for her to come home, so he can run his wormy fingers over her.

What should I do?

She wants to be proactive, she wants to find out who is real, and who is not. Maybe she and Michael could set up a help group for people who are normal. If the Jehovah's Witnesses are right, then maybe they could bandy up together.

She remembers the little piggy tail of the witness who had come to Black Street last night.

The Witnesses aren't right.

She makes a decision. *Go to the top.*

Chapter 7

The tube is a cattle truck, trundling through the tunnel. Porky grunts and bored whinnying come from the bodies pressed around her. *Am I getting used to this?*

She alights at St James Park station, and moves out into the daylight. The bright pink light feels searing hot against her face. All around her are American tourists, obese, wobbling obstacles, who bare no thought for the others around them.

“Excuse me.”

“Oink oink.”

A Japanese couple stop her, their donkey ears flailing back and forth, and hand her their camera, with braying grins.

“Aren’t you worried I’m going to steal your soul?” she mutters as she presses the shutter. They jabber incoherently as she hands the camera back. “Evidently not.”

She sees the majestic clock tower of the Houses of Parliament, and notices an extra thirteenth hour has crept onto the face closest to her. It is five minutes to thirteen. She wonders what Big Ben is going to chime when it hits the hour.

She can hear the roar of the crowd on St James Park before she sees them. *There are humans here.*

They are holding banners, “Stop the End of the World,” “Ignorance is Sin”, and they are chanting, “Don’t hide away! Don’t hide away!”

It is a beautiful sight, so many human faces, contorted with anger, screaming about their fear. She wishes she had arrived earlier, so she had time to talk with these people. Now they are so loud, so frenzied, so determined, she believes they can do anything.

She cannot see the steps of the Houses of Parliament because the mob is so thick. She crosses over the road, hoping to get a more panoramic view. There is a Black Cab parked by the curb. She considers jumping on the bonnet for a better vantage point until she notices the driver is still sat in the taxi. *At least he's still human.*

"Fiona, news just coming in... the Prime Minister is about to make his announcement, he is coming out to face the protesters now."

She can hear the voice of the reporter through the window of the taxi. She taps on the driver door. He winds down the window and smiles at her.

"Do you mind if I listen to your radio? I can't work out what's going on."

"You ain't the only one. Hop in."

She goes round to the passenger side, and climbs in. Resting on the dashboard is a small portable T.V. The camera is trained on Adrian Marton, BBC reporter, his ridiculously long arms disappearing and reappearing off the side of screen.

She can see the Prime Minister moving down on the steps in front of Parliament, his face dour, the expressions of the front benchers behind him reflecting that mood. *They are normal.* Maddy is surprised to find this is a disappointment to her.

The clock starts to chime, low and sonorous, and as she counts down each tone, the crowd outside the taxi die down to nothing.

"Today," the Prime Minister begins, staring straight into the camera, his Joker-like mouth smaller than it has ever been. "Today is a truly tragic day for our nation.

"I have spoken to the leaders of America, Japan, France and Germany, and we are unanimous in our condemnation of these dreadful acts. These terrorists in our midst have no place in a civilised

society.” *Does he not understand this is more than just terrorism?* “The treasury will be diverting all available funds into the destruction of this evil.

“I tell you with all my heart, that I will personally do everything in my power to stop the apocalypse that is approaching, and I know my colleagues behind me will be working to the same objective. My opposite numbers in the other two main parties, are also of a mind. This is a trouble that transcends all political and cultural divides.

“I was telling my wife last night that there was only one way I would ever stop being Prime Minister of Great Britain, and that would be the End of the World.” He growls, and bears his teeth. “We cannot allow that happen.”

His snout pushes out like liquid. The camera follows the Prime Minister as he dives down the steps, his fingers sprouting claws as he descends. By the time he strikes the pavement, he has shed his clothes, snarling and snapping. Howls and yelps sound out from the tinny speakers. The Prime Minister bounds up to the protesters, and leaps at the crowd.

He catches a woman full in the face, blood splattering the placard behind her. Immediately, a cacophony of screaming rises from the throng.

The camera wheels back to the steps, where there are wolves flooding down from the entrance, their bodies thick together, their pink skin translucent in the light. They weave around the screen, then suddenly the camera falls to the ground, and a hideous, bloody face starts sniffing at the lens. The shot cuts to Fiona in the news room.

“Adrian Marton there, reporting from another dramatic day for the Prime Minister. We now go to – “

Maddy no longer pays attention. She is looking out the windscreen, at the fleeing protesters. They spread from the park like an explosion, rushing in every and any direction, and seemingly for every protestor there is a wolf, harassing and bloodying, claws shredding clothes, and

bodies crushing them to ground. She sees one fat protester with a dog worrying his wrist, holding him still, then three, four, five, join in the attack, pulling him down, and his body disappears from view.

The car suddenly jolts, and she turns her head to see a protester bouncing off the rear of the car and down an alleyway, with two of the beasts after him.

“Oh God,” Maddy suddenly finds her voice. “We’ve got to get out of here. Drive!”

The Cab Driver raises his right hand, and pushes down the lock, locking all four doors with a click. He turns to Maddy and blinks, and for a fleeting moment, his eyes blink black.

“Let me out, let me out!” Maddy yells, futilely yanking at the door handle. She starts to wind down the window, when suddenly there are paws up at the glass, and one of the wolves is gnashing at the crack. She winds it back up again.

“You don’t wanna go out there,” the Cab Driver grins. His grin stretches across his face, pulling round to his ears, which are retracting, pin pricks into his head. “Not when you can stay in ‘ere with me.”

He opens his mouth, and inside is another mouth. He reaches towards her with pincers on the end of his arms.

Maddy scrambles round in the chair, and keeping her left foot on the floor, she kicks out with her right in the centre of the Cab Driver’s chest. His two mouths gasp with pain. She can feel the pincers nipping at her leg, as she pulls it back to kick again. She hits him in the throat, and he crumples against his door.

She stretches over and unlocks the taxi, which is being buffeted on all sides by the wolf bodies. She grabs on to the handle of the driver’s door, and flicks it open.

The Cab Driver’s carcass slips sideways, and one of the wolves bites into his face dragging him out the car. Maddy clambers over the break, occupying the space quickly being vacated. She stretches out

her arm and catches hold of the door. She can feel a wolf's paws resting on her top, and she yanks the door shut. A dog howls, and she sees a crushed snout caught in the bottom of the door. She pushes the door, and pulls again, and this time she hears it click home.

She flings her legs round onto the pedals, and turns the key in the ignition.

There are paws hammering over the roof of the taxi, and she can hear the claws skid as she accelerates forward. There are a few jarring bumps as she smacks into the wolves in front, and she careers onto the pavement, trying desperately to keep control of the wheels.

The wolves seem to have picked up her scent. They are streaming after the car like the wake of a boat. *Thank God for the Congestion Charge*, Maddy praises, she does not want to run into a traffic jam right now. She drives up Whitehall and on to Charing Cross road, all the while squeezing her foot further onto the accelerator.

However, she doesn't seem to be losing the wolves. There are more, spewing out of the steps up from Warren Street station, pouring down Marylebone Road, hundreds, thousands. One of them smacks into her windscreen, leaving a bloody smear over the passenger side.

"Maddy, Maddy, come in, over."

"Maddy, come in, babe."

Damon's voice is coming out of the taxi radio transceiver.

"Maddy, I couldn't reach you on your mobile, I think you might have it switched off."

"Leave me alone," she mutters, knowing he can't hear her unless she presses the button.

"Don't ignore me, Maddy. We need to talk. Please, babe, just pick me up."

"I know you're upset with me, but shutting me out is not the way to deal with it."

She blasts through a red light, narrowly dodging a truck passing the other way. She watches in the rear view mirror, as it spins round,

blocking the road. It doesn't stop the wolves. They steal round the sides, squeeze under the cab, some come leaping over the top.

"Look at me, babe, can you not see how sorry I am?"

She can see him. He's sitting at the news desk on the television on the dashboard, his big green eyes rimmed with tears. There is a picture of her on the wall behind him. The red bar at the bottom of the screen reads:

"Breaking news. Damon is truly sorry for all the grief he as caused his girlfriend Madeleine."

"Why, you are so beautiful, babe. So beautiful. I could almost reach out and touch you."

He raises one of his hands above the desk, and the snake-like fingers stretch out toward the lens. She picks up the television and hurls it at the passenger door. There is a crunch, and the light goes off.

"Don't be cruel, Maddy."

She yanks the CB receiver wire until it snaps, and it tumbles down on top of the television.

She gets stuck behind a Chelsea tractor, and can see two kids squabbling on the back seat. She starts pounding down on the horn, as she sees the wolves running up the street.

I am in a Black Cab, and I'm tooting my horn. Who in the world is going to notice that?

She swerves on to the other side of the road, narrowly missing a Beamer coming the other way, up on to the opposite pavement and round the corner. She doesn't see the Beatle coming the other way. It smacks into her front bonnet, catching it on the side, and the Cab spins across the road, striking a pillar box.

The engine is revving as high as it can, but however hard she pushes the accelerator, the car doesn't move.

She tries to open the driver side door, but it has buckled under the impact. The passenger side is blocked by the pillar box. She clambers over to the back, and pushes her way out of the back door.

She can't see the wolves, but she can hear them barking a few hundred feet behind her.

How far am I from All Saints? A mile, half a mile?

She runs, her legs crying with pain with every stride. She runs, she runs, and does not dare to look behind her, but she can hear them, hear them gaining on her, up over the hill. She can see the spire of the church, glowing like a beacon.

As she passes Parlour Row, she can see them in their legion, swarming down the road towards her. She turns right onto Simon Street, then down the alley at the rear of the church.

She leaps over the wall

There is the door.

She flings herself at the North wing door, grasping the huge metal handle, but it is locked. She shakes it with frustration.

"Michael! Michael!"

No answer.

The wolves are leaping over the wall of the graveyard, twenty yards away, fifteen yards away. She turns her back to the door, and crouches down, covering her face with her hands, waiting for the mouths to reach her.

She falls back.

"In. Get in!"

Michael grabs her arm, and pushes the door shut behind her. Thud, thud, thud, the bodies strike the wood. Then silence. Then she can hear their claws scratching at the portal.

Maddy stands up and falls into Michael's arms exhausted.

"Michael, I'm –"

Smash. A stained glass window to their right bursts like a balloon and a wolf lands on the stone floor yards from them. Its paws skid to the side, and it bashes into a pew.

"Quick. To the vestry!" He pushes her towards the East wing, and picks up a candelabra, waving it at the beast as he retreats.

Suddenly, the whole East Window shatters, spraying glass on to the altar. A dozen wolves crash down onto carpet, one of them impaling itself on the cross. And more are leaping through the already broken window.

“Go! Go!”

She runs down the Nave, and into the South Transept. The wolves are on their feet, and they are moving towards them both. More wolves leap through, and land on the backs of the others, pushing them to the ground. One leaps at Michael, and he smacks it round the head with the end of the candelabra. He moves behind her, wildly swinging the stick.

“Leave us alone!” he shouts, but they pay no heed. One makes a lunge for Maddy, and she catches its front legs, spinning, twisting and hurling it into the wall. She opens the vestry door, as Michael moves behind her, waving the candelabra in sweeping arcs behind her. He hurls it at them as they approach, and they dart inside the vestry. They move behind the door, and both try to push it shut.

There are snouts and paws pushing round the edge of the door, and a momentous force is keeping it open. Michael spins round and plants his back against the door.

“Get them away!” he yells.

Maddy, picks up a bottle of water from the top of the pile, unscrews it, and squirts the liquid at the faces at the door. Paws skitter outside, and the faces disappear. Michael slams the door, and Maddy pulls the bolts home. They both slump to the ground, their backs against the door.

She can see shadows flickering past the windows in the vestry, but they are high off the ground, and they are narrow, and there are thick iron bars that stretch across them.

“You’re safe,” Michael tells her, and she folds into his arms weeping. “You’re safe.”

Chapter 8

Michael's hand is caked in blood. It's her blood. Her jeans are soaked in the stuff.

"We need to see to your legs," says Michael. "Was it the wolves?"

She thinks back to the Taxi Driver. "No... it wasn't the wolves."

"Do you mind?" he says, placing his hands near her trouser fly.

"Of course I don't mind. I know you're not going to do anything."

He slowly, ever so gently, unbuttons her fly, and she lifts herself up so he can pull the jeans over her bottom. His fingers are feathery over her thighs. He inches them off, slowly but surely. There are thick welts on her legs from where the pincers had dug into her skin.

"You'll need some alcohol," Maddy tells him.

"I've got some communion wine. Granny Port," he says. "Will that do?"

"Something stronger will be better."

"How about this?" He fetches a bottle surgical alcohol from the shelf, and a large tub filled with cotton wool buds. She can't stop herself from giggling.

"Please, don't joke, Michael. It really hurts."

"Aye," he says. "It will do."

He soaks a bud, and dabs it against the largest wound, on the inside of her thigh. She sucks in breath at the stinging.

"These look quite deep," he says. "What did this to you?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Well, what shall we talk about?" he says in his smooth low voice. "How about the weather? It's mighty pink for the time of year, don't you think?"

"That I do, Michael. It hasn't been this pink since the Year of the Blancmange."

"Ah, the Year of the Blancmange, I remember it well." She can hear the wolves, scratching and sniffing at the door. "It was not quite as bad as the Year of the Ambrosia Custard. That was a hard year, by any standards."

She laughs again, wincing in pain.

"Has there been anyone else?"

"No. No one else. Just you. I don't think anybody else will be able to get to us now, not with those things outside."

"Do you think they will leave?"

"Hopefully. Given long enough they'll get bored. There will be other prey out there. Easier targets."

"You seem to be very calm."

"Oh, Maddy," he says, fetching a long bandage roll, and some pins down from the shelf. "I am absolutely petrified. I might not show it, but I feel it. I am scared of dying, and I am scared of living with all this going on around us. I do not want this to be the end. I feel there is so much more on this earth. Ooh, sorry, I'll watch what I'm doing with those pins."

"There will be something we can do."

"What? This is the end of the world we are facing, Maddy, it is inevitable as whales pissing in the ocean. The only thing we can do is make sure we do not die before the day of reckoning. I would not like to think what would happen if we die before that day."

"There will be something we can do," she repeats with conviction. "There are books in here, we can work something out."

"But what if the books are wrong?"

“If the books are wrong, then maybe you are wrong. Maybe this isn’t the final battle, it’s just *a* battle.”

Michael speaks as if preaching. “And so the angels, Michael and Maddy approached the Devil, and spoke unto him and said, ‘Please stop. We don’t want to die.’ And the Devil replied, ‘Okay then. I’ll go home.’. It’s a crazy plan, Maddy, but it just might work.”

He binds the last of the bandages round her leg.

“You won’t be wearing these again.” He picks up her jeans and pushes them away behind the chemical bin. “There’s a few cassocks tucked away down by the toilet rolls. They might not be very attractive, but they’ll keep you warm.”

“That’s okay. I’m not feeling very attractive at the moment.”

“I’m not saying anything.”

Michael lifts up the linen cloth covering the table, and rolls onto the mattress, lowering the table covering behind him.

“What are you doing?”

“Giving you some privacy, Maddy.”

“What for?”

“There are some boxer shorts in the box over by the window. I’m going to start humming now. Let me know when you’re done.”

Then it hits her. This is now her home, this ten foot square box, is where she will be living, living for how long? Everything she does now is going to be in earshot of Michael, and everything he does, she will know about. It doesn’t strike her as too uncomfortable an arrangement.

“I didn’t want to live with anybody until *after* I was married,” she mutters.

“Was I meant to hear that?” says Michael, and then carries on singing to himself.

She kicks the bed when she is finished. A single mattress. A single bed.

“All done. Your turn.”

“Oh, I’m okay. I freshened up before you got here. I’m hungry though. Bet you are as well.”

“Not really.”

“You ought to eat something. I’ve got some lovely sausages and beans on the shelf there. A few minutes in the microwave and they’ll come out a treat.”

“Michael, I’m vegetarian.”

“Oh, of course you are. It slipped my mind. Beans it is then. I’ll have your sausages.”

She is picking out peaches from a can with her fork. Her legs are impossibly stiff. Michael has put a few sheets down on one of the large priest chairs to give her some padding.

It is pitch outside, and there are snuffling noises coming from all around them.

“They’re still out there, Michael.”

“I know. There’s not much we can do about it. I could give you some ear plugs if you think it’ll do some good.”

She munches on a peach.

“You know of the Book of Life.” She nods. “Armageddon starts because the Lamb of God opens the Book of Life.”

“And?”

“And if we could shut the Book of Life, maybe things will go back to the way they were.”

“Where is this Book?”

“I don’t know. Jerusalem, I expect. That’s where most of these relics are meant to be. The lamb is meant to have seven horns and seven eyes, and appear to be slain. We could fly to Jerusalem, and ask if anybody has seen a seven horned, seven eyed, dead lamb. When we find him, we’ll find our book.”

“You’re joking.”

“What about the Seal of God? An angel marks a hundred and forty thousand people with the Seal of God, before rushing home. All we

need to do is steal the seal off him, and mark everybody else with the seal, and then we shall all be saved, happily ever after.”

“Sarcasm does not become you, Michael.”

“My point is, looking through the books is not going to help you, Maddy. Even if you did find something, some mission from God, we neither have the manpower, nor the knowledge to do anything. How would we even get to Jerusalem?”

“Fly, of course. We’re not that far away from the airport.”

“But these stories from the Bible. They are *allegorical*. They aren’t real. That is not the way it is going to happen.”

“Don’t you get it, Michael? There will be more out there like us. We have to protect them. We have to do our best to save them. We have to – “

There is a pattering at the window.

“What was that?”

They look up at the glass as a shower of pebbles rush down against it.

“Maddy!” Damon’s voice comes muffled through the glass.

“Maddy, I know you’re in there!”

“Just keep quiet,” Michael whispers to her.

“Maddy, I know you’re in there with that priest! I don’t like you spending time with him, Maddy! I don’t want you in there with him. Come on, let me in!”

“If we don’t do anything, don’t say anything, he’ll go away.”

They sit in silence, holding each other’s hands, and waiting.

A rock smashes the window, and lands on the carpet in front of them.

“Maddy, I know you are in there, I can sense you. I can feel you in the tips of my fingers. If that priest has touched you, I am going to turn him inside out!”

They look again at the window, and they can *see* the tips of his fingers, resting round the broken glass.

Michael runs over to the table, and starts pushing piles of books on to the floor.

“Grab that!” he shouts pointing at a large cork board, hung on the back of the table. She heaves it off and drags it over to the table. “Bottom drawer,” Michael points. “Hammer and nails. Get them now.” He leaps onto the table, then hoists the cork board after him, slamming it over the window.

She passes up the hammer and a nail. He smacks the nail through the corkboard and in to the woodwork behind. “More. Quickly” In with the nails, bang, bang, bang. There is a small uncovered lip of window, and Maddy sees a finger creeping over the top. Michael whacks it with the hammer and it disappears. He keeps on smacking in the nails until all of them are gone.

“Your boyfriend is a right wanker,” Michael says, trying to catch his breath.

“Don’t I know it.”

“What’s that noise?”

“It’s Mrs Richards.”

“It’s horrible.”

“She never was much of an organist.”

There are a number of discordant squeaks and rumbles, as if somebody were bashing the keyboard of the organist randomly. Over the top of it all comes the baa-ing of sheep, with a descant of wolves howling.

“Very Philip Glass,” says Maddy.

“Shall I put the television on?”

“I wasn’t very impressed with the last thing I saw on T.V.”

“Still, it’s got to be better than this.”

They have rearranged the room, moved the table over to the side, and moved the tall wardrobe over in front of the corkboard. It effectively drowned out the sound of Damon’s voice, and would hopefully block any draft through that window.

He switches on the T.V.

Four naked men are standing in a line, each kissing the man in front's shoulders, and each with a cock up his partners arse. The one at the front, is holding a dog in his arms, and licking its testicles. They undulate back and forth as if they are rowing a boat.

Michael flicks channels, and a face fills the screen, held by a man at chest height. An electric drill is being pushed into one of the eyes, and gore is spattering the man behind's shirt. Michael flicks again, and more flesh fills the screen, breasts banging up against each other. After he has gone through all the channels, he switches the television back off, and sits back down.

"Honestly. Sex and Violence. That's all that's ever on T.V. these days. I was hoping for Songs of Praise." He looks her in the eyes. "Fancy a book instead?"

Maddy can hear a preacher out in the church. She recognises the voice. It is Damon.

"Put the sex back on. I can live with the sex."

It is getting late. The clock above the door reads quarter past eleven. They had listened to the sheep screaming, and they knew they were being sacrificed. The noises had been terrible, and the sights they had seen on the television had not been much better. Evensong is finished, but Maddy knows the wolves are still out there, and she can feel under her skin that Damon is out there as well.

"We had best get some sleep," says Michael. "We'll have a long day tomorrow."

Thunder rumbles outside the church.

"Got anything special planned?"

"Not really. Might go to the pictures, do a bit of shopping. Y'know, the usual."

"I'm going to start looking tomorrow."

"Maddy – "

“Shh. If we are going to be cooped up in this vestry for I don’t know how long, then I’m going to want to have something to do. I can’t sit here twiddling my thumbs for ever.”

“I was just going to say, I’ll give y’a hand.”

“Yes, you can give me a hand.”

“Thank you for your permission. Now vacate my chair, as I am planning to have a sleep.”

“No, I’m settled here. You sleep on the mattress.”

“Nonsense. My legs haven’t been torn to shreds by some zombie, you need to have a proper night’s – “

An almighty roar sounds through the night. It sounds far away, but whatever it is must be massive.

“What was - ?”

The ground beneath them shakes, and books fall off the edge of the table. A series of bangs, like fireworks sound immediately outside the church. From inside the nave, they hear the wolves waking, and in moments they are howling in unison, as the ground shakes again.

Suddenly, the light bulbs all pop at once, and the room is plunged into darkness.

“Looks like we are in for a long night, Maddy.”

Chapter 9

Maddy awakens to a bright light. The world is fuzzy, as if she has been pumped full of tranquiliser, but she can see she is in some kind of hospital.

She tries to sit up, but her arms are bound, tied down to the bed. She can't rise, or move her body, all she can do is turn her head to the side.

Damon is sitting next to her. *Is it Damon, or is it Michael?* Whoever it is, they are resting their hand on her hip.

"Nurse? Nurse? She's awake. I think she can see me"

No, its not Damon sitting there, or Michael. It is the Dragon. She can see the maggots crawling over his face, as he leans down to kiss her on the cheek.

BELIEVE.

One of the men in the beds opposite starts to scream.

Maddy sits bolt upright and bashes her head on the underneath of the table.

"Ah," she cries, rubbing her crown, as she tumbles off the mattress.

She can barely make out Michael in the darkness. He is twisting and turning in the chair as if he is being tortured, screaming, and yelling and whining.

"Michael," she says in a loud, clear voice. "Michael!"

“He is God!” Michael shouts through panting. “There is no other God! He is God!”

“Michael,” she cries at him, shaking his shoulders. “Wake up. Please wake up.”

He moans, and flails his arms at her. “No! There is no other God. He is God! He is God, Maddy!”

BELIEVE.

“Wake up, you stupid bastard, wake up, damn you!” She slaps him hard across the face.

His turns up to her. “Help me, Maddy.”

“I’m trying. I’m trying!”

“I’m so scared, Maddy, I’m so scared. I saw him, Maddy, and he is God, oh God I’m scared Maddy. Don’t you get it? There is no other, there is only the Dragon. The Dragon is God, Maddy, the Dragon is God.”

She cradles his head to her bosom as he sobs.

“Michael. Michael, you need to sleep.”

“I can’t sleep, Maddy. I’m afraid I’m not going to wake up. Please just hold me.”

“I need to sleep, Michael, at least give me that. Michael, come on to the mattress. I’ll hold you. We both need to keep warm.”

She leads him over to the table, and lets him fold onto the mattress. He is wracked with sobs, his chest tightening in silence, and then releasing in a great burst.

“Maddy, this is real isn’t it? Everything that is happening. I’m not dreaming it. Please tell me you are seeing the same things I am.”

“It is real, Michael.” She clutches him curled up in front of her like a child, and touches his cheek, stroking his smooth beard.

“Oh,” he sounds disappointed. “I was hoping you were going to say it wasn’t.”

“What are we supposed to believe, Maddy? We are all taught that there is one God and he is all that is good, and that there is the Devil,

and he is all that is Evil. What if we've got it backwards? What if there is but one God, and he is a sarcastic God? What if God intends to condemn only those who believe in him? That would fox the philosophers."

"You are ranting, Michael." She holds him tight to her.

"I'm not ranting. I am frightened. I am scared to the marrow. I am so scared, I –"

She turns his head to her, and places her lips against his. She holds him like this for what feels like minutes. He is out of breath when she retreats. She takes his hand, and guides it up to her bosom, letting his fingers rest on one of her breasts, separated by the cloth of her top and her bra.

"Maddy, I'm not sure I want this." She can feel his penis through his boxer shorts against her thigh.

"I want this," she tells him, and kisses him again. With one hand she eases her pants down her legs, and over her feet, and then she moves his hand down between her thighs, and brushes his fingers against her.

He is kissing her back now, his lips sucking hers, his tongue darting out to lick hers. She slips her hand down to his shorts, and gently steers his penis out through the opening. His hand is still resting gently against her cunt, as if he doesn't know what to do with it. She lays her palm flat against his penis, slowly and feather-like moving her fingers up and down the shaft, all the while keeping her lips locked with his.

She lifts her leg, and raises herself over him. Her thigh sings with the pain, but it cannot stop her. She lifts her head away from his, and kisses his neck, sucking the flesh in between her teeth, and then she can feel him kiss her eyes, his hands stroking her ears, moving down to the small of her back, and gently massaging her there.

She lifts his penis with her fingers, and lets it rest at the folds of her cunt, and then as slowly as her body will allow, she lowers herself

down onto him, through him, and within him. She places her lips with his and he rests his hands on her buttocks.

They lie motionless in this glorious embrace. She can feel him inside of her, warm and beautiful, and tastes his sweet lips, and his hands are like velvet. He is twitching now, and she can feel it building inside of her as well, and it is like a draught of joy, and then he gasps, pulling his lips away from hers, and his hands clench down, and he presses his feet against hers, and she can feel everything coursing inside her, and she can see light everywhere.

She kisses him again, and kisses him, and holds his head in her hands and she cannot move away from him, because she needs him still inside of her, and he twitches, and shakes, and rests, and twitches once more, and each time he sends shivers down to her toes and up her spine.

“Thank you,” he whispers to her.

“My pleasure. Do you think you can sleep now?”

“Aye. Yes, I think I can.”

And even through the roaring, and the banging, the howling and the screaming, they hold each other in their arms, and sleep the sleep of children.

Chapter 10

When she awakens, Michael is no longer beside her. There is a glow outside the makeshift bedroom, shining through the linen. She lifts up the flap to see a Kerosene lamp hanging down from the chandelier in the middle of the room.

She can smell tomatoes, hotdogs, eggs, and the smell is the best cooked breakfast she has ever had.

“Good morning, Maddy!”

“You’re sounding more cheerful today.”

“A good night’s sleep can do you wonders!”

“And the rest,” she smiles.

“Aye. The rest was pretty good too.”

She looks down at her legs. The wounds have been seeping throughout the night, and the bandages are soaking.

“I need to change these bandages.”

“After breakfast,” he says, and brings over a bowl of eggs and tomatoes.

“Where did you get the eggs from?”

“I’ve been down to the shop.”

“You’re joking.”

“Yes, I am. I unloaded the contents of my fridge before I came here yesterday.”

“And we ate beans last night?”

“There wasn’t much in my fridge.”

She gulps down the plum tomatoes, even though they are boiling hot.

“What time is it?”

“Just after ten o’clock.”

“Are the wolves still here?”

“I think so, Maddy, I can hear something moving out there. We may be stuck in here for quite some time yet.”

She pierces her egg, and lets the yolk run into the pot.

“Don’t suppose you’ve got any bread, have you?”

“No such luck.”

She sighs, and tips the pot back to her mouth, to drink the juices.

“Such elegance.”

“What are we going to do today, Michael?”

“Exactly as you said last night. We are going to plan the salvation of the world. Those dogs aren’t going to stay waiting for us for ever, and when they are gone, we want to be prepared.”

Michael crawls back under the table.

“What are you doing now?”

“I’m letting you change your bandages.”

“You’ve done it before, why don’t you give me a hand?”

He is uncomfortably silent, and then he says, hardly above a whisper, “I’m embarrassed”

“Embarrassed? Even after what we did last night?”

“Yes, embarrassed! Now get on wi’ it and leave me alone!”

They are each hunched over a book on the two chairs, his is a good book, hers is *The Good Book*. They look like monks at study, each dressed in a long black cassock.

“You know,” says Michael, “there are as many different End of the World scenarios as there are cultures. The Vikings believed in Ragnarok, the Mayans think the world will end some time in two

thousand and twelve. Muslims believe the Allah will appear before you and – “

“Shut up. I’m reading.”

“All these scenarios have one thing in common. We all die.”

“Everybody dies, Michael.”

“What I mean is, once the apocalypse has begun, it is inevitable. You can’t – “

“We need to go to Jerusalem.”

“What?”

“Jerusalem, Michael, I feel it. I know that is what we have to do.”

“How are we going to get there?”

“We’ll get a boat, and take it down the Thames. I’ve sailed before. Either that, or we will go to the airport, and find somebody to fly a plane.”

“Who?”

“There are people out there who can help us.”

“We don’t know what is out there, Maddy. We can’t even see outside the window.”

“We had better be well prepared then, hadn’t we? Have you got backpacks?”

“Just the one.”

“We’ll make another one, we can sew up one of those cassocks, I’ll do it.” She thinks. “Knives. We’ll need knives, and sheaths to put them in.”

“We’ve only got cutlery knives.”

“We’ll sharpen them. Even better, torches. I mean fire torches, it’ll keep away the dogs. Fetch me that cross.”

“Cross?”

“Cross, Michael! It’s made of wood. It’ll burn.”

She tears one of the surpluses, and wraps a white strip round and round the end of the cross. “Before we go, we douse it with

Kerosene, and light it. Then we can get out of the church. We'll need two, Michael. Find something that'll burn."

"Maddy, calm down. We don't have to go right away."

"Yes, we do! It's quiet at the moment, but what is going to happen next? Is some seven headed beast going to tear off the roof of the church? Are we suddenly going to be drowned in a tsunami? We have to go, Michael, now!"

"Where to?"

"To Jerusalem, Michael. Don't you get it? The people out there, the real people, they will all be thinking the same thing. That is where they will be, in Jerusalem!"

"I mean where first?"

"A gun shop," she says, thinking quickly. "We need to get some guns. We need weapons, and we need supplies."

"Maddy," he says, his eyes drooping with concern, "we are safe here. We may be able to survive through to the end."

"Show a little bit of support!" she snaps, and then takes a breath to calm down. "Michael, I appreciate what you are trying to do, but it doesn't matter any more. If we are to be saved, we will be saved, whether its in here or out there. At least if we are out there then – "

"Maddy!"

She leaps at the voice. It is coming through the door. Damon is calling to her.

Chapter 11

“Maddy, I know you’re in there with him. I can hear you talking.”

Maddy freezes.

“Don’t worry,” says Michael under his breath. “He can’t get in.” He clutches her arm.

“Maddy, I’m not leaving,” Damon says, his words heavy. “I’m not leaving until you come out. I want to take you home.”

“Damon, please, go away!”

“Ssh,” Michael whispers to her, “You don’t want to encourage him.”

“Maddy, I love you. I love you with all my heart. Babe, I have been a bastard to you, and I know that, and I know you look at me and think I am hideous, but I can’t leave you. I can’t leave you with him. Please, just open the door, and we’ll talk. That’s all I want.”

Michael holds her head against his chest and strokes her hair.

“Please, Maddy! There is something I need to give you. Something I should have given you the other night, if I hadn’t set the table on fire, something that it means the world to me for you to have. Please, just open the door, and I will give it to you, and then I’ll leave. I promise I will go, but if you want to come with me, you can.”

“Don’t go near it,” Michael cautions. She hadn’t been planning to anyway.

All she can hear is the sound of her breathing. Damon is waiting for her.

"I cannot bear him doing this to you," Michael tells her, "It breaks me inside."

"I can cope, Michael. I can stay it out with you. Just keep holding me."

"Maddy, I am going to push it under the door. If you want it, you can take it."

She watches the slim gap at the bottom of the door, as a fingertip appears, then a dozen more.

"He can't get in, Maddy, hold on to that. He can't get in."

The fingers keep sliding towards them, until she can see the top of his hand, and then as quick as that, they pull back out again.

Leaving a ring.

A small gold band, with an ostentatious diamond, glittering under the light from the Kerosene lamp. It sits on the carpet, patiently waiting for her to pick it up.

"Leave it," hisses Michael.

Then, slowly, almost imperceptibly, the ring uncoils its band in a straight line. Its diamond head stretches up a little, and then it starts to crawl across the carpet towards her like a caterpillar. Maddy yelps, and they both step away.

"Don't listen to him, Maddy!" Damon yells through the door. "He is corrupting your mind. He wants to use you. He doesn't love you, babe, not the way I do!"

Michael rushes over and stamps furiously on the ring. "Leave us alone!" he yells. "You useless freak! Fuck off, and leave us alone!"

"Listen to him, Maddy. That's not Michael, Michael would never say that. He's a monster. Come on Maddy, open the door, we can escape together. If you don't open the door, then I'm going to have to open it myself."

Michael kicks the ring back under the door with the toe of his boot. "He is full of it," he tells her, "That door is solid oak. He can't get in here."

The door shakes with an almighty thud.

Then silence.

Then again, the door bangs, and a small splinter of wood springs free from near the handle.

“He’s got an axe, Michael! He’s got an axe. She grabs the makeshift torch from the table. “Quick, where’s your matches? You’ve got to light this for me.”

Thud.

“He makes me so angry,” scowled Michael. “How could you ever love him?”

“He hasn’t always been like this. Light the torch, Michael. Quickly.”

Thud.

She can see the point of the axe through the door.

“Do you still love him?”

“No, how could you possibly - ?”

He grabs her arms, and holds her still, facing him.

“Do you love me?”

“We don’t have time for this. Please help me, Michael. He could be _ “

“I need to know. *Do you love me?*”

His eyes are brimming with tears. “Yes!” she shouts, “Yes, Michael, I love you. Now help me to light this bloody torch.”

He wipes the tears on his cassock sleeve, and looks up into her eyes. His eyes have turned black. No iris, no white, a shimmering black surface that captivates her.

I CANNOT LIE TO YOU ANY LONGER, MADDY.

The voice. The sweet caress. She can feel it sweeping through her, the rumbling tone, thick as tar. She feels woozy, sleepy, the only things holding her up are Michael’s hands resting on her arms.

Thud.

I AM THE ONE GOD, MADDY. THERE IS NO OTHER GOD.

Crack.

PLEASE, MADDY. ONE LAST KISS.

She leans towards him, shutting her eyes, pressing her lips against his.

Oh the sweet syrup! The golden nectar, the essence of silk that rushes down her throat. She drinks him in, and smells the cherries and blossom, and she can feel his face changing, and the fingers on his hands multiplying, and his body is moving away from hers, growing, lifting her off the ground, and he feels glorious against her.

He places her gently back on to the carpet, and she opens her eyes.

The Dragon fills the room.

There are legs over and around her, each balancing on knife points, splayed out like helicopter blades. She can see the mouths above her, tongues hanging out, searching and licking, and biting at each other. His huge black shell of a body pulsates up and down, twitching with anger.

Wood shatters from the door, and the full axe head appears where the lock once was. There is a hole, not a large one, but big enough for Damon to stretch his spindly fingers through.

The Dragon turns his head to Maddy, creatures forming and breaking, running down from his eyes like tears.

I'M SORRY, MADDY.

The Dragon crouches low to the ground, the faces on his chest almost touching the carpet, and tenses his legs, then, as fast as a cockroach, leaps straight at the door with a deafening roar, knocking the Kerosene lamp down from the ceiling.

The door shatters outwards like glass, and Damon screams with pain.

The Dragon, unfurls the wings on his back, flicking colours around the room like fireflies. He takes off from the floor, blowing a sickly breeze into Maddy's face, and she can see Damon's body impaled on the finger blades lifted up in to the body of the church by the Dragon.

He is screaming still, as the dragon pulls him up towards the mouths on his stomach.

The books behind her are on fire. She can feel the heat on her back.

Move, Maddy, Move!

She picks up the end of the cross, holding it like a sword, and thrusts the end into the flame. The cassock ignites at once, wisps of white charring to black, and floating away towards the ceiling.

Holding it out at arms length, she moves out into the nave of the church.

The dragon is hovering above the altar, his legs curled up towards his stomach moving in and out like a machine, and blood is dripping down onto the cloth below.

The wolves are close, braying and snickering, and sliding up and down the aisles. They keep away from Maddy as she waves the burning brand in front of her.

DON'T GO, MADDY.

She ignores the voice as she moves down the central aisle, down to the back of the church.

I WANT TO LOOK AFTER YOU.

She turns at the yelp of a wolf, scampering down the aisle behind her, and one of the Dragon's legs shoots out, impaling it before it reaches her.

She reaches the West Door and stares at the handle.

IT'S OPEN IF YOU WANT IT TO BE OPEN.

She holds the torch out to one side, and grabs hold of the iron ring in her right hand, and starts to turn it.

PLEASE, DON'T LEAVE ME MADDY. YOU AND I BELONG TOGETHER. YOU AREN'T SAFE OUT THERE, BUT YOU WILL BE SAFE IN HERE.

She can hear the flickering of his wings behind her. The door resists being pulled, but pull she must, and she keeps on pulling with all of her might. Then, it swings free, and she can see beyond.

She steps outside the church.

Chapter 12

The world is a scorched and blasted place.

She walks out through the graveyard listening to the landscape moan. The near by scrapers have toppled and crumbled, and the girders of iron are twisting under the weight of what remains. Just past the wreckage of an old block of shops, Maddy can see a vast river of lava, coursing its way through the land.

Over on the horizon she can see a huge beast towering high over the London Eye, with seven heads, and ten horns, and it is tearing the stars, the pinpricks of light from the sky and hurling them down to the ground as huge fireballs.

She can hear people groaning in agony around her. *They are under the earth.* The corpses in their graves are turning, fighting to get out.

She walks down the path to the graveyard gate, and out on to the street, holding the torch in front of her. Wolves pick there way over the rubble, their bodies glowing fluorescent from the light she holds, but they stay well clear.

She is drained, empty, totally lost. There is no help, and she has nowhere to go. The few buildings that remain standing are lifeless husks, shells that hold no hope of warmth or safety. The ground is shaking again, shifting the rubble around the ground, and she stays close to the middle of the road, strolling her way over broken glass

and fallen debris. She has no idea where to go, but she cannot stay still, so she just keeps on walking.

“Mmadddy.” A rasping growl greets her from behind an overturned car. “Maaddddy.”

There is a giant green slug waiting for her, its body undulating, slime secretions spreading over the ground around him.

“Mmaddy. Whyy arren’t youu at woork todaaay, Maddddy?”

“Leave me alone, Greg.”

“Musst tryy haaarder, Mmaddy, muusst woork harrder.”

Her boss oozes after her down the street.

“Didn’t you hear me? Go away.”

“III ssee youu’ve joiinned the priceesssthood, Maddddy. Sssales not goood enough forrr you?”

Maddy looks down at her dusty cassock. “Anything to get away from you, Greg.”

“Nnoo nneed to bee rruuude, Maadddy. Youu oougght to keep your frriendss around you.”

“You are not, and never have been my friend.”

“Doonnn’t sssayy thaat, Mmaaddy. II’m alll alonne oout hheere, III nneed you wiith meee. III need you iinn meee.”

From out of the centre of his body two long tentacles emerge, thick green ropes, that wrap around her leg.

“Away! Away!” she shouts, waving the torch at his nauseating face.

“Nnnoo, Mmaaddy! Pmm lonnnnely Maaaddy.”

She thrusts the torch into his chest, right up to her hand, and he screams as he starts to melt onto the pavement. She turns away from him, and carries on walking, without looking back.

The hospital is burning, flames stretching a hundred feet in the air, and from inside come shrieks and wails of pain. Maddy trudges onwards. *Why am I still here?* She doesn’t want to be around anymore, but cannot summon the motivation to end her own life. How easy would it be to run into the flames, to take the final step?

Somewhere inside her, the vivacious Maddy, the Maddy who gives a damn is crying out for her to act. *There is nothing to do. Go back to sleep.* A star crashes down behind her, striking the stinking remains of a mound of dead wolves, but she hardly notices, she keeps on plodding along the road. She doesn't know where her feet are taking her, but they pull her inexorably forward.

The ground shakes again, more violently this time, and she clutches onto a lamp post to remain upright. Down the end of the street, she sees the ground splitting, and a great geyser of flame shoots into the air.

I will have to go round.

So round she goes, down across St. Peter's park, where babies dressed in shell suits and Burberry caps are drinking from cans of beer on the swings.

"Fuck off, granny!" one of the babies yells at her, hurling an empty bottle at her. It misses by inches, and lands on the gravel in front of her. She kicks it out of the way as she passes.

Out she goes through the gate on the other side of the park, clambering over a fridge left in the middle of the alley, and out the alley onto Black Street.

Black Street.

Black Street.

She can see the drop-in centre half way down the road, only a couple of hundred yards away. *It is still standing.* Not only is it still standing but she can see light shining through the window at the front. *They are inside.* There are people inside, real people. She remembers Errol, and Big Jake, and Martha "The end of the world is coming." Sweet Martha. They knew, they knew, they knew, and they are together, and they will be able to help her.

We will go to Jerusalem. All of us. Together!

And she starts to run, even though her legs are stiff and aching, she can feel the safety and the protection emanating from the centre. The buildings on either side have crumpled but the drop-in centre is standing tall and safe. It is close, so close, and she knows Errol will be inside waiting for her, and they would have weapons, and food, and clothes, and people.

She can hear a rumbling around her, building and building, but she ignores it. She knows she has to get to the centre and she will get there. The ground shakes so violently she stumbles and falls, scraping her palms on the pavement, but up she gets, and she keeps on running.

Just a stone's throw, a hop, skip and a jump away, and Maddy, feels the earth move under her feet. The road is cracking, the piece she is running on is slanting downward. A fissure is opening up in front of her, the drop-in centre high on the other side, and her tarmac is shifting downwards. She can't stop running, and stumbles down, throwing her back against the cliff face that has opened up in front of her.

The ground is still slipping, tilting downwards, and she bounds back the way she came, hoping to reach the edge before she is crushed. She leaps towards the surface, but it is already gone. She falls, and hits something solid, her legs bending with a sickening crunch.

She is stuck on a ledge, several arms length beneath the road, and as she tries to stand, she sees bone jutting out of her ankle. She screams in pain, and tries to hold on to the wall of rock, tries to pull herself upwards. She looks down and the river of lava is rising, shooting up towards her at the rate of knots, and the roaring is louder and louder.

I must get to Black Street.

She drags herself up on the ledge, and inches up the rock face. Her fingers are torn and soaked with blood, and she slips back down to the ledge.

Suddenly, water is gushing over the sides of the fissure, a great mountain of water cascading down into the hole, spraying her, and

then overwhelming her, and dragging off the ledge, and down into the darkness.

Part 3

Landing

Chapter 13

She awakens to an impossibly bright light.

She blinks and blinks, and slowly begins to make out shapes, large rectangular blocks of a whiter light, and then she can see curtains around her, hanging down. Her head feels like hammers are banging on her skull, and the muscles in her arms are aching, but she can feel a mattress beneath her.

Am I in Black Street?

It doesn't feel like Black Street. The ceiling is too high, the smell is too clinical, it feels more like a hospital. She tries to swing herself up to a sitting position, but her arms have been tied with some soft material to the sides of the bed. Moving them causes huge motes to dance in front of her eyes and chills to run across her chest. She can't move her legs either.

She can't feel her legs at all.

She turns her head to one side, and feels a huge nausea rising up her throat causing her to pant for breath.

Why won't my vision clear?

There is somebody sleeping in the chair next to her bed, she can make out their form, but not their features. She can see a mass of unkempt hair on the top of his head. *It's Damon.*

She struggles, trying to free herself from the binds on her arms, trying to get up, but every action sends pain shooting her head. He is

stirring now, she can see him sit forward in the chair, and looking at her with mouth open.

“Maddy? Maddy? Can you hear me, Maddy?”

“Get away from me.” She finds it extraordinarily difficult talking, as if her mouth is full of cotton wool.

“Maddy, it’s me, Damon. Can you see me?”

“Yes.” Each word is taking an age to come out. “Get away from me, Damon.”

“Maddy! Maddy, look carefully, Maddy, please, can you tell me how many fingers I’m holding up?”

He holds up his hand, fingers splayed, and she can see them all, and they are beautiful.

“Five, Damon. Five fingers.”

“Oh, Maddy, I love you, babe! I love you so much, and whatever happens I will always love you.”

He strokes her arm, and kisses her face, again and again and again.

“Maddy. Can you hear me Maddy? Can you please tell me your full name?”

“Madeleine Archer.”

“Good. Excellent. My name is Doctor Alice Brookbank. I want you to do me a favour, Maddy. I am going to hold up a light, and I would like you to follow it with your eyes. Can you do that for me?”

“Where am I?”

“You are in St Peter’s Hospital, Maddy. Don’t try to talk if you find it difficult.”

She moves the light around in front of Maddy’s face. It is burning, but she tries her best to track it.

“Excellent. Excellent. Your father has been in. And Father Michael. And Damon’s parents. Damon has been here all the time, he wanted to be here when you woke up again. They all love you very much. We are all here to support you, and help you.”

“How long have I been here?”

“You’ve been here five days, Maddy. You were on a plane from America, do you remember that, Maddy?”

“Yes.”

“You have had a stroke.”

Maddy hears Damon sob on the other side of the bed.

“You developed a blood clot in your brain, which impeded the flow of oxygen. You were given oxygen on the plane, and we have been using Pulsed Electromagnetic Therapy and more pressurised oxygen whilst you’ve been under, but I have to tell you this, Maddy, the damage is quite extensive.”

She makes me sound like a smashed up car.

“I can’t feel my legs.”

“We can work on that. With therapy, it is entirely possible we can have you walking again. You are young, and otherwise healthy, and that will be a great help.”

“I need to get to Jerusalem.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t quite catch that.”

“I need to get to Jerusalem!”

The doctor waits a while before answering. “Maddy, you have suffered an incredible trauma to your system. While you were in a coma state, your brain will have been trying to adjust to that trauma, and you may have had hallucinations, visions. They are not real, Maddy. I’m real, Damon is real, the bed you are lying on is real. I know this is incredibly difficult to come to terms with, Maddy, but we will get through it.”

“Please. Get me Father Michael.”

She is trying to take a sip from a cup of water, but her arms are not cooperating. It sloshes down her chin, and she bangs it onto the side table in frustration. The nurses have untied her arms from the bed, and raised her into a sitting position, so she can see the full starkness of her hospital room. There are dozens of Get Well cards lining the

walls, and flowers adorn all the tables, but the walls are a drab dusty cream, and the room smells of sick.

They had helped her onto a metal potty, like she was a baby, a totally humiliating experience she hoped she would never have to repeat, and she is still wired to an intravenous drip, plugged into her arm. Every ten minutes or so a nurse comes in to give her oxygen, take her blood pressure, ask her if she is okay, which she is not. She most definitely is not.

The door opens, and Maddy squints to see who it is coming in. Her eyesight has improved since she regained consciousness, but it is still a struggle.

“Michael is here, Maddy,” says Damon.

Maddy sighs with relief. The vicar is carrying a large bunch of flowers, and a carry bag.

“I’ve brought you some magazines, Maddy. I thought you might be getting bored.”

“I can’t see very well.”

“I’ll read them to you if you like.” He puts the flowers down on the chair, and stands over the bed. “It’s great to see you, Maddy.”

“Thank you. Damon? Damon, could you leave us alone a minute?”

He doesn’t answer for a moment. *He is trying to work out what I said.*

“Yes. Yes, of course I can, babe. I’ll just go get a coffee.”

As he nips out the door, Michael picks up her hand, and holds it in his.

“You’re looking a little better,” he says.

She stares at him, trying to see him, trying to make out the details of his face, but it is all a blur. Maddy tries to squeeze his hand, but the fingers aren’t working, and her hand falls away from his. She can’t see him at all now, because tears have blinded her, and she can’t control her chest as she lets out a long whine, and she can feel herself toppling towards him, and he holds her tightly as she sobs. Her arms lightly pummel him, out of her control, and she is more than sobbing, she is screaming, and all the while he holds her. She cannot stop, the

spasms of fear keep rising within her, she can feel herself drooling onto his collar, and she weeps and weeps and weeps.

“There, there,” Michael says stroking the back of the neck. “It’ll be all right.”

“It won’t, it won’t, it won’t.”

Chapter 14

“Hello, Maddy!”

Her in-laws are here. Harry and Jackie and Damon. She is glad they hadn’t arrived earlier, otherwise they would have been here when her legs were being massaged. It had been a female nurse working over her muscles, stretching and pounding her legs, flexing her toes, then jabbing her joints with needles. It has happened each and every day since she woke up, for at least half an hour, and she cannot feel any of it.

“How are you feeling today?” asks Harry.

How do you think I am feeling? “Tired.”

“I’ll bet you are. Has Damon been looking after you?”

“He’s been great.” He has been there every day, but she finds she doesn’t feel anything for him. A total detachment.

“We’ve been talking about what is going to happen when you come home.”

“Maddy,” says Jackie, “we would like you to come and live with us.”

“Before you say anything, Maddy, we want to let you know that we’ve spoken to your father about it, and he thinks it’s a great idea. Harry is at home all the time now, so we would be able to give you all the care you need, and besides, he’s got the expertise to do the things you need doing.”

“Don’t you think that’s great, Maddy?”

Maddy looks up at the washed out faces. “That’s very generous of you all, but I was hoping – “

“Maddy, slow down, we can’t understand what you are saying.”

She resists the urge to curse. “I want to go to my home,” she says slowly, and with as much precision as she can muster.

Damon comes close to her, and touches her arm.

“Maddy. We have looked into providing full time care for you, and it just isn’t possible. It’s not all paid for by the state. The conversions you would need to have done even to reach your apartment door would be astronomical. Mum and dad have already looked into converting the downstairs study into a room for you, and it would be straightforward. You would have your own room, and you would be living in a quiet neighbourhood without all the hassle of living in London. Don’t you think it is the best thing to do?”

“I shall bow to your greater judgement.”

“Please, please try to speak clearly, babe, we are having such difficulty in understanding you.”

“Yes. I said yes.”

“I want you to take me to Jerusalem, Michael.”

“Jerusalem? That’s a fair way away, Maddy, why would you want to go there?”

“I need to go.”

Michael is helping her eat. He is holding her hands, helping her keep a grip of the utensils, and guiding the fork into her mouth. She is sitting at a table, not at the bed, and is able to keep herself upright by resting her elbows on the arms of the chair. The area around her coccyx is absolutely killing her. She is glad she can actually feel it.

“Damon has told me the doctors think you can go home soon. Going to live with his parents. How d’you feel about that?”

“Not good.”

"I understand completely, Maddy. You'll be away from your home, your friends, everything you love."

"They are going to sell my flat." She is learning to speak slower now, to let every word enunciate before she starts the next. It is a totally alienating experience. She sounds like a zombie.

"It is for the best, Maddy."

"Whose best?"

"Maddy, they will need the money they make from the apartment to pay for your care. You cannot afford to have an emotional attachment to it."

"Why can they sell it? It's mine. It's not theirs!" The fork slips from her grasp and falls onto the floor. Michael bends down to pick it up for her. Another challenge that is totally beyond her.

"I don't love him any more, Michael."

"Who? Damon?" She nods, her head lolling back and forth. "Maddy. You are still the woman you were last month even though you cannot see that. I *know* you, Maddy, and I can see you. Damon is just the same. You will try to reject him because you want to save him, from what *you think* is going to tear him apart. He will stay with you, Maddy, he isn't going to back out after a couple of months because he finds you too difficult.

"I know he is a fickle man, I know he is often so caught up in his painting he fails to see the nose in front of his face, but I also know that he loves you with every ounce of his being. Don't block him out, Maddy."

It is not him I love. It's you.

"You never answered my question."

"Which question?"

"Will you come with me to Jerusalem?"

"Of course I will, Maddy, I will just pencil it into my diary. When is good for you?"

The door opens, and Doctor Brookbank comes in.

“Michael? It is, Michael, isn’t it? Is it possible I could just have a quick word with you?”

Alice takes him out the room, and shuts the door. A moment later, Michael comes back in, and picks up his bag.

“I’m going to have to go, Maddy. The doctor needs to talk to you.”

“What about?”

“I don’t know, Maddy, you will have to speak to her.”

Alice passes him on the way out, and pats his arm.

“How are you doing with your mealtimes, Maddy?”

“What do you need to talk to me about?”

“We have just received the results of your latest blood test, and it confirms something we have suspected before. There is a complication with your treatment.”

“Comp.. Comp – “ she can’t spit the word out. “Is there a problem?”

“I need to tell you that we will always respect the decisions that you make, whatever they may be, but we need to let you know all the facts.”

“Tell me what is wrong.”

The doctor sits down on the edge of the bed and places her hand on Maddy’s back.

“Maddy, you are pregnant.”

She can feel him.

She can feel his tiny wings, a butterfly fluttering in her stomach.

“I want it terminated.”

“You don’t have to make a decision right away. There is the possibility your stroke will have adversely affected the development of your foetus – “ *My foetus*. “but there is every chance that if it has survived this far that it is will grow to be a normal baby. We cannot

possibly tell at this stage, but we will need to immediately modify your medication to avoid any chance of miscarriage.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Maddy, your genitalia is in full working condition, we can afford to let you carry the baby until we can perform a scan. At that time you will be in a far better position to decide.”

“I told you. I don’t want it.”

“At least involve Damon in the decision making process. If we carry out an abortion at this stage, it will be a complicated procedure, and we will have to inform Damon’s father so he can adequately administer treatment.”

“I don’t want him to know. I want it gone.”

“Maddy, I don’t think you can afford to keep it a secret from him. If he finds out later from his father, it will be a deal more upsetting than it is now. You have a strong relationship with your partner, Maddy. He will be supportive. I know he will.”

When Damon arrives later that day, he is carrying a sketchbook under his arm.

“Maddy! I’ve got something to show you.”

He comes and sits next to the bed, then opens up the sketchbook on her lap. He flicks it open, and she looks down. All she can see is a grey smudge, upon which her eyes refuse to focus.

“I’m sorry. I can’t see anything.”

“They’re pictures of you, babe. They’re pictures of you.”

“I’m sorry, Damon,” she lets her head fall back against the cushion.

“It doesn’t matter.” She can tell by his voice he is crestfallen.

“Darling, I’m very pleased for you.”

“You don’t sound very pleased.”

“Not now, Damon, I don’t want to argue.”

He takes back the sketchbook, and puts it on the table, then sits back in silence.

“The doctors have told me I’m pregnant.”

She cannot tell how Damon takes the news. She can barely even see him, hardly hear him breathe.

“Will it be okay?”

She doesn’t want to answer that question.

“I’m going to have it terminated.”

He sits forward, onto the edge of the chair.

“Don’t you think we ought to talk about it first? What have the doctors said?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters. If the doctors think the baby is going to be fine, then I would want to have it. We would be able to do this, babe.”

“We can’t do this. What if it has brain damage? What if it has Down’s?”

“There are tests they can do to find these things out, babe. They do scans. We can find out as much as we can and prepare. Maddy, we might never get another chance like this.”

“It isn’t going to be normal.”

“It, it, it! It is *our baby*, Maddy. We are going to have a baby!”

“It’s not *your* baby!”

There is a stunned silence coming from the chair beside her. She realises Damon has totally misinterpreted her last remark.

“I mean,” she adds, “it is a thing. It is a monster. It is growing inside of me, and I don’t want it.”

“You don’t *know* that.”

“I do.”

“No, you don’t!” Damon calms himself down before he speaks again. “It’s too early. It’s too early for you to make rational decisions after everything that has happened to you.”

“It’s my decision to make.”

“But you don’t need to make it now! You don’t need to make it today, not this minute. Please, Maddy. For me. Please can we wait.

We can talk it over with Doctor Brookbank, wait until we see the scans.”

“I’m not going to change my mind.”

“Please, babe, I beg of you. Please say you’ll wait. Just say you’ll wait until we can see a scan, until we know what the baby is going to be like.”

“Damon – “

“Just say yes, Maddy, please, for me. Just say yes.”

“Yes.”

It doesn’t feel like Maddy who said it.

Chapter 15

Maddy is sat in the back of Harry's MPV in a specially designed seat that keeps her head from lolling about. It is extremely uncomfortable. The base of her spine is aching, and the strap seems to dig in to her neck. She looks out the window at the blur that is passing by on the other side of the Motorway. The doctors told her that her eyesight problems could not be currently be corrected by glasses, and that it was the brain's inability to focus that is causing her blurred vision, and they hope that over time it would settle down. It makes her feel trapped inside herself.

Where has it gone? Where has my life gone?

Damon is on the seat next to her, holding her hand, but he keeps his head turned away. He hardly even talks to her. *He is still angry with me.*

"Not too far to go now, until we are home. It's going to be lovely having you around, Maddy." Again, Jackie demonstrates her impeccable ability to lie convincingly.

"Almost home now, Maddy. Almost home."

Harry unfolds the wheelchair from the boot of the car, "Your carriage awaits, ma'am."

Damon goes round to her side, unbuckles her, and tries to lift her out. He is not used to this. He bangs her head on the door frame, and stumbles on the gravel drive. "Let's get you inside, babe."

Harry pushes her all of five feet to the front door, and then the hassle starts again, as the two men try to lift her out. “We will need to put a ramp here, I think,” says Harry, ever practical.

The Baron runs up to her pushing his nose at her legs, sniffing and licking, sticking his paws on the men’s arms. “Jackie, can you deal with him, please!” It’s the first time she remembers hearing Harry sound cross. As Jackie ushers the dog out into the back garden, Harry and Damon carry her through into what used to be the study.

“Here is your own special room,” Harry says.

I am not a child! she wants to shout as he pushes open the door with his spare hand.

They lay her down on the bed against the wall. *It’s a single bed.* The metal bars which can be raised to stop her falling off have been lowered, but it is still cumbersome to lift her over the lip. She can’t imagine getting on and off the bed on her own.

“There’s the TV,” Harry points at a large LCD widescreen that has been mounted to the wall, “and you’ve got a stereo here as well. Jackie has bought a job load of audio books which she thought you might like. I know we’ve not had long to get it ready for you, but we want you to think of this as your room. If you want things moved about, just shout, and we’ll be happy to help.”

All she can see is the oxygen cylinder next to her bed.

“I want to go home.”

“We’ve brought all of your things from the old apartment.” *They didn’t hear me.* “We are selling it with most of the furniture, but as you see we’ve brought your desk in here, and your laptop is in the top drawer. The downstairs toilet will be yours, and yours alone, and we are intending to get a shower fitted in the cloakroom. You know, one of those sit down showers, where – “

“This is not my home! I want to go home!”

For a long while nobody says anything.

“This is your home, Maddy,” Jackie finally says in a quiet voice.

She can’t reply.

“Mum, dad? Can you give us a moment alone?”

Damon shuts the door behind his parents.

“Maddy, what is going on inside your head? What are you thinking? My parents have given up so much for you, the least you could do is show a little gratitude. How do you think this is for them? It’s not easy.”

Maddy’s head is pounding again, and she cannot help it. She can feel her throat constricting, and she can’t stop the crying. Damon comes over to the bed and touches her hair, trying to pull her towards his chest.

“Leave me alone!” she screams at him, pushing him away with her elbows. “Leave me alone!”

“Shh,” he says, keeping tight hold of her, her feeble strikes useless against his strength.

“Go away, go away, go away! Leave me alone!”

“Okay, I’m going. Maddy, I love you, Maddy.”

“Just get out.”

She turns away from him, and weeps into the pillow.

What are they saying about me?

She can hear them talking in subdued tones in the living room across the hall. Her bladder is full, horribly full, and she is extremely uncomfortable. She needs to go to the toilet soon. *Think, damn it, think.* She tries to envisage the route to the downstairs toilet, and every step seems to be an obstacle. She can’t stand, she can hardly support herself in a sitting position, how is she to even reach the door handle? She can cope. She can use the towel rail in the toilet to pull herself up onto the seat. *I can do this. I don’t need their help.*

First she needs to get off the bed.

She twists her body round, and puts her hands on the top bar. *Hands, don’t fail me now.* She pulls herself slowly round, dragging her legs off the side in a roll, first one, then the other. Then her entire

body twitches, and her hands have let go and she is falling down the side.

Her forehead cracks on the bars, and she almost blacks out, with swimming vision she can see blood on her hands, and can feel the wet on her face.

The door burst open, and her new family spread into the room. Jackie yelps when she sees the blood.

“Maddy, Maddy, are you all right?” she says.

“You should have put the bars up, Day!” Harry barks, “You should have put the bars up.”

“I need to go to the toilet.”

“We’ll have to take her to the hospital,” says Jackie, “She’s had a bang to the head, she may have concussion. Look at the state she’s in.”

“Listen to me!” They all stop talking. “I just need to go to the toilet. Please can somebody help me to the toilet. That’s all I want.”

They are looking down at her, splayed out like a corpse on the floor. *What a pitiful wretch I am.*

Damon picks her up in his arms, and carries her through to the cubicle, sitting her down on the seat.

“We need to get your pants down,” he says in a miserable whisper.

“Get Jackie to do it,” she says. She can’t bear the thought of him wiping her clean after she is finished.

“I can manage.”

“Please, Damon, please. I want Jackie to help.”

“Jackie is not going to be at home for ever.”

“But she’s here now.” He moves out of the cubicle, and Jackie takes his place.

“Thank you, Damon,” she says. “Thank you.”

Chapter 16

She is sitting at her desk in her prison cell. There are pictures of her on the walls, her with Damon, her at graduation, Harry has hung the picture Damon painted of her looking out to sea over the bed head. They are all pictures of her before.

Her vision is improving now. Most of the time, everything is a blur, but just occasionally her eyes focus on the thing she is actually looking at, and for a fleeting moment things become crystal clear. She has started to use her laptop. Harry has installed some software which allows the computer to read out documents to her, and she has been listening to the e-mails from well wishers, and creating voice recordings for them to listen to in return. At first she listened to the recordings she made, but they weren't her voice. She could hardly make out the words. The speech therapist says she is improving, but Maddy can't hear any difference. All she hears is the cripple she has become.

She is using the computer as a private diary, recording the thoughts that come to her, of going to Jerusalem, of halting the End of the World, and of the Dragon. Where are these thoughts coming from? Why does she let them into her head? Why does she cherish them so?

She is staring at the mirror, trying to focus on her face. The scar on her forehead has healed and drifted away, and Jackie always grooms her hair each morning, but these are the only recognisable features.

Her eyes seem to have melted and sunk into her skull, there is nothing human about them. Her mouth is slack and wide, beyond her control, there is a constant drool pouring from the corner. *That is not Maddy. I used to be beautiful.*

She has not been out the house for the fortnight since she has arrived. How can she dare to show this beast outside these four walls? Every night, they raise the cage. She can hardly sleep, the nightmares come so thick, she is alone for such long expanses, and when she is in company, it is because she needs oxygen, or her because Harry is massaging her legs, or because she needs to be dressed, or her arse needs to be wiped and she can't quite do it herself.

Jackie is going back to work on Monday, which means she will be alone in the house with Harry, who spends his time with his medical papers and research, and flying off to conferences. She cannot get used to him during their physical therapy sessions, running his hands up and down her legs, over her arms. He is not her lover, and all the time he is talking to her telling her what a pretty girl she is, and how soon she will be back on her feet. She doesn't want anybody's hands on her. She doesn't want anybody to touch her at all.

She can hear Jackie talking on the phone in the hallway. She wished they would realise that she is not deaf. Her hearing has not been affected by the stroke at all.

"Yes, but at least try and come down tonight... Yes I know you are, but you haven't been here at all this week... Day, she is *your* girlfriend, you can't just ignore her weeks at a time, it's not fair on her... She's lonely, Day... Don't say that, Day, please don't say that... So you'll come tonight? Good boy, Day, I am pleased.... Love you too."

She wishes Damon wouldn't come. She would be pleased if she never saw him again.

She is lying on the bed looking up at the ceiling whilst Harry runs his hands over the tops of her thighs. If she can't see him, it's almost as if he isn't there.

“Can you feel this?” he says, lightly slapping her on the outside of the thigh. Her top half is clothed, but she only has a pair of black pants to cover her dignity. Jackie, *sweet Jackie*, dresses her in the morning, and gets her ready for bed. She doesn’t want Harry doing that.

“No.”

“Nothing?”

“No, nothing.”

She is able to do a little more for herself now. She can get on and off the bed, due to some cushioned steps Harry and Damon had built, and most of the time she can go to the toilet herself. She still doesn’t have her own shower, the plumbers had done half a job, cracked the porcelain, and haven’t phoned back. She didn’t leave her room while they were in.

“I’m off to a conference in Brighton on Tuesday,” Harry tells her, I’ll be out the house for most of the day. Is this going to be a problem to you?”

“No.”

“Good, good.” He is working her left leg, bending it up to her chest, then flexing the knee, back and forth. “You’ve got extraordinary muscle tone in your legs, Maddy. You must have been very fit before the... the...”

“Stroke.”

“Yes, the stroke.” He moves on to the right leg. “I really enjoy these sessions with you. You’re a very pretty girl, Maddy. Still, I mean. You’re pretty now. Don’t let anybody tell you otherwise. Turn over, now, let’s do the other side.”

It’s Tuesday. She is sat at her desk, at her laptop, and she is in the house on her own. Well, not quite on her own. She has the Baron for company. He is lying down by her feet asleep. She presumes he’s asleep. He could be chewing her toes off and she would never notice.

I really need a cup of tea.

Okay.

This is a simple one.

She lowers herself to the ground, arse first. Her hands are good now, much better than they were. Her arms are almost always under her control, only the occasional spasm flicking them away from her. Baron dutiful gets up, and gives her a lick before getting out of the way. She drags herself through to the kitchen, and flicks the kettle power switch.

Get things ready. All of her crockery and cutlery are in one of the low down cupboards. She pulls out her favourite mug, and a spoon. Now get the milk out the fridge. They have a fridge built into the kitchen installation, disguised as a cupboard, at ground level.

Damn it! Damn it! No milk.

Maddy steels her resolve. The corner shop is just that, on the corner of the street, fifty yards away from the house. *It's only a pint of milk.* She can do this. How many people go to the shop to buy milk every day? It's a breeze. It must be a fundamental human right to be able to buy milk. To the shop and back. No time at all.

First she needs some money. No problem, her handbag is hanging off the back of the chair in the bedroom. Into the bedroom, grab the handbag, take out the purse. She pops it in her shirt pocket, and then pulls herself over to the entrance porch. She opens the inner door to reveal her wheelchair, folded up and resting under the coats.

She opens the outer door, and an Arctic breeze blows through her into the house. Christmas is a couple of weeks away, and its going to be a cold winter. She can't reach the coats pegs to unhook her coat. *Oh well.* The exercise will keep her warm.

With great care, she levers the chair from against the wall, unclips the catch, and eases the two sides apart. She pushes it up, over the lip of the door, and down the ramp onto the gravel, then drags herself out after it.

This is the first time she has been out of the house on her own since the flight.

I can do this.

She pushes the outer door shut behind her. No need to lock it, she'll be back soon. She doesn't have a key of her own, anyway. Then she drags herself to the front of the chair, takes hold of the arms, and pulls herself up, swivelling round, and down. Panting from the exertion she places her hands on the rims of the wheels on either side, and pushes.

The wheels groan in the gravel, and she inches forward. The muscles in her arms are aching like crazy, and as she lets go, the chair falls back into the tracks she has made.

The driveway seems to stretch on for ever.

"Come on, come on," she exhorts herself, "You can do this!"

She grabs the wheels and creeps forward another couple of feet. *Again.* Slowly she edges down the driveway towards the pavement ahead. When she reaches it, she has to grab tight of the wheels to stop her hurtling down on to the road.

A man walks past her, and she can see he is trying not to look, but his eyes keep springing back to her. *Watch the amazing cripple! See how she dribbles! See how her head moves from side to side, seemingly out of control of its owner!*

She wheels the chair round to face along the pavement, and she can see the corner shop across one side road. The pavement is on a slant, and she has to push harder with her left hand than with her right to keep herself in a straight line. *This is so much easier in the hospital.* At least in the hospital the floors are flat.

She can find herself building up a bit of speed along the smoother pavement, and can feel her confidence rise. She reaches the corner of the street in what feels like no time. The curb down to the road is further round the corner.

There are a gang of kids in shell suits, twelve, thirteen years old, she guesses, all of them wearing Burberry caps, leaning against railings on their bikes outside the betting shop.

Ignore them.

She starts to cross the road, hoping they won't see her. What a joke. They don't make invisible wheelchairs.

"Mong!" one of them shouts.

"Fucking Crip!"

She reaches the other side of the road, and pushes hard to make sure she gets up onto the pavement without rolling back down. The kids stay where they are, and go back to their smoking with gusto.

The door to the shop is shut, *Of course, its winter*. She turns her chair around, and pushes backwards, trying to open the door with the back of her chair. It doesn't budge. She has to wait until somebody opens the door.

A woman and her daughter are coming out the shop, "Do you want a hand in?"

The child holds the door, staring at her, as the mother pushes the wheelchair into the shop. "There you are. Is there anything I can get for you?"

How helpless she is. "I just want a pint of milk."

"Sorry, what was that? I didn't catch how much you wanted."

"A pint! A pint."

"Full fat or semi-skimmed?"

"I don't mind."

"Do you need me to count out the money for you?"

"No, thanks."

She pulls out her purse from her pocket, and gives the woman a pound. She wouldn't be able to get down the aisles of the shop anyway. They are too narrow for her chair, and the queue stretches half way round the shop.

She waits, tucked into the corner next to the till, as the woman goes back round the queue, and pays for her milk. They help her out the shop.

“We’re going this way. Are you going this way?”

“No, just up there.”

“Do you want a hand?”

“I’ll be all right. Thank you.”

As they walk away, she can hear the little girl say, “What is wrong with that lady?” before her mother shushes her.

She is on her way back across the road when she hears a large clunk, jolting her to one side, and the kids outside the betting shop are laughing. They are throwing rocks at her wheels.

She cries in frustration, and hurls what she has in her hands at the children. The milk carton lands yards away from them, crumpling and splattering milk over the road. They laugh all the more.

“Go back to the home, you fucking cripple!” one of them shouts, and the kids roll about. Another rock hits the back of the chair as she crosses the road.

It takes her an age to get home.

I’ll drink my tea black in future.

Chapter 17

It's Christmas Day, and the party is in full swing.

Maddy is sandwiched between the television and the Christmas Tree, totally dwarfed by both. Damon's extended family are here, his brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles. They come in, they say hello to her, ask her how she's getting on, and then they move on. Harry has placed her under the mistletoe, which he seemed to think would liven her up a bit. Nobody has kissed her yet.

Damon's brothers are standing in front of her, facing away and laughing, talking about an early morning football game they'd played on the local pitch. She hadn't been to watch. Everywhere she looks, she sees the backs of people enjoying themselves.

She had dearly wanted to go to church this morning, to see Michael, but Damon hadn't arrived, and Harry and Jackie needed to set up. Damon still hasn't arrived. Over the past six weeks, he has become a virtual stranger, perhaps turning up for one evening at the weekend, but otherwise making excuses. Always making excuses. He sometimes talks to her on the phone, but only because Jackie insists, and even then, he hardly seems to understand a word she says.

Jackie is heading round carrying a bottle in each hand, one red and one white. She tops up the glasses of Damon's brothers, and then pushes through to see Maddy.

"Do you want me to get you a drink, Maddy? Glass of orange juice? Cup of tea?"

“Glass of white wine, please.”

“Do you think, that’s wise, Maddy? Given your condition?”

“One glass of wine is not going to kill me.”

“I’ll get you an orange juice. I’ll be back in a moment.”

One of the brothers has left his glass on top of the television. While he is turned away, she swipes it, and takes a large gulp, before putting it down under her wheelchair. She notices blinking lights out the window before the door opens.

“All right, lads!” It’s Damon, and his words are slurring. He has flashing reindeer antlers on his head, tilted at an odd angle. He grabs his brothers in a big bear hug. “Where’s, Maddy? Where’s my beautiful girlfriend gone?” *Where indeed.* “I’ve bought you a present,” he says, leaning over her, his fetid breath drenching her. He takes off the antlers and snaps them onto her head. “Merry Christmas, babe!” he leans further still and kisses her on the forehead.

“I think you are mistaking me for the tree,” Maddy tells him.

“Sorry, didn’t quite catch that, babe. Hello mum! Happy Christmas.” He kisses Jackie on the cheek. She looks non too pleased with him.

“You were supposed to be here hours ago,” she hisses at him. “Couldn’t drag yourself from the pub? At least now we can get the dinner on the table.

“Sorry, mum! Got to get in the festive spirit, you know that!”

“Go through and help Dad set the table. Try and sober yourself up a bit,” she gives a meaningful look towards Maddy.

One of the Chuckle Brothers pushes her through to the lounge, and sits her next Damon. They’ve had to push two tables together to get everybody round, and even now it is a tight squeeze for the people on the far side of the dining room. They won’t be leaving in a hurry. Harry sits at the head of the table, close to the kitchen hatch, where Jackie is passing the dishes through to him. There is a space on her

right for Jackie, and Damon sits on her left, facing at an angle away from her.

When Jackie finally comes through, she pats Maddy on the shoulder and asks, "Are you okay?"

"Fine, just a bit of sickness, that's all." It's morning sickness. *What an inept description that is.*

She is hardly hungry. She occasionally takes a bite of carrot and potato, but she finds it difficult cutting still, and doesn't want to make a fool of herself.

After dinner, they decide to pull the crackers. Damon turns to Maddy with his, and it slips out of her grasp.

"Oh, for God's sake, Maddy. I'll do it myself."

"Damon!" Harry snaps. "Show some manners."

"Why should I? She's my girlfriend, she knows what I'm like."

"How can she? You're hardly ever here."

"Well, I'd be here more often if she wasn't such a fucking misery the whole time."

There it is. Out in the open. *Thank you, Damon.* Everybody is staring at him in shock. They don't realise that they've all been as bad as he is.

"What? What? It was a joke, just a little Christmas joke. Dad, would you top up my glass for me?"

"Damon," Jackie says. "Come and help me with the puddings."

One of Damon's uncles fires off a party popper, and the table starts whooping, and talking, and reading out poor jokes to each other. It isn't enough to drown out the sound of rowing coming from the kitchen.

Most of the family are through in the living room, watching the Alternative Christmas Speech on Four with their port and cheese, and hollering with laughter. Maddy is picking the bowls off the table and passing them through the hatch to Jackie.

“He doesn’t mean to be cruel,” Jackie tells her. “You know what he is like when he has had too much to drink.”

“An arsehole?”

“I wouldn’t put it quite like that, but... yes. He’s having a little difficulty going forward. He wants things to be back the way they were. He’s going to take a long time adjusting. But he does love you, Maddy. Believe me, he does.”

I don’t believe you at all. Besides, I don’t love him.

Her life now is based on this ridiculous illusion, that Damon and she love each other, and will want to spend the rest of their adult lives together. They all keep up the pretence for fear of what will happen when it all breaks down.

“I love him too,” she is glad her words are so malformed. It makes it so much easier to lie.

Harry opens the door from the hallway. “Look, someone’s come to see you, Maddy!”

She looks up at the door, and suddenly, for the first time this Christmas, she feels a glint of happiness.

“Michael!” she shouts, louder than she expects.

“Maddy! It’s great to see you.” He gives her a large kiss on the cheek, tickling her with the bristles of his beard. “This is for you, Jackie,” he hands over a bottle shaped box, “with kind regards for the festive season.”

“You are a gentleman, Michael, thank you.” She busies herself in the kitchen, and Harry goes back to the living room.

“I missed you at service this morning, Maddy.” She hasn’t been to All Saints since the accident.

“It’s difficult.”

“So I figured. So I thought, if the mountain can’t come to Mohammad...”

“Are you saying I’m fat?”

“Aye, Maddy, that I am. You great porker you.”

She is smiling. When was the last time she smiled? She knows it won't look as good as it feels, but she doesn't care.

"We do miss you down at the church, y'know. I've got a sack of Christmas cards for you in the car. You need to come back, and bring that boy of yours along too."

"Michael. I am really pleased to see you."

"And I you, Maddy, believe me. I'm sorry I haven't come to see you sooner. You are looking gorgeous, as ever. Now, to the important stuff. I've got you a present, Maddy."

"I'm sorry, I haven't –"

"Don't be silly, Maddy, I wasn't expecting anything in return, except maybe a kiss. Anyway, it's as much a present for me as it is for you." He looks her in the eye, and he is beaming. "It was an idea you gave me actually. Something I've been thinking about since you mentioned it. Here you are, Maddy. Take it."

She gives her an envelope from inside his jacket pocket.

"What's this?"

"It's tickets, Maddy. Tickets to Jerusalem."

She cannot believe it. Elation sweeps through her body, filling her soul.

"I can't accept this." *Oh, but I can!*

"It's nothing, believe me. It's all been organised through the church, and there will be a lot of us going. We're going to visit the sites, have a few bevies, you know, the usual. The parishioners have been very generous. We all miss you, Maddy, we all want to have you back."

"When do we go?"

"We fly out the first week after Easter, for two weeks."

There is another question she needs to ask.

"Is Damon going?"

"No. He's decided against it. There'll be enough people going to look after you though, don't you worry."

"Oh, thank you, Michael, thank you."

She leans forward, and kisses him on the cheek.

It is late, past midnight, and she is absolutely exhausted. She can hear Damon snoring like a pig through the floorboards above her as she drags herself up the steps and on to the bed. She unclips her trousers, and drags them down slowly over her legs. She has been able to undress herself over the past few days. One less indignity she has to suffer. She tosses them onto the chair, and then takes off her cardigan, then her top.

Her room is extremely cold, the bay windows not well sealed, and the air stream blowing through the room gives her Goosebumps. Jackie has bought her a dressing gown for Christmas, and left it at the bottom of the bed. She will definitely road test it tonight. She reaches over to the soft thick cotton, and pulls it to her.

There is a knock at her door.

"Hold on!" she says, but her warning is unheeded. She hastily drags the dressing gown over her almost naked body as the door swings open.

"It's me, Harry. I wondered whether you needed any help getting ready."

"I'm fine, thank you."

"Nonsense!" he says, "Let me give you a hand with that dressing gown." He puts down something on her bedside table. It's a sprig of mistletoe. He picks the robe up from her and slowly averts his eyes. His breath reeks of whisky.

She slips her arms in, and quickly folds it around her.

"Thank you, Harry. Merry Christmas, and goodnight."

"Before I go, Maddy. I know Damon didn't spend much time with you today, and I felt like you have missed out. I thought you might like a kiss under the mistletoe before bed."

"No, Harry. Goodnight."

"I won't take no for an answer." Holding the mistletoe high in one hand, he pulls her head towards him, and presses his mouth against

her top lip, drawing it in slightly. “There. That wasn’t too bad, was it? Not bad for an old man. Merry Christmas, Maddy. God bless you, and sleep well!”

Chapter 18

“We are going to use a technique called transvaginal ultrasonography. It sounds more scary than it is. Essentially, instead of the normal abdominal scan, a small probe will be placed in your vagina, completely painlessly. We won’t as yet be able to test for Down’s. We will be able to check for that in about a month’s time using a Nuchal Translucency Scan. What we will be able to test for now is that your baby is proceeding with normal development, that he has the right number of eyes, arms, that kind of thing. You have nothing to worry about. Your blood tests are good, and there have been no complications thus far. There is every chance that your baby is developing normally. We would love to be able to give you a Happy New Year.”

“Where is it?” says Damon impatiently.

“Please be patient for a minute,” the sonographer replies. “I’ll let you know when I find the baby.”

Maddy may not be in pain, but she is feeling like a trussed up pig. Her legs are raised in slings in the lithotomy position. She saw the probe before entry covered in a condom dripping with gel. The sonographer is slowly moving the probe around inside her underneath the sheet. *I’m being fucked by a machine.* She cannot bring herself to

look at the screen, and cannot bear to look at Damon either, so she gazes up at a crack on the wall.

Next to her, the sonographer types one handed into the computer, she can hear the click of keys, and a frequent beep.

"You see that?" she says to Damon. He affirms, excited. "That is the baby's head."

Again there are clicks.

"Left leg... Right leg... That's the baby's left arm... and that is his right arm. Hold on a moment." She can feel the probe moving inside her.

"Oh!" gasps Damon, "Maddy you've got to look at this. He looks like he's sucking his thumb." He giggles, but Maddy doesn't look.

"Do you want a photograph?"

"Would I, yes! Oh, Maddy, he's gorgeous!"

"We cannot tell yet whether it is a she or a he," says the sonographer.

"Oh, he's a he, I'm sure of it."

"Well," says the sonographer. "That's all I need to do for the moment. Let's get you cleaned up, and ready to go."

"Is there anything wrong with him? Is he okay?"

"I will give my notes to Doctor Brookbank, and she will talk to you later today."

"Please, just let me know if you found anything."

"I couldn't find anything adverse at this early stage. Your baby's fine. Your baby's fine."

"Are you sure you don't want to have a look at the photographs, babe? He is such a good looking guy, he takes after his dad, I know."

"No, I'm all right."

Doctor Brookbank comes into the waiting room, and takes them through to the consultant's office.

"Maddy, I'm sure you will be pleased to hear your baby appears to be developing normally. The foetus is slightly smaller than we would

expect given the date of conception, but all its limbs are in expected proportion, and facial features are also developing as we would expect.”

“When can I get it terminated?”

Neither Doctor Brookbank nor Damon say anything.

“I don’t want it. When can I get rid of it?”

“Babe,” Damon says, swallowing, “did you not hear right? The baby is fine. You don’t need to have it aborted, it’s going to be fine.”

“It will be fine, when it is gone.”

“Doctor, do you mind if we go home and discuss this? I think we need to think things through together.”

“I think that is an excellent idea. Take your time. It’s early days yet.”

Damon pushes to Maddy to the car in silence, and doesn’t speak until he has strapped her in.

“How can you talk of abortion?”

“I want it gone. I don’t want it in me.”

“But the baby is perfectly healthy! There are people around to help, mum, dad, me. It is my baby as well, and I know I would do a great job looking after it.” *Like you do a great job of looking after me.*

“It isn’t a part of me. It’s an alien inside me. I want rid, I want rid.”

“How can you say all this? I would understand if there was something wrong with it, but the doctors say it’s perfectly healthy, and that you are healthy enough to bring it to full term. And if you wanted to get rid of it, why have we waited until now? Why didn’t you get rid of it when we first found out?”

“Because you asked me not to.”

“I asked you to wait until we found the results of the tests. The tests are good, Maddy. The baby is well.”

“I told you I wouldn’t change my mind.”

Damon thumps the steering wheel with his fist.

"It's my fucking baby! How can you even talk about killing my baby?"

"It is my decision to make."

"You are incapable of making decisions! Not rational decisions. Maddy, your brain has been scrambled by the stroke, how can you possibly expect to make a decision as important as ending somebody's life?"

Maddy lies back in the seat, totally incapable of crying. She cannot answer him. He holds a power over her that she cannot resist.

"Maddy," Damon finds he can finally speak. "Maddy, I'm sorry. I would understand if there was something wrong with it, but there isn't. Maybe in a few weeks we will find he has Down's Syndrome, and maybe then I will agree with you."

"The baby is getting older, Damon. How old will it get before you let me terminate?"

"I will not let you terminate a healthy baby, Maddy. Not my baby. Not ever."

The Devil wins another hand.

"Dad! We're home!"

"Excellent! Hi, Maddy, Damon, your mum will be home shortly. She was a little caught up at the library. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Boy, would I, dad. I'm parched."

"What about you, Maddy."

She holds her hand up and shakes her head. "I need to go for a lie down."

Harry looks worried. "No, Dad, it's nothing to worry about. The baby is good, isn't it, babe."

"Yes. The baby is fine."

"Are you sure you're all right, Maddy? You are looking a little pale."

"Yes. I just need a lie down, that's all."

"Okay. Would you like a hand into your bed?"

"No thank you, Harry. I can do it myself."

She can hear them talking about her again. Talking as if there weren't just a couple of thin strips of plaster between them. Damon has gone home, surprise, surprise. Maddy is too boring for him now. She doesn't party as much as she used to.

"Damon said Maddy wants to have an abortion."

"That's terrible, Harry! How could he say such a thing?"

"Because it's true. She seems to think the baby is some kind of monster. She never even looked at the scan pictures."

Jackie is silent, seeming to think about this a while. "I don't think she wants to have *Damon's* baby. He's never here."

"He is a busy man."

"Harry, they aren't even married. They don't have any hold on each other. I think they are drifting apart." They are quiet for a while longer, before Jackie pipes up again, "What would happen if Damon found somebody else?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do I have to spell it out? If Damon started dating another woman. How do we explain Maddy to her? How do we explain that we are looking after his ex-girlfriend?"

"She is the mother of our grandchild, Jackie."

"Not if she has an abortion. How do you think she will feel, anyway? Trapped in the house of her ex-boyfriend's parents. It doesn't make sense. We ought to look into other methods of housing her. Maybe we ought to consider renting a bungalow and paying a full time carer for her."

"No! Maddy is like a daughter to me, Jackie. I'm not about to give her up just because Damon is being irresponsible. The fact of the matter is she *is* pregnant. And while she is carrying our grandchild I don't want to let go of her. I love her, Jackie, I love her as much as I love the boys."

"I know, Harry. I love her too. I am only thinking about what is best for her."

“What’s best for her is to stay here with us. At least until the baby is born.”

“Or it is gone.”

“Or it is gone.”

The door knocks, and Harry enters. She presses pause on the remote control to stop the audio book she was listening to.

“How are you doing?”

“Okay.”

“Do you want a drink of anything? I was just about to brew up.”

“I’m okay, thank you Harry.”

Harry looks bewildered. He stares at her for a while, and sighs before turning to leave.

“Harry.”

“Yes, Maddy.”

“Harry, I’ve been thinking. I think it would be best if I moved out. I am ready. I am such a burden on you and Jackie. It would be for the best.”

Harry comes and sits on the end of the bed.

“Maddy, thank you for saying that.” He sighs again. “But I don’t want you to leave. I think I’ve gotten used to having you around.”

He gently lays a hand upon her stomach.

“You are carrying my grandchild, Maddy. My first grandchild. Even if you weren’t, even if things went wrong, you are very special to me. You have been like a daughter, and I mean that. You have never been a burden to me, always a joy.” Keeping one hand on her stomach, he strokes her cheek with the other. His eyes are brimming with tears. “I’m scared of losing you, Maddy. I’m scared of losing you, and I’m scared of losing the baby.”

He is shaking now, shaking against her arms. He lays his head upon her chest, and holds her tight, crying onto her shirt. She cannot help herself but stroke his hair.

“I’m not going. It’s all right, Harry. I’m not going.”

Chapter 19

“Hi, Greg.”

“I’m sorry, who is this?”

“Maddy.”

“Sorry?”

“Madeleine Archer.”

“Oh, Maddy! Maddy, good to hear from you. Happy Christmas! I’m sorry, I didn’t recognise your voice for a moment there. How’s it going? I was sorry to hear about your accident. Did you get the flowers?”

Accident? I wasn’t in a car crash. “Yes, they were lovely.”

“Excellent, excellent. Now what can I do for you, Maddy?”

“I was hoping I would be able to start work again.”

“Hold on, Maddy, hold on... Sorry, Maddy, I’ve got somebody on the other line, can I call you back? On second thoughts, can we touch base again in the New Year? It’s a busy time for us at the moment. We’ll be in a better position to talk then. Speak soon, Maddy. Bye.”

“Hello, Gregory Bowman speaking. How can I help?”

“It’s Maddy.”

“Sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

“It’s Maddy. Maddy Archer. You asked me to call back in the New Year.”

“Oh yes, I remember now.”

“I was hoping for some part time work. I want to get back – “

“Sorry, Maddy. I’m just about to go into a meeting, I’ll ring you back. On second thoughts, can you phone me tomorrow? That would be convenient for me. About three o’clock? Great. I’ve got to rush.”

“Hello, Greg.”

“Hello, Maddy! Listen, thank you for calling me back. I’m sorry to say I’ve got some bad news for you. We’ve had a surge of layoffs just after Christmas, and I’m really sorry to say this, but your job was one of those that had to be let go.”

“I’ve got my laptop here. I’ve got the phone. I’m not asking to work a full week.”

“I’m really sorry, Maddy, but it’s nothing to do with me. The MD’s have decided to consolidate the laser division, and this is how they’ve chosen to do it. I fought for you I really did, but they had all ready made their decisions weeks ago.”

“You can’t do this!”

“It wasn’t me, Maddy, you’ve got to believe me. I would love to have you back, but there is nothing for you to come back to. I understand the finance department have constructed an extremely beneficial redundancy package for you in light of your condition.”

“I don’t want the money. I want to go back to work.”

“You will have to take it up with the MD, Maddy. Do you want me to put you through to him?”

“Don’t bother, Greg.”

She slams down the phone.

“What’s wrong, Maddy?”

Harry sits down at the end of the bed.

“I’m bored, Harry. I wanted to work, and they aren’t going to take me back. I know I’m never going to be a nurse again, but I thought at least I would be able to carry on with the job I already had.”

He puts his arms around her. "There, there. I know how hard it is for you. You'll find something, I know you will." He kisses her on the top of her head. "How have you been getting along with your juggling?"

"Not today, Harry. I'm not in the mood today."

"Maddy, listen to me. Your physiotherapy is the most important part of your treatment. It is the *only* way you will get better. It is important for you and it is important for the baby, that you are as fit as you can possibly be. You have to push yourself, Maddy."

"At least it is something to do."

"Exactly. Now where are those balls?"

He tosses her a ball, and she bats it to the wall with her hand in an effort to catch it.

"Good try, Maddy, excellent. Now here we go. One, two, three, four... whoops. Here it is, try again."

"Have you thought about me moving out?"

"Yes, I've thought about it, and it's not going to happen, Maddy. You need people around who love you, not some total stranger who is only in it for the money."

"I appreciate your care. But I don't want to be dependent upon you for ever."

"Not for ever... Good catch, Maddy! But you're going to need support while the baby is still small. We want to be there for you."

"I could always move in with Damon."

"You know I can tell when you're being sarcastic, Maddy. Even now. Damon is not going to want to move in with you." He picks up the dropped balls and passes them back to her. "Damon... do you know he was on the verge of proposing to you before you had the stroke? He had even bought the ring. He did love you, Maddy, he loved you with all his heart."

"And now?"

"Now... Lie down, Maddy, we have to do some leg work now. That's it. Lift yourself up a bit so I can get your trousers off. That's great. I don't know, Maddy. I whether I should be telling you this at all, but he's been talking about somebody else. Somebody he has met."

"Another woman."

"Maddy, you must understand what he is going through. This hasn't been at all easy for him."

"Don't say that."

"He can't help it, Maddy. He is still young."

"I suppose one of us needs to get on with their lives," she remarks bitterly.

"Can you feel this, Maddy?"

"Feel what?"

"Maddy, I am bending your left foot, please, please tell me you can feel it."

"I can't feel a thing."

Harry sighs. "This so upsets me, Maddy. You can't believe how much. I want you to feel it. I don't want you to be in a wheelchair for the rest of your life. It's psychosomatic, Maddy, you know that don't you? There is nothing wrong with your legs, the nerve endings are all there. It's just the part of your brain that registers the feelings that has changed. You can feel it, Maddy, I know you can."

She can feel his hands now, up on her pelvic bones, stroking down to her legs.

"Harry, what are you doing?"

"I'm just trying to find out where the sensation starts, Maddy. You can help me. You can tell me when you can no longer feel my fingers." He moves his fingertips round to the inside of her thighs, and down again.

"Harry, stop it. Stop it now."

"We can't stop, Maddy, not now. I've told you already how important these sessions are."

“No, Harry!”

He sits back. “I want you to be able to feel again, Maddy, that’s all I want. I know what you are saying. but this is *so* important. Let’s turn you over, and I can massage the other side.”

“I don’t want to continue the session now, Harry. Let’s do it again tomorrow.”

“Maddy, move forward a bit, and I will flatten your pillows.”

“Harry.”

“I’m the doctor. Do as I say. That’s it. That’s better. Now lie down on your front. Great.”

She presses her face down into the pillow and shuts her eyes.

“Can you feel this at all, Maddy?”

“No, I can’t feel anything.”

She hears the sound of slapped flesh. “Please, can you feel it, Maddy?”

“No.”

“I’m massaging your legs now, Maddy. You just tell me if you can feel that. Tell me the moment you start to feel anything.”

She can feel his hands now. She can feel them slipping under the fabric of her pants and kneading her buttocks.

“Harry!” she cries, “Please, please, stop!”

“Shh,” he says, lowering her knickers down over her legs. “I am trying to help you, Maddy. You know that. Please be quiet, Maddy. Damon doesn’t love you, you know that. I love you, Maddy. I think you are the most beautiful woman I have ever met. I’ve always loved you. You are beautiful, you know that don’t you? You are my beautiful girl. I want to make you feel beautiful again, make you feel beautiful. Please be quiet, Maddy, please be quiet. Can you feel it? Can you feel it yet? I just want to make you feel beautiful, I want you to feel loved, because I love you Maddy, I love you. Please tell me you can feel it, please tell me you can feel it...”

“I’m sorry, Maddy. I’m so sorry. I’m so truly, dreadfully sorry.”

“I love you, Maddy, I really do. I don’t want anything to hurt you.”

“Please stop crying, Maddy.”

“I’m going to have to get you cleaned up. Oh God, oh God. I’m going to have to clean you up.”

“Please, please, please, forgive me, Maddy. I don’t want to hurt you, I just want to make you better.”

“This isn’t happening, this isn’t happening.”

“I am not a rapist, Maddy. You know that, don’t you? I’m a decent human being. We both wanted it didn’t we?”

“I really, really am sorry, Maddy. Please stop crying.”

“Please don’t tell Jackie, Maddy, she would never forgive me.”

“I know you wanted it. You never said ‘no’, you never said ‘stop’. I do love you, Maddy.”

“It will never happen again, I promise you that. We all have too much to lose. I don’t want to lose you, Maddy, you know that. I don’t want to lose you.”

“This can be our little secret, can’t it? There’s no need to tell anybody. It was just a silly little accident.”

“Please talk to me, Maddy, don’t shut me out. Please talk to me.”

“Oh God, what a mess, what a mess, I’m going to have to clean you up, Maddy. Are you okay if I clean you up?”

“It was mutual consent, wasn’t it. I’m not a rapist, Maddy, I’ve never done anything like this before, and I never will again. I promise you, never again.”

“Please stop crying. I can’t stand it when you cry.”

“I am just trying to make you feel something. Feel beautiful. Did I not make you feel beautiful?”

“Oh, Maddy. I am so tied up in knots over this. Tell me you forgive me, for I will never forgive myself for what I’ve done.”

“Talk to me, Maddy. Please.”

“I can’t leave you like this, not like this, not after what has just happened. Tell me you will keep this our secret. Please don’t tell Jackie, it would absolutely break her.”

“I’ll make us a cup of tea, that’s what I’ll do. That will make us feel better. Won’t it make you feel better?”

“Please stop crying, Maddy. Please stop.”

“I love you, Maddy, and I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m so, so sorry.”

Chapter 20

Maddy is throwing up the remains of her breakfast.

She can hardly keep anything down these days, certainly not in the morning, it all comes right back up again. She hopes it doesn't last much longer. It is almost the end of the first trimester, and the baby is still inside her.

They are going to be arriving soon.

She has to get herself ready. Jackie is waiting outside to give her a hand. She helps her back to her room, and Maddy lifts herself onto the wheelchair.

"You don't have to go through this, it's not fair on you. If you want, we can tell them you are out."

"Don't. It's okay. I can do this."

"All right then. What colour lippy do you want? I've brought a few down. Something subtle or something bold?"

"Bold."

"How about this burnt umber? It'll bring out your eyes."

"Thank you for doing this."

"You're a very brave girl, Maddy. Far braver than I would ever be given the circumstances."

"Not brave. Stupid."

"Aren't they the same thing? Keep still for a moment."

The door bell rings.

“Don’t worry, Maddy. Harry will get that. We’ll come out when you are good and ready.”

Harry answers the door, and she can hear Damon’s booming voice outside while Jackie applies some mascara.

“What do you think?”

She looks at herself in the mirror. Her features are too stretched, too large, but there is something of the old Maddy about her.

“I’m ready.”

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

Jackie pushes her out of her room and into the lounge.

“Hello, mum. This is Angela. Angela, this is my mum Jackie.”

Maddy stares at the woman Damon has brought in with astonishment. She has long black hair, oval dark eyes, and a slim athletic figure. It’s as if she were looking into a mirror. She kisses Jackie on the cheek with a smile. *She is Dorian Grey, and I am the painting in the attic.*

“And this is my sister, Maddy.”

“Hello! Your brother has told me so much about you.”

“Not everything, I’m sure!”

“He certainly didn’t tell me how beautiful you are.”

“He’s my brother. He probably doesn’t think about these things.”

“Right,” says Harry. “I think dinner is almost ready. Shall we all go through to the dining room?”

“Jackie, have you seen the carving knife? I can’t find it anywhere.”

“Just use another knife, Harry.”

“Which one?”

“Leave it to me. Honestly, the men in this household...”

“So Angela,” says Harry. “How did a pretty woman like you end up with a son like ours?”

“Well, that’s a story,” she grins. “I wanted to buy my mum a painting, you know, a Christmas present, and I was looking at this

painting in Damon's gallery. 'This man asked me what I thought of it, and I said I wasn't much impressed. He then started showing me round all the others, telling me what his favourites were, and which ones he thought were good for the money. It was then I twigged that he was the artist. I didn't know what to say, did I, Damon?'

"She stood there like this." He opens his mouth and widens his eyes, then lifts his jaw up and down like a fish.

"Anyway," she continues. "We went for a drink afterwards, and it all went from there really."

This was before Christmas.

"What do you do for a living, Angela," Maddy asks?

"I'm a nurse. I'm based at a doctor's surgery in the West End. We've had a busy time over winter, but it's dying down now. You used to be a nurse too, didn't you, Maddy? We are so alike. I know we are going to be good friends."

"Would you like a glass of wine, babe?" Damon holds up the bottle. Maddy finds herself almost answering before she realises he is actually talking to Angela.

"Just a small one."

"I'll drive back if you like."

"No, I'll drive. You drove here, it's the least I can do."

"No problems, babe." He fills his glass close to the brim and takes a large swig. *Same old Damon, same old woman. How long will she last?*

"Have you met Angela's parents yet?"

"I've met them a couple of times. They came to visit us yesterday. We had some news to tell them. We've got some news to tell you too."

"Oh, what's that?"

"Angela is going to move in with me."

Maddy chokes on her water. "You've only known each other two months!" she says aghast.

"That's... That's excellent news, Damon!" Even Jackie has trouble sounding convincing.

“Maddy, it’s over two months. And anyway, two months is long enough for us to know it is right.” He looks at Angela and smiles. “Isn’t that right babe?”

“Dump him now, Angela. He’s a bastard. You are a complete bastard, Damon.”

Angela laughs nervously. “I bet you two fought like hell when you were kids.”

“Fought? He didn’t even know me.”

“Maddy, don’t,” says Jackie in a deep voice.

“Yes, do as mum says,” adds Damon.

“Grow up, Damon!”

They all push their food around their plates, trying to make as little noise as possible.

“This is very nice, Jackie, the meat is lovely.” *There is a difference between us. She’s not vegetarian.*

“It’s very good of you to say so.”

Harry is turning more and more purple as the meal progresses. He is clearly not enjoying this.

“So when are you moving in?”

“As soon as we can arrange it, really. I’m living in rented accommodation at the moment, so I have to wait until April when the lease runs out.”

“I’m thinking about getting somewhere bigger anyway,” adds Damon. “Somewhere with a bit more studio space. We will need more rooms at some point anyway if we are going to start a family.”

Maddy sniggers. “Start a family? What about the family, you’ve already got?”

“Maddy, don’t.”

“No, Maddy, please do!” says Damon. “Please make this about you. It always is about you, isn’t it? You are a leach. You are sucking the life out of mum and dad. You are nothing to do with us, you know

that? You and *your* baby are nothing to do with us. The sooner you are out of here the better.”

“Get out,” Harry barks.

“I don’t see why we should continue with this sham.”

Harry slams his hands down on the table and rises to his feet. “Get out of my house!”

“Dad!”

“And take *her* with you.”

“Harry, calm down.”

“Get out, get out. I can’t stand the sight of you. Get out!”

He goes round to his son and physically picks him up by the shoulders, manhandling him out the door.

“I think you had better go too,” says Jackie, and Angela sheepishly rises, and walks out the room. “Well.” Jackie pats her mouth with a napkin. “I think that went about as well as could be expected.”

“I can’t believe him. He is not my son, he is a monster.”

Harry has brought her a cup of tea. Jackie has gone out. She said she was going shopping, but Maddy presumes she has gone after Damon.

“He is getting on with his life.”

“His life? What about your life? How can he treat you like this. It’s not fair, Maddy. It’s not fair on you at all. It’s his child inside you, and he is disowning it before it is even born.”

“I’m going to get it terminated.”

“Stop talking like that! That’s my grandchild you’re talking about. We are going to keep the baby, Maddy. You, me and Jackie. We can look after it together. We can be a proper family, the four of us. I want us to be a proper family. I love you, Maddy, we both love you.”

“I know.”

“Please, Maddy. Would you lie down on the bed for me?”

“I am lying down.”

“I mean lie down on your front. I need to make you feel better.”

“It doesn’t make me feel better.”

“Don’t argue, Maddy. Please don’t argue. Just turn yourself over for me. That’s it, Maddy. That’s it. You know I love you, Maddy, I love you like I would love my own daughter. You are the daughter I never had. That’s it, Maddy, that’s it.”

Maddy puts her hand under the pillow and holds tightly onto hilt of the carving knife like a security blanket.

“Damon is a monster, Maddy. I won’t let him do this to you again. Don’t you worry, Maddy. I love you, Maddy. I love you.”

Chapter 21

“Where d’you want to go?”

“I don’t care, Michael, anywhere that isn’t here. Just start driving.”

She sighs deeply as the car pulls out of the drive.

“Getting a bit claustrophobic at home?”

“It’s not my home, Michael. My home went long ago. My home was All Saints, my home was Black Street, my home was my job. I don’t have a home now.”

“Don’t say that, Maddy. Jackie and Harry love you as if you were their own.”

She can’t think of a suitable answer to that.

“You know Damon has started coming to church again.”

“No, I didn’t know that. Has he been going with his new floozy?”

“Angela? Yes.”

“They’ll be wanting to get married then. That’s the only reason he went to church with me.”

“You don’t know that, Maddy.”

“Yes, I do, and so do you.”

“Aye. I suppose so.”

“I’ve got something to tell you, Michael.”

“Go on.”

“I’m pregnant.”

“Aye, I suspected as much. Either that, or you’ve been eating too many pies.”

“Always jokes about my weight.”

“You know they *are* jokes, don’t you?”

“Of course I do!” She bops him on the shoulder.

“Ow! Still as strong as ever, I see.”

“I’m not strong. I’m not strong at all. I am weak. I am weak and frightened, and I have lost everything. I wake up in the morning, and I feel like I’m not there, like I’m a zombie, and I go through every day just letting everything bad wash over me. I don’t want to be living there. I don’t want to be trapped in the house. I don’t want to be saying ‘yes’ when I mean ‘no’, and I don’t want this baby. I don’t want this baby!”

“Calm down, Maddy. Take control. If you don’t want the baby, why don’t we go down to a termination clinic right now and make an appointment?”

“You would do that for me?”

“Aye, of course I would, Maddy! I’m not part of the pro-life loony brigade. What kind of life do they expect this baby to have with a father who doesn’t care and a mother who doesn’t want it? I’m your friend, Maddy, I understand what you’re going through. There’s not a week goes by when I am not counselling some poor child who is in the same position as you. Above all, it’s your choice, Maddy. Not Damon’s, not his parents, not even the doctors’. It’s yours.

“So what do you say, Maddy? Are you ready to do it now?”

For a moment, she can feel black eyes staring at her, and the voice in her head.

NO.

“The doctors say the baby looks to be healthy. That it is developing as it should be.”

“Abortion is not about the health of the baby. It is about the wellbeing of the mother.”

“I could have it adopted, couldn’t I? After it is born. If it’s a healthy baby then there must be thousands of people who can’t have children

of their own. Why should I deny them the right to look after my child?"

"Who is changing your mind, Maddy? It's not me."

"Nobody is changing my mind. I'm just having the time to think. You're giving me the time to think."

"I'm glad, Maddy. If I'd have known how distraught you have been, I wouldn't have hesitated to come sooner. At Christmas you were full of the joys."

"Only because I had seen you, Michael."

"Maddy, you are sweet."

"So where are we going to go?"

"It's my decision now, is it? I thought we were trying to empower you!"

"You decide, Michael."

"Okay... okay... it's coming to me now... right! I've got it."

"So put me out of my misery."

"We're going to the dogs."

"I'm not sure I approve of this!"

"Shut up and pick a dog."

"These names are dreadful. Bah's Choice. Endless Gossip. Creamery Border. They don't mean anything."

"I told you. Pick one. I've got to put a bet on now."

"You pick one for me."

"Sorry, I don't see that name. Try again."

"Oh, all right then. Lig Do Scith."

"Why that one?"

"Because you asked me to pick one."

"Okay. Just give me a minute."

She looks out over at the track, at the starting gates. There is something happening here. She can feel it. She is smiling.

"I've just realised," she says when Michael returns. "It's an anagram. Lick dog shit."

Michael ponders this for a moment. "No K."

"Kiss my arse."

"I told you. No K."

"No. You kiss my arse."

"Only if he wins."

"Deal."

They watch the dogs burst out of the starting gates, and the mechanical hare shoots off round the track.

"Which one is he, which one is he?"

"Number five."

"Which one's number five?"

"The one at the front."

"Ha ha! Run, you little bugger run!"

Lig Do Scith is bombing round the course as if his legs aren't touching the ground. He is yards ahead of the other greyhounds.

"Which one did you bet on?"

"Not telling."

"Go on."

"No. I'm not telling you."

"Well, he's not going to beat my little hero. Look at him go, You'd better start puckering up now, Michael."

"We'll see."

"We'll see will we? Look, across the finish line. Wahay!"

"There's still another lap to go."

"Another lap. You didn't tell me there were two laps."

"And spoil the surprise?"

Lig Do Scith is starting to flag on the second lap. The gap between the dogs behind and her greyhound is narrowing quickly. She can see the race is going to be close.

"What number is that one?"

"That's number two. Creamery Border. Look at him go, Maddy. Look at that form! Isn't he a beautiful animal?"

“So he’s yours then is he? Come on Lig Do Scith! Run! Come on!”

The crowd are roaring out names around her, and she is waving her arms, and Michael is leaning over the post and hollering, and then his hands are in the air and he is screaming, and she can’t make out the words, and the dogs are neck and neck, and suddenly the crowd erupts with cheering, and she wants to leap out the wheelchair, but she can’t

“Who won? Who won?”

“Creamery Border! Lig Do Scith came second.”

She can’t help feel a little disappointed.

“Congratulations, Michael. Well bet!”

“Congratulations to you too, Maddy!”

“What? My dog didn’t win.”

“I know. I put on an each way bet.”

“What’s that?”

“It means if it places anywhere in the top three then you win something.”

“How much?”

“Twenty five quid each.”

“Each?”

“Yes. I bet on the same dog as you.”

“You cheeky sod!”

“I’ve got faith in you, Maddy.”

“Well, you had better help me out of this wheelchair.”

“Why?”

“Because I want you to kiss my pretty cheeks.”

“No, no. I said I’d do that if your dog won.”

“The bet was if I won.”

“No, it wasn’t. It was the dog, and the dog only placed.”

“Semantic crap. You owe me a kiss.”

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure, but later. We’ve got a bit of cash now. We’d better find some dogs to lose it on.”

“That was fantastic. Absolutely fantastic! How much did we win?”

“Almost as much as we lost.”

“Good show! Michael, can we do it again? Do it again soon?”

“Who says I won’t have something better up my sleeve next time? Anyway, its not that long until we are jetting off to sunny Israel. That’s something and a half, isn’t it?”

“I can’t wait. I am so excited! Please, don’t take me home.”

“Sorry?”

“Turn the car around, and we’ll go back to your place. You can hide me there until we go.”

“The vicarage? Ah, wouldn’t that be nice. I shall have to think about it. But for now, I’ll drop you back at Damon’s parents. They’ll be wondering what I’ve done to you.”

“Seriously, Michael. I’m not sure I can go back there.”

“What can be so bad that Maddy Archer cannot handle it? Maddy, the quick witted, beautiful woman I have come to know and love?”

“I could tell you, but then I would have to kill you.”

“Don’t let anybody kick you around. It’s time you stopped listening to people tell you what *you* have to do. You tell them. You tell them and you do it. It’s your body, Maddy. Nobody else’s.” *I wish it was yours.*

“Thanks, Michael.”

“And remember... you have my mobile number. Use it. Whatever time, day or night. I would drop everything for you, Maddy, you know that? I would walk out in the middle of a funeral to be by your side if you needed me.”

“That means a lot to me.”

“I mean it, Maddy. Anything.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

“You still haven’t kissed my arse yet.”

“Anything but that.”

“Thanks for the coffee, Jackie. And Maddy, don’t forget! Phone!”

“I will!”

She watches Michael’s car disappear into the darkness.

“So I take it you had a good time today,” Jackie says, “I haven’t seen you smiling so much in ages.”

“Yes, it was great.”

“Michael is a lovely man, isn’t he?”

“He is. He’s been marvellous to me.”

Jackie wheels her into the house.

“You know... you know Harry and I understand about... about you wanting to move on from Damon. You are like a daughter to us. Damon has got on with his life, and we would not be upset if you did the same. You see Michael as much as you want to.”

“Thank you, Jackie. But I don’t think anything is happening between me and Michael if that is what you are suggesting.”

“Ah, but the question, is do you want it to?”

Maddy grins like a schoolgirl.

I love him. I really, really love him.

Chapter 22

Monday is the start of a new day. A fabulous, glorious, bright spring day, and this is the day Maddy is going to take back control of her life.

“Hello, Gregory, this is Madeleine Archer.”

“Ah, Maddy. What an unexpected surprise!”

“A pleasure for me too, I assure you. I thought you should be the first to know. I have been speaking to a lawyer this morning about your making me redundant, and he believes I have a strong case for unfair dismissal. He tells me that for a job to be made redundant, there has to be at least a two week consultation period with the employee. Now I don’t ever remember meeting up with you, or anybody else. Do you, Greg?”

“Maddy, this doesn’t have to be – “

“He also was somewhat alarmed by the way you treat the female staff in the office. I happen to have some e-mails that mention some of your remarks to me that were distinctly unsavoury. That, together with the way you have treated me since my illness makes him believe I could also have a strong case of sexual discrimination that would hold you personally responsible.”

“Maddy, I – “

“It’s been a pleasure speaking to you, Gregory. Goodbye.”

That felt good. That felt really, really good.

“Yes, hello there. I’m phoning to see about a flat you have listed on your internet site, number six three oh. Yes, that’s the one. Does it have wheelchair access from the ground floor? Okay, no problems, I’ll keep looking...”

“Hello, Alice? Doctor Brookbank? You said I could always phone if I needed anything. Well, there’s a couple of things I wanted to run past you. The first was, I’m making arrangements to move out of my in-law’s house, and I was wondering how we could arrange for a part time carer to come in... Yes... Yes... Is there some kind of registration process?... Okay... Yes... So you’ll get back to me. And the other thing? Damon and I have been talking, and we were considering the possibility of putting the baby up for adoption....”

She can hear it now. She cannot tell how long it has been going on, but its getting louder. It is the sound of Harry crying at the base of her door.

She levers herself off the chair to open the door.

“What are you doing, Harry?”

“It’s time for your physiotherapy session,” he says between whimpers.

“How long have you been listening?”

“I don’t know.”

“Harry. I’ve got to leave.”

“No, you don’t. You’re my family, and I love you, and I want you here.”

“Harry, you don’t love me. You are using me, and I don’t like it.”

“Why? Have you been talking? Who have you told about us? Is it that vicar? Michael? Is that why he was here yesterday, so you could tell him about our secret?”

“Harry, sit down on the bed.” He does as she asks. “I haven’t told anybody. I’m just trying to claw back some of my life. I can’t stay here with somebody else’s family.”

“You can’t go.”

“I’m not going to leave immediately. It will take time to arrange, but I’m hoping to be moving out after the trip to Jerusalem. I’m – “

“No! No! Listen to me. You cannot go.”

“Harry.”

“I need you, Maddy. I need you, I can’t let you go.”

“Please, Harry.”

“We’ve got something between us. Something special, it’s called – “

“Rape, Harry! It’s called rape.”

“No, it’s not! I am not a rapist! You have always consented.”

“No I haven’t. I have never wanted it.”

“Yes you did! Don’t lie to me, I’m your father!”

“Take your hands off me, Harry.”

“No I will not!” He picks her up off the chair, and throws her down on the bed. “I’m going to show you, Maddy. I’m going to show you how good it could be. You love it as much as I do. You know you do.”

He pushes her sweater top up with one hand, holding her upper arms with the other, and starts to kiss and lick her belly, pressing harder and harder down with his arm.

“Harry! Harry, stop!”

“No, its good, Maddy!”

He unbuttons her fly, and tugs away at her trousers, until the hair beneath is revealed and slips his hand down under her pants.

“Get off me!”

“Shut up, please! You’ll enjoy it more.” He places his hand over her mouth, and presses down. She tries to beat his hand away, but he holds on tight. He’s fumbling with his own trousers now, and she tries to bite his fingers, but his hand is like a muzzle.

“Can you feel how good it is? How good it is?” He kisses the back of his hand.

Maddy lets her fingers drift back under the pillow until they rest on the hilt of the carving knife.

“Maddy, you’re never going to leave, are you. Please tell me you’re not leaving. You love me, don’t you, Maddy? You love me. Say you love me!”

She brings the knife out, and slashes it at his arm. It digs into the triceps, she can feel it strike bone. Harry doesn’t even flinch, he’s too far gone.

“I love you, Maddy, I love you! Stay with me. Stay with me for ever.”

“Get off me!” she screams at the top of her lungs, and swings the knife round again. This time the point of the blade goes into his neck. It seems to slice as easily as the roasts did, and for a second it looks like a novelty knife, with the tiny point sticking out the other side.

Then Harry starts to twitch, his whole body spasming against her, his eyes looking toward heaven, and a ghastly gurgling coming from his throat. Blood is cascading down from his neck over the bed, over her face.

Finally he is still.

Part 4

The End

Chapter 23

She lies back on the bed feeling nothing. Absolutely nothing at all. Her head is clear and void, she can't see or hear, she isn't even there. She can feel it at the edge of her mind, a white light that surrounds her, consumes her, but somehow too far away for her to touch.

It is the constriction to her breathing that finally brings her back. The heavy weight on her chest that is Harry. His body, his corpse, rising and falling with each breath.

I've killed him.

She groans, "I've killed him I've killed him." She cannot stop saying it, the words go round her head. "I've killed him help me help me I've killed him." She is panting, and sweating, *I've killed him* and can't see because the blood is in her eyes, and over her, and his weight is pressing down, and she wants the covers to fall over her, to smother her.

"Help me help me I've killed him aah help me." There is nobody to help, *help me* only Harry, and he is not talking, or breathing or anything, he's just lying on top of her in oblivion.

"Please aaah please help get him off me off me off me I've killed him."

She tries to move, but he is too heavy for her, and she is crying and she can't see and *I killed him, I killed him*. "Help me aah help me"

And she pushes *help me get him off me* and pushes, and suddenly he falls *I killed him what have I done* off the bed, a rag doll *he's dead what have I done*. "What have I done what have I done let me go don't come near me what have I done."

She retches *let me go I didn't mean it* but nothing comes to her throat except bile and phlegm, but her chest keeps contracting and *I've killed him help me* kicking, and her throat keeps twisting until finally her stomach lurches and it flows out of her and *he was in me he was in me oh hell he was in me* over the bed.

"He was in me and I killed him and get away from me get away get away get away."

She is holding on to her knees, covered in sick and blood and *I killed him I killed him* sobbing and she can't feel her hands on her knees and she can't feel her legs and she can hardly see anything except for the bloody pool down the side of the bed and the body *and the body and the body and I killed him I killed him I'm so dirty I'm so dirty I'm so dirty I killed him*.

"I'm dirty I'm dirty I killed him help me please."

How can she get off the bed? *I'm so dirty I'm so dirty I'm such a dirty person*. How can she move with that *help me help me* corpse lying down beside her?

She looks over the side of the bed *he's dead he's dead he's dead* and another wave of nausea strikes her. She has to move *I'm so dirty* she has to clean, she has to wash herself, and *what am I going to do with the body* she can't understand what is happening.

She pushes her leg over the side onto the top of the steps where his legs *he's dead I've killed him help me help me* are lying haphazardly, and lowers herself onto the floor. The carpet is soaked with a thick crimson, spreading out into the hall. The bleeding from his throat has not abated *oh my god what have I done I've killed him*.

She drags herself out of the bedroom and down the corridor *I didn't mean it let me go let me go* leaving a thick trail of blood behind her, then into her shower room. Fully clothed she turns the shower on *I'm so*

dirty so dirty and presses her face against the cool tiles and slams her hands against the floor as the cold water floods down on her.

“Help me help me oh god aah I’m so dirty dirty dirty.”

The water keeps coming, turning pink in the base of the shower room and *I killed him I killed him* she strips off her top, and tugs off her trousers, and all over she is speckled with congealed blood and *I didn’t want to kill him I just wanted him to leave me alone leave me alone* no matter how hard she scrubs there seems to be more and more red coming from her, and her skin is pink and she doesn’t know whether it is from the scrubbing or from Harry *he’s dead he’s dead oh hell he was in me he was in me*.

Finally she turns the shower off, and groaning and sobbing she pulls herself back down the corridor back over the stains she had just managed to clean off herself *I’m so dirty so dirty so dirty help me*. She picks up the phone.

She picks up the receiver, and punches in Michael’s number, written on the pad by the phone.

“Please answer please answer oh please.” *Please answer please be there.*

“Hello, Maddy?”

“Michael Michael Michael aaah help me help me.” *I killed him killed him killed him*.

“Maddy! Maddy, slow down. What’s wrong?”

“I can’t I can’t I can’t aah oh god Michael.”

“Stay there, Maddy, I’m on my way over.”

“No no no no! No you can’t come here no you can’t come here I’ll come to you. Aah aah I’ll come to you Michael. At All Saints in the vestry in the vestry I’ll be safe in the vestry please please.”

“Maddy, what’s going wrong?”

“Please please please do as I say Michael please. Please go to the vestry and I will aah aah I will come there help me help me.”

“Maddy, I’m there! Whatever it is, I’m there for you. I’m on my way over now. Whatever time you get here I’ll be there.”

“Thank you Michael aah thank you thank you thank you.”

She hangs up the phone. How is she going to get there? *I’ve killed him aah I’m so dirty.* She has to phone a taxi, she has to get dressed, she has to make sure nobody comes into the house, *what a mess aah help me.* She has to move, she has to do this *oh god oh god oh god*, she has to go back into the bedroom to get her clothes.

She drags herself along the floor and back into the bedroom trying not to look at the dead *he’s dead he’s dead* body lying inches away from her. As she drags herself along she can see her forearms covered with red, and looks down at her legs and belly smeared with blood. *I can’t do this I can’t do this help me.* She wipes her hands clean on an old blouse, then grabs a clean top and trousers, and fresh underwear from the drawers, and tosses them into the hallway, aiming for a small patch of carpet not stained. She then pulls her handbag from the back of the chair and throws that out as well.

She can see his face, eyes wide open but rolled upwards, his upper body cloaked in crimson “I’m so sorry so sorry aah I didn’t mean it please believe me I didn’t mean it.”

She drags herself back to the shower room and washes again *I’m so dirty so dirty* then huddles up by the door pulling her clothes on. The hallway looks like an abattoir, blood stretching over the carpet, up the walls, long trails of red where she has dragged her legs marring the wool.

She pulls the phone and the phonebook off the table, and flicks through the book until it opens on taxis. She breathes rapidly for a moment, and then holds her breath and dials the first number.

“Hello, A1 Taxis?”

“Hello, I’d like a taxi as soon as possible please please.”

“I’m sorry, can you please slow down?”

Maddy slams the phone down and picks another number.

“Hello, Alpha taxis?”

“Hello,” *I killed him I killed him I killed him.* “I’d like... to hire... a taxi. As soon as possible please.”

“It will be about half an hour, is that okay?”

“Yes.”

She gives the addresses and her name, then hangs up. Now she has to get out the house. She opens the inner porch door, picks up her handbag and squeezes into the porch, lifting her legs round, then shutting the door behind her. At least now anybody walking past the house won't see the hallway and *the mess oh my god the mess* the mess.

She opens the outer door, then unfolds the wheelchair and pushes it out, then stretches up and yanks Jackie's red coat off the hanger, wrapping herself into it, disguising the veins of red that run across her top and skirt.

She is shivering uncontrollably, and not with the cold. She shuts the door behind her and pulls herself onto the wheelchair to wait.

The Taxi Driver looks eerily familiar to her.

“You got a carer?” he says to her as he opens the car door.
“Someone to look after you?”

“No, I'm fine.”

“I don't have a license for disabled passengers if they don't have a carer with them, lady. You shoulda mentioned it when you phoned.”

“Please. I've got money. She holds up her handbag.”

“All right, all right. Might cost you a little extra, mind.”

“Fine.”

“You want anything else out the house?”

“No!”

“Keep your 'air on, their's no need to snap.”

“Sorry. I'm just... in a hurry.”

“Okay, okay. Let's get you in then. I'm not sure my boot is big enough for that chair though.”

“It is.”

“Do you need an 'and getting in?”

“I'm okay.”

She pulls herself up, one hand on the door handle and one on the passenger seat, and buckles herself in.

“Right, ready to go.”

The driver jumps in, and then pulls out of the driveway.

“Beautiful spring day, innit?”

“Yes.”

“You doing anything nice today? Is it a wedding? My cousin got married around this time last year. It was tippin’ it down. We got – “

“Would you mind?”

“Sorry?”

“I’ve got an awful headache.”

“Oh right. I’ve got some pain killers if you want ‘em.”

“No thank you. Quiet is good.”

“Have it your way. Do you mind if I put the radio on?”

“Go ahead.”

It isn’t enough to drown out the sound though. She can hear them. She can hear the wolves pounding up the road behind the car.

And they are gaining.

Chapter 24

She pays the taxi driver at the top of the graveyard, hoping never to see him again. The sun is setting now, thick streaks of pink shrouding the sky. Jackie will be home soon. Jackie will open the door to the horror she has left in the corridor. She will fear the worst, and when she goes into the bedroom... *I killed him. I killed her husband. I stabbed him in the neck with a knife, and now he is dead. Jackie, sweet Jackie, I have killed him.*

She wheels herself down the path through the graveyard and pounds the great door knocker on the church.

After what seems an eternity, Michael opens the door.

She is aware of how pitiful she looks, her hair straggling around her unmade-up face, slouching and shivering in her wheelchair.

“Maddy, Maddy, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“Get me inside, Michael.”

“Please, Maddy, tell me. You’re worrying me. Is there something wrong with the baby? Is it all right?”

“Not... not here. Please, get me into the vestry and I will tell you there.”

He pushes her over the lip of the door and into the church. It is dark inside. Dark and empty and cold. The figures in the stained glass are looking down on her with disdain. It is such a long time that

she has been in All Saints it seems like a different building to her. *I've killed him, Michael. Help me.*

He pushes her into the vestry. It is plain and cavernous. *Where are the cans of food? Where's the television?*

"Now can you tell me?"

"Lock the door."

"What is it?"

"Lock the door, Michael. Lock the door, and pull the bolts across. Lock it, please."

He does as she asks.

"What's this about, Maddy?"

She has to tell him.

"I... I aah I aah." The words can't come. Her mouth is drifting out of her control. "I.. I aah oh god oh god I aah help me help me." She crumples, falling forward in the wheelchair. Michael kneels in front of her, and holds her up, wrapping his arms around her.

"Maddy. Oh, Maddy, let me help you. Please tell me what's wrong. Is it Damon?"

"No no no oh god help me please please I'm so dirty so so dirty aah help me hold me hold me."

"Ssh. Don't say anything, Maddy. Just try and get your breath back."

"Oh Michael aah aah I didn't mean it I didn't mean it I love you Michael I love you please say you love me please say you love me."

"I don't know what's –"

"Say you love me please Michael aah say you love me say you love me."

"I love you, Maddy. You are like a sister to me." He kisses her on the cheek.

"No no no no aah oh god I need you to hide me hide me."

"What do you mean? What's going on? Has somebody hurt you? Has somebody hurt you, Maddy? Is it Damon?"

“Aah aah aah. Not Damon not Damon it’s nothing to do with Damon.”

“Let me get you a drink. You need to calm down, Maddy, I can’t hear what you’re saying.” He decants some communion wine into a glass while she shudders and weeps. “I’m sorry, it’s all I’ve got.”

She grabs the glass and drains it like manna. The liquid burns in her stomach.

“I... I need you to hide me, Michael.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I need you to hide me in here in here in the vestry. I have to stay here until we go.”

“Go where?”

“To Jerusalem to Jerusalem I need to get to Jerusalem. I need to stay help me help me aah help me stay here.”

“I don’t understand. Why do you want to stay cooped up in the vestry?”

“It will work it will work. They won’t get me here they won’t get me. You bring me things food and drinks and a toilet and things. I’ll stay in here I’ll stay in here.”

“You aren’t making any sense, Maddy. People come in here. The verger, the choir. You can’t stay here. Who is coming to get you? Damon?”

“No no no the police the police are coming. I’ve done something terrible something awful oh my god oh my god aah help me I’ve done something terrible.”

“What is it, Maddy? What have you done?”

“Oh god I’m so dirty aah so dirty I’ve killed him I’ve killed him aah aah help me.”

“Please, Maddy. For the love of God, Maddy, what have you done?”

“I’ve killed him I’ve killed him aaah I’ve killed him.”

“Who? Who have you killed?”

“No no no aah I killed him he was inside me and I killed him and I’m so dirty and I’m so dirty and I love you I love you please help me.”

“Who?”

“Harry! I’ve killed Harry.” Michael shrinks away from her. “No Michael no you’ve got to help me help me please.”

“What do you mean, you’ve killed him?”

“He’s dead he’s dead he’s dead Harry’s dead oh god what have I done I’ve killed him. There was blood everywhere all around he’s dead oh god.”

Michael walks over to the vestry phone and picks up the receiver.

“Michael Michael what are you doing?”

“I’m phoning the emergency services! If Harry is hurt we need to get an ambulance to him.”

“No no no no no! Listen to me listen to me! He’s dead. He’s dead. I killed him. I stabbed him in the throat with a knife. He’s dead!”

“What have you done?”

Michael presses numbers on the keypad.

“Put the phone down! Listen to me! Listen to me I need to tell you something!”

Michael puts his finger on the receiver and slowly lowers the handset with shaking fingers.

“What?”

“Michael, listen to me. I’m scared, I’m so scared, I need your help.”

“I can’t help you, Maddy.”

“This is a confession, isn’t it? It’s a confession. You aren’t allowed to tell anybody.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not a Catholic, you’re not a Catholic. I can’t help you. I have to phone the police.”

“You don’t understand. Harry... Harry raped me.”

Michael stands next to the phone, unmoving.

“Did you hear me? Harry raped me. Again and again and again. He waited until I was on the bed and he raped me. Did you hear me, did you hear me?”

When Michael speaks he does so in a very quiet voice. “I *have* to phone the police, Maddy.”

“No you don’t. You have to hide me here. Please Michael.”

“They will protect you, Maddy. If Harry had been abusing you – “

“He was, Michael, he was.”

“*If* Harry was abusing you then the police will do everything in their power to protect you.”

“I killed him, Michael, I killed him. He was on top of me and I killed him.”

“The police will sort it out. If it was self defence then you won’t be put away. But they are going to find out. They are going to find the body. Where’s the knife?”

“It’s still in him, I couldn’t touch it.”

“They will know it’s you. You can’t hide.”

“I can I can. I need to hide I need to get to Jerusalem. Please please I need to get to Jerusalem.”

“Why? It’s not important.”

“You’ve got to hide me here!”

“I can’t. How did you get here, Maddy? People will have seen you. There will be a trail that leads the police right to my door. You can’t avoid them. I don’t know why you would want to. They will protect you, Maddy. I will help you in whatever way I can.”

“The wolves are coming, Michael.”

“What?”

“Can’t you hear them, Michael. They are coming over the walls, they are coming into the church. I’ve got to stay here.”

Michael sighs and picks up the phone. “There is nothing more I can do for you, Maddy.”

“Let me go.”

“What do you mean.”

“Let me leave the church. You can do that for me.”

“Where are you going to go? You aren’t exactly inconspicuous.”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to stay here. Please. Let me go.”

“I’m still going to phone the police.”

“I know. But let me out of the church first, please.”

“Maddy, I don’t think this is a good idea. The police are going to find you wherever you go. You will be safe here.”

“I appreciate your concern. Please unlock the door.”

“Maddy – “

“Please. I am asking you. Please unlock the door.”

Michael sighs and moves over to the bolts, pulling them across one by one. He turns the key, and pushes the door open.

“This is silly, Maddy.”

“Thank you for your help.” She grabs hold of the wheels, and spins them towards the centre aisle. Michael is following her. “No. Don’t. You’ve got a phone call to make.”

“Don’t do this. I want to help you, Maddy.”

“Leave me alone!”

“I’m just opening the door for you, Maddy. Let me do that, at least.”

“Go away! I’ll do it myself.”

She turns the wheelchair round and pushes against the door with all her might.

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know. Away from here. Go make your phone call.”

She moves out into the darkness and lets the door swing shut behind her, then turns the wheelchair back around.

She does know where she is going. It’s where she should have gone first of all. A place where there are people like her and not like the others. A place where she will be helped.

Black Street.

Chapter 25

The night has taken the last breath of warmth out of the air. Maddy can see her breath frosting in front of her as she moves down the street. *Betrayer*. She should have known Michael wouldn't help her. She should have known. The moon is high and the streetlamps are shining down on her like spotlights. She has to get away from here as quickly as possible.

There are people on the streets, all over the streets, heading home with their shopping bags and mobile phones, and they are all staring at her, staring at the wide-eyed cripple as she speeds down the pavement, and she is thinking *Do they know yet?* It will be on the news, she knows it will. *The police are on the lookout for a severely handicapped woman wearing a red coat. Do not approach her, she is dangerous and likely to be armed. Contact the police on this number.*

And they are staring at her, and speaking into their mobile phones, and stepping away from her in fear, and she knows its true. They all know she is a murderer.

She can hear one now as she crosses the road. A police siren faint behind her. They are coming for her, they are hounding her, they will soon be upon her.

There is another police car ahead, this one quiet, but its black and white markings plain as day, and she turns down the street on her right towards the hospital, hoping they haven't seen her. Again she

can hear the sirens. *How many cars are there? How many policemen are necessary to arrest this poor cripple?*

She knows they will follow her to Black Street. She is leaving a trail of witnesses, and even though she hasn't told Michael, he is certain to guess. She has to get there before the police do. She has to be safe. She has to get them all to Jerusalem.

Ahead are the gates to St Peter's park. All she has to do is cross the park and she will be on Black Street. She can still hear the sirens howling in the distance, and her arms are aching from the exertion. *Keep going.*

There are kids in the park. Burberry clad monsters with fags hanging out of their obnoxious gobs. *Ignore them.* They are yelling abuse at her, but she doesn't care, she just has to cross the park and get out the other side. One of them flicks a cigarette butt at her, but she is going so fast, it lands harmlessly on the grass behind her.

She comes out of the gate opposite, and down the alleyway. *I'm going to make it.* Where are the earthquakes, where is the lava? Nothing is going to stop her reaching the centre. Then she hears the sirens, and they are louder, louder, louder. She pushes the wheels faster, and bursts out the alley. She has to get there, she has to get in.

She can see it now, she can see it, glowing like a fairy light half way down the street. Not only can she see it but she can hear it, a great choir singing in unison.

"Swing low, sweet chariot, Comin' for to carry me home!"

They are waiting for her, she knows they are. She can hear laughter amongst the singing, and the closer she gets the more it drowns out the sirens.

Ahead, a few yards ahead is the glass door at the front of the building. Closed, but that is not unusual given the cold weather. There sounds like there are hundreds inside. She has never heard so many voices, such frivolity coming from the drop-in centre. *Are they having a party?*

Then she sees a hand, a black hand tapping against the glass. The hand is holding a gun. *The police are here already.*

She is about to wheel around and head back down to the alley when the glass door opens, and Errol faces her holding the gun up and aiming it at her.

“Maddy!” he yells. “Get the fuck inside, now. We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Waiting for me? How long have you been waiting?”

“For a long fucking time, Maddy. Now get in here.”

Maddy wheels herself through the door.

Chapter 26

“Maddy!” Big Jake salutes her as she enters the centre. They are all here, almost a hundred. She recognises them all, but has never seen everybody together. Around the table are people, standing, sitting, laughing, and drinking spirits from plastic cups. Along the wall at the back is a large banner with dog edges, that reads “Welcome Home, Maddy!” in gaudy letters. They all turn to her as she enters, and they are chanting her name. Jake comes to her wheelchair and kisses her on the cheek, which triggers a procession of well-wishers, all wanting to touch her, kiss her, ask how she is. But all the time she can see some of the larger men holding guns and standing by the front window.

“What’s going on? What’s all this for?”

“We are having an End of the World party,” says Martha.

“Shut the fuck up, Martha. It’s a homecoming party. We wanted to give you a big welcome home.”

“I don’t understand. How did you know I was coming here?”

“Michael phoned and said you were on your way,” Errol explains

“Did he tell you what I’ve done?”

“We know what you’ve done. We heard it on the news. And you know what, Maddy? We don’t give a fuck.”

“Don’t you know I killed somebody?”

“Don’t think you’re the only fucking person in this room who’s killed somebody, Maddy. Besides, you’ve come to us. If you didn’t come for protection, what did you come for?”

“I need to get to Jerusalem, Errol. I have things to do there, things to find. I can’t let it end like this!”

“Jerusalem? Don’t you fucking get it, Maddy? We are in Jerusalem.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jerusalem is here. In this room. You’ve made it, Maddy, you’ve made it.”

And Errol starts to sing, and almost as soon as he starts the whole room is singing together in unison.

*And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountain green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?
And did the countenance divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among those dark satanic mills?*

*Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!
I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.*

Maddy is unable to speak. Her eyes are filled with tears. She has made it. She is safe.

“What do we do now?”

“It’s tea time. These people are fucking hungry. You’re gonna help me make some soup. Jake, watch the front door.”

On the way to the kitchen she can see Simon crouched down by the back door which is slightly ajar, watching, a machine gun poked out through the gap.

“Any there yet?” asks Errol.

“A couple.”

“Fucking pigs.”

He wheels her into the kitchen and puts his gun down on the counter.

“Where did all the guns come from?”

“Simon brought them in. He’s been collecting them from his fucking navy mates. That, and he robbed a fucking gun shop.”

“What?”

“You chop while I peel.”

He gives her a heavy, sharp kitchen knife. She holds it in her hands and stares at it. She can see the blood dripping down the handle onto her fingers.

“Get over it, Maddy. Have you never seen a fucking knife before?” He tosses her a peeled potato, and she puts it up onto the chopping board. It’s almost too high for her, she can only just see above the lip, but she lowers the knife onto the potato and it slices through like butter.

As she cuts the vegetables, she can hear more sirens outside the building. *All for me*. It’s not going to be long now, she can feel it. Then she hears another faint noise like the tinkling of a bell. It seems to be coming from Errol.

“What’s that?”

“That? Oh, it’s my fucking mobile. Ignore it.”

The phone keeps ringing, and Errol pulls it out of his jacket, and stares at the screen. “It’s Michael. Do you want me to talk to him?”

“Yes.”

“Hello, Michael? Yes... yes, she’s fine... she made it safely... will do.”
He holds the phone out to her. “It’s for you.”

“Hello?”

“Maddy,” his voice sounds tinny through the speaker. She can hear a hubbub of voices behind him cutting through the sirens and the traffic. “Maddy, are you hurt?”

“No! No, I’m fine.”

“Listen to me. The police have asked me to talk to you because I’m a friend – “

“You’re no friend of mine.”

“Maddy, this is important. Nobody knows what is going on out here. We need to know. How many hostages are there in the building?”

“Hostages? There aren’t any hostages. Anybody is free to walk out whenever they like.”

“Listen to me closely, Maddy. There are people with guns in there. You need to get out as soon as you can.”

“I know there are! They are my friends, Michael. They are looking after me. They are going to keep me safe.”

“From what? There’s nobody out here who wants to hurt you. The police’s priority is to get everybody out safe and sound.” She can hear a howling from down the phone. The wolves are waiting.

“I’m going to stay here.”

“What are you doing, Maddy? Please tell me, what are you doing?”

“I’m making soup,” she says, and hangs up.

“Boy, that is smelling good.” Maddy sniffs the great urn and watches the gravy running over the handles. She realises she hasn’t eaten since breakfast.

“It’s about done. You go and get someone to help dish it up.”

She wheels herself into the hallway.

“All right, Maddy,” Simon says, although he doesn’t take his eyes away from the door. “You hang in there.”

She fetches Martha from the hall. She is unsteady on her feet, but she is standing. Some of the others have drunk so much they are already slumped unconscious on the floor.

“Great party, isn’t it?” the old woman says, sipping from a bottle of Diamond White.

“Marvellous. Are you all right dishing up some grub?”

“Jake tells me there’s lots of nice policemen outside. I like a man in uniform. Do you think they are here to join the party?”

“Gatecrashers, more like.”

“Oh what a shame. I was hoping they were those nice Chippendale men. You know, the ones who do the striptease.”

“You are a dirty minded woman, Martha.”

“It’s how I keep myself alive,” she replies, picking up two bowls of soup, and carrying them out the kitchen.

“You go through,” says Errol. “Martha and I can handle this. Take a bowl for yourself.” He slips the gun off the counter, and puts it in his pocket, then starts loading soup on to a tray.

She picks one of the bowls off the table and puts it on her lap. She can feel its warmth against her chest through the thick coat and idly wonders if she is burning her legs.

Bang bang bang.

The gun firing makes her jump.

“Maddy,” Errol puts the bowls back down on the counter, “hold on a second.”

He picks up the large kitchen knife, and rinses it under the tap, then hands it over to her. “You look after this, okay? If those fuckers get anywhere near you I want you to use it. You’re gonna be okay, okay?”

She slips the knife down under her coat.

“Simon, what the fuck was that about?” Errol shouts into the hall.

“One of them came a little too close!”

“Is it a problem?”

“No. No problem. They won’t be doing that again.”

“Okay, you keep watching.”

“Will do, chief.”

Chapter 27

Maddy has almost drained her soup, when Errol comes over with his mobile phone ringing. “It’s that fucking priest again. You want to speak to him?”

“Go on, give me the phone.” She flips it open. “Michael?”

“Maddy.” It’s not Michael’s voice. It’s too deep.

“Who is this?”

“My name is Arthur Cl – “

“I’m not talking to anybody from the police.” She hangs up. Shortly, the phone rings again.

“Michael?”

“Maddy, you need to get out of there. As soon as possible. A policeman has been shot.”

“And?”

“Don’t you understand? This is serious. The police don’t want any more innocent people to get hurt. You need to get them out. There is going to be a massacre otherwise.”

“Michael. You can stop this. Tell them to go home. Tell them they aren’t needed anymore.”

“Don’t you care? Did you not hear me? A policeman has been shot.”

“Is he dead?”

“No he’s not dead. He was shot in the leg, and he is bleeding. It’s awful, Maddy. I’m going to put the Inspector on.”

“I’m not going to speak to him. Get them to leave, Michael.”

“Maddy, I am begging you. Get them out of there before the police have no other choice.”

“I’m not leaving.”

She can hear Michael talking to somebody with the phone muffled, and then his voice comes back on again.

“Maddy, I need you to help me. Tell me how many gun men are there.”

“There are lots, Michael. We are well protected.”

“Where are they?”

“All over. You aren’t getting in.”

“How many? How many are near the back door? How many at the front? They need to know.”

“Why?”

“Maddy, I’ll be blunt. They are planning to storm the building. They want to do it soon, and they want to do it with the minimum cost of human life.”

“We aren’t causing any harm. Leave us alone.”

“No harm? What’s wrong with you, Maddy? What’s happened? A policeman is dying out here. Everybody is worried. We are worried about you.”

“Who is? Nobody is worried about me, nobody gives a damn about me. You certainly don’t. I’m a murderer and the end of the world is coming and nobody knows or cares.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Can’t you hear them? Can’t you hear them coming?”

“Who, Maddy? Who?”

“The wolves, Michael. I can hear them howling. There’s thousands of them, thousands and they are all coming here to Jerusalem. They’re all going to get us, and there is nothing that can stop them. Listen to them. Take a minute and listen hard.”

She can hear them all round the building, scratching and sniffing, and howling.

"I don't know what you are talking about, Maddy. There aren't any wolves. There aren't any! And you aren't in Jerusalem. You are in London, and you're being held hostage, and I'm scared to death about what is happening to you. Please come out. Please!"

"Say you love me."

"Sorry?"

"Say you love me, Michael."

"Maddy, I don't think – "

She hangs up on him.

"Errol, would you do me a favour?"

"What do you want?"

"Would you get me a drink?"

They are sat round a table together. Big Jake, Martha, Errol and Maddy, each of them passing the bottle of Jim Beam round to top up their plastic cups. This is a council of war.

"What did they want?"

"They wanted to know where the gun men were. I think they are planning to storm the building."

"The end of the world is coming," says Martha.

"Maybe we should get the others out," says Big Jake. "They shouldn't be in here."

"No!" says Maddy, emphatically. "If we send them out, the wolves will get them."

"Maddy is right," adds Errol. "The only reason why they don't come in here and kill the whole fucking lot of us is because the others are here. We need to keep them. They are bluffing. As soon as we open the door, they'll open fire."

Maddy isn't listening. She is watching the bottle on the table, the golden liquid inside shimmering with vibrations. *It's an earthquake.* The liquid lies still again.

“What do we do to stop it?” she says.

“Stop what?”

“Stop the Armageddon.”

“Have another drink, Maddy.” Big Jake tops up her cup once more. She can feel it in her head now. She is starting to float.

“Can you hear them? The wolves outside. They are the ones we have to protect ourselves from. The police are a distraction.”

“I can hear them,” says Martha. “They are howling at the moon. They are running. They are coming to get us.”

“We need to get the tables up against those fucking doors.”

“Are we going to have a dance?” asks Martha. “I would like to have a dance. I haven’t danced since... since I can’t remember when.”

“Yes, Martha. Just help us get the tables against the wall.” Errol stands up. “Everybody! Get these tables against the wall. Quick as you can. We need the space. Now! That’s it. Turn them up on their sides and push them against the doors... Don’t worry about that, we’ll clean it up later. A bit fucking quicker, please.”

In almost no time, there is a large barricade against the inner doors, and the centre of the room is clear.

“That’s it. That’s it. Find yourself a partner. Not you, Jake, you watch the front. Al, are you gonna give us a few tunes? Something up beat.”

Al starts blowing his harmonica, tapping his one foot against the floor in rhythm. Almost at once couples are dancing round the room to the tune of *How much is that doggy in the window?* singing along for all they are worth.

“You wanna dance, Maddy?” asks Errol.

“I’m not very mobile at the moment.”

“I’m not gonna dance with you in that fucking thing.”

Errol bends down to her, and puts his hands round her waist, pulling her upwards and into his arms. She nestles her head into his shoulder as he carries her round.

“You are a great dancer, Errol.”

“I should fucking hope so.”

Al segues seamlessly into *My Bonny Lies Over the Ocean*, and the dancers bob round the room at a slightly more sedate pace.

“What’s going to happen, Errol?”

“How the fuck should I know?”

“You should. You always know these things.”

“The police will fuck off, and we’ll all go home, that’s what’ll happen.”

“All the homeless?”

“Yup. We’ll all go home.”

The ground is shaking again, and Errol almost loses his balance, shifting his arm underneath her to stop them both falling down.

“What the fuck are they doing out there?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just keep dancing.”

She can feel it in his jacket pocket. His mobile phone is vibrating. She tries to ignore it, but it keeps on ringing.

“Put me down, Errol. I’ll take it.”

He lowers her gently back into the chair and gives her the phone. The dancers are whirling around her with abandon.

“Hello Michael.”

“Maddy. You don’t have much time. You need to get as many people out of there as you possibly can.”

“We’re dancing, Michael. You can’t interrupt us.”

“At least get them away from the doors. Please. Get them into the kitchen, or the bathrooms. Get them away from the doors!”

She holds up the mobile phone towards the dancers.

“Anybody need to go to the toilet?”

“No!” they all shout back.

“Maddy! This is no time for joking. People are going to die. I implore you with all my heart. Get out of there. Get them away from the doors.”

“I think...” she says. “I think that would be a bad idea. The police won’t attack us. We are all innocent. Our hearts are pure. It’s you they are going to get. The wolves are coming, and they can’t get in here. They will get you, though, all of you. I would run if I were you, Michael, before it is too late.”

“There aren’t any wolves. Listen to me, there aren’t any! The army is here, there are camera crews here, there’s thousands of policemen, and one of them is dead. Tell me why you are doing this. You can stop this. All you need is to say the word and you can walk through those doors, and it will all be over.”

“Thanks for the offer, Michael, but I am staying.”

There is silence on the other end of the phone for a moment.

“Maddy, there is somebody who wants to speak to you.”

“I told you before, I don’t want to speak to the police.”

“It’s not the police. It’s Jackie.”

Chapter 28

No no no no no.

Maddy can hear her breathing down the phone in little flutters, like a butterfly.

“Maddy,” Jackie shudders with each syllable. “I love you, Maddy.” *How long have I waited? How long have I waited for somebody to say it and mean it?* “I love you... and I forgive you.” Jackie lets out a momentary sob. “Please come out. We will look after you, I promise.”

“How?” Maddy’s own voice is cracking. “How can you forgive me? I killed him. I killed your husband. I wanted him dead, and then he was. You can’t forgive me, you can’t.”

“I... I do forgive you. Please. Give up the guns, and come outside.”

“I don’t understand, I don’t know what you want! His blood was all over me, it was everywhere. I stabbed him, I stabbed him and he is dead.”

“I... know. I... saw.”

“I’m sorry, Jackie. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean it, I didn’t, I don’t know anymore.”

“I mean... I know what he was doing.”

The earth is shaking again.

“What do you mean?”

“I... saw him. I saw what he was doing to you. I know why you... did what you did. I forgive you.”

The scales are dropping from Maddy's eyes. "*You knew?* How did you know?"

"I... heard him through the window. I... heard him saying... horrible things to you. I've... I've told the police. They know you were just... defending yourself. They want to protect you. We all do."

"You knew, and yet you did nothing?"

"Please... please forgive me, Maddy. He was... my husband. I loved him more than anything. Please, please forgive me."

"*He was raping me!* How could you let him do this to me? How could you stand by knowing what I was going through? He raped me again and again, and all the time you *knew?*"

"You've got to understand – "

"*God damn you! God damn you to hell!*"

She beats the phone on the arm of the chair until it snaps in two, then grabs the separate halves, and tears it apart, snapping the wires. She hurls the remnants against the wall, and they crumble and fall to the floor. She continues to beat her hands against the arms, until her fingers are bruised and red.

Errol comes over and lays a hand on her shoulder. "My mobile phone's fucked," he says tenderly.

"I hate her, I hate her. How could she stand by and let it happen?"

"It cost me a tenner, that phone."

"I hope the wolves get her. I hope they tear her apart."

"I suppose I can always buy another one."

Through her sobs, she can hear the harmonica starting *Tie a Yellow Ribbon*.

"You wanna dance?" asks Errol.

"No thanks. I think I'll sit this one out."

The dancers whirl around her, singing and chatting, and drinking from bottles. Nobody wants to stop. Nobody wants to be the first to

sit out. They are drunk and happy, and totally and blissfully ignorant. She watches them with envy.

Ouch.

What was that? What was that movement from within her? *Aah. There it is again.* She places her hand on her stomach. It wasn't hiccups, it wasn't indigestion. *It isn't me at all.* It's the baby. He is dancing, dancing in time with the music. A little kick here, a little swoop there, his tiny little wings tickling the inside her womb. She pushes down on her stomach hard, hoping to stop the sensation, but there it is again. Swimming around inside of her.

I don't want you. You aren't part of me. I'm just a cocoon for you to grow in. I don't even know who you are.

She can hear faint gunfire around the building now. *It's starting.* The room is vibrating again, and the corner of Maddy's Welcome banner springs free from the wall, and wafts down to the floor. Errol excuses himself from the dance, and moves over to the tables, standing a little away from the door with his gun cocked. Big Jake is on the other side. The dancers are gaining pace, whirling round her, and the singing is building in a crescendo.

Suddenly she can hear screaming, and machine-gun fire rattles through the hall.

"Help! Help me!" comes a high pitched screech coming down the hallway leading to the back door. Immediately men spring across the hall towards the back, running through the dancers as they aim their guns.

Simon backs inches into the main hall, then holds his ground, spraying bullets down the corridor. There are blood specks on his face and over his arms, and he is screaming, "Help!" at the top of his lungs. The others flank him, and their faces contort in horror as they start shooting down the passageway.

Maddy wheels herself back a few yards, clutching the knife tucked down the side of her chair. The dancers continue their steps. *One two three, one two three, one two three, spin.*

The rat-tat-tat of the machine gun grinds to a halt, and Simon throws the gun down the hallway screaming, “There’s too many, oh God, there’s too many!” and the others are still firing until their bullets dry up.

There is a momentary silence. Even Al has removed the harmonica from his lips and placed it on his lap. Everybody is staring at Simon. *No. Past Simon.*

Maddy cranes to see what everybody else is looking at, but she can’t see round the edge of the corridor. She can hear though. She can hear a guttural growling.

Then a large white paw appears from round the corner, and a hairless snout. The teeth are bared, long and pale, the gums pulled back tight and quivering. The head is bloody, the ear ripped off by a bullet. The beast pads slowly forward, his glowing body tense, the muscles bunched and firm. His black eyes are fixed on Simon, who is transfixed by him, alone at the edge of the room, the circle of dancers creating a wide berth around him.

The wolf looks slowly around the room, and then back to Simon. It crouches down low on its haunches, and growls once more. Simon pushes his arms forward as the creature leaps toward him, but the force knocks him to the ground. The beast’s paws pin his arms to the ground, and its snout digs into Simon’s jaw, ripping it loose.

Now there are a stream of wolves coming through the corridor, and pouncing on the body, ripping and tearing. Finally the other gunmen come to life. They all leave their posts by the front, and form a circle round the dogs, firing bullets into their writhing bodies. They fall around the corpse, slipping across the blood-slicked floor. Some that can still run scamper back to the corridor, waiting for the gunfire to die down, but others are bolder, and pad their way towards the shooters. The whole room is drowned in the sound of panic. Dancers are screaming, and backing away from the wolves, but they

are totally trapped within the walls. Above it all Maddy can hear Martha laughing, and screaming, "It's coming, it's coming."

There is a huge explosion and the tables buckle away from the wall, spinning across the Formica. The inner door is bent off its hinges, and through the gap Maddy can see fragments of the glass doors littering the ground.

Outside there are wolves, hundreds of them, swarming over the police cars like insects. They flow towards the new opening, smelling the meat inside. They push their way through past the tables and into the hall, and now they are attacking indiscriminately. She sees a half dozen of them swarm around Martha, and pull her to the ground, then leap across to Al's wheelchair, pulling at his single leg until they drag him down.

She briefly catches the eye of Errol, who is calmly but quickly pushing a cartridge of bullets from the pocket of his jacket into his gun. Each time a wolf tries to near him, he unloads another bullet into the beast's head. Big Jake is over by the front, picking off the beasts as they come through the blasted door. The ground is violently shaking, moving her chair back and forth across the ground.

They are moving around her now, eyeing her suspiciously, and she clutches the knife tight in her hands, waiting for them to spring.

Then the roof comes off the building.

Chapter 29

Maddy sees it fly away, hurled like a discus into the sky, revealing the stars above. Moments later, the ground shakes as the roof crashes into a far off building.

The wolves are suddenly still. They turn their noses away from their prey, and look up as one past Maddy, and into the air. An enormous roar rings out, and as one the wolves turn, and start to flee from the centre. They are leaping over themselves, digging claws into each others backs in their attempts to get away. In just a few seconds, they have cleared the hall.

Maddy looks round the room in the near stillness that results. There are bodies everywhere, bodies of wolves, bodies of friends, bodies piled high in every corner. What little floor there is still visible is coated in red, covering every last inch. From the ground come sobs and moans and whimpering, and occasionally the floor of bodies shifts a few inches, as people try to drag themselves from under the corpses. A lone wolf rises to its feet, and slinks out through the corridor, its back leg hanging dead behind it.

There are few left standing. Big Jake is leaning against the front wall, his trousers soaking with blood, Errol is a few feet away from her, holding the gun down by his waist. There are others, barely recognisable in their blood splattered clothes. All of them are looking up at the sky behind Maddy with their eyes wide and mouths low. She

can't turn her head far enough round to see what it is that is holding their attention, but she knows what it is. She can feel him, feel his breath down the back of her neck. She can hear the whispering of the voices from the thousands of mouths on his chest.

A giant knife-like finger strikes down at the ground in front of her, a few feet away from Big Jake. It pierces straight through the bodies beside him, and splits the Formica with a great crack. A second comes down beside it, and this one passes straight through the top of Jake's head, and all the way through him, splitting his body completely in two. Then more blades descend, a third, a forth, a fifth, a sixth. striking the ground like a man tapping his fingers on a table.

The giant claw constricts, and the sound is like the scraping of fingers across a blackboard. The fingers close around the wall and then rips it from the foundations, raising it into the air, and hurling it outwards along the street. The wall lands a hundred yards away, skidding into cars like skittles.

She can hear him moving now. Every time one of the giant claws strikes the ground the vibrations run up the arms of the chair like an electric shock. He is stepping round to her right, to the side of the building. A leg the length of a London bus crashes down inside the hall, fingers smashing through the opposite wall. She can see it close, a few feet away, the black glistening like marble, smoothly curved to a sharp edge. It sweeps sideways, ripping the rest of the building away, walls tumbling like card. The remaining two walls, having lost all support, topple outwards and crash to the ground.

The drop-in centre is gone.

Over on her left she can see police cars and jeeps, guns poking from round the bonnets. There are a few wolves scuttling round the rubble, their glowing bodies instantly recognisable in the darkness.

"Maddy!" a voice calls to her. It's Jackie's voice. "Maddy, please come to us. We'll protect you!"

She ignores it. *Where's Michael?*

But instinctively she knows where Michael is, what Michael has become. Michael is behind her. Michael is the Dragon.

She can hear a buzzing, like a hundred hives of bees, and the leg pulls away and up into the sky. She sees the Dragon now, high above her head, the wings shining golden from the starlight. His carapace shimmering with silver lines. He lands above the road, fingers resting on the roofs of the buildings on either side of him. He must be a hundred feet high. It is difficult to judge because his body is moving up and down as if he is breathing.

An arm suddenly snakes out and the fingers strike down, piercing wolves on each of the points. The claw then closes round a jeep, flicking it away into a crowd of policemen. It strikes a wall behind them and bursts into flames. The light reflects in the shiny black arm of the Dragon, and it is as if his fingers are on fire.

Another smaller hand falls onto a screaming soldier, and pulls him up to the Dragon's underbelly. The mouths snap, and tongues stretch out, each of them is begging to be fed. Maddy shuts her eyes, not bearing to look.

Then she feels the fingers on her shoulder.

"Maddy," whispers Errol into her ear, "We've got to get the fuck out of here. Come on."

He slips the gun back in his pocket, grabs hold of the handles, and tries to push her across the floor. At first, his feet slip on the ichor, but then his grip holds, and she slides forwards. He turns her round, and then pulls her backwards, up, over a body, and then up onto the remnants of the wall behind. Off the other side, he flips her round again, and pushes her down through the rubble.

With amazing strength, he picks the wheelchair up and carries her over a knocked down gate, several feet before dumping her down again onto the road behind the drop-in centre. He pants for breath, and then starts to run down the street.

“We’ve got to find some cover. Fucking hell, Maddy, what is that?”

The Dragon behind them roars, and leaps into the air.

“Get to the tube station!” she cries. “Get underground. He’s too big to follow us down there.”

She clutches the knife tight as they skelter down the street. They hear a thump behind them, as the dragon lands on the tarmac, and he roars again.

“We aren’t going to make it! Maddy, you are going to have to go on with out me. Oh fuck, Maddy. He’s huge. Oh God!”

Suddenly she is free wheeling. She drops the knife onto her lap.

“Errol, no! We can make it! Please, we can make it!”

She’s too close to the curb, and she can’t stop herself, and then the wheelchair is toppling to one side on two wheels. She flings herself to the side, trying to right the chair, but it is skidding over, and her shoulder hits the ground, and the chair is giving off sparks as it scrapes along the road.

Her shoulder is screaming with pain. Part of her top is torn, and she can see a large flap of skin hanging loose. She looks down the street for Errol.

He is standing in the middle of the street, with the barrel of the gun pointing upwards high above his head. The Dragon is above him. He is large now, his big black carapace as wide as the road, his legs bent tight but still higher than the buildings around them. One of the claws rests on the face of a block of flats on her right, the long bladed fingers stretching over two storeys.

Errol fires the gun upwards into the hissing and shouting mouths above him. Again. Again. The Dragon doesn’t even flinch, indeed some of the maws are laughing. Errol drops the gun helplessly down by his side, and bows his head. The Dragon slowly starts to lower his huge body downwards towards him, long slavers of drool coming from the mouths in a thick rain.

Maddy screams as loud as her battered lungs will allow, “*Leave him!*”

The Dragon pauses his descent. His colossal head raises, and stretches out to look at her. Constantly in movement, the insects swarm over the features, but the black eyes stay focused on her. It's getting closer to her, momentarily forming a nose to sniff her out. The monster's neck is elongating, escalating, until the face is an arm's length away from her lying on the ground.

She can see the insects in focus now, beetles and spiders seething and writhing around each other. Butterflies hover just inches away, glistening like perspiration. They shift sideways to form a mouth, a large dark hole in the centre of the face, and the Dragon purses his lips.

"I believe in the Lord!"

The face springs away from her as if on elastic, and the Dragon grunts like a wounded bear. He bounces upwards, and cranes his head underneath to watch this new noise. Errol is still standing underneath the beast, his arms are now outstretched, and his head turned upwards. She can see his eyes are shut.

"I believe in the Lord!"

Errol is louder now, his voice so pure it seems to rock the street. The Dragon looks uneasy, he is bobbing up and down, his great bladed fingers tapping against the sides of the buildings. He cannot form a face, the features keep slipping across, first a nose, then some ears, not knowing where to settle.

"I believe in the Lord!"

He is doing this for me. He is trying to save me. Maddy has to get away. She pushes herself up with her wounded arm, and then rights the wheel chair.

"I believe in the Lord!"

There is a flicker of light seeming to come from Damon, and then it is gone. She glances round for the knife. *There.* She drags herself over to the blade, and picks it up, then lobes it onto the seat of the wheelchair. The Dragon appears to be confused, in indecision over

whether to kill the man. The mouths are crying to taste him, swimming downwards, stretching at the beast's torso, but the Dragon's legs are trying to strain away. He is desperate not to disobey her.

What power do I hold over him? says a small voice within her.

A still smaller voice replies, *You know what power.*

"I believe in the Lord!"

Again comes the flash of white, as she drags herself back towards the wheelchair. She grabs hold of the arm rests and hauls herself up, taking care not to prick herself on the kitchen knife lying on the fabric. She starts to turn the wheelchair round, hoping the framework hasn't been bent by the crash.

"I believe in the Lord!"

Maddy has to cover her face with her arm, the light is so bright. This time it doesn't die away. The Dragon thunderously roars, and she can hear him pawing at the ground like an enraged horse. She peers through half-closed eyes letting them adjust.

Errol is surrounded by a perfect hemisphere of white, it stretches all the way across the road, just touching the buildings on either side. She can just make out his figure inside, a vague silhouette, grey against the white, his arms still outstretched. The light is acting like a shield, the Dragon raising his carapace high enough so his belly doesn't touch the surface, his fingers flexing away so as not to enter the sphere.

He bellows again, a long cry of pain, and she can see his face, insects dropping away from the eyes, like tears. His head sways back and forth, as he cries, and his whole gigantic body quivers.

"I believe in the –"

And the Dragon eats him.

Chapter 30

Errol disappears into the Dragon's stomach, the light extinguishing like a candle. For a moment Maddy is totally blind, the imprint of the circle of light crushing her vision in red, but slowly she begins to make out the shape of the Dragon around her.

She turns the wheelchair round, and starts up the street, her eyes stinging with tears.

DON'T RUN, MADDY.

She spins the wheels faster. She has to get away from him.

PLEASE DON'T RUN.

"You killed him!" she screams, as she pushes herself forwards.

I'M SORRY, MADDY. HE WAS HURTING ME.

She can see a leg extending down the street to one side ahead of her, and another appears on her right. The claws clasp onto the sides of buildings, gracefully tapping them as they land, smooth and straight like an octopus crawling through a pipe.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE SCARED OF ME, MADDY. I AM NOT GOING TO HARM YOU. I WON'T LET ANYONE HURT YOU.

"Leave me alone!"

I CAN'T LEAVE YOU. I HAVE TO PROTECT YOU.

She outruns the length of his arms, but it is futile. Two more arms stretch forward, and his whole body comes up behind her. His head

appears in front of her on top of the long curved neck, and moves in front of her, keeping pace as she wheels herself forward.

I CAN BE WHO YOU WANT ME TO BE.

The features shift, and suddenly she is looking at Damon, then Harry, then Maddy herself, before finally settling on Michael. The butterfly's hover round his chin, forming his beard. His mouth opens into a broad grin.

"You killed them. You killed them all!"

THEY ARE NOT DEAD, MADDY. THEY HAVE GONE TO ANOTHER PLACE.

Maddy, holds the knife up towards the face.

"Leave me alone."

WE COULD LIVE TOGETHER. YOU AND I. LIKE KING AND QUEEN.

"I don't want this! I command you to leave. I want to go back to how it was. Leave me now!"

The face bows down before her, and lets out a sigh.

AS YOU WISH.

And, like a wisp of smoke, he is gone.

She can hear the sirens now, and ahead of her a blockade of police cars stream into place. She can hear more of them moving up behind her.

"Drop the knife."

Maddy clutches it even more tightly. *Where are the wolves? Where is the Dragon?*

"Drop the knife, and hold up your hands. We aren't going to hurt you, Maddy."

Somebody is getting out one of the cars now. It's Michael, she can see his black beard forming into a concerned smile.

"It's okay, Maddy. Do as they say!"

She raises her arms, and lets the knife clatter down to the ground. Her whole body is aching, her legs stinging, and her shoulder still

seeping from the scratch, and she is shaking from cold and fear. Michael runs towards her, and she doesn't know whether she should turn and flee him, or wait for him with open arms.

It is no matter, because within moments he is upon her, and he is smothering her face with kisses, and holding her close.

"I love you, Maddy. I love you, I love you, I love you. Don't worry anymore. Everything is going to be fine. Everything is good. You're safe now. You're safe."

"I don't understand."

"Don't worry. The main thing is you're alive. You're alive!"

"What's going to happen now?"

"The police are going to have to take you to the station for questioning. They want to know what happened inside. But they managed to kill all the gunmen, and free some of the hostages. They say they have been tracking Simon for a few days now, but they didn't expect this. I'm so sorry this has happened to you, Maddy, I love you so much."

He presses his face against her bosom, shielding her with his warmth.

"I'm going to go to prison, Michael."

"No! No you aren't. Harry has confessed. The police aren't going to press charges."

"What do you mean? Harry is dead."

"He isn't, Maddy. He's alive. The doctors say his condition is stable. He cannot talk, but he wrote a letter, confessing to everything he had done to you. I'm so sorry I doubted you, Maddy. I will never do it again, I promise with all my heart."

It is the day of the funeral.

Michael is conducting the service, his face long and broken, as he chants the litany of names.

“... Richard Ellis, Martha, Peter Smith, Jake, known as Big Jake, Simon Whittaker, and Errol Royston. We commend each and every one of these people to your service. Guard them well, oh Lord, and they will protect you. Such a great loss of life serves no purpose on this world, but they will be angels by your side.”

She knows she should be crying, but something is focussing her attention away from the service. Her legs are tingling again. She can feel a kind of pleasant sharpness running up and down to her toes.

She wills it, she concentrates until her temples start to throb. *I can do this!*

Her left foot turns to one side.

“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”

“Amen.”

“Michael! Michael! I think he’s coming now.”

“Are you sure it’s not just another false alarm?”

She stretches upward from where she is bent over the side of the sofa. “Damn right, I’m sure.”

“How close together are they?”

“Oh God, here comes another one. Aaah! Come on, Michael, we’ve got to go. Now!”

“I’ll just get your stick.”

“Hurry!”

He fetches her stick from the hall, and they hobble together out the front door of the vestry. He opens the passenger door for her, and she climbs in, hoisting her stick on to the back seat.

“Do you want me to phone Damon?”

“Would he phone me? Don’t bother, Michael, get a move on.”

“Don’t worry, it’s only a short drive.”

Even so, he accelerates down to the road like he is driving a rally.

She sits in the birthing pool, screaming as she has never screamed before, grasping hold of the metal bars for dear life.

“More air!” she cries, and the midwife hands her the mask. “Oh, this is horrible, aah, this is so hard.” But she knows she has a huge smile on her face. Michael clasps her hand in his, and is beaming at her.

“I love you, Maddy. You’re doing so well. I’m so proud of you.” He kisses her hand.

“The next time you get a contraction,” says the midwife serenely, “I want you to push as hard as you can. Will you do that, Maddy?”

“Yes, yes, yes. Oh, Michael. Oh, oh. Would you give me some water?”

“Of course, anything.”

“Just water for now.”

“You wouldn’t believe how much I want to get into that pool with you.”

“Don’t you dare! Aaah, aah, it’s coming, I can feel it coming again!”

She pushes and pushes, and the pain and pleasure is astronomical, she can’t see, and she is floating round the pool like she is in air, and the midwife’s hands are on her thighs, and Michael is shouting, “I can see him! I can see him, Maddy! I can see his head. Oh God, Maddy, it’s incredible! You are so gorgeous, Maddy, keep pushing, keep pushing. I love you, Maddy, keep pushing, keep pushing.”

She can feel him come out, and suddenly everything seems so much easier. She can see again, and the water feels so cool against her hot skin.

“Oh God, Maddy, oh wow, he is beautiful. He is so beautiful. I’m so proud of you.”

The midwife, has snipped the umbilical cord and is wrapping the baby in a blanket, cooing, “You look like your daddy, don’t you? Yes, you do.”

“Erm, he’s not – “

“Bring him to me, please. I want to see him.”

The water is already running from the pool enough for her to hold him to her breast. He looks up with great blue eyes from a face that

looks like that of a small child's rather than a newborn's, slim and long. He *does* look like Michael. He looks more like Michael than he does Damon.

"Do you have a name for him, yet?"

"Adam," she replies, briefly glancing at Michael for confirmation. He grins at the sound of the name. "Yes, Adam."

"So, no more talk of adoption then," Michael whispers into her ear as the midwife takes Adam off to be weighed.

"He is beautiful," Maddy says. "He is the most wonderful little man in the whole world."

"And you are the most wonderful woman." Michael looks down, and then back at her. "Listen, I know this is a really bad time to ask..."

"Yes?"

"Will you marry me?"

Maddy looks into his eyes, those wonderful almond eyes, and can see the light shining from within. "Of course I will. Only..."

"What's wrong, Maddy?"

"Who is going to take the service?"

"That won't be a problem," he chuckles. "I've got friends in high places."

What a glorious summer's day this has turned out to be, and Maddy is determined to walk down the aisle without the aid of a stick. The church is absolutely packed, there are even people from the drop-in centre standing in droves around the font. Most are from after the massacre, but there are one or two stalwarts who had survived the gun-shoot. She knows the others, like Big Jake and Errol, will be looking down on her and giving her their blessing.

Every step she takes is a challenge, but her father is by her side, holding her steady. She can see Michael at the front of the church looking resplendent in an emerald green morning suit. He's shaved his beard off. She liked his beard, and doesn't know why he shaved it,

but it has taken years off him. He turns his head slightly, and his eyes twinkle.

And where is my little boy?

She sees him now, he's at the front, sitting on his grandmother's knee. Jackie is gently bouncing him up and down, and he is grinning, his blonde locks whirling round his head like a halo.

It had taken her a long time to forgive Jackie, but it had been important to Michael that she did so. *She has always cared for me. She was just scared of losing her husband.* Besides which, she absolutely dotes on her grandchild. Damon, on the other hand, only makes his presence known by posting the occasional cheque. She is glad. Jackie tells her he had become more and more self-centred as time goes on, and nowadays only seems to paint pictures *he* likes. Maddy hopes he rots.

The Bishop holds his hands high in greeting as she approaches, and Michael rises to stand by her side.

"Maddy, you are so strong," he whispers to her, "and you are looking absolutely radiant. I love you more than anything." His voice deepens. "I want you more than anything."

She can feel the colour rise to her cheeks.

"Later," she murmurs back.

"No, let's do it now." She can feel his hand touching her waist.

"We are gathered here today..."

She knocks his hand away from her. Behind her, she can hear Adam giggling.

"Mummy, mummy!"

"What is it, Adam? I've got to go back to work."

"I've got something to show you."

"Later."

“No, now!” Her little boy grabs her hand and drags her into the kitchen, where Michael is washing up. “Look, look! I’ve made you a picture to take to work.”

“I can’t take a picture to the hospital. Where would I put it up?”

“You’ll find somewhere. I know you will.”

“Okay, darling. Let me see. Who is it?”

“That’s you, that’s me and that’s daddy.”

She stares at the picture. For a five year old, his art is a wonder. The vestry is drawn in perspective, at an angle to the view, and the three of them are standing on the ground, instead of balancing on the line that marks the horizon.

“What’s that?” she says pointing at two small shadows drawn either side of Michael.

“They are daddy’s wings.”

She feels a tingling, but she cannot place the source. “Daddy doesn’t have wings.”

“Yes, he does,” Adam replies with authority. “Daddy is an angel.”

Michael giggles to himself over the dishes.

“Oh, he is that,” Maddy tells her son. “Definitely an angel.”

She can still feel the tingling.

“Have you decided what you want to be when you grow up, Adam?”

“I *am* grown up, Granny!”

Maddy always feels odd when they go to visit Granny Jackie. It’s the memories of the house, especially *that room* at the front, which she dare not enter anymore. She doesn’t explain to Adam why she never goes in there, it’s one of life’s mysteries to him.

“I know you are, Adam, I mean when you are old, like mummy and daddy.” *She keeps the illusion so well.* “Do you want to be a nurse, like mummy, and help people get better?”

Adam appears to be giving this a great deal of thought. “I want... I want to be famous.”

Michael laughs. "Famous? You have to be famous *for something*, Adam."

"I want to be famous for doing something... wonderful. Like Superman."

"You don't ask for much," Maddy says.

"I've got a friend who wants to be a funeral director," says Adam.

"Aye!" says Michael. "Well I think I prefer your way of thinking."

"I want to be Prime Minister."

Maddy has a vision of a wolf's snout. "Oh, Adam. I thought you said you wanted to do something wonderful."

"Do Prime Ministers not do wonderful things?"

Michael replies. "Adam, if you were Prime Minister, I'm sure they would."

Maddy is collecting the newspaper cuttings.

She has over twenty now, and in many of them she can see Adam's boyish face looking out of the black and white at her.

In the one she is currently looking at, he is protesting at the proposed motorway "enhancement" due to go through a conservation area. He holds his sign high and proud. *Do not destroy our planet*. She had cut off the caption which mentioned the scarcity of numbers turning up for the protest. The point was, he was doing something. He was doing something... wonderful. He may not be famous yet, but he is on the bottom rung of the ladder.

She has heard the rumours. She knows that sometimes his methods are a little unsavoury. Michael has invited him to the church, but he has his own ideas. He says he doesn't want to be boxed in by Christian doctrine, that the only way to get things done is to go out and do them, and not offer futile gestures to an imaginary host. He is most definitely his own man, he is going to go far.

She looks down at the pictures with a great sense of pride. She remembers a time so long ago, when she thought she could change

things. She remembers being amongst the crowds at the steps of parliament trying to reveal the evil in this world, when she wanted, like Adam, to do something special. Now she is happy to settle into her little niche of goodness, working at the drop-in centre and the hospital. She is pleased to pass the baton to Adam. In his hands, and others like him, the world will be saved.

And who knows? One day he may even reach his ambition, and become Prime Minister. Stranger things have happened.

They are lying together in a post-coital snooze, Michael gently rubbing his hand on Maddy's thigh, when it happens. It starts slowly, as if there is a ton weight sitting on her chest, but then her vision flickers red, even with her eyes shut.

"Maddy! What's wrong?"

"Aah!" she cries in pain, and feels her limbs flick outwards. "Oh God, Michael, phone an ambulance!"

Her whole body starts to go haywire, and her head feels like it is being smacked by hammers. She knows she is flailing wildly, and Michael is holding her. Her senses keep flicking on and off, sometimes she can feel him, sometimes she can't, her eyes juddering like stop-motion video.

She blinks, and when her eyes open, she is in the ambulance, and can hear the siren, and Michael is holding her hand tightly, and she blinks again, and she is in the hospital, and she can see doctors around her, and machines, and again she blinks and she can see *oh my god* she doesn't know what she sees, and then her eyes shut.

She can hear her own heartbeat, slowing, slowing, slowing, and then, just as it appears it is about to stop, it is beating like a tambourine, flickering so fast she can hardly hear the separate beats, and she opens her eyes again.

Michael is sat beside her, tears rolling down his time worn cheeks. He looks at her awake, and smiles at her with such a delicate turning of his lips, that he need not say anything.

“Michael...” The pain in her chest is intense and continuous, the words almost impossible to force out. “Michael, I’m dying aren’t I?”

He bows his head, and sobs silently for a moment, then raises his head once more. He is so handsome, even with his eyes hollow and cheeks burned by tears, even without his thick beard. He is still the man she fell in love with. She is still very much in love with him.

“It doesn’t matter,” she tells him. “I’m so happy, Michael, it doesn’t matter.”

He holds onto her hand with a vice like grip. “I don’t want you to go, Maddy, I don’t want to be alone.”

“You won’t be alone. You will still have Adam. And I won’t be far away from you, Michael. I’ll be just over the other side.”

“You have always been my greatest love.”

“You don’t have to stop loving me, Michael. But I am freeing you. You can move on. I want you to move on. It won’t matter to me once I am dead.”

Michael is weeping openly, clutching her hand to his forehead. “Please, please, don’t leave me!”

“I’m dying, Michael. It’s as inevitable as the end of the world. Let me go.” She looks at him, *poor Michael*, almost bent double by her side. “Michael, could you do me a favour?”

“Anything.”

“Would you get Adam for me?”

“He’s already on his way.”

Adam stands away from the bed, with his hands down by his side. Her sight is failing her, but she can see he is quivering.

“Don’t be scared, Adam.”

“I’m not scared.” He raises his hands up, and runs them through his blonde hair. “I’m angry.”

He steps forward towards her, and leans over the bed. She can see now, his eyes are like steel, he is shaking with rage. “Why!” he cries.

“This is not justice. This is not fair! You are my mother, you are the strongest woman in the world. Why now?”

“It is my time, Maddy. I’ve been so happy, Adam, I’ve seen you grow into a wonderful, wonderful man.”

“It’s not your *time*. It’s that fucking tumour in your head, eating your brain! That is not the way it is *meant* to be!”

“I want you to continue to be strong, Adam.”

“Fuck you! They aren’t going to let you die. The doctors are going to operate, and you will be made well again. You will be home again.”

“I love you, Adam. I will be going to a better place, believe me.”

“What are you talking about? There is no *better place*. This is the end. Once you are dead, there is no you. You’re gone. Finished!”

She can feel it now, her heart beginning to constrict. She winces, and her hand goes to her head.

“Adam, please calm down,” Michael interjects, “You’re scaring her.”

“I’m not going to let you die! I love you so much, mother, I’m not going to let this happen to you!” He beats his fists down next to her.

Her vision is dimming now, and she can vaguely hear Michael calling for the doctors. Adam holds onto her hands and stares deep into her eyes.

“I’m going to save you, mother.”

She looks up, and his eyes are black. She is sinking into those pitch eyes, those wonderful shining eyes, deeper and deeper until all around her is darkness. Her heart beats is growing slower and fainter, and she keeps on drifting downwards, down on to the street, back into the wheelchair, back in front of the Dragon.

The Dragon sits in front of her, his great arms resting on the buildings on either side, the wreckage of the drop-in centre burning in the distance.

“What happens next?”

YOU WOULD NEVER HAVE TO KNOW.

The Dragon is smiling at her sweetly, with Michael’s face. It would be sweet if it weren’t for the beetles running across his shimmering

teeth. She clutches the knife tighter to her. She could still flee, she could still get to the underground, she just has to persuade him to let her go.

“I do need to know. What does Adam do after I die?”

DO YOU NOT SEE? I AM SPARING YOU FROM ALL THAT. I RELEASE YOU, MADDY. YOUR LIFE WOULD BE ONE OF JOY. YOU WOULD NEVER NEED TO KNOW ABOUT AFTER.

“But he is my son!” she yells at him, looking high up at his hideous carapace.

HE IS MY SON, ALSO.

“You cannot win. They won’t allow you to win!”

I HAVE TOLD YOU, MADDY. I AM THE ONE GOD. THERE IS NO OTHER GOD. THERE IS MY SON, AND THERE IS ME. NOONE ELSE.

She can see the condensation from her mouth shining from the street lights around her. The Dragon towers above her like a colossus, a thousand feet high.

“There is me.”

She holds the kitchen knife in front of her towards his face.

I LOVE YOU, MADDY. YOU CANNOT HARM ME. YOU CANNOT TOUCH ME. I WILL LOOK AFTER YOU.

She can feel Adam inside her, tiny little punches and kicks against the lining of her womb. She wonders briefly if foetuses can cry.

“I do not mean to hurt you.”

She turns the blade towards her stomach, and grasps onto the hilt with both hands.

NO, MADDY. I FORBID YOU.

“You cannot stop me.”

BELIEVE ME, MADDY. BELIEVE.

With one fluid motion she plunges the knife into her own belly. It pierces through her skin as easily as it parts her coat and top. The

pain is tremendous, her vision is swimming, and she can hear screaming. The screaming is coming from the mouths of the Dragon, who raises up into the sky, pounding his great claws into the surrounding city.

With all of her strength, Maddy pulls the knife out from her stomach, and slams it back in again, twisting it round inside herself. Blood is pouring out of her, but now she cannot feel it, she cannot even breathe. Her head flips back, and cracks itself on the back of the chair. The Dragon is high in the air, spinning like a top, his legs stretched out miles wide as he howls.

Then, suddenly there is light around her...

It is the brightest possible white she has ever seen...

And it goes on...

For...

Ever.

