

The Hollow Places

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PART ONE

Chapter One

For the driver, only three things existed: the road, the wheel and the woman in the back seat.

A glance in the mirror showed him nothing but the rear windscreen, so he took a look over his shoulder and saw that the woman hadn't moved, sitting with her head between her knees, a fall of dyed blonde hair, making burping sounds and sniffing.

"It's okay," Simon said and kept the car sliding through the darkness. He was enjoying a heightened state of awareness and sensed each turn before it appeared. His foot on the accelerator, he knew that they were unlikely to encounter anyone else on this road. It was just him and her.

When she sat up, her large, brown eyes were very dark and ringed with red. Her skin was waxy, streaked black with mascara.

"Oh-my-God, I am sorry," she sniffed and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"It's okay," Simon said again.

It wasn't his car.

Unknown to her, Simon watched her wipe her hand on the fabric of the back seat and then strain to see past her ghostly reflection in the glass. He offered her a bottle of water.

"I don't think it is good for me," she said, her Parisian accent coming through. "It will just make me more ..." She gestured throwing up and had to suppress another wave of nausea. "We are nearly there?"

"This way will avoid the traffic," Simon said.

This way would avoid everyone.

Trees linked arms overhead, attempting to seal out the moonlight. Their leaves glowed preternaturally in the headlights before becoming ash-black and then scarlet as they rolled by. Ahead, a steep incline began winding down to the sea coast, but they would turn off before they reached the bottom.

"This might help," he said, winding his window part-way down.

The sound of waves smothering rocks and then sliding back, crashing and retreating, accompanied the fluttering of owls or bats and the scampering of unseen things in the trees.

He might have found it disturbing, but he was on a high now and found himself observing the fine, curly hairs on the backs of his hands before remembering the road. The road appeared to be undulating beneath him, as if their destination was sliding towards them and the car was still.

"So, you really think it is broked?" she asked, holding up her hand, which was very small and pale, except for her little finger, which was swollen and almost black.

"We need a medical opinion," Simon told her. "I'm a taxi driver."

He glanced in the mirror to see if she knew she was in trouble yet.

She was peering though the passenger windows, first one side and then the other. Both views offered her something that evidently upset her.

"This isn't London," she said. "Where is the hospital?"

Part of him wanted her to know what was coming, because he didn't want to lie to her anymore, but he knew that lying was for the best. If their roles had been reversed, he wouldn't want to know what was coming either.

"Not far now," he said, though his heart wasn't in it.

She was starting to panic.

"Doesn't your finger hurt?" Simon asked.

"Yes," she said. "It hurts. But I can't do anything about it, so why complain?"

"Good for you," he said.

"How long you have been a taxi driver?" she asked.

"Six years," he said.

"Why six years?" she demanded to know. "Why didn't you say five or seven? It's a lie, right?"

"I always say six years," Simon admitted. "I've been saying six years for two years."

"My mother owns a boutique and my father is a designer. They have money. A lot of money."

Some people attempted to develop a rapport with him to dissuade him from murdering or raping them. This young woman had gone straight to bargaining. She was sobering up fast and in other circumstances he might have liked her, though it was a long time since he had thought of anyone but him and his sister. Their survival came first.

The turn was coming up.

The usual sensation occurred as he slowed the car. He could feel the turn 'glowing', calling to him. It was like being pulled in by tractor beam.

He flicked off the lights.

"What are you doing?" She sat forward and he got a waft of vomit and perfume.

"Sit back," he ordered her. "A rabbit in the road, that's all. Headlights dazzle them."

She flopped back in her seat and Simon completed the narrow turning into the woods.

His eyes flicked back and forth from the forest to the rear view mirror.

She was trying the doors. Of course they were locked centrally. From the look in her eyes, she appeared to be thinking about screaming, but probably didn't want to admit that she was in that much danger yet. She saw no point in accelerating events when she may still be able to talk her way out of this, whatever this was.

She sucked in a lungful of air, stifling another wave of nausea. Still and tense, she stared at her reflection in the black glass, until she was over the worst of it.

"So ... Vincent," she began. "Why don't I call my parents, before my friends do, and organise some money? Then you let me to go. It is easy to do."

"I'll do a deal with you," Simon said. "You can ask me five questions and I promise to tell you the truth, answering yes or answering no. But then you have to stop talking."

His night vision had become very good over the last few years, so he was able to discern a route ahead by squinting through the windscreen. After a few moments, however, he found that he knew when to jog left and jog right, and gradually let go of control, guided. The vehicle bounced down a new incline, crunching dirt and dead leaves. They could have been driving in a bubble at the bottom of the ocean, or bumping along over the dark side of the moon.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Have you never played Twenty Questions? You can still have five."

"Stop fucking around," she said. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not fucking around," he said. "Four."

"Can I please go home? Please."

"No."

"Please?"

Simon stopped the car, shut off the engine and faced her. "You can ask two more questions," he told her.

Her voice thinned. "Please don't hurt me. Vincent? Are you going to ...?"

"No," Simon said.

She couldn't announce her fears out loud. She still didn't want to make it real.

Simon opened her door from the outside and held open a plastic, supermarket bag.

"Empty your pockets into this," he said.

"I don't have money," she said. "I said to you. My parents have the money."

She squirmed around on the back seat, reaching into the pockets of her skin-tight jeans. It took some time, because she only had use of her right hand. She managed to retrieve a plastic lighter, some tissues and a phone number written in blue ink on a strip of paper. She dropped each one into the bag.

"My purse is in my handbag," she said.

"Drop it in," he told her and she unzipped it, searching for the purse. "No," Simon said.

"Your handbag. The whole thing."

She dropped it into the carrier and looked up into his face, holding his gaze. He imagined how he must look to her. It was difficult, because since he had got out of the car he felt very little. He watched her face for some clue as to how he might appear to her.

After thirty seconds or so, her eyes began to tremble. Whatever she'd been searching for in his eyes, she hadn't found it.

"Time to go," he said.

She managed to punch him in the face as he leaned in, but her fist glanced off his cheek and soon he was hauling her out into the night. As she struggled, she reignited the pain in her dislocated finger and cried out, so Simon clamped one hand over her mouth and that's where it stayed as he pulled her away from the car and forced her deeper into the forest. He held her body tight against him, knowing that her attempts to scream for help would give way to sobs. Soon, he could feel her tears and snot running over his fingers, the chill in the wind making his wet hand feel icy.

When her legs gave way, he responded by picking up his pace, dragging her towards the sound of waves until they came to a clearing, where he remembered to pop her finger back into place. He muffled her howl and subsequent whimpers. A couple of minutes later, she settled and he relaxed his hold on her.

She took in her surroundings, realising that all the while they had been approaching the edge of a cliff.

"Are you going to let me go now?" she asked quietly.

It had helped him to think of it as a game, but now she was all out of questions and he was out of time.

"Yes and no," Simon said. "You're going to be okay. After a few minutes, you won't know what's happening. You won't feel anything."

Stifling her protests, he dragged her through the rest of the clearing, towards the edge. Her eyes rolled and she stamped her bare heels, grinding her toes into the dirt, but he was much too strong for her. She was punching and kicking, but he lifted her from the ground, dumped her onto one shoulder and stood facing the drop.

Silvery clouds shrouded the moon in the dark, blue sky, and the black sea rolled below, toiling and growling up at them.

He imagined himself carrying her back to the car, setting her in the back seat, and driving back to the road before dumping her somewhere, alive, but the idea alone was enough to promote a headache. It was as if a finger penetrated the back of his skull and a sharp fingernail began peeling back a layer of brain.

“Okay!” he thought in response and winced. “I’m doing it!”

He pitched her over the edge, almost losing his footing in the process, making his stomach lurch.

She didn’t scream. The last sound she made was a gasp. Perhaps she was surprised that he'd really dropped her, or perhaps she was sucking in the air for a scream that didn't have time to materialise.

Simon peered over the edge in time to see her body disappear into an enormous wave. It arced over the rocks and plucked her out of the air. Sea water crashed against the cliff, showering Simon’s face, shoulders and chest. The woman's body was gone. Taken.

Only once had he been this close to the Creature.

Chapter Two

Three things contributed to Simon's survival and the survival of his sister. He delivered whoever the Creature asked him to, he thought ahead and he knew when and how to stop thinking entirely. He switched between modes as easily as he had switched gears in the car he had dumped.

Huge raindrops splattered on his raincoat - thinking ahead - which was good, because the rain would also help to confuse any evidence he had left behind.

As he walked, he was dimly aware of the Creature, circling his mind. It was doing so more proprietorially than with any real interest, but he made sure to give it nothing to consider or question anyway.

He turned to meditation. As he strolled along the narrow paths, the muddy roads and later the glistening streets, he imagined that everything was being washed clean. Even him.

He counted the footsteps that disturbed the flooded gutters and caused the reflected sky to tremble; he counted street lamps that turned raindrops into sparks; and he counted the occasional car that held him in its headlights before passing by, as if satisfied that he wasn't the one they were looking for.

*

Home was a two-storey brick building, boxy with a bay window, much like its suburban neighbours. He hadn't done any work on it since he inherited it, so it remained old-fashioned and in disrepair. He had intended to tidy things up, to repaint the walls and fix the leak in the bathroom, to lay wooden flooring and fix the hinges on the cupboards, or perhaps replace the kitchen entirely, with spotlights and an electric cooker instead of a microwave and a second-hand electric hob plugged into the mains.

He had begun the project well, ripping up the carpets in the bedrooms and stripping the peeling paper from the stairway and the bathroom walls. He'd removed the broken cupboard doors and had bullied furniture into what was now a store room downstairs in order to make room for repair work and painting. Having done this, however, he discovered that he lacked the proper motivation to finish a single one of the jobs.

Having discarded the things he didn't want, he discovered that it was enough that they were gone.

He was not short of funds, thanks to his inheritance from his father, via his mother, so he could have paid a builder to come in and do it all for him, but he refused. He never had any guests or workmen inside the house. It was a fortress and a sanctuary. Neither needed to be pretty.

Structurally, it was sound and his father had upgraded the windows and doors on every part of the house. The new front and back doors were fitted with toughened security glass and a turn of the handle sent five metal bolts into the frame with a clack. It wouldn't keep an intruder out if they were determined, but it would slow them down and hopefully that would be all he needed.

From the outside, it looked like any other house on their Essex street, only somewhat shabbier. It was set back from the road by a semi-circular drive, on which sat his shitty, metallic-

blue Toyota Corolla, and was protected from view by evergreens, which also flanked the property.

Although their nearest neighbour was thirty seconds walk away, he sometimes felt as though he was alone, living in one of the nearby forests. While this was good for privacy, which he protected fiercely, it also reminded him of events that he would sooner block out.

If trees really did communicate, then the news of what he had done on the cliff had reached home before him. He glanced up at the foreboding branches before unlocking the front door and ducking inside.

He was met by the familiar disarray of the kitchen/diner, where every available surface was occupied, not at all like those show homes in the adverts. This was real-life. Yet there remained an otherness to the house, as though he was looking at it all through tissue paper. He felt like he'd been away for years, although it had only been one night, and almost felt himself drifting across the room like a ghost.

It was not the house that was in any way unreal, he knew, it was him. He was still connected to the Creature and would be until It released him, minutes or hours from now. It was reasonable to assume that his work was done for the night, but he could feel It circling his mind. It was observing, but It made no further demands.

He set about domestic chores, although his body wanted him to collapse and dream. Sleeping while the Creature was in residence was the most dangerous thing of all, because that's when thoughts rose up, unbidden, and who knew what the mind would throw up when it was moving towards unconsciousness, crazy things, repressed memories, the truth. Instead, he emptied the washing machine and hung an armful of wet clothes over the radiators. They looked like multicoloured skins. He counted them as he went ... sixteen.

The sink was full of cups and plates, pots and pans, one in particular burnt black from an over-ambitious attempt to make flapjacks using convection setting on the microwave. He had left it to soak, but that had been some days ago and now it was a science project. He attempted to root out the plug to release the sludge of water, but there was no plug, only rotting food – peas, rice, spaghetti - and hair.

He unloaded the sink, so he could unblock it with the plunger.

One, two, three, four, five ...

Then, he began washing up.

Six dinner plates.

Three breakfast bowls.

Eight forks.

Five desert spoons.

Five tea spoons. There should have been six, but one of them had gone missing. He wondered if it wouldn't have been better to pare down to two of everything, rather than have to deal with all this shit he had inherited.

Eleven knives.

Throw it all away.

A corkscrew.

A manual juicer.

An electric tin opener. Broken.

He heard a toilet flush upstairs and then the sound of footsteps, on the stairs, in the hall.

“Hi,” the girl said.

Simon rinsed and stacked. Rinsed. Stacked.

She sat down at the breakfast bar and scooped up her college papers, underneath which lurked the mail from the last few days. For want of an empty space, she dumped them all on the floor next to her stool, then gave the same treatment to a large clothing catalogue and miscellaneous magazines and TV guides. She appeared to have been infected by Simon's cleaning drive, but then she uncovered what she had been looking for. She opened up the cardboard box and helped herself to a slice of cold pizza.

"Want some?" she asked.

Simon glanced at her and saw that she was wearing her blue dressing gown. The slice of pizza in her hand was yellow and green. She took a bite with her perfect, little teeth and a layer of hard cheese slid from the pizza base. She stuffed it into her mouth with her little finger. Although he had been desperately hungry, the sight turned his stomach. He bent over the sink and returned to scrubbing the non-stick surface from a frying pan.

"You know," she said, above the sound of scouring, "I've only got revision today. I could skip college. We could do something."

He could hear her flicking through the pages of a magazine.

"Sally," he said. "I think you should go to college today. Exams are important."

"They're not even real exams," she replied, not picking up on the fact that he'd called her Sally. "They're mocks, remember? And I can study at home, as if I need to. I'd probably end up skipping out later anyway. They're like kids. I'd quite like an adult conversation, or as close as I can get to one with you."

"I think it would be good for you to get out of the house today, Sally."

"We could go to the park," she suggested. "Scare the animals. Give them names."

"Perhaps if I ignore her," Simon thought. "Perhaps she'll get bored and go away of her own accord."

He hung the frying pan on the wall and dried his hands, before returning to the laundry, deciding to separate the pile into bright colours, dark colours and whites. Good. That was the next five minutes accounted for.

Her clothes were all mixed in with his. Most of her items went into the bright colours pile. She had put her tie-dyed dress into the basket, which made things a little bit more complicated. He'd have to separate the bright colours into two piles. He took his time, concentrating only on what he was doing, ignoring the smell of a pizza slice warming in the microwave and the sound of beeping when it was done.

The black pile he created comprised of fleecy jumpers, combat trousers and t-shirts, all largely the same colour, but different to his eye, because they were his clothes, most of which he had bought at army and navy stores a couple of years ago. He also extracted several pairs of black socks, a woolly hat and a pair of fingerless gloves from the mound of dirty clothes that had grown around the laundry basket like a tumour.

He was getting there.

Slowly.

Slowly was good.

Behind him, the girl dropped her magazine onto the floor where it landed with a slap. She made a farting sound with her mouth and switched the kettle on.

"Coffee?" she asked.

"No."

"Tea?"

"No, Sally. No tea."

“Hot chocolate?”

He straightened up, but still didn't look at her. “Go to college, Sal,” he said.

The girl sighed again. “Will you stop calling me that? I hate it.”

The white pile was always their smallest collection of clothing, but now, with the addition of a single bedsheet and a couple of pillowcases, he had enough for a full load. As he filled the machine, her bras reminded him that she wasn't a girl any more. Like him, she had grown up quickly. She was just bored, playing silly, but it was irritating nonetheless. He needed her out of his (thoughts) space, because despite the locks on the doors and all the security glass, he had a key; he was the crack in the windscreen.

“You were quiet last night. Maybe we can hang out today; have some fun. Remember that? Fun?”

“Maybe when you get back,” Simon said.

“But I can-“

He faced her at last and his expression cut her off mid-sentence. She dropped her pizza.

“Go away,” he said and she actually ran, taking the stairs quickly but one at a time. Stomp stomp stomp stomp stomp.

Perhaps she was still a kid after all, masquerading as an adult, as was he.

He heard her door slam shut.

Good.

Slam all the doors. The further away the better.

Chapter Three

At six in the evening, Simon woke slumped over the kitchen counter. His first thought was of Sarah and he groaned as he allowed the memories to spiral up.

He had frightened and upset her, but she should have known better than to press him, particularly after he'd been out all night. What did she think he'd been doing? Clubbing?

He had called her Sally half a dozen times. Yes, Sally. No, Sally. He had explained that he'd only call her that when something was wrong, but she had remained oblivious to his signals.

Maybe he needed to let her in on how much danger surrounded them. While he had no wish to make her afraid to leave the house, he did need her to be more alert.

Observing these thoughts, he analysed them and let them go. His anger with her behaviour was really anger with himself. She trusted him to make everything all right and he knew he was failing her. While her ignorance was the main danger to her, it was the thing he wanted to preserve most. Her ignorance was innocence.

He paced the kitchen, getting the feeling back in his legs, knowing that by the time she came home he would be calm and that they would attempt to make cornflake cakes and everything would be cool again for a while.

He reached for the remaining slice of pizza, which had sickened him earlier, and took half of it down in one bite. It was cold and wet and tasted of nothing, certainly nothing good, but his need was great and he shoved the remainder into his mouth. So it was that Sarah came home and found him chewing furiously. As he made room to speak to her, she made for the stairs. Sensible girl ... woman ... whatever ...

"Sarah," he spluttered.

She observed him carefully. He was never what she would consider relaxed. Early one morning, she had pushed his door open to see if he was home and he had been lying on his mattress on the floor, on his back, fully-clothed, staring at the ceiling.

"Go," he had said. He hadn't even turned to look at her. At the time, she had wondered if that was how he always slept, waiting for morning, trainers on, alert, ready for action, but since then she had seen him in all manners, sleeping at the counter, on the kitchen floor, on the stair. He always woke before she reached him.

Often, he smelled as though he had been to bars and she wondered if he had been clubbing without her, though she never smelled alcohol on his breath - had never seen him drink in fact, except for one three-day marathon session after mum died. Aside from that, he had never been so out of it that he hadn't been able to open at least one eye before she got close enough to check he was still breathing.

Go upstairs.

Go to bed.

Go away.

He was clearly feeling better now. Colour had returned to his cheeks. He was eating.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Simon managed to say, losing a green pepper in the process.

"I'm sorry too," Sarah said. "I should have thought."

"I think we both could have handled that better. Next time we will. We learn and move on, yeah?"

Sarah tried to smile although she was close to crying, because she couldn't deny that there would be a next time. And a next time after that. And after that. She looked away in the hope that Simon wouldn't see how despondent his words had made her.

"You've been out more often the last month," she observed.

Simon stopped chewing, aware that his eyes were drilling holes into her but unable to stop. She had never brought up the subject of his night-time missions. He had spoken of them often, but because she refused to engage with the subject he had no idea how much she had understood and how much she had discarded.

"I didn't realise you were out last night," she said, "I didn't hear you leave - so when I saw you this morning, I didn't realise you were ... you know ... here but not here."

Simon nodded, surprised by his reticence. He finally had her full attention and she actively wanted to know more about what was going on, but more than ever he felt that the life he had been given to live should not infect hers. He liked the fact that she didn't embrace the danger. The point of his existence was to protect her. He worked so she didn't have to.

"Last night," Sarah said. "Was it a bad one?"

"There are no good ones."

"Do you ... every time you go out, do you ... is there always ..."

"Almost always," Simon said.

Her eyes were trembling. "But it wasn't always like that, right? In the beginning, sometimes you would go and you didn't always ..."

Simon shook his head.

"So why is it changing now?" she asked.

"That's a good question," he said, stalling. After months of attempting to have this conversation and failing, he now found himself utterly unprepared. "There's a sense of urgency that wasn't there before," Simon admitted.

Sarah didn't move.

"I feel as though It's looking for something," Simon continued. "I think that soon It will find it and when It does it will leave us alone."

"Really?" She sounded desperate.

"Yes," Simon said. Although the Creature was not currently watching his thoughts, he could not entirely shut down the Simon-automaton he had created as his coping mechanism.

"I hope it happens soon," Sarah said.

Simon noted that she had come as close to the subject as she could bear. She wouldn't refer to the Creature itself. He wished that he could lay her thoughts out and see them as clearly as the Creature could see his.

The sitting area was illuminated solely by a small, grey, porcelain table lamp that had belonged to their mother. While they had been talking, it had grown darker outside and Simon was glad of the cover. Normally, he was an exceptional liar. The trick, he discovered, was to practice and to believe the lie, to make it real by living it, to find the element of truth and exaggerate it so that the lie existed in its shadow. It was a dangerous exercise, which kept him on a knife edge between an intolerable reality and a psychotic nightmare, but it was the only way to go on day after day, night after night. He couldn't keep up the pretence with Sarah though. He loved her too much. Her presence illuminated the holes in his stories.

He avoided her gaze by going to the window to close the blinds. The trees appeared to be have stepped together to protect them from the outside world. The house held its breath. The only noise was the buzz of electricity somewhere above and the refrigerator, humming to itself in an attempt not to hear the next part of their conversation.

In a hushed voice, accentuating the near-silence, Sarah asked: "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

She took an audible breath. "Kill them."

The motor of the refrigerator clunked off.

She had made the question sound almost casual and somehow it did not seem out of place among the plates and bowls and the broken food mixer and the coffee machine and the egg timer. It didn't seem like such a frightening question at all, until he tried to answer.

He opened his mouth to talk about the deliveries. It would be good to get it out. Perhaps sharing the horror of it would put a brake on the flashbacks and stop his eyes glazing over in the cereal aisle in Tesco or while licking the back of an envelope in the post office queue, or staring at the patterns made by paint peeling from the ceiling over the bath. He needed to share some of this information, to release the pressure, but not with her.

The woman he had delivered the night before may only have been two years older than Sarah. They had roughly the same figure; both studying; both smart. He had ripped her from the world she knew and cast her, gasping, to a fate unknown. How could he tell Sarah what he had done?

If the woman was still alive, perhaps it was worse than having died. Perhaps she was underwater, in the grip of the thing that had demanded her, stripped of flesh and mind. Or perhaps she had been lucky, torn into pieces and consumed. At least that way it would be over.

Or perhaps nothing happened down there. Maybe she was taken and returned to her life, her mind broken, but physically in tact.

Imagine it and it was possible.

It was not difficult to distance himself from the consequences of his actions while the Creature was with him. The whispers and Its guidance were seductive. Afterwards, however, when the Creature left his mind, he always had to face Sarah. No matter how deep he buried his memories, seeing her would make them creep back up.

"I don't need protecting any more," Sarah told him. "I want to help you. You need looking after."

Simon put his hands over his eyes. His fingers were ice cold. "Let's talk about this another time."

"You treat me like a kid," she said, "but I see what's going on. I've got questions and I deserve answers."

"I've tried to tell you," he said.

"You tell me that it's dangerous and that the danger could come at any moment and that I have to know where all the knives are and if I see anything inside the house I've got to run and I've got to keep my mobile phone on me at all times and you're going to go out sometimes and I have to avoid you, except it's hard to tell when that is, so if I can't avoid you I mustn't ask any questions; I just have to do as I'm told and it will all be ok. This is bullshit, Simon. We never talk about mum or dad. What happened to them. Or you. Or what's going to happen to us. Or anything that really matters."

"What really matters is that you have friends. College. Prospects. You have a life."

"What about you?"

“What about me?” The confusion in his voice frightened her.

“You’re my brother. I can help you.”

“Yes, you can help,” Simon said.

“Tell me how?”

“You can forget about trying to save me. I can look after myself.”

“And I can look after myself too, Simon, but maybe together we can beat whatever it is that has us living like this.”

Simon was shaking his head before she had finished. Beat it? Beat what? It was nothing and nowhere, and yet it could be inside him at any moment. It was a compulsion and a thing in the water. Beat that?

‘Living like this’. Living like what? In a house, with food and drink and heating, television, a bed to sleep in. It was home. What was wrong with that?

“I’m sick of being afraid,” she said. “I want to know everything. Not just the bits that you want to tell me. Because as it is, it sounds crazy.”

He was forced to admit that he didn’t want her up to speed after all. He wanted things as they were, without questions, with their lives gently overlapping when his mind was clear. She had played along until now, fitting into the lie that had suited him. In her way, she had been protecting him since this had begun.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll fill in the gaps. But I can’t do this now.”

“Then when?”

“I’m going out,” he said. “I need to clear my head.” The house felt unsafe. She was too close to the danger, too close to him. He had to get away and unfurl the things in his mind so that he could repack them, more neatly and tightly, strap them down so that they couldn’t fly when she reached for them.

“You’ll be gone all evening,” she said.

“I’ll be back tonight,” Simon said.

Chapter Four

Obedying an emotional need to return to the edge and look down into the waves, but with a clear mind, not invaded by the entity, Simon knew what kind of thoughts would emerge. It would be bleak, but he needed to face what he had done before talking to Sarah, even in the knowledge that it was a matter of time before he would be doing the same to somebody else.

Without ethereal guidance, he searched for the greater part of an hour before he recognised the turning into the wood. It didn't look like a turning at all now. There was a small dirt step, rather than a slope and it led to something more like a gap between tree trunks that someone might have used to shelter from the rain than a path. Upon entering the channel, however, it veered to the right, then to the left and then plunged on into darkness.

As his eyes adjusted, he felt his way ahead, one arm outstretched so that his hand encountered branches before they struck or snagged him. He resisted the urge to switch on his flashlight and crept on.

The air was clear and sharp. Creatures stirred amid the trees, watching him with eyes much more accustomed to this than his. He snapped their twigs and tripped over fallen branches, blundering into their domain until the trail came to an end, signalled by a change in the texture of the ground, from dirt that slid underfoot to a carpet of weeds and sucking mud. His heart picked up its pace as he recalled stopping the car, and the girl's skinny arms in his fists, her body almost twisting from him as he marched her into the wood.

He had made her play Twenty Questions.

What had he been thinking?

He stomped through the undergrowth, mindful now of the pain he had caused her, fingers on pressure points that made her whimper, snapping her finger back into place.

People would be wondering what had happened to her. She wasn't a carefully selected vagrant. The Creature had decided that it wanted her and that was that. Its reasons were unknown. She'd be missed, on both sides of the Channel. A lover might have begun calling local hospitals by now. If she had parents, perhaps they would dwell on the memory that they hadn't wanted her to go to England and they'd argue about whose responsibility it had been to prevent her leaving. Hours, days, weeks from now, they would be facing the prospect of being invited to identify her body, her clothes in a clear plastic bag; passionless talk of dental records.

She wasn't necessarily dead though. He thought again of the wave that had snatched her, like a tsunami, freezing momentarily to absorb her legs before withdrawing the way it had come, dragging her with it, wrapping itself around her torso like a black, foamy tongue.

Dead would probably have been better.

Eventually the authorities would catch up with him. He had never been especially careful and now he had returned to the scene of his last delivery, a reckless thing to do, but he couldn't help himself.

Ultimately, he reckoned, he'd either be captured or shot dead. Either way, he wouldn't be able to work for the Creature anymore, which would be a great relief, but both eventualities meant leaving Sarah alone and he'd promised her that he'd never abandon her. He had no doubt

that she'd visit him in prison every week, if it came to that, even though he'd order her not to come. She'd try to smuggle something in for him; get caught; try again.

He had to stay sane and strong for Sarah, but, in lieu of any authority or proper punishment, he berated himself a while longer, as the trees thinned out and more moonlight filtered through the leaves. Ahead, waves broke against the cliff.

He knew how this was going to end. He'd stand at the very lip of the cliff and observe the waves below, contemplating jumping, fantasising about hitting the rocks, but in the end he'd turn to face his ominous journey back to the car, back home and back to his life, such as it was, where Sarah would be surprised to see him and no less keen on answers than she had been earlier that evening.

He thought about what he would say to her.

Perhaps jumping wasn't such a bad option after all.

Dad had handed him the keys to the family special deliveries franchise and mum had looked at the floor. He didn't think it would do her any good to know that. It only made it more difficult to sleep.

And he was afraid of the forgotten things that might clamber up if he allowed Sarah to ask questions. He had to be empty to do what he did. The past was gone. The future was unknown. He could only survive in the present.

He stopped mid-step, eyes wide, before dropping to the ground and crouching, holding his breath.

Torchlight hovered in the mid-distance. He had been moving towards it as though it was the north star. Now, he flattened himself against the ground and the light washed in his direction. Head to one side, eyes open, he saw it sweep past him, then back. Lungs burning, he drew a very slow breath, knowing that he wouldn't be able to breathe out again without giving a signalling plume of vapour. He remained perfectly still on the damp earth as the light settled beside him. He closed his eyes for a moment, working to regain control of his desire to see more clearly and his desire to run. His heartbeat thumped in his ears.

Someone was looking for him or the French woman.

Perhaps, he thought, this person had seen him last night and had returned in the safety afforded by 24 hours. Or perhaps it was someone following the tracks, looking for evidence. Finding it. He'd been sloppy. He'd been exhausted. He'd been high. Twenty Questions.

He opened his eyes again when, in the distance, he heard a snort and saw that the torch bearer had given up on training the light in his direction and was now facing the other way, so that it created a halo, revealing a male figure, sitting on the ground, his elbows resting on his knees. The man was not crying but weeping. He had a coughing fit through the tears and wiped his face with his fists. He growled at himself in anger and thumped the ground, stamped a foot.

Simon didn't imagine that this was the boyfriend. The father perhaps. He wondered if this man had seen what he had done last night but had been powerless or too afraid to stop it, and had returned here, like him, to reignite his grief and have it soar. His cries went up, promising minute relief but ultimately falling dead among the branches. He sat in the middle, suffering, his breath hitching, waiting it out.

Every sound the man made caused Simon to wince. He could feel his throat burning, as though he was going to cry, but he didn't dare lose control.

The man's grief seemed both old and new, as if he was unhappy for many reasons, which were presenting themselves to him in a dismal procession.

If this was the French girl's father, Simon admitted, then he had robbed the man of the one thing that was keeping him alive.

He wished that he hadn't come back and seen this. He knew that he could have gone anywhere to ponder his actions and come to terms with what he had done, but Sarah's questioning had driven him toward the extra flagellation that returning to the cliff would afford him. As good as he was at burying his emotions, this night would keep him in nightmares for the rest of his life.

*

Twenty more paces would have brought Simon to the edge and that was where the man had stopped, swinging his big head left and right, gazing down into the tumultuous waves. He was portly and ungainly, like a PE teacher he had once had, and he was wearing a short, waxy jacket that hissed when he moved.

Simon wondered if the man was working himself up to jump and again he felt contradictory urges: the muscles of his legs tensed, ready to spring from his hiding place and haul him back, because he had sent too many people into the unknown to watch it happen again without the demand of the Creature and yet any attempt to save him would mean giving himself away.

Suicide or not, the man's presence here posed questions that were becoming increasingly intolerable. The torch had fallen from his fingers and lay at his feet spilling light through fallen branches; a gust of wind tussled his hair and no other part of him moved. He didn't even appear to be breathing and Simon knew that it wouldn't be long before he toppled over the edge like a domino.

Terrified and surprised by himself, Simon found that he was drifting forward to stop him when the man bent down for his torch, groaned and, contrary to Simon's expectations, turned to retrace his steps through the forest.

Simon crouched, ready to defend himself, but while the man passed nearby, he continued into darkness, back towards the road, torch light fading.

Simon followed.

Near the cliff, where the ground had been damp, Simon had moved quietly, but now, despite his best efforts, dry leaves and twigs crunched underfoot, obvious to his ears. A small branch snapped and he cursed to himself, ducking, but the man ahead kept moving, making a racket himself and even tripping and falling a couple of times in his hurry to get out of the trees. Simon walked as quickly as he dared, determined to keep up; almost failing.

As the man reached the tarmac road, Simon was forced to stop because any noise now would give him away. The man walked up the hill and retrieved keys from his trouser pocket. A white Micra was parked on the verge up ahead and Simon knew that as soon as the man reached it, this episode would be over, without answers but, perhaps more importantly, without being seen. He had done his best. Now it was time to let go.

He had successfully kept a low profile over the last couple of years and had been lucky too, even passing undetected on the one occasion he had been stopped by police for speeding, so why in the hell was he now stumbling out of the forest and saying:

“Hi.”

The man turned as if yanked by a rope. His smart trousers and sensible, nylon jacket bore the marks of his venture into the woods, but nothing more so than his leather shoes, which were caked with mud. His hair was greasy, abandoned. His eyes, terrified, gave away the fact that whatever he had been doing in the woods, it was a guilty secret. He watched, dumbstruck as Simon descended the bank and moved towards him over the road.

"I saw you," Simon said, with deliberate ambiguity.

The man's face slackened, but his eyes hardened. Simon assumed that he was making calculations, despite his apparent shock. The fight or flight response, but in slow-motion.

"What do you want?" the man asked.

Good question. He hadn't really had time to think about it.

"I heard you," Simon said. "Are you ok?"

"Fine. Goodbye."

Simon kept coming and the man stepped back, stumbling again. He seemed to be slurring his words.

"Why here?" Simon said. "Why this place?"

The man shrugged.

"Have you lost something?"

"Everything," he said. And then: "Haven't we all?" It was the first thing he said that didn't seem to have been calculated, and he didn't regret his spontaneity; he was angry. Simon, on the other hand, was now having second thoughts. Since he had shown his face to this man, here where he had delivered the French girl, he couldn't let him leave. Perhaps it would have been better for him to have lived with the curiosity and anxiety than to kill, particularly as he had not been selected by the Creature. Wrong place. Wrong time. For both of them.

It might have sounded like a normal exhalation, but in fact it was a sigh; having decided to kill him, Simon became more bold.

"Why were you in the trees?"

The man sensed the shift in his tone and stood staring down at him for almost a minute. He clenched and unclenched big fists, struggling to remain calm. Seeing that Simon was implacable, he said very clearly:

"Let's not make this worse than it needs to be. I'm walking away."

"Tell me," Simon said.

The man only shrugged. "You've decided that you have to kill me," he said, "so what benefit is it to me if I tell you? You're not a torturer. So I'll take my chances."

After all the pleas for help he had heard over the months, insane bargains, impossible promises and lies, no-one had ever spoken to him this coolly in such circumstances. His manner was detached, as though he didn't much care about survival and he found this experience sad not frightening.

"This doesn't have to be unpleasant," Simon said. "Maybe we can make a deal."

"You don't have anything to bargain with. I don't care what you've seen or what you know or what you think you know. I've seen it all."

"Who are you?"

"I'm the one who's holding all the cards. And if someone like me has all the cards, what does that say about you, you dipshit? Go home," he said. "Tell Sarah you love her. Make her understand. Something's coming. Make sure she understands. This is the warning I never had."

The man turned, heading to his car without a look back. Simon demanded his name, but he had been right, he didn't have anything to barter with. The man had known Sarah's name and yet was completely unknown to Simon. There was little he could do but watch him crunch the stones at the side of the road, open up his door and get inside.

Make her understand.

This is the warning I never had.

The Micra's engine brought Simon round. He started towards the car, but skidded on the gravel, falling to his hands and knees.

“Wait!”

The car pulled away, bathing Simon in red light.

Chapter Five

The chicken was burnt. Sarah glugged down half a glass of white wine, refilled it and then settled down to eat dinner on her lap beside her brother.

On the television screen, giant spiders spilled from fast food containers and shoeboxes, from under the bed and out of coffee cups, ultimately clambering over cars and hedges, over people's faces, spinning webs the size of parasols between tree branches.

Simon would normally have been halfway through his meal by the time Sarah sat down, but instead he chewed mechanically, thinking of the man by the cliff.

Make her understand.

This is the warning I never had.

He glanced across at her. She had pried a small bone from a drumstick and was stripping it with her front teeth. She worked quickly, but gave up on it when it got difficult, discarding it on the edge of the plate and moving on to the next.

"Are you really watching this?" Sarah asked. Simon nodded, his mind far, far from home. "Can we talk now? About mum and dad."

He was desperate to stall, not least of all because his attempt to clear his head had made him more anxious. Echoing and burbling with almost forgotten voices, he wanted to throw himself down and drown amongst them.

"Was it really suicide?" Sarah asked. She assumed he had all the answers. Until a couple of hours ago, he could almost have believed that it was true.

The cavern yawned and his memory of their father's disappearance snatched a breath.

His father had told him to look after his sister and then walked out of the front door, leaving his keys on the hook. He had been the last person to see him. His father hadn't seemed under duress. He had been relaxed. Even relieved.

"You'll be alright," he had said with a pat on his shoulder and then he was gone without a look back.

Sarah discarded her meal on the table in front of them.

Simon opened his mouth to speak, not yet knowing what he was going to say, but as he did so he felt the familiar squeezing sensation at the nape of his neck, like a thumb and forefinger probing and then pinching. He arched his back slightly as the shockwave ran down his spine.

As the Creature made its presence felt within him, he focussed his mind on his breathing, letting go of his personality, and his whirling thoughts, letting the prospect of a tricky conversation about their dead father to slip away. As the Creature took up residence, Simon allowed himself to become empty. He had to become the servant again. The vessel.

So soon?

He could feel the nefarious sensation of the thing working its way into position. He felt its 'fingers' climbing his vertebra, pressing on his skull, through, tapping inside his brain, searching out the familiar pathways.

"Simon?"

Rather than being displaced as one might expect, he felt more vital than ever. The Creature could see what he could see and it could express its pleasure or otherwise, but he remained in control. He rocked gently with the adrenaline rush and attempted to stay calm.

The old, worn cushions cradled the sore muscles of his back. The tray, warmed by the plate, was a comfortable weight on his lap, breathing with him. His skin buzzed pleasurably, wetly, in the cool air.

He saw the worry lines of Sarah's forehead, ridges in sandstone. Her hair no longer appeared to be a jumble of dirty-blond curls; each strand had its purpose and place within an overarching pattern, not reminiscent of dead cells at all, but of a substance that effectively caught and reflected the light so it appeared that they radiated light of their own. Her eyes, chestnut brown with fiery flecks of amber, like his, glistened with tears.

She was disappointed and he wouldn't comfort her. The Creature's consciousness swelled within him, its gossamer tendrils stiffening, announcing its desire for yet another delivery. It took up position within him so swiftly that he didn't have time to prepare for the night's work ahead. He continued to focus on his breathing, but couldn't help a stab of anxiety.

Even serial killers at their most prolific did not often take people as frequently as he had done in the last two months. When killers picked up their pace like this, they left objects behind, they were seen, people made connections. He knew he was likely to get caught soon. It would seem that the man he followed last night had already been following him. Everything was going to shit. Fast.

The growing presence of the Creature, however, was a drug, and gradually, he began to feel invincible, knowing that It would steer him around the danger. He felt he could handle anything, which was useful, because anything could happen.

He turned to his sister to make an excuse to leave, but he felt the squeeze in his skull the moment he looked at her. He immediately turned away, but there was no denying what had happened. The sensation had been sharp and definite.

He looked at her again. She was attempting to keep her emotions in check, as was he.
Squeeze.

There was no time for explanations or goodbyes.

The Creature had chosen her and now he had a job to do.

Chapter Six

“We're going out,” said Simon, tempering a headache that would cripple him if he didn't act on the Creature's instruction. He stood. “Now.”

Sarah looked at her plate, meal not even half-finished, and then back at him.

“Dessert,” he said. “I've had enough of that microwave. I want to buy something before the shop closes.”

“That,” she said, “is the most pathetic lie I've ever heard. You're still avoiding talking to me. You'll do anything, won't you?”

“I'm not avoiding you,” he said. “You're coming with me. Get your warm coat.”

“We're taking your car, right?”

“Warm ... coat ...” Simon said.

Her bare feet thudded against the carpeted stairs, hitting the ones that squeaked and the ones that didn't indiscriminately. The sound got smaller and smaller and then he heard her open her wardrobe door, followed by the clack and clang of hangers. Within moments, she was running back down the stairs in trainers. Over one arm was the dark green army jacket he had requested she wear.

“Okay,” she said, hopping down the last step. “Let's get this over with.”

“... Put it on then,” Simon said.

“I'll look like a div,” she replied. She hadn't worn the coat since Simon had given it to her. It was all pockets and straps and scuffed, metal poppers. It had a detachable hood and a worn tag that said it was authentic, as used by the UK military. “I know you wear these, but ...” Although it was chilly out, it was still technically summer. Technically, she'd look like a div. She pouted in defiance. “Can't I just carry it? ... Okay, okay, I'll wear it.”

In the car, she made a point of fiddling with the windows and the fan before even reaching for the seat belt. When she did, Simon said:

“I wouldn't bother with that if I was you, Rabbit,” and set about adjusting the rear view mirror.

She let the seatbelt go and it clunked back into its place behind her left shoulder. She sat absolutely still.

She had been stupid to grab her coat and come back downstairs. That had been her opportunity to escape. 'Warm coat' was her signal to run and she had missed it. 'Rabbit' confirmed that she was now in deep shit.

Or was she? Maybe she should call his bluff.

She felt weak when she glanced at Simon's face. She saw no emotion. No life. They were not going out for cake.

Only the hope that this might be a drill prevented her from babbling at him, as she had no intention of being chased down by him, by her own brother. She would rather die here and now.

Eyes shut tight, she tried not to cry. She had behaved stupidly, not once, but twice, so absorbed by her thoughts and her need for answers that she hadn't seen the change come over him.

When she opened her eyes, the car was eating up white lines. Simon looked dead ahead, focusing outwards.

If this is a test, she thought, what does Simon expect of me? They were driving too quickly for her to grab the wheel without killing them. Maybe that was what he wanted. She glanced at him again for some kind of hint, but he communicated nothing. He had become the automaton.

As if she needed more evidence that something was wrong, they drove past the local shop, which was still open, without slowing. Simon took a corner in fourth gear and Sarah's stomach turned.

The road descended steeply, flanked by trees on either side whose branches locked fingers overhead. They rocketed down the hill.

If she was going to stop this, she had to do it now. At the current speed, her options seemed to be injury or death and, considering that Simon had contingency plans for every eventuality, she ascertained that this must be the plan.

Now's my chance, she thought. Grab the wheel. Roll the car ...

It was one thing to think it and another to reach across, take the cold leather of the steering wheel and pull.

"Gum," Simon demanded, breaking her mental loop. His eyes remained on the road.

"What? Where?"

"In your pocket," Simon said, as though talking to a child.

In the inside pocket of the div jacket, she found a pack of spearmint chewing gum, along with an index card. She dropped two tablets of gum into Simon's outstretched hand, afraid to touch him, and then she shrank back to read the card, which she was able to do quickly, because it had only one word written on it, in thick, black, marker pen letters.

GO.

"We're nearly there," Simon said.

She had never seriously considered that she would have to protect herself from him, but here it was, and faced with this reality, she couldn't do what it took to escape. Knowing her luck, she'd kill them both, and while that might have been part of Simon's plan it certainly wasn't something she could accept. She couldn't risk hurting him.

Simon glanced at her.

"It's okay," Sarah said.

Simon allowed a vehicle to overtake and get some distance ahead, before he cut the lights and turned the car onto a path that was partially concealed from the road, almost like driving through curtains and ending up backstage. Panic leapt within her and she knew why Simon had been keen for her to escape before this turning. She could not see ahead and within a few seconds could no longer see behind either. Through the passenger window, she made out the outline of trees, tall, old men with their arms around each other for support.

The tyres chewed the dirt, the engine growled to get up an incline, and then everything was still.

"Alright, rabbit," he said and cut the engine with a flick of his wrist.

There was the word 'rabbit' again, her invitation to run, but she could not see more than a few feet in any direction. She had more chance of getting a branch in the face than losing Simon. This was probably his territory. She'd fall and scream, be lost and found, she'd run in a circle. Getting out of the car would only prolong the end. She wouldn't do it.

"Let's get it over with," Simon said, taking the words out of her mouth. When she didn't move, he said: "If you don't get out of the car, I'll drag you out."

She looked deep into his dark, brown eyes and saw nothing except that he meant what he had said. He stared into hers and saw that she understood, and yet she still didn't move.

She thought he might slap her then, but instead he got out of the car. He became a shape, like the trees; a man in an army and navy surplus store jacket, unbuttoned, walking fast, with grim purpose. When he reached her door, she flicked the lock down, leaned over the driver's seat, slammed the driver's door shut and locked it too.

He looked surprised.

"Open the door, Sarah."

On the other side of the glass, his voice was raised, but calm and very far away. She clambered over the gear stick, into the driver's seat and started the engine. As she crunched into reverse gear, Simon took a step back and delivered a swift side kick to the glass. The car rocked, the glass cracked but didn't break.

She hit the accelerator and the car revved uselessly. She raised the clutch, too quickly, and stalled the engine. Silence.

Simon was a blur at the window. This time the glass smashed into chunks and he reached in, leaning over the passenger seat and grabbing a handful of her jacket.

"Don't do it," he growled. "Get out."

With one hand, she attempted to fight him off without much effect. With the other, she twisted the key and the car jumped backwards, forcing Simon to release her, spilling him to the ground.

Treat it like a driving lesson, she thought.

Check the mirrors. Signal. No. Fuck that. Raise the clutch. Slowly. Slowly.

As the car moved backwards, revving wildly, Simon reached through the broken glass a second time. This time he unlocked the door and had it open. Sarah allowed the car to pick up speed, racing back towards the main road, bumping up the steep incline and throwing Simon to the floor a second time. He rolled as though it was nothing, gained his feet and ran after her.

She jerked the wheel left and then right, engine screaming as the car crawled backwards up the incline, kicking up dirt. The back of the car hit a tree, but she kept moving, with the sound of metal on bark now. And then it was free and the car slammed down on the main road. She lost her grip on the wheel; caught it again. Still rolling backwards, she put the car into first gear.

Unable to watch what Simon was doing and concentrate on her driving, she looked down at her feet. Clutch. Gently. Gentle acceleration. The car lurched.

Heart hammering, she looked up and saw Simon running in her path, arms outstretched, waving her down. In the headlights she saw that his chin was bloody. She might have stopped had she not seen his eyes. Empty, as though he did not feel pain or anger or fear. There was only her and his need to take her into the forest.

Don't stall, she told herself.

When she was sure that the engine had bitten, she floored the accelerator and was rewarded with a momentary squeal of tyres. She tried to swerve around her brother, but heard a sickening thud as he glanced off the wing.

She checked the mirror to see if he was (still coming) okay, but the road was empty.

It was half a mile before she realised she was holding her breath and another half a mile before she considered that she needn't hurry as she neither knew where she was nor where she was going.

She pulled over, tyres scraping the kerb, and took a deep breath of the air that swirled in through the broken window. The passenger seat was covered in shattered glass.

She had to go where Simon couldn't find her, something he had made her arrange, but which she had never taken seriously, as if not thinking about it could have prevented it from happening. It had almost worked.

He had always warned her not to go home. It was the first place anyone would look. And it was where he would go too, which made it the most dangerous place in the world.

Chapter Seven

This was the first time someone had escaped from him. He massaged his temple as the pain spiked. The most likely thing, he managed to think through his headache, was that she was on her way home to pick up some things before clearing out. So that was where he would go too. He forced himself to start walking.

He could hardly believe she had stolen his car.

The pain again, like a needle in the forehead.

She'd be too afraid to go far, he told himself, and the Creature. Aside from the fact that she didn't know how to drive, she relied on him for everything. If he was quick enough, he expected to find her at home with the doors locked, as though that would be able to keep him out.

She'd have taken possession of the baseball bat. He'd act cool, tell her it was ok, and then take it from her fingers.

His pain eased gradually as he continued to visualise his plan of action. He was very careful to think of places and objects, keeping his emotions submerged. He thought of the way the house leaned back from the road. He visualised himself walking up the path. The dewy grass would silence his steps. He would enter through the back as usual. If the lights were on in the kitchen, Sarah would not see him approaching from inside. The baseball bat had come from a sports superstore. It was black, with the words 'big hitter' written in white on one side. He thought of its weight in his hands.

Most of all, however, he focussed on the path directly ahead. He allowed himself to be part-mesmerised by the glistening tarmac; he counted leaves, steps, breaths, gaps between paving stones, their variation in colours. As practised, he did this to the exclusion of almost all other thoughts.

Fifteen minutes later he came across a bus stop and looked at the timetable to work out the quickest route home.

Going home, he told himself. Going home. Going home.

A mantra, going round and round, attaching itself to stray thoughts and flinging them back into the deep.

His focus was broken by the deep bass rumble of a transit van slowing to a stop in a side road. It was dirty, with a couple of dents in the side, noticeable even from a distance, but otherwise unremarkable.

The Creature squeezed, however, and so he knew it was bad news. He sensed that the Creature saw it as possible transportation home, but when it pulled out of the side road and growled in his direction, he knew it was worse than that. The headlights were on full beam, so he couldn't see into the cab.

Something's coming.

This is the warning I never had.

The van pulled up beside him.

The man inside had already wound down the passenger window so he could be heard. He was wearing a smart, brimmed hat. He kept his head down and his face in shadow, but Simon saw that his skin was dark and creased like tan leather.

“Need a lift?” he said, revealing crooked teeth and leaning over the passenger seat. His breath billowed from his mouth.

“I’m fine,” Simon said. The corresponding bolt of pain almost crippled him. The Creature had its own ideas.

“Get in, Simon”. The smile remained, but the veneer of humour was gone. His tone of voice was tired, as though he was fed up of doing things the hard way. In response to the look in his eyes, Simon opened the door and climbed in.

“You’ll get used to the smell,” the man said. The cab was muddy and stank of piss and rotting meat. “Belt up.” Simon connected his seatbelt and the man got the van moving, adding: “Safety first.”

Simon took his first good look at the man’s face and was reminded of a bust that Sarah had made in pottery class. She hadn’t shown it to him; he had examined it while she was in another room looking for a hammer with which to destroy it. Dented and lopsided, scarred and thumbed, it possessed more than a passing resemblance to the man now sitting beside him.

“I’m Firdy,” he said. He had the voice of a very heavy smoker, pre-op, although there was no accompanying odour of cigarettes. Just a drunk, old man on a farmyard smell, made more nauseating by the additional stench of stale food. He glanced at Simon, displaying his milky eye, which appeared to be blind. The other was sly and gun-metal grey.

He didn’t offer a hand. He only had one good one of these too. He was wearing black, leather gloves. He winced every time he changed gear and the fingers of his left hand only moved when he was stretching them. Otherwise, it was a grabber; a claw. He worked the wheel with his good hand, which was no small feat in a van this size, and he made it seem easy. On a straight, he drummed his fingers.

He wore a long mohair jacket, like the city boys wore, over a dark shirt and baggy, faded jeans.

“Where is she going?” Firdy said.

“She’ll go home,” said Simon.

Firdy changed down a gear. Squeeze. Wince. Release.

He waited a moment before speaking again. “And where will she go really?” He turned to watch Simon’s response.

“She’ll go home,” Simon repeated. “I’ll tell you the way.”

“No need,” Firdy said. He turned right at the end of the road. “Give me your phone.”

“She won’t answer,” Simon said.

“You’re going to do everything I say, when I say it. It takes too long to say everything twice.” He took his good hand off the steering wheel for a moment to slam his palm against the back of the cabin. He was rewarded with a corresponding thump and scrapes, like hooks dragging across floorboards. There was a muffled snuffling and then another sequence of thumps. They were not random sounds. They were steps. “Give me your phone,” Firdy said, “or you can travel the rest of the way in the back.”

Simon placed his mobile inside Firdy’s gloved hand.

Squeeze.

“Good,” Firdy said. “Let’s keep this simple.”

He held the phone against the wheel and used his thumb to unlock the keypad and flick through the menus. Whatever had happened to his left hand, it had been that way for some time, because the skill of his right was remarkable. Eventually he said: "So Simon, is this supposed to be funny?"

He found no useful information of any kind. The phone had no stored numbers or text messages, neither received nor sent, and there was no record of any calls.

"You asked me to do everything you say," Simon reminded him.

Firdy bit his lip. "Give me Sarah's number."

Simon did as he was told and Firdy punched the number into the phone. He then slipped it into his inside pocket without hitting the call button.

They drove in silence. From time to time, Firdy glanced across at Simon who was always staring dead ahead.

"I know what you're doing," Firdy said eventually. Simon did not respond. Not even a twitch. "You're counting. It's a very good trick, but you can't keep it up. Sooner or later, I'll see what I'm looking for. There are always cracks. I'll wait."

Simon didn't move.

*

By the time they reached home, Simon had learnt two new shortcuts. They might have been useful in the last couple of months, but tonight he was going to do everything the long way, slowly and methodically.

Firdy turned into the drive and parked in the space where Simon's car should have been. Light shone through the wooden blinds of the kitchen window, but that didn't mean Sarah was home. Firdy watched Simon for his reaction and frowned because yet again there wasn't one. He was behaving like a robot, two plus two making four, unconcerned about future equations.

He removed the keys from the ignition and gave Simon a broken-toothed grin. "Out."

Simon did as he was told, his movements deliberate, controlled, as if underwater. They met up behind the van.

"What are you going to do if she's home?" Firdy asked.

"Whatever you say," said Simon. It was true. Firdy sensed no deception.

Simon heard thumping inside the van, like heavy footsteps again and something being dragged.

"Wait there," Firdy said. "No closer." He opened up one of the rear doors, stared inside for a moment and then stepped back.

The thing that jumped out was a rush of matted grey and brown fur. It landed deftly on the tarmac, displaying great dexterity, despite its unkempt, almost disfigured, appearance. The bedraggled thing was about the size of an adult Akita and, like an enormous dog, it shook itself. Its face, however, was too narrow and too long. It looked more like a child's drawing of a wolf than a dog.

Its eyes were deep, black and fierce. Panting, it stared at Simon and a bass rumble rose from its throat, like a drum roll. Simon looked to Firdy who, to his alarm, was busy reaching into the van. Nothing was restraining the dog, except perhaps Firdy's proximity.

After a long moment, the beast took a bold step forward and revealed not one but two rows of teeth. Simon immediately thought of a shark. That was what they were; two rows of mismatched shark teeth. Many were missing, but it still had more than a dog should have, including an entire extra row on the lower left-hand side of its jaw. Two rows for grinding.

It drew its lips back further in a terrible sneer.

It was enjoying his discomfort.

He knew that he shouldn't display his fear, but he was unarmed and ill-equipped to fight such an animal. That was why Firdy had it. Looking into its dimly dark eyes, it was impossible to remain calm. He forced himself to hold his ground, but the dog had the psychic advantage; it knew that he was afraid. It had known that he would be from the moment he had climbed into the van.

It snarled with apparent disgust.

"I see you're getting acquainted," Firdy said. "That's good." He pulled a length of rope from the back of the van, wrapping it so it hung in loops over his left arm. It was about fifteen feet long. He stood there like a happy executioner. "You're not so good at concentrating with the Dog around," he said. "Now I know that Sarah's not inside, because when your new friend jumped out of the van, your first thought was that you're glad she's not here."

He stooped and grimaced as he connected the rope to the dog's collar, which was a leather strap around its neck. Then he put his hand on Simon's shoulder. "Let's go."

As Simon, Firdy and the dog walked towards the house, further sounds of movement came from inside the van. Firdy stared hard in its direction and the scraping noise stopped as abruptly as it had started. He continued to lead them to the front door, but Simon took a lingering look back at the van where he knew at least one other creature was waiting for its moment.

The dog walked at Firdy's side, its back rising and falling at the level of Firdy's waist. They were probably about equal in weight, around 60 kilograms, meaning that it would be physically impossible for Firdy to control it if it wanted to do its own thing. Simon noticed, however, that the dog was limping; perhaps in pain, but also because its legs were different lengths. Its expression as it moved, looking from side to side, was a constant snarl.

Firdy tried the door. It was locked. As was becoming usual, he watched Simon for his reaction, but Simon simply produced the key.

"After you," Firdy said and then, once they were all inside, took the key and locked up behind them.

The dog's paws twisted and turned on the dirty, off-white tiles. In this domestic setting, among cupboards and cutlery, the swing top bin and the mop and bucket, it looked more out of place than ever; bigger too. It had moved with the darkness and even with its dirty white and brown fur it could probably sneak and travel in shadows, but under the harsh neon spotlights there was no getting away from what an abomination it was. Drool slopped over its jaws. It had canines, as well as the shark-like teeth. They jutted out from the front of its mouth by an inch or so, like mini-tusks.

"Wait," Firdy told Simon and then turned to the dog, extending a finger. "You too." The dog grumbled as it lay down, cooling its belly on the floor.

Firdy moved silently through the kitchen/diner, taking in the half-eaten meal. He removed a glove to dip a finger into the food and then slid it back on again. He glanced at the television, which was murmuring to itself, a simulation of a DNA strand spinning on screen. He examined the chairs as he passed. All the while he drew ever deeper breaths, as if sniffing for clues.

When Firdy entered the adjacent room, Simon was able to fix his position by the sound of air whistling through his nose. He was in the lounge or sitting room or whatever those things were called. At present it was a graveyard; a place for the things they had inherited that had too high an emotional cost. He hadn't been in there for weeks and now he winced as Firdy walked over the creaking boards, searching in the darkness with his one eye, touching shadows with his gloved fingers.

Simon considered whether or not it would be wise to take this opportunity to increase his distance from the dog, but before he even moved it stood up, its claws clacking on the tiles.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Firdy called from the next room.

It bared its fangs.

Firdy appeared again, but started up the stairs.

"Er," said Simon.

"Don't move and it won't kill you," Firdy said as he ascended, one foot facing inwards, one arm hanging limply at his side. He moved quickly, despite his disabilities. Silently too. In a few seconds he was gone and once more Simon was at the mercy of the dog. It had taken up a crouching position from which it could either lie down or charge at him.

He took a deep, shaking breath, aiming to clear his thoughts. The dog, Firdy and the Creature in his head were all focussed on him; the psychic traffic was strictly one way. He had to hold it together. For Sarah's sake.

The dog stood and took a step forward.

Peaceful thoughts. Cracks in the ceiling. One. Two. Three.

The Fibonacci sequence; one, one, two, three, five, eight, thirteen ...

Bottles of beer; ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall, ninety-nine bottles of beer, if one of those bottles should happen to fall there'd be ninety-eight bottles of beer on the wall, ninety-eight bottles of beer on the wall, ninety-eight bottles of beer ...

Firdy returned to the kitchen/diner.

"Empty," he said.

"What?"

"It's all clear. But then we knew that, didn't we? I don't trust you, that's all." He winced with what looked like a headache rocketing through his skull and then he bent down to gather up the rope, working through the pain.

"Let's go," Firdy said and nodded towards the stairs.

Simon did as he was told. The dog walked at his heels, barring the exit route.

There were five doors off the landing. They led to the bathroom, his room, Sarah's room, an airing cupboard and the master bedroom. Firdy gestured towards the master bedroom.

"This one's locked," he said. "Why?" Simon didn't answer. "This is where it happened, isn't it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Pain. The fingernails again, raking across his brain.

Firdy persisted. "This is where your mother killed herself. That's why you keep it locked."

"Are you asking me, or telling me?"

They stared into each other's eyes; probing; hiding.

Firdy let it go and nodded at the door to Simon's room.

"In."

It was a small space, so it was only ever going to be in one of two states. Tidy or an utter mess. The room exhibited almost military neatness. Firdy might not have believed that Simon slept in here had the dog not been so keen to enter the room, sniffing the bare floorboards and the grey camp bed against one wall. Its tail curled as it did so. Simon thought that it was strangely playful for a beast that was able to rip his face off with one bite.

It peed on the floor. When it was finished, Firdy checked the rope and collar, which were attached by a single, metal clip and then tied the other end of the rope to Simon's desk, which was to one side of the door. He saw no ink stains on the desk, but found scratches and burn

marks, probably from where Simon was making weapons, he thought. He had to remember that there were weapons stashed all over the house and that Simon was dangerous. He was glad he had brought the Dog.

“The numbers,” Firdy said when the rope was securely fastened. “The counting. The footsteps. The breaths. Are you a Buddhist or something? Let's see how long you can keep it up.” Firdy's eyes narrowed, searching. He thought he almost had something, but it eluded him again. He gave up for now. “Don't move or he'll rip your head off. The rope won't protect you; it's to stop him leaving the house if he decides to kill you. Stay still and you'll be fine. I'll free you when I find your sister.” He stroked the dog's head. “Do you want to give me that information now?” he asked Simon.

“I can't,” said Simon. “I don't know where she is.” Once more, he was telling the truth.

The dog watched Firdy limp out of the room, then it lowered its head and sat like a Sphinx, its bulky hindquarters thudding against the floorboards.

Simon turned away before panic took him and made him do something stupid. He thought of nothing. The dog sensed deceit and readied itself to spring.

Chapter Eight

After the neatness of Simon's room, Sarah's bedroom made Firidy's head spin. He sat on the psychedelic, flowery sheets of the bed, still unmade, and attempted to take everything in. It was the room of someone much more childlike than he had expected, though he could smell a sophisticated perfume and cut flowers, dying lavender in a vase made of an old, white wine bottle. Beneath the various scents he could smell her skin. Like fresh air, he thought. He gathered up a t-shirt that she had slept in and put it to his face. His eye rolled back in its socket.

Shaking, he put it in his pocket for the Cat. Her sense of smell, should he require it, was much more profound than his and, perversely, better too than the Dog's. She was faster, smarter and more independent. She didn't go on the lead. She was constantly honing her skills and kept her claws sharp. Should he need her before the night was out, she would make a perfect hunter and retriever.

Sarah's walls were adorned with scribbings and sketches, postcards, notes in varied handwriting, things to do, things to buy, places to go, magazine clippings, supposedly humorous articles about animals or unlikely things that had happened to 'real' people – and photographs.

Firidy squeezed his throbbing temple.

On the back of her door, underneath several jackets and an array of scarves, was an enormous poster of the play Chicago, perhaps the result of an opportunistic grab from a bus shelter.

Every surface – dressing table, desk, chest of drawers – was covered in papers, or items that held talismanic and ornamental value: matchbooks and pens, stuffed animals, an electric glow ball, a fish bowl full of marbles, a crystal figurine of a unicorn with a snapped horn.

The floor was littered with clothes, clean tops and dirty underwear forming a new layer on top of the carpet.

“How can people live like this?” he said and lay back on the bed until his vision steadied.

On the ceiling were stickers, cinema ticket stubs and glow in the dark stars.

He closed his eyes. He'd have to look at all this to gather clues, but not yet. Not yet.

When the nausea passed – the headache was constant – he switched on Sarah's computer, a green and white Mac, hoping to access her email. He knew that there were things called cookies and that he might be able to find some useful information on her whereabouts. While he waited for the machine to boot up, he plucked a photo from the edge of the monitor. Photos would be the way forward. Sarah had plenty for him to look at.

Simon had more personality in the photo he held than he did in the flesh. Perhaps, Firidy considered, it was taken three or more years ago, before his life had changed. He was standing behind Sarah with his arms wrapped around her waist, his chin resting on her head and his eyes sparkling. Amazing what life can do to someone, Firidy thought. It had scooped out Simon's insides, blown the light out of his eyes, but kept the body running. He was an efficient machine now. An emotional void.

Sarah, beautiful, was grinning so much it looked like her face could split in two. Her slender hand gripped Simon's forearm, keeping his protecting arm in place. Her hair was long and shining in the sun.

The photo had definitely been taken before the change; before Simon had received his first orders. Firdy tossed it onto the table amid Sarah's scruffy college notes and then turned to the photo gallery on the wall beside her bed. She was clearly popular, though she was not the centre of any group photo. Perhaps she was more reserved and more like Simon than she looked. He searched for recurring faces, pried a few from the wall, but the photos were not annotated. No names. No numbers. He suspected that he was going to have to be methodical in order to track her down, but method bored him. The Cat would speed up the search, but of course, there were risks.

He allowed his eyes to wander again over the perfect faces. Sarah on piggyback. Sarah dressed as a witch. Sarah, Simon and their father, Aubrey, standing outside the entrance to a cave. Pluck.

In this photo, Simon was standing a little to one side, smiling for the camera, not so good at pretending then. This, Firdy thought, had been taken after the change. At this point, Simon would have known that his life was about to change forever. Aubrey had his arm around Sarah's waist, squeezing her and laughing.

Wow, thought Firdy; now, that's thought-control.

Chapter Nine

“Geraldine. It’s Sarah.”

A long pause reeled out, but she had been expecting that.

“I don't believe it,” Geraldine said eventually. “I took your number off my phone; otherwise I wouldn't have answered.”

“How are you doing?”

“I just said I took your number off my phone. Why are you asking me how I'm doing?”

“Making conversation, I guess ... Hello? ... Hello?”

Sarah dialled back. Once. Twice. Three times.

“Geraldine,” she was able to say eventually. “I'm in trouble. I'm sorry I've not been in touch, but I'm in big trouble.” Another silence. “You remember your promise?”

“I don't believe this.”

“Choose a friend,” Simon had said. “Someone reliable. One of your best friends. Make them promise to put you up if anything happens to me. You're going to need people you can trust around you. All the time. But I can't know who they are. Find someone reliable, make them promise and then keep a low profile. Don't tell me their name, where they live, what sex they are. They're not to phone the house or your mobile. No email. No Facebook. Cut them off. No contact unless you need their help.”

To her shame, she had done it. They hadn't been best friends, but they had been getting close. It felt unusual and good. Asking her to promise to look after her in an emergency had cemented the relationship. Geraldine had almost cried. And then, as Simon had demanded, she had broken contact.

“I've been a bitch,” she said.

“Maybe,” Geraldine said. “I don't know what I'd do if I saw you again.”

“Let's find out,” Sarah said. “Look out of your window.”

*

Geraldine opened the front door wearing a fluffy pink dressing gown and pink slippers with pig faces. As she stepped outside, however, her expression was serious. Sarah was used to seeing her with and without make-up. The morning after a night out her beautiful molasses sugar skin would be sucked dry of moisture, ashy, her lips cracked. She'd be standing over a pot of coffee in a similarly fluffy dressing gown, inhaling the caffeine fumes for an early hit and trying not to be sick. Although she appeared to be healthier now than she had been on those occasions, there was something unwholesome about her now. It was difficult to say why on a first impression. She had put on a stone or two, but that wasn't it. Her hair was combed out and unglamorous, secured on top of her head by a purple scarf, in preparation for future styling, but that wasn't it either.

It was late and her eyes were red. Sarah would have expected that of anyone else, but Geraldine had always been full of life, full of energy. Her eyes told a new, sombre story. They used to sparkle and everyone believed that she would become an actress as she wished, because she had an intangible quality that made people want to listen to her. Even when she was murderously angry, she had a light of sorts.

That all appeared to be in the past.

"I can't believe you're here," Geraldine said. "I can't believe you're doing this." Her voice could be politely described as husky. To Sarah it was something rubbed dry and raw.

"I'm desperate," Sarah said. "I've got to get off the road for a while. I could sleep on the floor."

Geraldine hesitated. "I'm married now, Sarah," she said. "Things have changed."

"Married? When? Who?"

"I didn't think you were that bothered. You never answered my calls."

Sarah held her head in her hands. Keep it together.

"Congratulations," she said.

"What will he think if he wakes up and finds you on the floor?"

Sarah couldn't believe what she was hearing. Geraldine giving a fuck what someone else thought? When did that happen? Like oil in water, it changed everything.

"Can you talk to him?" Sarah asked and Geraldine sniggered then sighed.

"He's asleep. It's best if he doesn't ever find out you're here."

"I'll be silent," Sarah said.

"You're good at that."

"Look ... I am sorry."

"You look. I'm going to keep my promise, but in the morning you have to find somewhere else to stay. I don't ever want to see you again."

It stung even more than Sarah had imagined. She followed Geraldine into the dark hallway and Geraldine shut the door behind her. Sarah could smell perfume on her dressing gown – Calvin Klein, one of her own favourites – intermingled with a fragrance for a man, something equally expensive, layered with stale cigarette smoke.

As they ascended the stairs, Sarah following Geraldine's swinging hips, she could smell oil and eggs and sausages and was suddenly starving. She hoped that Geraldine would offer her a snack, but instead she pushed open a door off the landing and said in a low voice:

"Stay in here. Don't come out. Don't come out for anything. Don't make a sound. Do you understand?"

She sounded like Simon.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," she said.

"Do you need to pee?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah."

"Good."

It was at that moment that Sarah's phone rang. It began as a tentative rumble in her pocket and then there was a woosh as the ringtone began to sing. She pulled it from her pocket, intending to cut it off immediately, but she found herself staring at Simon's name on the display, terrified, confused and elated all at once. Geraldine attempted to snatch it from her grip, but she pulled away.

"Sarah!" Geraldine hissed. In the darkness, Sarah couldn't see her expression and she was glad. She sounded furious and she was right to be, but she could not hang up. She felt connected to her brother again. She wanted to answer the call so he could tell her everything was alright again. Needing to make a quick decision, she decided that it didn't matter that it might not be

safe. It was worth the risk. It's better to regret something you have done, than something you haven't. She'd heard that in a song. That was right, wasn't it?

"Sarah!"

Her thumb hovered above the answer button.

"Give me the phone!"

It waited for a few seconds more and then Sarah closed her eyes and disconnected the call.

"Oh my God," said Geraldine and shoved her into the spare room. Sarah wanted to explain, but knew that she couldn't. "Turn it off," Geraldine said.

Sarah switched the phone to vibrate.

"Off!" Geraldine said.

"It is off."

"No noise. Not a sound. Go to sleep. Do not come out until I get you, or I swear to God ..."

"Okay. I heard you."

Geraldine shut the door gently although she wanted to slam it. Sarah pressed her ear against the cool wood, listening to her fluffy slipper footsteps crossing the landing, to the right, followed by the sound of a door brushing against carpet as it opened. A pause and then again, hushing, she closed the door behind her.

The room in which she stood was about ten feet by ten feet, somewhat larger than Simon's room, but with more items inside. Moonlight illuminated the flimsy curtains and showed her disconcerting silhouettes. She stared at the shadowy objects in an attempt to make sense of them, but the more she examined them the more they seemed like dead things, giant skeletons, animals waiting to pounce. Almost whimpering, surprised at herself, she edged towards the curtain. She let out a yelp when one of the things touched her and she slapped her hand over her mouth.

I'm nearly crying, she realised as she reached the curtain. Tentatively, she drew it back so she could see the room more clearly.

A cross-trainer, with tea towels and pillowcases draped over its arms. A washing basket. A clothes horse. A TV set with an old-fashioned aerial. Boxes and boxes, labelled with marker pen, stacked up almost as high as the ceiling. A past life. Hidden.

She hoped to cast her eyes on a fridge, but it didn't materialise. This room was strictly storage, where Geraldine – or her new husband - had put things that she couldn't let go of, but wanted to keep out of sight.

She sank to the floor and let the curtain go, returning the room to its eerie, semi-gloom.

It had been ten minutes now and Simon hadn't called back. If she hadn't come here, she could have spoken to him, might have been able to turn the car around and head back home. Now she was waiting again, something she was no good at all.

In one corner was a pile of sheets, from which she made herself a makeshift pillow. She put her head down and listened to the house as she often did when she was at home. She could hear the buzz of electricity in the wires, the breeze in the trees and somewhere a very late or very early bird was chirping.

In the hallway, a clock was ticking steadily.

She removed her jacket, wrapped it around her like a blanket and considered what she would do tomorrow. She shouldn't be alone. She could do some shopping, she supposed. The shops counted as a public place and Simon had left her a healthy amount of emergency money in one of the jacket pockets. That probably hadn't been his intention though. That money would be for transport, food, shelter. Simon things.

She didn't want to be alone tomorrow. An entire day of fear and loneliness loomed. She clutched her phone to her chest so she would be certain to feel it if Simon called again. She knew she wouldn't sleep until she heard from him.

Chapter Ten

As slowly as he could manage, Simon adjusted his kneeling position to prevent himself losing the feeling in his legs. The dog raised its head. The beast was comfortable and its eyes were closing, but every time Simon thought it might be asleep it moved; his thought stirred it on each occasion.

He continued to keep his thoughts benign, but it was difficult, because he was exhausted and wanted to sleep too, even if only for a few minutes. It was tempting. Blinking became a dangerous operation as opening his eyes again now required significant effort.

Counting was soporific. He searched for something else to focus his attention on. From Sarah's room, he heard the start-up bleep of her computer, followed a minute or so later by the jingle of the operating system. In the space between the beep and the music, he had taken two breaths, very slow and even, like a diver conserving his oxygen supply.

The dog's body shivered as it panted. The sound, like a steam train gathering speed, filled the room and filled his head. The odour of its body and its foetid breath did the same, swamping his senses, nauseating him.

He dug deeper. And deeper still.

In this state, it could have been three minutes or thirty three before he heard Firdy's voice in the next room. He couldn't make out the individual words, but he recognised the rhythm as one side of a telephone conversation. It was repeated several times, amid the clattering of drawers, the scattering of papers, the smashing of glass.

He's the hangman, he thought, drawing the noose tight.

The dog's ears pricked up. Simon knew better than to attempt to rein his thought in. That would only cause more ripples. He let it go, the one that got away, disappearing in the murky waters of this lake, still, serene and submerged, leaving barely a trace, but a trace nonetheless.

The dog squinted at him and sighed.

Chapter Eleven

Sarah heard a knock and opened one eye.

“Yeah,” she said. Her throat was dry, painful. “Come in.”

The knock came again and she realised that it wasn't the door, but the wall.

She sat upright and pulled her jacket on, getting her arm caught in the sleeve. She had to get ready to run, but she was dizzy and could hardly stand.

Bang!

Bang!

Of the two possibilities for the violence - Simon or someone he had hoped to protect her from - she knew which she dreaded most; the thought of opening the door and seeing Simon rushing toward her made her feel sick.

At the window, she saw that an extension had been built at the back of the house. Its roof was beneath the window, so she ought to be able to climb across and lower herself down to the ground without much difficulty. A rickety fence, about six feet tall, separated the overgrown garden from the back street. She was fit. She could probably climb the fence, give or take a few splinters, but much rather than the uncertain fate that waited if she stayed put. Working out her route, wondering if she could get to her car from there, she attempted to open the window, but it was locked.

Bang! Thud. And another thump, followed by the slap of flesh hitting the wall.

Fuck.

Maybe she should run for the stairs and head straight to the car. At the spare room door now, she listened, feeling for her keys. Where were they?

There was no sound from the hallway. Again, something struck the wall from the other side. She heard Geraldine yelp.

Fuck.

And again.

And again.

Rhythmic ...

...

Sarah slipped to her knees, weary now that she was no longer afraid, and she worked hard to stifle a fit of laughter.

Geraldine wailed again, the pillow or fist or ball-gag, whatever it was, slipping out her mouth, she supposed. Listening carefully, she could hear her husband grunting too, roughly in time to the sound of the headboard striking the wall.

Her chest ached and she noticed the beginnings of tears in her eyes, conveying relief and regret at once. She swatted them away and slapped her cheeks to get a hold of herself. She was surprised that she had fallen asleep, but any good it had done had been undone by her shock upon waking.

In the next room, they weren't making love. They were fucking. Geraldine was the fuckee. The bed was slamming against the wall. Every now and then, there was the sharp snap of a heavy palm across buttocks. She heard Geraldine gasping for breath, never quite catching it.

It went on like this for a long time; long enough for Sarah to wish it would stop.

Hands over her ears, she couldn't help thinking of the time – the first and last – that she had heard her parents having sex. It was a school night and they had thought she was asleep, but she had been staring at the ceiling, fingers in her ears, in the room that was now Simon's, the walls too close on all sides. It wasn't sounds of pleasure she had blocked out, but desperation. Release.

She had heard her mother say 'no', but the noise continued, like a fist pounding on a door; the door finally giving way.

She couldn't recall them ever hugging each other again, no matter how bad things got. In fact, she couldn't remember them touching. They glared at each other, they passed the salt, they left each other curt messages on their remaining headed notepaper, they said goodnight.

She counted slowly to two hundred and tentatively removed her hands from her ears, just in time to hear Geraldine's husband come, long and loud, the sound of a beast, not a man; an ape that has just taken new territory perhaps. An ape that will be insufferable for days on the back of it.

There were no words, unless they were whispering. Except for the drone of electricity, the house was as silent as death. The air was still.

Her phone vibrated and she pounced on it. It was Simon again. A text this time.

Are you ok? I'm ok now. Where are you?

She was thinking about what this meant when she heard heavy footsteps heading across the landing. She held her breath and prayed that the man would not come in here for any reason. The footsteps went past her door and then there was the sound of the light pull being activated in the bathroom, followed by the clank of the toilet seat. He peed thunderously, like a racehorse Simon called it, directly into the water.

When he was done, she heard Geraldine crying. Her sobs dyed when the toilet flushed. The man returned to the bedroom. His voice. A rumble.

She began tapping out her reply to her brother, but paused with her finger over the send button. She didn't want to consider it, but perhaps Simon wasn't himself yet after all. It was possible that he was going through the motions to lure her home. There was something about a code or pattern that she was meant to follow. She hadn't memorised it; at the time, she had hoped that if she didn't entertain the notion of something like this happening, everything would be okay. She should have known that that wouldn't work. Dad had still left. And mum had still died.

She read the message again.

Are you ok? I'm ok now. Where are you?

It was short and to the point, the way she had imagined his messages would be. There was nothing special about it, but she was sure there should be. He hadn't used her name, neither Sarah nor Sally. Wouldn't he have used one or the other to signal his state of mind?

She imagined him walking home in the dark, stabbing out the message, an assassin with the advantage of knowing his target inside out.

Her hopes of a reunion receded, because she knew it was true. Simon wasn't back yet. This message wasn't from him.

She cancelled her reply, feeling dejected, vulnerable and alone, missing Simon more than she could have known.

It was only then that she noticed she had missed four calls. All from him. A few minutes apart. Wasn't this the code? He would call a number of times in a row and ring off before she answered; then he would call her a final time, giving her enough time to pick up. Only she had slept through the whole thing, because she was exhausted and had set her phone to vibrate.

She was almost sure that this was the case and the thought of letting him down if he needed to talk to her was unbearable. She had done so many things wrong, she had to try to make up for it. She could at least let him know that she was safe. If there was a problem, she would move on. It was better than staying here, in limbo, with nothing but her thoughts for company, not knowing what was going to happen to her and not knowing if Simon was okay.

Fingers shaking with adrenaline, cold and relief, she set about typing her reply. When it was done she re-read it and hit send. The phone thought about it for a few seconds, during which she changed her mind several times, and then the handset buzzed.

Message sent.

That was that.

A reply came back within seconds. She realised that she had been holding her breath and sighed with relief when she opened up the message.

She knew it. Everything was going to be okay.

Chapter Twelve

The dog jumped as if it had been kicked and moments later Firdy stomped into the room.

“I’ve found her,” he said. At last, he was rewarded with more than a flicker of interest from his captive.

He had trawled her emails until his eyes were sore from staring at the screen and he had scrutinised her private letters before phoning more than a dozen of the numbers he collated. Of those that answered, half of them had given him abuse. It was unfair to dislike Sarah because of the friends she kept, but it was easy and he did dislike her.

He rubbed his temple.

Oh, but it couldn't be helped.

Of those that answered his questions, most of them thought she would be at home. They made random suggestions as to her whereabouts, though nothing rang true. In the end, she had broken cover all by herself.

“Don’t move,” he said and threw him half a loaf of bread and the remains of the chicken they had been eating for dinner. “That’s for you. Don’t feed the Dog; he’ll bite your hand off. Don’t run,” he said earnestly. “He’ll kill you if you try. I’ll be back with your sister as soon as I can.” Then he patted the dog on the head as though it was a puppy. “Good boy,” he said. “No killing.” He didn't check the rope. He pulled the door shut and thudded down the stairs, careless now in his enthusiasm to get to Sarah.

The Dog sat on its haunches watching Simon who sat motionless in the corner. Beneath them, the front door opened and closed, then the van door. The engine coughed to life and rumbled for a while before Firdy backed out onto the main road. He revved the engine hard and it grew quieter moment by moment until Simon and the dog were alone, or at least as alone as they could be with an uninvited presence in their minds. Simon could almost feel it catching his thoughts like fish in a stream, holding them up to the light, throwing them back.

He imagined a deep, deep river, the very depths of which were brown, blue, then black, unable to be penetrated by any kind of light. He imagined the dusty river bed and the weird, plant-like creatures clinging to it. Beneath them were caves and tunnels where even more freakish creatures kept safe from the predators above. This was where he put his mind. He took great handfuls of dirt and covered it up. When he was done, he washed his hands and looked the other way.

As his headache began to intensify, he conjured up a mental screen and filled it with a great many objects, so he wouldn't be tempted to think of Sarah again, of her reaction when she saw Firdy or what Firdy intended to do to her. He made the objects as real as possible and counted them off one by one. He linked them together and made ridiculous stories.

The dog was perplexed. Simon's mind was strange, but that was no reason to kill him. It would wait. It was the calm one, not like the cat, which was still locked inside the back of the van. No. Its patience had been rewarded in the past; it had no doubt that it would be again.

Chapter Thirteen

With the accelerator pressed to the floor, the transit van did just over 70mph. The motorway stretched on and on. The glowing studs zipped by, but not quickly enough for Firdy's liking. He was unaware of the confines of the van and of distance; only time. At this speed, he'd be in East London in about an hour. In an hour and a half, he could have Sarah. So in three hours he could be back at the house and things could really get started.

Three hours, he had to admit, was a painfully long time. It would be getting light by then. That was no good at all. It could delay proceedings another day and time was running out.

The headlights of vehicles coming the other way caused spots of light to hover in front of his eyes and his skull was pounding. The Third did not agree that he was doing the right thing by abandoning Simon, but It trusted him enough not to incapacitate him. He had his reasons. He would be quicker without him. He wouldn't have to worry that Simon was going to grab the wheel at some point and try to run them off the road. He trusted the Dog to keep an eye on him and prevent escape. Again, the Third disagreed.

He thinks of you as 'The Creature', Firdy thought angrily.

The Third's response was another spike of pain, like a needle going through the back of his head.

Okay, okay.

To the best of his ability, he kept his mind on his driving. Driving came naturally to him and it was something he enjoyed. Sometimes it even helped him to relax. He wished the van would give him another ten miles per hour, but it was probably for the best that he was stuck to the speed limit. He didn't want to get pulled over with the Cat in the back. That could be messy.

He could sense that the Cat was pleased to be away from the Dog, but was frustrated and confused by her continued confinement.

Your time will come, he thought and she settled somewhat, though he imagined that she was facing the exit, eyes wide in the dark, tapping her claws.

The Third hadn't been keen on his taking the Dog or Cat with him, but his confidence in their ability had convinced her to let him try. He had been looking forward to this night for weeks; he wasn't about to do anything to jeopardise its success. The Third knew that, though she kept a close and constant watch on his thoughts and (stabbed) tugged every now and then when something worried her.

It was all going to be okay though. Sarah had got away, but he and the Cat would soon retrieve her. It was a good thing he had decided to bring her as she'd be useful to him if anything else unexpected happened. He knew that sometimes she left home and hunted; she was a good tracker and based on appearance alone she'd be good for crowd control.

He had everything worked out.

You see, he thought. You see how I care for you.

He was changing lane to head for the centre of London when he felt a sudden sensation of falling.

It was as if he had been dropped.

He hit the brakes, too hard, and swerved across three lanes, the back fanning out. He wasn't wearing his seatbelt so the sudden drop in speed threw his body into the wheel. He freed his hand and turned the wheel hard to correct the skid, but his foot slipped from the brake and hit the accelerator. He swerved and braked again, tires screaming.

A truck moved over to the middle lane to avoid him and rushed by, its canvas-covered load flapping like a sail. It was all multi-coloured lights and a roar of disapproval.

On the hard shoulder, Firdy regained some semblance of control. He hit the bank and skidded to a stop. Something came off the van. A hub cap. It rolled on and on and then veered into the lanes of traffic.

Firdy rested his head against the steering wheel, hostage to a panic that was less to do with the fact that he had almost died, but more because the Third was gone and it had happened in a matter of seconds. She had never withdrawn so quickly before. It meant that something was wrong, something he didn't want to think about.

The Cat was mewling in the back, though it sounded more like a dog's whine or a child's groan. She was a big Cat. She was missing the Third too. For a while she would be lost without her.

"It'll pass," he said out loud. The sound of his voice, however, only served to punctuate the loneliness and make any attempts to defeat it seem futile.

He had to get out of the van. The nothingness, the silence, was crushing him. He fumbled the door open and half-fell out of the cab. His knees buckled and he had to haul himself up, stagger around the van. He stumbled up the bank and sat down in the wild grass, breathing hard.

Take a moment, he told himself. It's always the same. It always feels like this, but I'm still here.

He became aware of trucks thundering by. The world – their world – was enormous, sprawling, and it would destroy him, because he didn't fit.

The vehicles' momentum, however, reminded him that although it may be impossible to complete the mission, he should take the opportunity to make up time. He had to hope that the Third would return as usual, refreshed and recharged, refocussed and ready. She could do so before the day was out.

It would get better.

Another positive was that his headache was gone. He was free to think broad and deep without questions and disapproval. He could get things done; his way.

Knees aching, he forced himself to his feet and staggered like a much older man back down to the van. He would have expected it to be rocking from side to side as the Cat threw herself at the walls, but all was utterly still, physically and mentally.

He sought his connection to the animal, which usually persisted even when the Third was gone, but there was nothing. He grasped at the familiar strings, but none of them were connected, neither to the Cat nor the Dog.

He put his ear to the door, but couldn't hear anything above the occasional sound of engines on the motorway. He didn't have time for this, so he lowered the lever, paused for a moment with his weight against the door to judge the Cat's reaction and then, when he thought it was safe, he pulled the door open. It was only open a crack when the Cat slammed against it, knocking him to the floor and leaping over him, landing with hardly a sound, only the clicking of claws on the tarmac beyond him. Firdy span on the ground so he was lying on his stomach, face to face with the animal.

Like the Dog, its mouth appeared to be a permanent smile.

“It's okay,” Firdy said. “Alright.” He got to his knees before the Cat began backing away. He didn't have long before somebody saw it and called the police or the National Enquirer. Get in the van, Firdy thought, but the Cat did not respond and so he said it out loud, enunciating clearly. “Get in the van.”

The Cat bolted up the incline and paused at the top, half-hidden against a background of trees.

“Don't do this,” Firdy said.

It darted over the summit and beyond the tree line. By the time Firdy had scrambled back to the top of the hill, she was gone. He couldn't even tell which direction she had run in. Not without the Third's help.

Thinking of the Third now made him feel queasy. He was going to be in big trouble for losing the Cat. Keeping her hungry no longer seemed like such a good idea.

He had starved the Dog too. Although he trusted him more than the Cat, there was a chance, he realised, that he'd be found lying beside Simon's half-eaten body.

He called after the Cat, mentally and vocally, hoping that if he got her back he could reconnect with her, and then through her reconnect to the Dog. After a quarter of an hour of trudging through leaves and branches and vegetation, however, he had to admit that he had no control over either animal. He barely had control over himself. His legs were shaking with fear. Everything was falling apart.

Chapter Fourteen

The dog kept creeping forward. The rope hissed against the ground. It was almost impossible for Simon to remain focused. For a while, he had meditated on the pain in his legs caused by sitting without moving for so long, but then the pain had given way to numbness and he turned his attention instead to other body parts; his rising heartbeat, the ache in his forehead, the dryness of his throat.

His head nodded and he blinked hard to stay awake, recalling for inspiration Firdy's warning that the rope around the dog's neck was intended to prevent it running away once it had killed him; it was not intended to protect him.

Its ears pricked up.

It stood.

Simon shook the thought from his head. Back to breathing. In. Out. In ... but the creature remained agitated. It whined, dropped its head and walked to the door.

Simon felt what had disturbed it. Clarity was returning. And then it was done, in the time it takes to fall to the ground.

He and the dog-thing were now free. Free to think. Free to act. Free to kill. He had little doubt that the dog would turn on him. It was in the doorway, still whining, its tail between its legs.

Simon rolled and managed to get to his feet though his legs felt leaden.

The dog's enormous head inclined. Staring into its black eyes, Simon was flooded with adrenaline. He no longer bit back his emotional response. His hands shook and his legs threatened to buckle as he backed away. He had never seen anything like this. He didn't know how to kill it. All he knew was that it intended to prevent him from leaving and it would die rather than let him go.

It advanced and he lumbered towards the window. Behind him, the thing barked and its paws skidded on the boards.

Snapping jaws.

Simon threw himself into the curtains, into the nets, into the glass and through, into the night.

It was dark for a long time. His legs kicked. He had time to wonder which way up he was before he hit the ground – feet, shoulder, ear - and tumbled over and over, skidding along the drive. He may as well have landed on his head. The only reason he didn't cry out with pain was because the collision knocked the wind out of him. He lay on the stone amid broken glass and his bedroom curtains, wearing them like a shroud.

When he unwrapped himself, he saw the dog hanging by the rope that Firdy had attached to its neck. The other side was still attached to Simon's desk. The dog whimpered noisily and it kicked its legs, which caused it to swing like a pendulum. Each time it bashed into the side of the house it scabbled at the wall, but it didn't have that kind of dexterity. If the rope held out, it was going to die. Simon thought it unwise to trust the knot of a one-handed man any further and so once again he forced himself to his knees and then to his feet, swaying, feeling as though he'd

been swatted by a giant hand, but no part of his body was screaming for attention more than any other and so soon he was hobbling into the house, arming himself and returning to his room.

Chapter Fifteen

Firdy trampled through the long grass, his joints feeling like broken glass. His mind felt shattered too. He had been calling for both the Cat and the Dog, but neither of them had responded. Now, the Cat, the Dog and Simon were all unknown quantities. The Dog would have guarded Simon for hours had he not lost his connection to the animal when the Third withdrew. His plan, to put it simply, was fucked.

The Third would be furious that he had lost the Cat, but that would not compare to how she felt about losing Simon. Things were going badly.

He was losing time. It wouldn't be long before it was light.

Stay on mission, Firdy told himself.

He stumbled down the bank again and returned to the van, relieved that it had not yet drawn out a recovery vehicle or motorway police.

Opening the door and climbing in made him cry out with pain; if he hadn't been alone, he would have bitten it back, but it was a relief to let go. He used his teeth to remove the glove from his good hand and examined the hairy, knobby knuckles that agonised him. He threw painkillers into his mouth, spilling most of them, swallowing the rest dry, gagging on their bitterness.

His other hand was hurting as much as usual, bearable in comparison to the new aches all over his body. Again, he removed the glove with his teeth. The hand was swollen, sweaty, red. He tried to move the stumpy fingers and two of them twitched.

Useless and disgusting, he thought. In 24 hours it could all be different.

Eyes closed, he listened to the movement of other vehicles and tried to imagine that they took his pain with them. Each time anything larger than a car passed by the van shimmied and he wished that he could be a part of their world, wished he had a home to return to, memories to keep him warm, a friend.

The idea of suicide flowered in his mind. As usual, there was no note nor a lengthy drive to the edge of a cliff. There was the efficient use of whatever was to hand.

The perfect vehicle rocketed by with a rush of noise and a whirl of colour and then it was gone.

If he timed it well, his life could be over in a moment. No more pain. No more loneliness. No more anything.

The same thing as ever stopped him opening the door. The Third needed him. He still had purpose; at least for one more day. He couldn't give in until he had exhausted the other option and that meant getting Sarah back as quickly as possible.

From what she had said, she wasn't far away. She didn't know it, but she had given him hope. Capturing her would change everything for him. Everything.

Chapter Sixteen

Simon was relieved to find that Firdy hadn't forced the door to his mother's room. Sarah's room, however, had been devastated. Firdy had turned over her table and trampled everything that had been on it. He had smashed her photo frames and ripped up individual photos. He had pulled out every drawer in her chest of drawers and dumped the contents, before overturning the chest itself and kicking in the back. Her bed sheets lay coiled on the floor in a soggy, stinking pile. These were not the actions of a man who was simply looking for something. Firdy's rage was such that he had done this even while the creature had been watching. Knuckles turning white on the doorframe, Simon was immobilised by thoughts of what Firdy might do now that he was off the lead.

Eventually, he continued to his own room where the rope securing the dog was taut and still. He leaned out of the window and saw the animal hanging below. Its body was limp. Hand over hand, he hauled it towards him, pausing twice to catch his breath. When it was within reach, half-resting on the window sill, he stabbed it three times in the back of the neck, twisting and pulling the knife out, before dragging the dog completely into the room.

It looked as though it should never have been alive. As he suspected, it wasn't all dog. There were other things in there. It was part rodent perhaps. And those teeth ...

He cut its throat for good measure, which produced little blood, and wiped the knife on a dry patch of fur before sliding it into his trouser pocket.

One dead.

Two to go.

Chapter Seventeen

A small service station came into view and Firdy was tempted to stop for a few minutes. Perhaps a caffeine injection would do him good. He could justify that. Its lights called to him. He could see the signs offering fuel, fast food, fresh-filtered coffee. He liked such places; large railways and airports were particularly good too, especially in and around London. They granted him company while allowing him to maintain his anonymity. He was able to sit among people. Sometimes they glanced at his face and moved away, but usually they ignored him and he'd be able to sit close enough to smell their deodorants and perfumes, to hear their gloriously dull conversations, to feel the warmth from their bodies.

Although it was very late, he saw someone gazing at the menu above the counter in the coffee shop. He could stop for ten minutes.

But ten minutes was the difference between finding Sarah and having her move on, the difference between night and dawn.

Wincing as he drove by, he took solace from the fact that he was on his way to bigger things. Finding Sarah would be better than all the fast food eateries in London.

Motivated again, he tried to push the accelerator, but he already had it down to the floor. He felt stronger. He could do this. He was doing it.

He hadn't been driving long before he glimpsed the Cat on the bank. He swerved across two lanes onto the hard shoulder and hit the brakes.

The Cat had withdrawn, but after a minute it came into view alongside the van.

It had something in its mouth.

This time, Firdy didn't wind down the window to call to it. He called it with his mind, without desperation, without need.

Die alone, he thought, or live with me.

The Cat took a step forward and then another. It paused for a few seconds, almost sitting down, but then, unable to resist, it ran across the grass towards the van.

Satisfied, Firdy stepped out of the cab and opened up the rear doors. The Cat padded up to him, its head low and it dropped what it had been carrying at his feet.

It was a baby's forearm. A finger and thumb were missing.

Get in.

The Cat hopped into the merciful darkness.

Firdy picked up the little arm and tossed it into the back. He slammed the door.

Shaking, he got back behind the wheel.

This was what happened when you lost control: people got hurt, people got killed and he would get caught.

He vowed never to lose control again, neither of himself nor the animals. He could do this. It was only for a day or two more.

He pulled away and brought the van up to speed.

Chapter Eighteen

On television, the expert criminals got into cars like this in seconds. He'd had a lot of practice, but it still took an agonising amount of time to pop the door.

It was a blue, late-1980s Honda, not unlike his own car. He still couldn't get over the fact that Sarah had stolen it. One second he had been walking around the front of the car, the next she was in the driving seat.

Finally, he managed to force the crowbar into the correct position, pushed and the door flew open. Inside, the Magic Tree air freshener was losing its battle against cigarette smoke, which had permeated the upholstery. Printed papers were strewn about on the back seat and floor, along with a couple of empty food containers, drinks cartons and a banana skin. Fortunately, the car was not so much of a mess on the outside, sporting a single dent that gave it a lived in look.

He set to work getting the car started, this time pulling a small, cordless drill from his rucksack. He had the engine running in seven minutes.

It spluttered twice, but overall it was the uncaged animal he had hoped it would be. It had a much bigger engine than his and he backed out of the car park and put it to the test.

Soon, he skidded to a stop alongside a phonebox and left the engine rumbling while he dialled Sarah's number. He hoped that he wasn't already too late.

Chapter Nineteen

While it was still dark enough to go unnoticed, Firdy jammed the crowbar between the front door and the frame and worked it, tearing wood from both. He worked hard, sweating, and then leaned his shoulder into it.

It didn't give.

Why wouldn't Sarah just answer her phone?

He'd even rung the bell and knocked on the door in a bid to gain access legally. He'd done everything he could, but there wasn't time for patience.

He gave the panel his heftiest kick. A bigger man might have sent the door flying open, might not have needed a crowbar at all, but his best kick only had the effect of advancing the door another half-inch from the doorframe. Furious now, he retrieved the crowbar, like pulling a knife from a wound, and gave the door the final half a dozen shoves it needed to swing open.

Inside, he shut the door behind him and listened. A baby was crying in the house next door and a cat mewled in the street. He didn't hear any people, but after all the noise he had made he suspected it wouldn't be long before he was disturbed.

He crept through the hallway, checking each room. They were pristine, plain and perhaps somewhat old-fashioned, but aside from that it was almost like a house he might have seen in a magazine. The signs of inhabitation seemed deliberate, like the ultimate fighting magazine on the coffee table. They were show rooms. Fake.

The kitchen was the same. Although he could smell fried food, no-one appeared to have ever cooked or eaten in here. There were no used frying pans, no dirty dishes. The draining board was empty. Dry. No crumbs on the sideboard.

There was, however, a comprehensive selection of Sabatier kitchen knives. One by one, he slid them from the wooden block, until he found one intended for slicing meat, large but light, and sharp. Big knives always created the right impression.

On the stairs he kept to the wall where the boards were less likely to creak and he was careful to avoid brushing against the wedding photos hanging on the wall.

The bathroom was vacant.

He tried another door and found the water heater. Neat piles of fluffy blankets.

That left only two more doors.

Although breaking into the house and the possibility of being caught were good reasons for his elevated heart rate, he knew that the root of his excitement was his proximity to the Sarah. Behind the door to his right, all was silent, but he could smell a mixture of her and her room, a sweet, musty odour. It dizzied him, a pleasurable sensation, except that it came with anxiety, because he could smell Simon too. He looked over his shoulder, but there was no-one on the landing but him. Alive or dead, Simon was in his bedroom in Essex.

He took a final deep breath, knowing that he had to move quickly now. As soon as Sarah realised it wasn't Simon walking in, she would scream and attempt to escape. He adjusted the knife so it would be visible. He would rush in, put his hand over her mouth and tell her to be quiet. That was all. Assertive and in control.

Above all, in control.

Chapter Twenty

Simon followed signs for East London, knowing that Firdy was well ahead of him. He floored the accelerator, not slowing for speed cameras, which were foreshadowed by waves of brake lights ahead. Instead, he weaved between vehicles and blared the horn. If he was too careful, Firdy would catch up with Sarah and he would never see her again.

He struck the wheel, half-imagining hitting himself and half-imagining knocking Sarah's head against a wall. He had performed the code and she had answered, only to tell him that she had already made Firdy's job easy by texting him her location. Tears of frustration and rage welled in his eyes. She was naïve, but after the disappearance of their parents, the weapons positioned strategically around the house, the vetting of her friends, being abandoned for days at a time and blood in the bathroom, perhaps he should be grateful that she still managed to show some sign of innocence.

As long as it didn't get her killed.

The engine idled at yet another set of traffic lights, this time an enormous roundabout with half a dozen exits. He scanned the rows of vehicles, noting the white Transit vans, discounting each one from the possibility of belonging to Firdy.

He felt as though he should get out and run to keep moving, but when the lights changed to green, he felt sick, advancing towards a series of confrontations that could only end badly.

He had to kill Firdy or he'd always be a threat to Sarah. He had to do it before the Creature returned. Physically, he didn't imagine that killing him would be too much of a problem, as Firdy appeared to be sick and in a lot of pain. He thought that Firdy would be less sure of himself without the Creature, but he was likely to be less predictable too.

The two main problems lay elsewhere. The first was the remaining animal in the van. If it was anything like the dog, he was in trouble.

Another set of lights.

The second problem would come later. He projected himself into the future, a world in which Firdy's body was on one side of the room and his head on the other; what then? When the Creature returned, it would discover what had happened. The thing would read his mind. He could stash ideas, bury memories, tie thoughts down, but he wouldn't be able to suppress the memory of having killed Firdy. He wasn't that good.

Even if he could somehow get away with killing him, the Creature would expect him to pick up where he left off. Once again, he'd be a threat to Sarah. She would always be in danger, until either he or the creature was dead.

How do you kill something that's invisible, intangible, but can see every thought you have?
You don't.

There was no cold sweat as he considered suicide. It was a familiar destination, as all paths seemed to lead this way.

He changed down a gear, swung the car around a corner and powered to the end of the street, cutting out a jam. Protecting Sarah was his reason to live. If living placed her in more danger than dying, then suicide was the logical option.

In some ways it would be a relief. His death would save a lot of lives. He had been selfish the last three years. Many people had met uncertain ends so that he could have the pleasure of watching Sarah live.

The danger was too close now. He didn't know how much time he had before the Creature returned; it could be the next corner, it could be next month. Once he had made life as safe as possible for Sarah, he'd have to kill himself.

She'd want to know, but that was out of the question. It would be cruel. She wouldn't understand.

I don't understand, thought Simon. It could have anyone. Why does it want her?

Chapter Twenty-One

Gloved fingers on the door handle, Firidy took a few seconds to compose himself. Perhaps quick and dirty wasn't the way to do it after all. He put his ear to the door and listened. He could hear her breathing, slow and regular, snoring lightly. All he had to do was creep in and this could really happen. There was no time for fuck-ups. When the Third returned, he wanted Sarah at his side.

He pushed the handle down and edged open the door inch by inch, listening, holding his breath. The bottom of the door hissed over the carpet.

Inside was dark, but he was used to darkness. Flimsy curtains at the far end of the room allowed in enough light for him to make out stacks of boxes. He stepped inside and craned his neck to see around them, noticing with confusion that the sound of snoring was no louder. If anything, it was quieter. He saw no bed, makeshift or otherwise. It was a small room and it didn't take him long to see that Sarah wasn't in it.

He looked for a wardrobe or closet. Nothing. There was nowhere to hide.

She had been here though. He was sure of that. That familiar smell was stronger than before. She'd been here moments ago.

He'd checked downstairs and had then ascended the stairs, so there was no way she could have got past him. The window was locked from the inside, so she hadn't escaped this way.

That left one more room.

He crept back to the landing.

Again, he could hear snoring.

Finding Sarah, take two.

He pushed open the door, ever so slowly, and this time the sound of breathing was louder. As he tiptoed in, he wrinkled his nose against the odour of sweat and deodorant. This room was significantly larger. In the middle was a double bed and in it lay a large man with his legs sprawled out and his hands behind his head, tribal tattoos visible on his muscular arms. This, he presumed, was the Ultimate Fighter; Sarah's protector.

Firidy got down on to all fours, knees clicking, and looked under the bed. Weights. A sit-up bench. A box of books. No young woman.

He saw himself in a floor-to-ceiling mirror that hung on one door of a built-in wardrobe; he was not a person anyone wanted to see upon waking. The knife was a creepy touch. The sight even made him feel uncomfortable.

He opened the first wardrobe door with a click and pulled aside dresses, skirts and trousers. The wooden hangers clacked against each other. These would belong to the woman he had seen in the wedding photos on the stairs. The wardrobe was as it should be; no screaming girl crouching in the corner. He checked the spaces behind the other three doors with the same result.

He crept across the room towards the bed, timing his steps to coincide with the man's snores, thinking that this must be what it felt like to be a child. Once he was beside the bed, he found himself gazing at the man's chest, which was covered in wispy, light brown hair. A pectoral muscle twitched as he slept and a perfect arm swatted away a dream fly before the hand

flopped down on the bed on top of the covers. His tribal tattoo ran from his shoulder to his forearm. It was called a sleeve, he knew; he had found some measure of acceptance in a bar where the clientele were primarily adorned with piercings and tattoos, Prince Alberts and sleeves.

He touched the blue-black ink with a gloved finger and traced a line from bicep to forearm. The man stirred but did not wake.

Firdy drew back the covers. The man was naked beneath. Beautiful, toned abs, strong thighs; his penis was small and uncircumcised; his pubic hair was shaved.

Given the opportunity, he would have swapped his body in half a heartbeat. A new body, new memories, a new life. He would have swapped with almost anyone.

The man grunted and slapped himself in the face.

It was time to act before he woke up. He pulled out Simon's mobile phone and punched in another message to Sarah. He sat on the edge of the bed, like a gargoyle, waiting for a reply.

Apart from the smell, it was a pleasant room. It would be nice to sleep here. Comfortable. The floor-to-ceiling curtains glowed pink and orange with the rising sun. It was pretty. He had no desire to draw the curtains, because sunlight didn't agree with him. Pale skin. No melatonin. He was thankful that it was autumn. Summer had been almost unbearable.

He paced the room and while he continued to wait for a reply to his text a large screen television showed him another reflection of himself. This time he saw himself grey and deformed. He stared at himself, horrified, desperate to be done with this place.

It occurred to him that he had neglected to search one place. On all fours, he looked under the bed. No girl clambering out the other side. Disappointed, he rolled the nearest of a pair of dumbbells toward him. It bore three metal weights on either end and was too heavy for him to lift. Of course it was. His fingers screamed as he unscrewed the clamp. With consistent pressure, the lever turned, giving up its grip on three of the weights, which he guided off the bar. He attempted to lift it again and this time he was able to raise it, arms shaking, above his head.

Without the Third, the gloves were off, so to speak; he had to get to the truth quickly and he felt no shame in enjoying the process. In about five minutes, he'd either have Sarah's new location or a means of finding her, as well as anything else he wanted to know.

He positioned himself beside the bed, ready to begin.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Sarah had known that Simon would be infuriated to find that she had left the house, after his text had told her to stay put, but she'd had no choice. He'd have to be satisfied with her new location. He'd always stressed that she should stay in a public place if she was in danger and a theatre/community centre on the opening day of a play was a pretty good find. Geraldine had rushed in already, late because her husband had decided he needed the car and she had had to rely on Sarah for a lift.

The double doors were wide open. Sarah decided that she would walk right in. She imagined that that was what Simon would do.

Had to move from house. Sorry, but will explain when I c u. Now in community centre in Walthamstow. All ok. Not sure what the door no. is but on the high st, nr station I think.

It was a touch too long for one text and she didn't want to sound like she was gabbling, so she started to condense it. She was concentrating, tapping quickly, when the phone rang and she almost dropped it.

She waited, looking at the number, which had an Essex code but was otherwise unrecognisable. While it could have been Simon calling - maybe the battery had run down on his mobile phone - she had expected him to have reached London by now. Maybe there was a problem. Maybe this was the reason for the sense of dread she'd been unable to shake off.

It wasn't long before the phone stopped ringing.

If it was Simon, she'd know in about ten seconds.

Two.

Four.

Six.

The same Essex number appeared on the display. She waited three rings and it rang off.

It was him.

It rang a third time.

On the fourth, she answered the call.

"We need a quicker system," Simon said.

"Thank God you're ok. You're still coming to get me, yeah?"

"You think that I contacted you earlier, Sarah, but whatever was said, it wasn't me. A man has my phone. He's the one you replied to and he's looking for you right now."

Are you ok?

I'm ok now.

Where are you?

Where are you?

"Fuck."

"What did you tell him, Sarah?"

"I gave him my friend's address, where I was staying. I texted him."

"Was staying?"

"Yeah. I moved. I was about to text you. Or him as it turns out."

“What happened to our code, Sarah? The one we worked out. The one you said you understood.”

“I woke up and there were four missed calls. I thought I'd slept through the code ... are you there? I'm not at the house now anyway. I'm in a theatre in Walthamstow. Well, it's a community cen-

“Stop. Don't be specific. I'm back, but I don't know for how long. Do you understand? You can't tell me exactly where you are yet. Now that I know you're at a community centre, I need you to move again, in case I'm not myself by the time I arrive. It's very, very important.”

“Okay.”

“Don't go back to your friend's place for anything.”

“Is she in danger?”

“Don't go back there, Sarah. Stay in public. Don't go anywhere by yourself, not even to the toilet. And leave the car. It'll make it too easy to find you.

“Okay, Simon. I'll leave it here.”

“Listen to me. Look out for a small guy – skinny, scars, sick-looking. He might wear sunglasses; he's got a dodgy eye. He might be wearing a hat, covering himself up.”

“I understand.”

“If you even think you see him, walk the other way. Stay public.”

“Simon, I'm scared.”

“Do as I say. I'll call you with more instructions when I reach Walthamstow. It'll be from a payphone. I'll do the code, but let's make it three rings. I've got to go.”

“Simon?”

The line had gone dead and she had gone limp. She felt as she had done when watching Geraldine walk through the double doors without a look back; only this was ten times worse. Her loneliness swamped her. It had been waiting to do so.

She closed her eyes and put her head down, sobbing so hard that it made her throat ache. Knowing that nobody would see or hear her for the moment, she let go, coughing, tears dropping from her cheeks and splatting on the coat that Simon had made her wear. It was the full works and it left her breathless.

A few minutes later, she wiped snot from her nose with the back of her sleeve and tried to stop shaking. That morning, she had thought that if she started crying she would do so forever, but it wasn't so bad in the end; it seemed that she could only make so many tears and now that she was empty, she could get on with life for a while.

She got out of the car, pleased to be ditching it, because that was where this nightmare had started. There was even a smudge on the door where Simon had tried to yank it open while she was moving.

Head down, she headed towards the double doors.

“What are you so upset about, darling?”

The woman was wearing brown, leather boots, faded-blue, skinny-fit jeans and a long white coat over a fluffy, pink jumper. Evidently, she had slipped out of the community centre for a cigarette. She held it unlit in one beautiful hand. Long fingers, but short nails. With the other, she pushed neat, rectangular glasses up her ski-slope nose. Sarah smiled at her and scrubbed her face.

“I'm fine,” she said and continued towards the entrance.

“Darling, if you're feeling sensitive, I think you're better off out here. It's like Piccadilly Circus in there and they want to minimise traffic. They don't really want me in there.” She pointed to a poster in the window that was advertising the play. “And I wrote the fucking thing.”

Sarah walked over to have a look. The play was called 'Sunrise Sunset'. The woman's name was Clare Harris.

"I suggested a couple of changes," Clare said. "Didn't go down well. They're not bad people, but they're under a lot of stress. You too by the looks of it. Are you meant to be working in there?"

"No. I'm with my friend. Geraldine."

"Uh-huh. Well, it doesn't seem to be a spectator sport. Pre-match nerves."

Sarah nodded.

"Smoke?" Clare said.

Sarah accepted and pulled one from her packet.

"Got enough?"

"You look like you need one more than me; that's saying something."

Sarah sighed and put it in her mouth. She wasn't supposed to smoke, but Simon wasn't here to see.

She was alone.

"Sometimes I think life would be easier without other people," she mused as she lit Sarah's cigarette for her and then returned the cheap, plastic lighter to her coat pocket. "Present company excepted, of course. Actors? We could definitely do without those."

"Aren't you nervous too?"

"Shitting myself. Talking to you makes me realise that I need some normality. I can't stand the tension in there. It's not even nine o'clock and I'm thinking about getting drunk."

Sarah laughed, for the first time in hours.

"You too, eh?" Clare said.

Sarah nodded and took a deep drag on her cigarette. It tasted foul and she tried not to retch, hoping that the nicotine was flowing into her system quickly and would do some good.

There wasn't much of a view. Across the road was a large grocery, which had already been open when she arrived, servicing a slow but steady stream of customers. On either side of that were uninspiring enterprises: estate agents, a textile store, a fast food chicken restaurant.

Can you have fast food restaurants? she wondered. Isn't that a misnomer?

Up above, a flock of about a dozen birds broke cover, taking up a triangular formation, like an arrow, as they passed overhead.

"Have you ever wished you were something else?" said Clare.

They locked eyes then and Sarah knew that they could be friends. Although, that was the way she had felt about Geraldine and she had made a mess of that.

A bus pulled up nearby, wheezing like a wounded animal. The engine grumbled. Sarah's eyes flitted over the windows. Every face she met seemed to be looking out at her. She glared back, angry, vulnerable. As the bus moved off, she stuck her tongue out and felt better for it.

Even the drivers of cars were looking at her as they accelerated by. She found herself searching their faces for sunglasses or a gammy eye.

He might be wearing a hat.

Covering himself up.

I need to get off the street, she thought. The street is too public.

Clare flicked her cigarette up in the air and it bounced off a taxi cab window before landing in the gutter.

"Shot," said Sarah.

Clare shoved her hands into her pockets. "I'm going down the road for a coffee. Nice to meet you, babe. Try not to worry too much. And don't go in there unless you have to."

Sarah watched Clare walk away, hips swaying naturally in her long, white coat.

Ever wanted to be someone else? Yes. I'd swap places with you in a heartbeat.

"Wait," Sarah said.

Clare turned, looking to see if she had dropped something.

Simon had warned her to move location. "Do you mind if I come?" she said. "I'll buy you a coffee."

Clare wandered back towards her.

"You seem like a nice girl," she said, "but I've got a lot on my mind. I wouldn't say no to some company, but if you start crying again, I don't know if I could bear it."

"I'm not going to cry again," Sarah said, not sure if it was true, not sure that she wasn't going to cry at that exact moment. Accordingly, Clare didn't seem convinced and so Sarah thought of Simon and what he would think of her if he saw her like this. "I'm fine," she said and this time she believed it. "I'm buying."

There were no more flocks of birds to punctuate the moment. The sky, the air, the faces in the windows: all empty.

"This way," Clare said and Sarah's shoulders sagged with relief.

As they walked, Sarah looked out for Simon, and also for the man he had warned her about. She did her best not to appear frightened, but it was difficult because seeing one of them would mean life and seeing the other ... she didn't want to think about that; not while there was hope.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"I'm looking for Sarah," Firdy said. "Who the fuck is Jerry and why the fuck should I care?"

The man spat blood. Firdy had hit him too hard. Or too many times. In minutes he would be no more use.

Jerry. Jerry. Jerry. That's all the man was saying. Who was ...

"Geri," Firdy said. "Geri is your wife?"

The man managed to nod.

"Sarah is with Geri."

"I ... don't know ... I think ... so."

Firdy clenched and unclenched his fist. It wouldn't do to hit him again. Not yet anyway.

"And where is Geri?"

The man's eyes rolled back in their sockets and Firdy slapped him, grabbed his mouth between finger and thumb. "Tell me where she is, and I'll go. I won't hurt you anymore. I won't kill you."

The man's teeth, those he had left, were bloody. "Play," he spat. He pointed to the bedside table.

Firdy pulled open the drawer, expecting to find a dicta-phone, but instead he pulled out a bible, some scribblings and letters, more Ultimate Fighter magazines and a flyer.

"Oh," Firdy said. "Play. Like the theatre."

The man wheezed.

The play opened this afternoon and then would be performed again tonight. Geraldine was on the cast list. She'd probably be rehearsing.

"Th-theatre," the man said.

"I understand," Firdy replied, gazing down at him. "I smashed you up pretty good." He wiped his bloody gloves on the bedsheets and put the flyer in his jacket pocket. "Thank you for this."

As he walked towards the door, the man struggled to speak again.

"Don't ..."

"I don't have time," Firdy said.

"Don't ... hurt ... Geri."

"I told you. It's Sarah I want. As soon as I have her, I'll leave you both alone. You'll never see me again. I mean that."

Nervous and excited, he skipped down the gloomy stairs and out into the street. It was no longer dark enough to hide what he was going to do, but he had to finish this anyway. It didn't have to be clean. It only had to be quick. In twenty-four hours, there would be no way to trace anything back to him.

*

George attempted to roll onto his side, gurgled and spat blood. As he inched across the bed, his chest burned. He couldn't move his neck enough to see the damage the man had done to him, but

he suspected that that was for the best. If he saw the state of himself, he'd probably pass out. He'd already pissed himself and he was far from proud of that.

In the second drawer of the bedside table, he turned over a mass of envelopes and reached under a magazine until his fingers felt the leather of his mobile phone case. Aware that every second left Geri in danger, he stretched, cried out and hooked the phone with two fingers, dragging it towards him.

Eventually he was clutching the phone and he concentrated on not passing out. Not only did he have to warn Geri, but if he succumbed to sleep, no-one would find him until it was too late; he might not wake up, not in hospital, not ever. Geri was the believer in God. He believed in nothing and he wasn't ready to go yet. He hadn't given it enough thought.

He scrolled through the recent numbers and dialled Geri.

Waited.

The sun was streaming through a gap in the curtains. It was easy to mistake the shaft of light for something spiritual, but he tried to stay focussed; he was in bed and he was dying, this was what dying felt like, but he wasn't gone yet. The sunlight was warming his skin. This was a good sign.

Geri's voicemail message kicked in.

Okay. So maybe he would die after all.

Maybe Geri too.

“Jesus,” he said and sobbed.

He was surprised and ashamed of himself for giving the man Geri's whereabouts. He could have lied. But the pain had been terrible, the fear of a further attack had been worse and he knew that. He hadn't been able to think; he had only wanted it to end.

End.

He ended the call to Geri, realising that he had been recording his breathing, and dialled 999.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Sarah stirred three sugars into her coffee and took a sip, holding cup in both hands so it warmed her fingers as well as her belly. She'd never been much of a coffee drinker, but then she wasn't much of a smoker either and she had been doing that too.

The cafe had six tables inside, but Sarah was disappointed to find that she and Clare were the only people inside apart from the proprietors. It didn't seem like the kind of place that would attract an influx of builders seeking a fry-up, but, and she wouldn't have said this twenty-four hours ago, she hoped to be proved wrong. The more people around her the better. The more men there were to put off her unknown pursuant the better.

The menu said that the business was family-run. What she assumed were husband and wife stood behind the counter. The woman, Greek and plump, grinned hopefully at her whenever she looked over. It didn't look like they were expecting it to get much busier than this after all. At least she had three friendly people in close proximity.

Clare sat opposite. Her big white coat was on the back of her chair, so now Sarah could see her fuzzy pink jumper in all its glory. It looked as if it had been bought in a charity shop or was an unwanted gift from someone's grandma, but somehow it looked cool on her, perhaps because she appeared unaware of how awful it should have been.

Her features lacked the balance of a model, nor were they unusual enough to be striking, and yet she possessed the quality of being utterly at ease, which made her very attractive. Sarah was envious. She watched her stir a single sugar into her coffee, holding the spoon lightly between two long, pale fingers.

"I feel so much better," Sarah said when she was caught gazing. "I've had an utterly shit twenty-four hours."

"What's been so bad about it?"

She thought for a moment and then, relieved that she wouldn't have to lie, said: "I came to visit my friend, you know, Geraldine, on the spur of the moment, thinking it would be like old times, but things have changed."

"How long's it been?"

"... A couple of years. I didn't realise people could change so much so quickly. But I changed, so I should have known. It wasn't the kind of night for thinking things through though."

"You can't rely on other people. They're malleable."

"Malleable?"

"They bend, according to pressure. They change their minds. Everyone does. Either that, or they break."

Sarah thought of Simon, who must have bent so much that he was coming full circle.

"I suppose if good people can become bad," Sarah said, "then bad people can become good."

"You're young ..."

Sarah bristled.

“... Life isn't that black and white. But you have a point. Good people do bad things all the time, but it doesn't make them evil. Speaking of which, I'm going out for another cigarette. Want one?”

Sarah raised a hand to say no and watched Clare leave the table. In her mind she was back in the car with Simon. He was trying to tell her that she needed to run and she was paralysed, unable to believe what was happening. Once again, she considered what would have happened if she hadn't run.

She had asked him if he had killed people and he hadn't answered. Last night, she had almost seen for herself.

Ultimately, she didn't believe that he would hurt her. She believed that he would sacrifice himself if he felt it necessary, but where would that leave her? She may as well be dead without him. As much as he lived for her, she lived for him.

When Clare returned, Sarah picked up the conversation from where they had left off.

“Some things never change.”

“Like what?” Clare asked, removing her coat again.

“Love,” Sarah said.

Clare sniggered. “I'm sorry,” she said. “I didn't mean to laugh. But everything changes; especially love. I know you don't want to hear this, but love is the most unreliable emotion of all. Don't rely on emotions. That's how you get hurt.”

“Don't you ever get hurt?”

“Been there. Done that.”

“Don't you care?”

“I don't expect anything from anyone, including me. Nobody knows what's around the corner.”

Sarah frowned as she thought about what Clare was suggesting. She was right, she didn't want to hear it, but in the end she agreed, to a point.

“I suppose you don't know how you'd react until a situation actually happens. You behave in ways you wouldn't have expected.”

“There you go. And you've changed your opinion in the space of thirty seconds. Malleable. Don't look so sad. Being able to adapt is a good thing. It's survival.”

“It's a jungle out there,” Sarah said, looking into the street.

“Lions and tigers and bears,” Clare said.

In her best not-in-Kansas-anymore voice, Sarah said: “Oh my.”

“Speaking of survival: could you eat?”

“I'll get this,” Sarah said and reached inside her jacket. Clare made as if to stand up, but Sarah held out her hand, insistent on paying, thinking that if she did that then Clare might be inclined to spend more time with her. She needed company for as long as she could get it. If that meant paying for it, then so be it. She retrieved a twenty pound note and picked up the menu.

“I've been having a fantasy about going –“

“– straight to dessert,” Clare finished, sitting back now. “I recommend the chocolate fudge brownie.”

“Two then.”

While waiting for one of the owners to come out of the kitchen, Sarah touched her jeans pocket to make sure she had her phone. She was trying to look cool and together, but she couldn't resist pulling it out and checked for messages. Nothing.

She glanced over at Clare, who wasn't paying attention, because she was occupied with her own mobile phone. She was glad that Clare hadn't seen her, because she didn't want another lecture on expectations and letting go, no matter how coolly delivered.

The woman's words were working on her though. Who knew what was going to happen? She only had to experience each moment and live through it, as best as she could.

It would have been a relief to tell Clare her full story, but she was not the right person to hear it; Clare was sympathetic, but she didn't want to get involved and Sarah didn't blame her.

Besides, whenever she worked at putting the story into words, she imagined the look of dismay on Simon's face and couldn't go through with it. Her imaginary Simon was right: she needed to keep her mouth shut, but it was easier to think something than to do it; her fear and loneliness over the last 24 hours made her want to run back to the table and give Clare a hug, to cry again and tell her everything.

Instead, once she had ordered, she sat back down, with one hand pressed firmly against her mobile phone pocket.

"Business or pleasure?" she asked Clare.

"Business," Clare said and pulled a face.

"I'm starting to hate mine too," Sarah told her. "Although, waiting for it to ring is worse than when it's going constantly."

"I'll take your word for that."

When their desserts arrived, Clare asked what they should eat to. Lots of things came into Sarah's head. She bit her lip. She didn't want to say them out loud. In the end, she settled for: "What will be will be?"

"What will be will be," Clare agreed.

Their forks slid through the cream and the chocolate and the fudge. They each put an opening forkful into their mouths.

"Isn't that gorgeous?" Clare said.

Sarah felt slightly light-headed. She closed her eyes.

"Oh my God," she said.

As she ate, she began to relax. It was going to be okay. Simon would call her, they'd meet and they'd work out a plan from there. All she had to do was stick to the plan. Stay in public. Don't go anywhere alone. Look out for a skinny, sick guy in a hat who wouldn't be able to do anything as long as she was in the cafe with witnesses.

The woman behind the counter, all curly, dark hair and dimples and apron, smiled at her. Not like mum, but like a mum, Sarah thought, and although she felt sad, she felt safe.

"Chocolate's cheered you up," Clare observed.

"I think I was hungry. Sugar-deprived."

"Can't have that."

Clare ordered another coffee each, confessing that if she had any more after this she would be bouncing off the walls, then she put her coat on again.

Sarah envied Clare's addiction; it was something so easily satisfied. Create a problem and solve it, ten times a day, or forty if you were Clare. At least something in life could be simple.

"Can I have another one?" Sarah said. "I'll come with you."

"I smoke because I'm sick anyway," Clare said. "It doesn't matter if I get lung cancer. You're healthy. If you want to destroy something beautiful, you'll have to do that all by yourself."

Suddenly, Sarah felt stupid, as if the adult had gone out to do grown-up things, while she was left behind. Sit still. Be a good girl.

Aside from being somewhat pale, Clare didn't look sick to her. She could have done with some sun, but that was all. Her hair was dry, but full; it wasn't falling out. If Clare was lying about this, Sarah wondered, what else would she lie about.

When the coffee arrived, she smiled weakly. Feeling conspicuous, she pulled her phone from her pocket. No missed calls. No text messages. No nothing.

She dialled Geraldine's number, telling herself that she ought to apologise for arriving suddenly the way she did, but really she wanted to be reassured that the rest of the world was turning, even though her world was holding its breath. She was surprised when the phone was answered after a single ring.

"Geraldine," she said. "It's Sarah."

"I know. What did you do? What kind of trouble are you in?"

"I don't understand."

"There's an ambulance on its way to my flat. George's been beaten up by a guy looking for you."

Out of the window, Sarah saw Clare's back and car's inching along in traffic.

"If I'd known it was going to be like this," Geraldine continued, "I would have called the police as soon as I saw you. What have you done, Sarah? Why does he want you?"

"I don't know," she said. "I didn't do anything."

"Well, he's still looking for you and when he finds you, he'll probably do the same to you as he did to George, so you'd better stop running and call the police right now. Where are you?"

"I'm in a cafe," Sarah said. "The Olive Tree. With Clare. The woman who wrote the play."

"Clare's here," Geraldine said. "I just told her what happened and she said that she'll drive me to the hospital."

Sarah looked up again and saw Clare flicking a spent cigarette into the road.

"Clare?" Sarah asked. "Tall, white coat, red-blonde, smokes like a chimney, skin like tracing paper."

"I don't know who you're with. Clare's here at the theatre. I'm looking at her. I suggest you call the police now. Don't be brave. And don't be stupid."

"Geraldine, I'm so (scared) sorry about this."

"Me too. Don't come again, will you?"

The line went dead.

Sarah stood to leave, but Clare was on her way back to the door so she sat down. She had to act cool.

"Freezing out there," Clare said as she removed her coat and sat down. "Makes me want to give up smoking."

Sarah smiled.

There was a moment of silence between them; the first one that was unnatural. It spun into something else, until it became agonising.

"All that coffee," Sarah said. "I'm desperate to pee." She pushed her chair back from the table.

"There's no toilet in here," Clare said.

She was right. Maybe that's why she had chosen this place. One way in and one way out.

Sarah reminded herself to stay calm.

“You can come back to my place,” Clare suggested. “It’s five or six minutes from here. You can see it from that corner.” She pointed.

“I can hold it,” Sarah said, feeling her nerve wilting. “Actually, I might get back to the theatre. Geraldine called, wondering where I am. I told her I was here and said I’d be back in a few minutes.”

Clare's face was tranquil but her eyes were alert, assessing her. “Oh,” she said.

“You haven't done anything wrong,” Sarah said. “I just really have to get back. It’s rude of me to bail on my friend. I’ve kind of fucked her day up and I have to make it up to her.”

Clare nodded. “Did you tell her you were with me?” She sipped her coffee.

“No,” Sarah said too quickly and she dropped her eyes. Damn it. She was no good at this. She pretended to take a sip of her drink to cover up the mistake.

“Why didn't you tell her I was here?” Clare asked.

“I don't know,” Sarah said. Clare could have asked anything then and she would have replied that she didn't know. She wanted to stop talking entirely. She wanted to be out in the open again. “I didn’t think to mention it,” she said. “It never came up. The conversation was pretty short. She was pretty short with me.” Clare made a steeple of her fingers. “Look, I’ve really got to go,” Sarah said. “Thanks for everything. Here’s some money to cover the extra coffee.”

“Forget about the coffee, Sarah.”

“Maybe if I’m down here again, I can say hello. Could I have your number? I know you hate phones, but I could text you; find out how the play went.”

“Sit down, Sarah.”

“Geraldine’s waiting for me, so I'd better-”

“Sarah, I won’t tell you again.”

Clare put her index fingers to her lips, which Sarah took as a sign of self-restraint. Her eyes were cold and sad and Sarah saw that the woman she had been talking to for the last forty-five minutes hadn’t existed at all. Looking into those eyes, she felt exhausted and trapped.

The plastic seat squeaked as Sarah sat back down; the legs groaned as they scraped half an inch on the tiles.

When Clare spoke next, the easiness of her speech was absent. “I’m going to give you one piece of advice,” she said. “Don’t run.”

“Who are you?” Sarah asked, but Clare didn't answer. Sarah couldn't help looking away. She glanced at the counter, wondering if the owners of the café were in on this.

“You can't stop me leaving,” Sarah told Clare.

“You won't think so, but I'm doing you a favour,” Clare said. “It's better this way.”

Sarah demanded to know who she was, but again received nothing in return but a constant gaze, appraising her. She'd seen that look before; Simon, every time he refused to answer her questions.

“What do you want with me?” Sarah said. “I deserve an answer.”

Over Clare's shoulder, Sarah saw the sick-looking man through the window. She knew it was him immediately and her entire body tensed as though a spider had scuttled over her. He was peering in through a pair of sunglasses, moving in a hurry, and he was wearing a brimmed hat, which he pulled low as he shoved open the door. His trainers squeaked as he crossed the tiles. He stank.

She had been certain that Simon would save her. Even now, she thought that he would appear.

When the man stopped at their table, she was as surprised as she was afraid. His skin was covered in scars and his features had the appearance of having been wrapped in cling film. Sarah's skin crawled.

"Sarah," he said. His voice was a cobweb. "I'm Firdy." Sarah shrugged. Clare put her hands flat on the table as if to push herself up, but Firdy gave her a look that pinned her to her seat. "Sorry I took so long," he said. "I see you're getting acquainted." He looked from one woman to the other. "Or not. Finish your drink, Sarah, and we'll go."

He extended his hand and Sarah stared at the black leather glove.

The kindly couple were behind the counter, watching. They didn't seem to be aware of what was happening. If she screamed, Sarah thought, they'd get the message.

"Now," said Firdy. "Or I'll make you."

Sarah watched herself in the reflection of his sunglasses. She appeared small and frightened, so she sat up straight and got a glimpse of his misty eye over the top of his sunglasses. She recoiled.

"I can hurt you," he said. "And I don't give a fuck that we're in public. I'll choke the fucking life out of you. Don't give me an excuse."

"Remember," Clare warned her. "You don't have a choice."

"And how about you?" Sarah said. "Did you have a choice?" For the first time, she got a reaction. Clare's lips parted and closed again. That was all; easily missed, but not by Sarah. Compared to her composure a few minutes before, she looked as if she'd been slapped.

"Stand up, Sarah," Firdy said.

One last look over her shoulder as she stood. The couple were watching her leave, doing nothing. She reached out to them with her eyes, but that was all, afraid of what Firdy would do.

"I had a feeling you'd be smart," Firdy said. "You had to be either very smart or very stupid, but you just made the right choice." He nodded towards the door and Sarah went, her muscles watery and her steps uncertain.

"Wait," Firdy said when she was at the door.

Clare had known that it wouldn't be over so quickly.

"I told you to call me the moment you saw her," Firdy said. He laid a hand on her shoulder. She didn't flinch. "You did well," he said, "but next time I ask you to do something, you do it. You could have saved me - and someone else - a lot of trouble. A lot of trouble." It was Clare's turn to be disconcerted by her reflection in his dark glasses. She watched herself nod. "And stop smoking."

He limped towards the door. "Go," he said, waving Sarah on.

As she stepped out into the street, Sarah was frightened and angry and confused. She looked through the cafe window and saw Clare staring into her coffee cup. Firdy shoved her to keep her moving.

As she walked, with Firdy behind her, she thought about running again, getting lost in the crowd. The man had a limp. How difficult could it be to get away?

Doing as she was told had got her caught. She was going to have to save herself, her own way.

She took a deep breath, not believing that she was about to do this, but -

"Here," Firdy said.

The transit van dwarfed the car in front and behind. Mud had splattered the lower half of the vehicle and the wheels were caked.

If you get in there, she assured herself, you'll die.

She could still run. There were people walking nearby; some of them looked half-crazy, but they were better than Firdy. She saw cars stuck at the lights. She could scream and a dozen people would look their way.

“I have your brother,” Firdy said, unlocking the doors with his key fob. “If you want to see him alive, you’ll get in the van and come with me.”

Her knees buckled. She wondered if Simon was in the back of the van, tied and gagged. Instinctively, she drifted towards it.

Firdy opened the passenger door for her, his twisted face betraying the strain of remaining patient. She could see in the curl of his thin lips that he had had enough of chasing her and that he wouldn’t do it again, not as long as there were knives and guns and clubs and leather gloves and Simon. He had Simon, so she really didn’t have a choice.

She climbed into the van.

“Thank you,” Firdy said.

He sighed and slammed her door shut.

PART TWO

Chapter Twenty-Five

Clare ordered a lemon cheesecake and another coffee. She didn't want to appear a glutton and had considered moving to another cafe, but her legs weren't working properly so she suffered the shame. It was nothing compared to the shame of what she had done, handing Sarah to Firdy.

The cheesecake arrived, a pristine wedge, glistening. A little fork. A napkin. She stuck the fork into the cake and split it in two. Today was officially the worst day of her life.

She didn't know how she would live with what she had done, but she knew that she would. The prospect was awful but true.

She imagined that the cheesecake was a cliff and that the shiny, white plate was oblivion. She imagined herself stepping off the edge, not jumping, but hitting the rocks on the way down, dead before she hit the bottom. She knew she wasn't going to kill herself though; she had given up Sarah to protect herself and her own family. If she was going to kill herself, she would have done it this morning. It was too late to do any good now.

So she'd live. She'd go home and cry and start cutting. In the morning, she'd disinfect her incisions, eat Golden Grahams and watch Jeremy Kyle.

Then maybe more cutting.

Just another day.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The tension in the hall thickened the air, which smelled of dust, pine and birch, varnish, paint and coffee. Two actresses were gabbling in hushed tones in front of a wooden backdrop on which the entrance to a forest had been painted; a path disappearing into blackness.

Immediately in front of the stage, was an orchestra pit, where a violinist was attempting to argue a man in scruffy combat trousers, but he was preoccupied with his headset.

Simon gathered from the palpable anxiety that this was 'opening night' rather than a dress rehearsal. Most of the work had been done and now it was too late to make any dramatic changes. All they could do was follow the script and hope for the best. Except, something had happened. There was an air of panic. This was almost chaos.

It wouldn't be difficult for him to fit in. He picked up a plastic cup of coffee, which was sitting on a table against the wall, and took a sip from it as he strode across the hall, looking busy and purposeful, but feeling anything but confident and in control.

Sarah wasn't answering her phone, so he had to find Geraldine fast. He looked for a man on his own so he could pose as a friend of Geraldine's and ask where she was. Nothing would destroy his deception more quickly than telling Geraldine that he was a friend looking for her.

He approached a couple of men who were positioning a table by the door, but they hadn't seen her. He tried an old man who stopped laying out chairs to scan the entire hall, but was no use at all.

He felt success drawing away from him. It was agony to be so near and yet so far from finding Sarah.

Though he was familiar with life and death situations, the 'death' was normally a consequence of his actions. Perhaps, he thought, this is how it feels to be on the other side; this fear - surreal and unshakeable.

He grabbed handfuls of his hair, biting back a scream of frustration, and then he saw a woman run down the steps to the right of the stage. She appeared to be hurrying so that nobody would see that she was crying. A sob escaped from her as she threw herself through the exit.

Simon jogged through the hall and found her leaning against the wall outside, her head in her hands.

"Geraldine?" he said and she stared at him through her tears. He suspected that Firdy had got here before him and that her distress was the aftermath of his visit. "I'm looking for Sarah," he said.

She laughed. "Isn't everyone?"

So he had been right; Firdy had been here or at least their paths had overlapped.

"I'm looking for the man too," Simon added. She stopped smiling. "You've seen him, haven't you?"

"No," she said. "Not exactly."

"Will you help me?"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Clare was finally about to leave the cafe when her phone vibrated.

It wasn't Firdy for once.

It was Ellen.

She was surprised to find that she wasn't exactly relieved by this. She couldn't bring herself to answer the call. The shame of what she had become was too great. She caught her reflection in the window and was disgusted. Drawn lips. Pinched cheeks. A hollow gaze.

The phone continued to vibrate long after she had dropped it into her coat pocket and she felt unable to move until it's buzzing released her. She often ignored Ellen's calls without feeling paralysed by regret, but today was different. Today, she imagined Ellen sitting on her antique chair at the bottom of the stairs, gazing at the speaker in the handset as though she could will it to life, knuckles turning white.

Clare took a deep breath.

She reached into her pocket.

"Hi, Ellen," she said.

"Bea."

"How are you?"

"Well, I'm fine. How are you? That's more important."

"I'm ok, Ellen. I'm ok. I'm so sorry that I couldn't be there today."

"I didn't expect you to come, Bea, but ... I had hoped for a card."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm only 80 once, you know. Good thing too, if you ask me."

"I know." Clare wanted to call her Granny, but she didn't dare. Ellen had always insisted that they treat each other as equals; she only happened to be older. Clare didn't feel the equal to her now. She never had. As a teenager, she had lived with Ellen, her maternal grandmother, when things had been unbearable at home. Over the years, Clare had found that she was someone she could trust. The only person she could trust. Ellen had taught her how to listen, how to wait and how to keep going despite her fear. These skills had served her well, but she couldn't tell Ellen how or why. She had to bear her life alone.

"How are things down in London?" Ellen asked.

"Fine," Clare replied. "Everything's fine."

They pretended to chat in this manner, much as they had pretended to be close over the last year and a half, but Clare knew that she alone had broken the connection they used to have. That was another thing that she had to live with.

"Are you there?" Ellen asked.

"I'm here, Ellen. I can't talk right now."

"Of course you can't."

She yearned to confess the things she had done to people and why, but how could she? At it's best it would sound crazy; at it's worst it was despicable and criminal.

According to Firdy, it was almost over. A few more lies, though the biggest ever, and she would be free.

“Your mother’s here,” Ellen said. “I hope that’s not the reason you didn’t come.”

“No, of course not.”

“Shall I believe you?”

Clare could hear the smile in her voice, but could tell that she was upset. The fact that she had called told her that she was upset. Normally, she would have waited for her to get in touch, by which time she would already have forgiven her, ready for her to do it again.

But not this time. Not anymore.

“I’d better leave you to it then,” Ellen said. “I have gifts to open. Your mother sends her love.”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“No. She doesn’t. But I could tell that she was disappointed when I told her you weren’t here. When did you two last see each other?”

“I’ll make it up to you,” Clare said. “I promise.”

“No, Bea, you won’t. Bye honey.”

“Ellen? Granny?”

She drew away when she felt a hand on her shoulder. It was the Greek woman, Androula, looking alarmed.

“Are you okay?” Androula asked. Clare bowed her head, letting her forehead touch the surface of the table. It was cool. A moment of peace. “Come on,” the woman said, “Don’t do this to yourself. Sit up. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“You’re very kind,” Clare said. “You’ve always been kind to me, but you don’t understand. I should go.”

“You’re right,” Androula said. “I don’t understand, but I think that you should talk to someone; I’m a good listener, Sharonne ...”

She was normally Sharonne when she was here, but sometimes she had to be Bea. Today she had played Clare for the first time. She snorted at the strangeness of the thing that she had become. The name on her birth certificate was Bernadette. Her life as Bernadette seemed far away. A dead thing. A mile underground.

She pushed her chair back, but Androula urged her to stay.

“Look at the state of you,” she said. “You can’t go out like that. I’ll get you some water. Please. Wait. Just a minute.”

*

By the time he reached the Olive Tree, he was out of breath and the pain in his leg was sending flares up into his hip. He’d had to drive past the restaurant and double back on foot, abandoning the car on the pavement fifty yards up the road.

As he ran, he worked through his options. They were few. The best involved taking Sarah by the hand and returning to the car with her. The worst ... he felt for the knife in his jacket, freed it from its leather scabbard and let it rest naked in his pocket.

When he entered the cafe, a kindly-looking woman behind the counter looked up from polishing a glass display cabinet. Simon saw a man in an apron sitting on a wooden chair in the kitchen beyond and a second woman at a table near the window finishing up a glass of water.

The cafe was clean and smelled of fresh bread. A radio played Heart FM quietly. There was no cloak room and no toilet. No Sarah.

He returned his attention to the woman sitting at the table. She was pale and very thin, with dark blonde hair. She was staring into her glass and hadn't so much as glanced at him as he burst in to the cafe. Now he stood beside the table and stared down at her, forcing her to acknowledge him. Her movements were subtle, but he could see that she was taking a breath, drawing herself up to full strength. Finally, when their eyes met, her face slackened. It only lasted a moment, but Simon saw enough to pull out a chair and sit opposite her. He turned the seat at an angle, so his back wasn't entirely to the window.

"How do you know who I am?" he asked.

"I don't know who you are."

"You know that I don't have time to argue with you."

She thought it over.

"You've made a mistake," she said and stood up.

Simon grabbed her by the wrist. With her free hand, she snatched up the glass she had been drinking from. She restrained herself, for the time being, from smashing it in his face.

"I only want to talk," he said.

She flicked her eyes to the right, indicating the owners of the cafe. Simon didn't make the mistake of looking. He had heard the man join the woman at the counter, but he wasn't concerned about them. He wanted answers.

"Talk," Simon said.

She glanced at the door.

"Here," Simon said.

Finally, she sat down. Simon let go of her arm and she let go of the glass.

"Now talk," Simon said.

She sighed and said: "He took her."

"When?"

"Ten, fifteen minutes."

"Which?"

"Ten."

"You helped him."

"Yes."

"Why? Who are you?"

Her eyes flicked towards the old couple over her shoulder again.

"Answer," Simon said.

"This isn't going to help you get her back."

"Quickly."

She pushed her fingers through her hair and grabbed a handful. "I'm like you," she said. "I do as I'm told. I don't get hurt. The people I care about don't get hurt. You'd have done the same as me. As far as I knew, you already had."

"Why does he want her?"

She was staring at him very steadily and intensely. Her eyes had both the colour and texture of a frozen lake. She swallowed hard.

"The same thing is going to happen to her as happens to all the people you deliver."

Simon's hand tightened into a fist. "And what is that?"

Surprise swept over her face so quickly that she hadn't a chance to hide it. When the tremor was over, her mouth curled into a contemptuous smile. She rested her hands in her lap and slouched. The contempt travelled up to her eyes.

“Just tell me what happens,” Simon said.

“You don't know much, do you?” she said. “It learns from them. It takes them apart to see if it can put them together again. Usually the answer's 'no' ... You asked me.”

“Sarah's his insurance to keep me ... delivering. Why does it want her now?”

“I'd like to help you,” she said, “but I can't. We're very similar, so you'll understand why I can't say any more.” Before Simon could speak, she continued: “Firdy will tell you everything you want to know. I've got no stake in this. Nothing to gain and everything to lose. It's not that I don't sympathise. I can't.” She stood up.

Simon told her to sit down, but she straightened her coat and put up her hood.

“I can't say it was nice to meet you,” she said. “Don't follow me. And one other piece of advice: when he realises that you're not where he left you, he'll be very upset. He has a terrible temper.”

The woman raised a hand to the couple behind the counter and strolled out of the cafe.

Simon looked at the empty doorway, flicking through his options. He was so absorbed in thought that he didn't notice that the man had emerged from behind the counter and was now standing beside him, looking upset.

“You going to order or what?” the man asked, his arms hanging at his sides as if he was a gunslinger.

Simon pushed past him.

In the street, there was no sign of the woman in the white coat. He thought about what she had said. She was right. Firdy told him that he would return to the house with Sarah. Having failed to reach his sister in time, all he could do now was get home and limit the damage. And once again, time was against him.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Do you want the radio? You can have the radio if you want. Although I can’t stand pop music. I’m more of a jazz man. What kind of music are you into? You look like an intellectual, despite the jacket. You like Radio Four, I suppose. People bashing their heads against walls. Yeah, that’s you, but sitting on the sidelines, watching the world go by, because it can’t really touch you, can it? Keep your hands clean. I’ve never had that luxury, but of course I wouldn’t have it any other way. It’s made me what I am, right? You’ve got to try. You’ve got to get involved. Or you may as well be dead. Don’t you see? Only, it’s difficult when you look like me. It’s difficult to get involved.

“But that’s life. You’ve got to play with the cards you’ve been dealt. Your brother would say the same thing. Take him back three years and he’d take the exact same path and it would lead him to me and me to him.

“He’s done a good job of protecting you, but that’s no longer necessary. I’m going to take care of everything.

“It’s cold; I’m going to put the heater on again. Do you mind the heat? I’ve never liked the cold. Tell me if it’s too hot. I don’t have any water left, but we’ll be back at yours soon. You can have a wash; rest, sleep, dream ... Everything’s going to be okay.

“I want you to understand now, in case anything happens, that I’m not going to kill Simon, unless he makes me. He’s a smart man. I don’t think he’s going to do that. There’s a chance that he’s going to see us together and feel upset about that, but I don’t think he’ll do anything stupid. If he does, well, let’s not think about that. Sometimes you can think about something and it happens. Know what I mean? No. Perhaps not.

“Smile. This could have been much worse, you know. If Sharonne hadn’t found you, I would have got to you first. That might not have been pretty. I was quite upset. I think I’ve just killed someone. I was getting kind of fed up of chasing you. You might not have been sitting here, comfortable, in the front with me. I might have put you in the back. You don’t want that.

“You’ll be back with your brother in under an hour. That’s what you wanted, isn’t it? It’s on my terms, but at least it’s going to happen, right? In return for that, I expect you to co-operate. I don’t expect much. You follow where I lead; that’s all I ask. If I say move, you move. That’s all. Like Simon. Ultimately, he does as his told.

“We all do.

“You don’t talk much, do you? Gives me room to think. You don’t need to talk. Rest. We’ve got a lot to do.

“Are you sure you don’t want the radio on? When you hire a van like this, it seems a shame not to try the radio.”

She was staring out of the passenger window.

“Fuck it.” He pushed the 'on' button. It was national radio; too loud, too jolly. “Good,” he said. “That’s better.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Firdy held the door and nodded for Sarah to enter before him. Doing so would cause her to brush against him. She'd have to be nearer to him than they had been during the entire journey in the van.

"I won't bite," he said and smiled, on the brink of losing his patience. She had no choice but to do as he said so she bit her lip and forced her right foot in front of left and her left foot in front of right. She held her breath as she passed between him and the door frame. The smell of him invaded her nostrils and she gagged.

He's in my lungs, she thought. He's inside me.

When he crossed the threshold after her, everything in the world lost its balance. His presence – his stench, his skin, his lopsided gait – was vile and terrifying in their private space. They had been safe here once and he was ruining it. It seemed impossible that this was happening. She wanted to scream at him and tell him so; she wanted to throw plates.

He locked them in.

"Now give me your keys," he said and paused for only a moment before adding: "Give them to me or I'll take them from you."

She reached into her jeans and tossed the keys to him. He attempted to catch them with his right hand, but missed by a good way and they clattered at his feet. As he knelt down to retrieve them he didn't take his eyes from her, as if willing her to take the opportunity to run, knowing that there was nowhere to go now.

She maintained his gaze, although she felt violated.

Crouched on the floor like an imp, the folds of his long black coat gathered like a crushed flower and when he picked up her keys it was with a hiss of leather against the tiles. Rising, he was insect-like, all knees and elbows and thin limbs. She couldn't help averting her eyes then. She heard him snigger and then he was limping his way towards the living area, pocketing her keys as he went.

"Sit down," he said. "Be still. Don't talk."

She sat on a stool at the breakfast bar, alternately watching Firdy and glancing through the window that looked out onto the drive. It was going to be frightening when Firdy discovered that Simon wasn't here.

Even as she listened to him securing the front door using the second and third locks, she thought of escape. She knew that a weapon had been taped beneath the breakfast bar, inches from her knees. It would be a knife or a police baton or maybe an escrima sharpened to a point. There were no guns.

If you pull one of these things out, Simon had told her, be prepared to use it.

Firdy was grunting, struggling with one of the locks.

She was prepared to kill him. Escaping was the problem. Each time Firdy hit a pothole or bumped the kerb, she heard the thing in the back scrabble around. It butted the walls, scratched and snorted. She didn't know what it was, but its temperament was even worse than Firdy's.

Even if she did kill Firidy, the thing in the van would get her. Eventually, it would break out or someone would investigate the abandoned vehicle and it would be free. Firidy had made it clear that its purpose was to find her and that its desire was to eat some of her. Firidy was the only thing between her and the animal.

“Don’t look so unhappy,” Firidy said. “By tomorrow, it’ll be over. Try to relax until then. You’re here, with me, and you don’t have a choice. So get used to it. And get some rest.”

He removed his hat, revealing his hairless scalp. In secondary school, her pottery class had once been tasked to make model heads. They had moulded clay around newspaper balls, building the mixture up and then defining it until they were skull-shaped. She’d made nostrils by shoving a pencil into the nose. She worked for an entire day on the eyes but couldn’t quite get them right and had attempted to smooth the skin all over the head, but could always see the dents made by her tools and the trenches made by her fingers. It was not bad for a first attempt though, she had thought.

She had glazed the head, holding it by the neck between her thumb and index finger and dipping it into the pot of yellow gloop.

On her way to the kiln for the biscuit firing, however, it had slipped from her fingers. After it had slapped against the stone floor, she noticed its peculiar expression, the curl of its mouth and the plaintive, lopsided eyes accusing her.

She tried to fix it, but there wasn’t time to do a good job. The firing would happen with or without it. Guilty, she quickly straightened his features and placed him inside.

The following morning, Mrs Gutteridge told the class that two of the heads had exploded during the firing and, as it was a very small kiln, they had managed to damage every other head in the process. All except for Sarah’s, which everyone thought was unfair, because hers had been the worst of all. Mrs Gutteridge had the head on her desk, where it sneered at everyone.

At home, Sarah had promptly smashed it with a hammer and had scraped the pieces into the bin. Now he was back, alive and climbing the stairs with his mis-shapen head. His gloved right hand made a recurrent wet slap and hissing sound against the wall as he used it to steady himself.

When he was out of sight, she slid her hand under the breakfast bar and felt for the weapon.

*

As he climbed the stairs, he felt nervous and afraid. His life was coming to an end and he was making it happen. In fewer than 24 hours, he’d be gone. So would Simon. So would Sarah. He wasn’t afraid to die - he’d looked forward to this for far too long - he was only scared that he might fail, having come so far. This was his chance to prove himself, to show how well he could do without the Third’s guidance and thus earn his place in the next life.

Sarah’s escape was a big negative, but he had made the best of it. He’d got her back to the house, calm and afraid and predictable. Besides, he had the main thing in place already.

With his hand on the door to Simon’s room, he couldn’t help considering consequences of the Third rejecting him at the last moment.

Thanks for everything, but it wasn’t enough.

He’d kill everyone. It was that simple.

And when they were dead, he’d ...

... left it open.

Simon’s door should still have been open; he’d deliberately left it that way so he could hear what was going on in there.

He considered retrieving the Cat from the van, but decided against it. His control was limited. He couldn’t even feel the Dog. Whatever he found in that room, he’d deal with it alone.

His hunting knife slid easily from inside his coat. He upended it so he could thrust it in a downward arc, into a shoulder or an arm or a leg, and so the serrated edge would punch in cleanly. He had to remember to leave the knife in, otherwise Simon might bleed to death. He had to be very careful. He knew how quickly things could go wrong.

Listening with his ear against the door for a minute, he heard no sound on the other side and wondered if Simon was doing the same, holding his breath.

He shoved the door and it swung open, slamming against the wall inside.

Simon was not there.

Nor was the Dog.

As the door reverberated, on its way back to the closed position, Firdy entered the room. The rope he had used to secure the Dog was heaped on the floor, one end still attached to Simon's desk. The other end was draped over what looked like a discarded rug. He walked towards it and fell to his knees.

He removed his glove to lay his bare hand on Dog's side.

In attempting to remove the rope from his neck, his fingers disturbed torn flesh. He found three stab wounds in the back of his neck. Although the Dog's throat had been cut too, Firdy didn't imagine that it had been a quick death.

Trembling, he let the Dog slide from his hands. Aside from the Dog – dead - and Simon - missing, everything appeared to be as it had been. What had he overlooked when setting this up? Somehow Simon had got far enough from Dog that he was impeded by his rope, but it was little more than a box room. There should have been nowhere to run. Had Simon managed to get past the animal?

Firdy shook his head and found that once he had started he didn't want to stop. He drew a deep breath. The cool air cleared his head somewhat. The window was open. From his knees, he could see the tops of trees silhouetted against the ocean-dark sky, waving, watching, laughing. A sudden breeze toyed with the curtains, explored the room, found his bald head and played with the scars. This so-called fresh air stank. He wanted this life over with.

He spent a few painful seconds straightening up and in the process the significance of the open window came to him. On investigation, he found that it was not open, but smashed. With a naked finger, he touched one of the remaining shards that remained in the frame. There was so little glass on the floor that it could only have been broken from inside.

He leaned out.

It was a long way down.

Now he knew what had happened to the Dog. He'd flung himself out of the window, chasing Simon, and he'd hung himself. Simon had finished him off.

Firdy didn't know where Simon was ... only what he would do to the escapee when he found him.

*

She probed with the fingers of her right hand, looking over her shoulder to see if Firdy was descending. The stairs were empty.

She laid her hand firmly on the thing and gave a yelp as the blade sliced deep into two fingers. That was stupid. Her palm was full of blood by the time she found a cloth under the sink.

With the cloth wrapped around her hand, she thrust it, burning, into her pocket. She was allowing herself a croak of pain when, upstairs, Firdy yelled. She stared up towards Simon's room, where the yell was followed by a crash.

This, she assumed, was the sound of Firdy realising that Simon wasn't home after all.

She returned to the bench and detached the knife.

*

The bulb in the lamp smashed, but the rest of the contraption made an unsatisfying clatter against the wall before dropping to the ground. Simon's room was so sparse that there was nothing to hand that was worth breaking.

Firdy stormed onto the landing and kicked open the bathroom door. As he expected, Simon was not inside.

He had already turned Sarah's room over looking for clues as to her location. As soon as he saw that Simon was not in there either, he completed the job. He ripped the Chicago poster from the back of the door. The middle section tore away, leaving two heavily made-up women on either side. He clawed at them, pulled them down, kicked them across the littered floor. He swiped photographs and paintings and sketches from the walls, hauled over the chest of drawers, turned over the bed. A Maglite torch rolled across the floor; he upended it and hurled it at the television screen. Missed. He kicked the television from its stand, but it didn't break, so he made his stance wide and picked it up, attempting to raise it above his head. Its wires kept it tethered though, so he dropped it and the floor shook. He tried to put his foot through the screen, but again it wouldn't break. He roared with frustration.

He wanted to strangle Simon the way he had strangled the Dog. He wanted to see his eyes roll back in his head, to snap his fucking neck.

But the Third needed Simon. Above all, she needed him. She had been specific about that.

They'd be committed to existing together. The thought made him nauseous. There was something, however, that would redress the balance.

It was time to for answers from Sarah. If she happened to die in the process, then so be it.

*

The thing in the van snorted, barging into the walls, tearing strips out of the floor. Its steps thudded in a circular path in the darkness.

It sensed that something terrible was going to happen. It could feel Firdy's anger spiralling out of control, making him consider doing something that would upset the Third.

Killing the baby had been a bad move, but in the end that was collateral damage. They had got the girl; all they had to do now was deliver her along with her brother.

It paced the darkness, attempting in vain to communicate with its so-called master. In truth, the only thing it respected, the only thing it feared, was the Third. When she returned, Firdy's raging would be nothing compared to her anger.

*

He had been meaning to question her when he came down the stairs, but her clear skin with the slight odour of sweat and those big eyes looking at him all trembling made him want to crush her perfect body, snap her arms and punch in that pretty face; he wanted to yank her by the arm and dislocate her beautiful shoulder, show her what he could have done to her all along if he hadn't been nice.

Seeing the expression on his face, she slid from her stool and started backing away.

"Tell me where he is," Firdy said, "or I'm going to break every fucking bone in your body. I'll start with your fingers. I'll bite them right off."

He was jabbing a single finger at her; the rest were curled around the handle of a knife that dwarfed the one she had managed to secure for herself. She kept it hidden behind her back as she spoke.

“There’s no need for that,” she said. “I’ll tell you what I know, but you probably know more than I do.”

The speed of his movement took her by surprise. His fist slammed into her chest and she fell and fell and fell, spilling over a stool and landing painfully on her arm, banging her head against the tiles. Her knife spun away from her. She heard the clatter, but didn't see where it went.

Before she could get up, he was coming again, landing on top of her. She bucked, but he overpowered her, his left forearm jammed against her throat, pinning her to the ground and cutting off her air at the same time.

“Stop wriggling,” he said, “or I’ll crush your throat.”

She gasped, a sound that terrified her. “Please,” she said, and she tried to draw a breath. Nothing.

“Give me a reason, you ... fucking ... cunt.”

His spittle landed on her lips and she gagged; his rotten-animal breath was hot against her face. His one good eye flicked around like a pinball and she thought she was going to laugh, but a scream came out of her mouth instead. Firdy released her throat and slapped his hand over her mouth.

She saw the knife that he meant to hurt her with, discarded on the floor. Its serrated edge was monstrous. He would be certain to twist it once it was inside her. She understood that he was capable of anything and had seen the desire in his eyes. Being sliced scared her even more than being stabbed; worst of all was the idea of being gutted, losing herself amid a bloody spray, splashing tiles, screaming, soaking the floor.

See that especially clean patch on the carpet?

Sarah woz ‘ere.

Firdy removed his hand from her mouth in order to snatch up the knife, which he did with great speed. He raised his arm high above his head. Her eyes were wide as he plunged the blade into her shoulder.

This time, his hand couldn't absorb her scream.

When she opened her eyes, crying with the pain, snot bubbling under his hand, he was glaring down at her.

“I’m enjoying this,” he said, “but it stops as soon as you tell me where he is.”

She had known that Firdy might try to kill her, but she hadn’t prepared herself for the possibility of being tortured first.

“I’m going to ask you some questions. I’d like you to answer them as completely as you can.”

Part of her wanted to tell Firdy that Simon had followed her to Walthamstow. It wanted to tell him everything to make the pain stop. The other part; the greater part, it seemed, said:

“Fuck. You.”

Firdy fingered the handle protruding from her shoulder. She stiffened and couldn't help crying out. “There will be consequences,” he said. “For both of you.”

“You won’t find him ... before he finds you.”

“We don’t have masses of time, so I’m going to start twisting.” He grabbed the handle and she wailed. “Last chance,” he said.

If this is the last thing I'm going to do, she thought, I'm going to do it with dignity. She bit her lip hard enough to draw blood and sucked in a deep, deep breath. He looked surprised.

"Okay," he said. "Let's do it your way."

She closed her eyes against the approaching pain, knowing that she would not have felt anything like this before. She didn't have much of a pain threshold. Even paper cuts made her want to cry. Nauseous already, she hoped that what Firidy was about to do would make her pass out. Teeth clenched, she waited for agony.

Instead, she heard something strike the kitchen window. She and Firidy looked towards the source at the same time and they heard a second strike, cracking the glass, and then a third, smashing the pane. Firidy paused, momentarily stunned and confused, as a hand reached in, unlocked the window from the inside and threw it open. Firidy rolled across the floor, knees and elbows thumping into the ground. He scrambled to his feet as Simon leapt through the window.

Another man might have got away, but Firidy was struggling to move after kneeling for so long. He aimed a kick at Simon who had closed the distance quickly, but Simon absorbed it, barrelling into him at full pelt and throwing him into the wall. They slid on the tiles, a tangle of arms and legs.

Sarah pushed herself away from the fight, overwhelmed by their grunts and rapid breathing, tearing clothes, the boom of Firidy's body hitting the wall again, then dropping to the ground, dragging Simon with him.

Simon performed what looked like a martial arts move that forced Firidy to his back and pinned him there, but the smaller man managed to fire a left hook across Simon's face. There was a spray of blood from Simon's mouth and a tooth rattled across the tiles.

Sarah forced herself to stop watching and went for the knife that she had lost. It wasn't immediately evident, so she checked the skirting boards and looked under the stools. As she searched, she heard blows landing behind her. She hoped it was the sound of Simon laying into Firidy, but she couldn't be sure. Neither of them spoke. It would be a fight to the death. Her hands shook as the certainty came over her. Finding her knife would be instrumental in swaying the balance.

It was underneath the counter. She crawled on her hands and knees, her right hand burning from the gash in her palm. She was unable to use her left arm at all without pain radiating throughout her shoulder and neck before shooting down towards her fingers.

As her bloody hand grabbed the knife, she realised that it had all gone quiet behind her. Fearing the worst, she slid out from beneath the counter.

Firidy was on his back, legs and arms bent as though he was about to slide backwards across the floor as she had attempted to do minutes ago, but he was still except for his chest, which heaved with exertion. He had thrown his head back. His mouth made an 'O' of exhaustion.

Simon, to her relief, was standing, regarding his fallen opponent. Sarah hurried across the kitchen to hand him the knife. He looked at it for a while before he took it from her, then he held it at his side while he watched Firidy again.

Firidy's jaw remained slack and Sarah saw that what teeth he had left were yellow or black and as crooked as tombstones. He had a distant, scared look on his face, as if something momentous were rolling towards him, a terrible horizon. Drool spilled over his almost-non-existent bottom lip. He groaned.

Simon didn't move. Sarah was surprised by the words that came to her.

"Kill it," she said. Simon glanced at her and then back at Firidy who was writhing on the floor, moving not in agony but with pleasure. Neither of them spoke as Firidy grunted and

appeared to orgasm, his gloved hand reaching between his legs at the moment of ejaculation. He collapsed then, on his back, getting his breath.

Simon's expression conveyed nothing. He strolled through the kitchen, slid the knife on top of a cupboard and returned to Firdy. He offered his hand and Firdy hauled himself up, nodded and then staggered into the living area where he slumped in the armchair.

Sarah grabbed Simon's sleeve in her fist.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"Calm down, Sally," he said. His words stabbed her. Sally. Simon was gone again. They'd missed their opportunity to rid themselves of Firdy. "It's going to be alright," he said and she knew that he was lying.

Chapter Thirty

Firdy sat with his head between his knees, muttering to what Sarah gathered were the voices in his head.

“I’m sorry ... didn’t mean to ... last chance ... what I’ve done ...”

While Firdy ranted, Simon sat beside Sarah on the sofa. Simon appeared to be calm. Only Sarah was fidgeting, looking at the men and the door and the broken window and wondering if she should take charge. In a way, listening to Simon had got them into this mess. Perhaps if she did things her way for a while, she could get them out of it. Simon was unable to kill Firdy now, but there was nothing stopping her and there probably wouldn’t be a better time than this. He was hunched, rocking back and forth. She could stab him in the spine. He wouldn’t see it coming. She glanced at the cupboard where Simon had (discarded) stashed the knife.

“Keep still,” Simon said.

“You’re not even yourself,” Sarah said. “Why should I listen to you?”

“You shouldn’t have run, Sally. We could be in a lot of trouble now. From now on, I need you to do as you’re told.”

She didn’t understand. Was that a message in disguise? Was she supposed to do the opposite of everything he said.

She began to stand and Simon yanked her back by the wrist.

“Sit,” he said. “Let me see your shoulder.”

The handle of the knife still protruded from her body. Considering the length of the blade, she assumed that it protruded from the back of her shoulder, but she couldn’t turn her head to see without excruciating pain. She kept her breaths shallow, because her chest ached.

Simon said that removing the knife would cause her to start bleeding again. She was glad that he wasn’t going to try to pull it out. And yet, the sight of it made her feel nauseous, because Firdy had done this to her. Although he had acted quickly and with ferocity, she thought that he had taken great pleasure in wounding her in this way, so that they were more alike. He had wanted her to feel what it was like to lose the use of an arm. If Simon hadn’t interrupted him, her eye would have been next.

“Feels ok,” she said when she saw that Simon had finished examining her. And then: “In case I don’t get a chance later, I want to say -”

“Shh.”

She wanted to say that she loved him, that she always would, no matter what he had to do to her. She hoped that he would know that to be true. Somehow. Somewhere. Before the end.

Firdy was tearing at the skin on top of his head. He appeared to be in agony, and still in dialogue with the voices. Sarah had no doubt that he was insane. She stared at Simon and wondered to what extent he was all there too.

She was stuck between two lunatics. She could make it to the window and get help, even with one arm.

“Sorry,” Firdy said. His face was sweaty and his eye was red. To Simon, he said: “Looks like we're back to business.”

“On the lead again,” Simon said.

Firdy raised his eye to the ceiling, but neither of them mentioned the dead dog out loud. Instead, Simon massaged his temple and Firidy said: “Get me a drink.” Simon filled a glass with tap water. “Good boy,” Firidy said, and then to Sarah: “How's your shoulder? I'm sorry about that. Really, I am, but, in my defence, if your brother hadn't left, it would never have happened.” He drained most of his water in one gulp and then offered the remaining inch or so to Simon, who declined. Firidy insisted, however, and Simon drank what was left with a grimace. “We have to learn to share,” Firidy said. “What's mine is yours ...” He sat back in the armchair, enjoying the tension. “Sit back down, Simon. Sit.”

Firdy doesn't fit, Sarah thought, he's trying so hard, but he doesn't fit.

Their leftovers from the night before were still in the table. The television was on stand-by. She recalled the movie that they had been watching; the arachnids, taking over a small town.

“What happens now?” Simon asked.

“You know. The Third – who you call 'the Creature' – wants me to wait. And so we wait.”

“For the cover of darkness,” Simon said.

“Under a full moon? I don't think so.”

“So what are we waiting for? Tell me, Firidy; what's going to happen tonight?”

“It'll only scare you,” Firidy said. “But when it's over, you'll see through new eyes. You too, Sarah. You'll see the world in ways you can't imagine and this will all have been worth it.”

“And what do we do in the meantime?”

“You stay put. Since you can't be trusted, I get to watch you.”

After a few minutes of silence, waiting for the dark, Simon told Sarah that she may as well try to sleep.

“You're kidding?” Sarah said and Simon only gazed at her in response. She took one last look at Firidy – he was grinning – and she forced herself to close her eyes. She was afraid and would have been surprised to know that she fell into a fitful sleep within a couple of minutes.

“It's with us,” Simon said, “but distracted.” He could feel its presence in his mind, scrabbling, alert but benign compared to its usual intrusion. Firidy didn't reply. “It's not distracted,” Simon realised. “It's saving its strength for later. And there's something else happening... We're connected again, me and you, but it's working both ways. I can feel you this time.”

Firidy assessed the tone of Simon's voice and the rigid expression on his face. Everything about the man was careful and controlled.

“I can feel you,” Simon went on, “but you're hiding things from me.”

“Now you know how it feels.”

“For one thing, you're hiding what's going to happen tonight.”

“Of course, I am,” Firidy said. He watched Sarah's breathing to make sure she was asleep. “To be honest, I'm not sure what's going to happen, but everything is going to be better. For all of us. This life – your missions, the chaos – that will end. You'll be normal again. I know you want to be normal, Simon.”

“What about your life?” Simon said. “How does that improve? That's the real reason you're doing this. That's why you're so dedicated. I don't imagine that you'll go on living like this. Hiding your face. Wearing sunglasses at night. Running you errands. There must be something in it for you, because if I had your life, I think I would have killed myself. If I was trapped in

your life, in your body ...” Simon heard the leather of Firidy’s gloves creak and knew he was hitting the mark. “The pain,” Simon said. “The constant pain. The loneliness.”

“I’m not alone,” Firidy said.

“You have your crazy pets, I suppose.”

“They’re not pets!”

Sarah stirred. In her sleep, she shuffled so that her head rested on Simon’s shoulder.

“She needs a hospital,” Simon said.

“I lost my temper with her,” Firidy said, “but she’ll be fine. I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you; hurting you is like hurting myself. We’re connected, right? And I’m not alone, actually. I have you. And I have her. And I always will.”

“I didn’t say you were alone. I said you were lonely. I know that it’s awful for you.”

“So this is how it feels to be invaded,” Firidy said. “I don’t suppose it would do any good to ask you to stop.”

“I want to know what’s going to happen tonight,” Simon said, “and I’m going to keep digging until I find out.”

Firidy stood up. “You might not like what you find along the way.” He paced for a while, stopping at a kitchen cupboard. After pulling open a door, he looked surprised.

“The glasses,” he remarked.

“In the bottom cupboard,” Simon said.

Firidy stooped, frowned again, and then removed a plain, half-pint glass. He took a little time to examine the sparse contents of the refrigerator before settling for tap water again, downing the contents in one. He refilled the glass, paced some more, checked his pockets, fiddled with the scummy contents.

The presence of the Third, as Firidy had called it, negated any possibility of physical violence between them, but it allowed their psychic battle to continue, Simon probing and Firidy twisting away from him. No observer, even if Sarah were to wake, would have known that such a struggle was taking place; Simon seemed to be approaching sleep and Firidy appeared to be preoccupied by trivial things; the buttons of his jacket, the plain decoration of the kitchen, cobwebs in the corners. Aside from the occasional ripple in the form of a frown or wince their faces appeared relaxed and unperturbed.

As he strolled around the room, Firidy came across a cracked floor tile, which had no doubt been broken by Simon slamming his head against it. The throbbing of his cheek testified to that. The Third knew about the fight. She had retrieved that information and had scalded him accordingly, but that was over now, as she agreed that their future conduct was more important. Firidy stepped over the tile and kept pacing, managing to put it out of his mind until he encountered the white enamel of Simon’s tooth. He wanted to pocket it, to keep it as a bloody souvenir, as ridiculous as that was, but deep down inside him he could feel the Third turning his way. Her investigation was best avoided, so he took a psychic step away from her and a took physical path towards Simon, settling down in the armchair opposite him.

“You must be exhausted,” Simon observed.

“You too,” Firidy said, but Simon had beaten him to it and his words caused a wave of tiredness to swamp his body. He hadn’t slept for ... days ... surviving on adrenaline and fear and excitement, but now, suddenly, he craved a hard floor to sleep on. He was yet to lie on a mattress that didn’t leave him in pain on waking. He was happiest down with the dust and the bugs.

He thought of his flat, which he had been squatting for the past three months. It looked as if it hadn’t been decorated in twenty years. Where there was wallpaper, it was peeling away from

the walls like shorn skin. In places, printed flowers peered out from beneath, grey and brown and damp.

The room he took as his bedroom was much like Simon's, but because it was larger the emptiness was more profound. He too had a camp bed on the floor, but his was in the middle of the room, away from the things that scuttled in and out of the skirting boards. There was a rickety table and a broken chair, an empty wardrobe with one door, a grainy window with the curtains drawn, heavy with dust and dank.

The room smelled of piss. His. He'd peed in the corners and in the bed. At first, peeing in his clothes had been a shameful accident, but he'd eventually got used to his body's deficiencies, as long as he considered them temporary.

He glanced at Simon, wondering how much of that daydream he'd picked up. It was hard to tell, because Simon was as difficult to read as ever. It perplexed him, as did the idea that his home of the last three months might be destroyed without anyone ever knowing he had been there. Certainly, he'd had some terrible nights there, but it had also been a place of refuge. It had been home and it occurred to him that perhaps he should have left something behind for somebody to find. A note. Something.

He took a deep breath and put the thought aside. That was in the past. He put all thoughts aside.

Despite his best efforts, within ten minutes he was nodding.

Simon had his eyes closed too.

What the hell.

In fifteen minutes, he was asleep.

*

Firdy knew that he was dreaming, because Simon was a baby, perhaps two years old. He was leading the boy upstairs, but it was taking a long time, because Simon wanted to do it by himself.

"Come on. Hurry up."

Simon crawled up the steps on all fours, grinning as he came.

"You can do it. Come on. Come on."

Every time Firdy reached for the toddler he squealed and pulled away.

"Okay, you can do it, but hurry."

He didn't know why it was so important for them to get to the top, but when they were almost there he felt simultaneous dread and satisfaction at what was to happen.

"Come on," he said. The bath was running. It would overflow if they weren't quick.

At the top step, Simon squealed and Firdy picked him up, except he wasn't Firdy, because his hands were big and whole and comfortable. He carried the boy like a pack of sugar and pushed open the bathroom door, half-expecting something terrible in there, but there was no monster, only the bath, approaching half-full, water gushing out of the silver tap. Good, it wasn't too late.

He hurriedly pulled Simon's clothes off and then the big hands picked him up again.

He thought about apologising, but decided it was better if he didn't know what was going to happen. He placed him in the water, which was cool and clear and beautiful, yet he knew that it was deadly and that it wanted the boy. Before he could change his mind, he shoved the boy's head under the water.

To his surprise, the boy continued to play, kicking his legs, unperturbed by the drowning. Firdy/the man closed his eyes and held the boy down, his big finger and thumb securing him now by the throat.

Eventually, the baby stopped kicking.

He kept his hand underwater for another minute or so to be sure it was done, then he opened his eyes.

They were outdoors and the baby was lying in a puddle in the dirt. Looking down at the boy and what he had done, he felt as though a dark flower were opening up inside him. It tore his insides. Those big hands were shaking.

He prodded the boy's white flesh with a finger.

"Come on," he heard himself say. "Stop pretending. Get up. Get up now."

*

His eyelids, which had felt as though they were glued shut, snapped open. He yelled and sat upright, heart hammering. The pain in his chest was incredible. His trousers were wet again.

"What are you staring at!?" Firdy said.

Simon pointed.

Firdy looked down at himself, half-expecting to see his cock in his hand. It happened sometimes. Instead, he saw that he was holding his small, black, leather-bound notebook. He was so surprised to see it there that he dropped it.

This body, he thought. It has a mind of its own.

He removed the elastic band that was holding the book closed.

"Address book," Simon suggested. "Got a hot date when you've finished with us?"

Firdy tapped the side of his head.

"Addresses are in here," he said. "This book is something else entirely."

He had a good memory for people, places and events. Dreams were elusive though. The more he had tried to remember them, the more they span away from him. And so he'd kept the journal, noting down fragments upon waking. That had been in the beginning. He'd slowly discovered rhythms and patterns, recurring themes. Eventually, he had focussed less on recording them and spent more time analysing the contents. Remembering the dreams became easy. They were horrible. The trouble now was separating them from reality.

He thought that someone might read the book one day. He had intended to leave it under the floorboard in his flat, but something had made him bring it along.

This body, he thought.

"Here," he said and tossed the book to Simon. "Take it. It doesn't really belong to me."

It was liberating to know that in hours none of this was going to matter, but he still felt a pang of anxiety when Simon turned to the first page. He felt naked.

"I'll be back in a minute," Firdy said, and hurried to the door, retrieving the key from his pocket.

*

A RIVER AND YET A GREAT WAVE.

ALL THE PEOPLE I'VE KILLED ARE INSIDE.

THEY ARE DROWNING AGAIN.

AND AGAIN.

AND SO AM I AS I WATCH THEM.

REACHING FOR ME.

I'M ONE OF THEM.

WORSE.

MUCH WORSE.

Firdy's writing was irregular, ropey and childish, with no respect for lines. In places, he had torn the paper with his pens, perhaps deliberately, but more likely in the spur of the moment. On some pages, the text ran almost vertically, suggesting that he had been writing without looking. At first, Simon thought he was reading poetry, but after a few pages it seemed more likely that these were dreams, transcribed upon waking. In the night. In a cold sweat.

Most of the passages were written in capital letters. For the most part, these were the only ones Simon could decipher, but he could see that they had been written furiously nonetheless, as if the hand had been chasing the words across the page.

Here and there a word or phrase caught his eye.

LIKE PINPRICKS

I PRETENDED NOT TO NOTICE

DON'T FEEL THE COLD I DON'T FEEL ANYTHING

THERE IS NO ME NOT HERE AND NOWHERE

IT WAS ALWAYS GOING TO BE

SHOULD HAVE KNOWN

LOST COUNT

The same phrases recurred over and over across the pages.

IT DOESNT MATTER NOW

HELL

SHOULD HAVE KNOWN

NO POINT

PARASITE

SHOULD HAVE KNOWN

SHOULD HAVE KNOWN

Some entries were dated, all within the past year and a half, but Firdy hadn't kept up the dating system. Although the entries would have been written in chronological order, the thoughts appeared jumbled; one horrendous passage stopped abruptly and then another began. New line. New pen. New thought.

Firdy was outside. Sarah continued to rest. Simon turned to a new page. The capitalised scrawl had been written on top of existing sentences, further evidence that much of this had been written in darkness. He struggled to punctuate the sentences. The more he read the easier it became.

DREAM:

ARM AROUND A ...

CARE ABOUT HER I'M ALSO ...
TIGHT SO SHE CAN'T ESCAPE ...
MY DAUGHTER ...
WIFE AND SHE'S ...
OUR PICTURE ...
SHE'S NOT STEPPING BACK, SHE'S JUST SLIDING AWAY FROM US ...
I HOLD THE GIRL, MY DAUGHTER, BECAUSE I KNOW THAT AS LONG AS I HAVE
HER WE WON'T SLIDE AWAY TOO ...
I'M SQUEEZING AND SQUEEZING HER AND I CAN'T STOP. I HEAR HER BONES
CRACK ...
SHE TRIES TO TELL ME TO STOP BUT I'VE CRUSHED HER ...
SHE CAN'T BREATHE ...
TAKES A PICTURE ...
THE CAMERA ...
AND EVERYONE DISAPPEARS ...
EXCEPT FOR ME ...

*

"I used to have that dream every week," Firdy said. He was standing in the doorway looking over his shoulder to face Simon. "I'd wake up and reach out for them. I'd hear them screaming, even though I was awake, but they were never there. Of course not. They never were. I didn't even know who they were.

"I'd get up, wash, go for a walk, try to eat, but I could still hear them. Chatting, laughing, screaming. Nice. Try getting on with your day with that going on in your head.

"I thought it would get easier once I knew who they were. I was wrong."

"Who -"

"Don't be dense, Simon. You know who they are. You were in the photograph. The question isn't 'who is the family'; it's 'why am I dreaming about them'? Why have I been having this dream for years, when we only met yesterday."

He went back outside, shutting the door behind him.

Simon was floundering. He put the book aside and attempted to steady himself. In the distance, he could feel the Creature, the Third as Firdy had called it. Thinking of it by its new name caused it cast an inquisitive tendril in his direction. Its movements, if thoughts could be called such a thing, were slow and gentle, oily and threatening, but still very far away. He thought that he had been right when he suggested that it was conserving its energy, but he also sensed that it had plenty; perhaps more than ever, concentrated. He had no intention of testing the theory.

He calmed his breathing and tried to think of something neutral, but there was the book, full of questions and answers.

*

In a meandering, lower-case note that began in a margin and then took over the page:

“It’s difficult to keep a family together. A family isn’t a living thing, it’s lots of living things, all pulling and tugging. You need someone to keep them all going in the same direction. It’s not easy to be that person.”

“Here and there they go, obeying the voice and the vibration, leaving their offices, their workshops, their beds, their husbands and wives, to wander the streets of the city at night, sometimes returning home exhausted but relieved, and other times collecting a friendly face along the way and chucking them in the river, in the canal, in the sea.

“All pulling and tugging in different directions.

“A family needs a mother and a father. Thankless tasks both.”

*

Simon heard Firdy open the door and looked up. He wished that he hadn't. Firdy had the thing that he had been keeping in the van.

This thing was not like the dog. From a glance, he was able to ascertain that it had much more in the way of intelligence, because it had seemed to smile at him.

It padded across the tiles, with lighter footsteps than the dog. It was feline; enormous and wrong because of its size. Its fur was dark grey with bald patches where pink skin showed through. It sat on the floor and took in its surroundings while Firdy locked the door. It licked its paws.

“The Third has forgiven you for what you did to the Dog,” Firdy said. “And I must follow suit. The Cat, however, has a mind of her own and has been known to hold a grudge. So you might want to keep your distance, regardless of where I am.”

He gestured for the cat to follow him into the living area and it walked in the opposite direction, inspecting Simon's stray tooth.

Firdy winced and lowered his head.

The smart ones are harder to train, Simon thought.

“Yes,” said Firdy, as though Simon had spoken, and he snapped his fingers. The cat scowled. “Come here,” he said. It walked straight past him, then curled up on the floor beside the armchair. “They'll be plenty for you to do soon,” Firdy said. “It'll be worth waiting for.” It seemed placated by this and continued licking its giant paws. Now that it was closer, Simon could see that one paw was much bigger than the other.

There was no escape from his anxiety. To his left sat the cat, Firdy's ragged guardian and defender; when he closed his eyes he was aware of the Third, twisting and coiling, bringing itself to the boil, and in his hands he held the tattered, black book.

“It took so much to write it,” Firdy said, “that the least you can do is read it.” He hadn't created it with an audience in mind, but, aside from the fact that Simon would be gone before the night was over, there was no better witness to his journal.

*

As was often the case, the subtitle 'Dream' had been crossed out and replaced with the word 'Memory' followed by a question mark:

SHE APPROACHES ME, MAKING IT EASY. SHE ASKS IF I WANT TO HAVE SOME FUN AND I ASK STUPID QUESTIONS. "WHAT KIND OF FUN?" SHE FROWNS A LOT BUT IN THE END SHE STILL GETS IN. BEING HONEST WITH HER IS A RELIEF. IT'S A RELIEF NOT TO HAVE TO PRETEND. I ASK HER HOW OLD SHE IS AND SHE SAYS 23. I THINK SHE'S LYING. SHE'S THE ONE PRETENDING.

I DRIVE. I FEEL NERVOUS AND SHE GIVES ME DIRECTIONS TO A PLAYGROUND WHERE SHE NORMALLY GOES WITH CLIENTS. I LOOK AT HER A COUPLE OF TIMES. SHE'S WEARING A TINY, WHITE SKIRT AND I LOOK AT HER THIGHS. I CAN'T WAIT TO BE INSIDE HER. I WANT TO BE CLOSE TO SOMEONE AGAIN AND YOU CAN'T GET CLOSER THAN THIS. I THINK ABOUT TELLING HER, BUT I DON'T THINK SHE WANTS TO HEAR IT. I PULL UP AND PAY UP AND SHE IMMEDIATELY GOES DOWN ON ME. I CLOSE MY EYES. MY HEART IS THUMPING, BUT I DON'T FEEL TURNED ON AT ALL. I DON'T FEEL LIKE I'M REALLY HERE.

IT'S A LONG TIME BEFORE I'M HARD. SHE ASKS ME WHAT'S WRONG. SHE CALLS ME DARLING, WHICH HELPS THINGS ALONG.

THEN, FROM VERY FAR AWAY, I FEEL SOMETHING COMING AND I'M THINKING "NO, NOT NOW," BUT IT'S HERE. I PUSH THE GIRL AWAY AND SHE STARES AT ME. AT FIRST SHE'S SHOCKED AND THEN SHE'S ANGRY AND SHE'S ASKING ME WHAT'S GOING ON.

IN ONE INSTANT I'M GETTING MY COCK SUCKED AND IN THE NEXT I'M CRYING AND IT'S BACK TO BUSINESS AND I HAVE MY INSTRUCTIONS.

THE GIRL ASKS ME WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH ME AND THAT'S THE LAST THING SHE SAYS TO ANYBODY, BECAUSE I TAKE A LOOK AROUND AND PUT MY HANDS AROUND HER THROAT AND BEFORE I CHANGE MY MIND TO DO IT HERE I'VE STRANGLERED HER.

I DON'T QUITE KILL HER. SHE PASSES OUT AND SLUMPS OVER AND I DRIVE TO THE THROWING OFF POINT. I DRAG HER OUT OF THE CAR. SHE'S LIGHT. I PULL HER BODY THROUGH THE TREES. IT'S WORSE THAN WITH THE OTHERS, BECAUSE I GOT HER INTO THIS. I CALLED HER OVER TO ME TO SATISFY MY NEEDS, NOT THE THING'S. IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR ME, SHE'D STILL BE WORKING BESIDE TOWER HILL TUBE, SUCKING COCK, WALKING HOME, EATING CEREAL.

BEFORE SHE WAKES I DUMP HER HALF-DRESSED BODY INTO THE THAMES. SHE MAKES A BIG SPLASH. THERE'S A HORRIBLE THUD. THE RIVER TAKES HER DOWNSTREAM. SHE BOBS UP A FEW TIMES, SPINNING. I WISH I COULD TAKE IT BACK, BUT IT'S DONE NOW. I DIDN'T HAVE A CHOICE.

I WATCH UNTIL SHE IS ALMOST OUT OF SIGHT. THEN SHE'S SUCKED UNDER THE SURFACE, HEAD FIRST. IT ISN'T THE CURRENT THAT'S DONE THIS. THERE ARE NO AIR BUBBLES. THERE'S NO STRUGGLE. SHE'S JUST PULLED UNDER. THE LAST BIT OF HOPE IN ME GOES WITH HER.

*

Firdy raided the kitchen for anything edible and settled for cheese and stale crackers. He furnished himself with a cup of coffee.

"I don't normally drink the stuff," he said. He offered to make one for Simon, but he declined.

Sarah woke intermittently, but never for more than a few seconds. Her clothes were drenched with sweat.

"I know you're worried about her," Firdy said, "but I need her as well as you, so I wouldn't let anything bad happen to her."

"Anything else, you mean."

"You'll do me the favour of remembering that I at least apologised."

The cat had been eyeing up the remains of last night's chicken dinner and attempting to make eye contact with Firdy. It tilted its head in a manner that Simon felt was sarcastic. After some time, Firdy nodded and the cat knocked the chicken bones to the carpet, assembling them in a pile beside the armchair before ripping at the flesh and pulling cartilage with its teeth. Unlike the dog, the inside of the cat's mouth appeared to be normal, except for the size and apparent strength of it. Simon felt cold run through him as its teeth scraped at a drumstick and it tongued the marrow.

Firdy made messy business of the cheese and crackers. When he was done, he retrieved a small, square bottle from his jacket pocket and turned it over and over in his hand.

"Imagine waking up with these thoughts every morning," he said. "Dragging them around. I see that girl's face everywhere. I remember the smell of her, even though we never met." He removed the lid of the bottle and sprayed the fragrance into the air between them. "Cinema. Yves Saint Lauren. Cinema and cigarettes. She had no smell of her own."

Simon knew that their symbiosis was deepening, because as the scent reached him he felt his heart rate spike. Not only that, but he sensed the answer to a question he'd dared not ask. It had lain there, unspoken between them, for almost 24 hours, but now it begged to be out in the open, as terrible as it was.

"I can't help but respond to that smell," Firdy was saying. "I'd say that it takes me back, but I wasn't there."

"Memory by osmosis," Simon said.

"Now you're getting it."

"You haven't been around very long have you?" Simon said.

"Three years," Firdy said.

This man, with his pale, wizened skin, his bald head and crooked teeth, claimed to be no older than a baby, but the answer didn't surprise Simon, because his father had disappeared three years ago and it was making a horrible kind of sense now.

"Ask the question," Firdy said. "I'll answer it."

"My dad walked out of this house three years ago and didn't come back," Simon said. "Until yesterday."

In the near-silence, Sarah's chest rose and sank.

Rose ...

"Yeah," said Firdy.

... Sank.

Simon's pulse accelerated. His calm, his concentration, was shattered. While he felt that the Creature, the Third, was aware of the change in him, it did not intervene.

Simon looked Firdy up and down. His mind was doing handbrake turns, populated suddenly by incredible thoughts.

“Shall I explain?” Firdy said. When Simon failed to find his voice, Firdy continued. “I arrived, was born, three years ago, fully-formed.” He looked at his left hand. “So to speak. I had to work out how to walk, how to eat, how to sleep. But these things took hours, not months. I was remembering, not learning. I never had to learn a single word and yet I speak pretty well compared to most people I’ve met. I was born complete with memories, emotional scars, ticks and nightmares. I’m a hybrid. Four men in total. Physically and mentally.”

Simon searched his face for a trace of his father, but the head was too misshapen, he had no hair, the nose was broken and fixed and rebroken; the good eye was brown, whereas his father's had been very dark blue. His mouth, with its thin lips, was like a slash that let the air in and out. His chin, well, he didn't have one. Nothing was recognisable.

“He's inside,” said Firdy, tapping his head. Then he indicated the leather journal and said: “He's in there too. I feel him when I dream. He lingers. Like a stench. Like guilt. His fear. His self-loathing. Sometimes I think I could almost be happy if it wasn't for him.

“The night I was born, I tried to go home. It wasn't easy. For one thing, there were several to choose from. Past lives. Broken things. That night, I chose yours. It was the most powerful impulse.

“I watched you through the same window that you broke tonight. It hurt to look at you. I didn't know why at the time. But I know now. It was your father's memory. It was nothing to do with me, but I felt it anyway.

“I was lost. The Third gave me my reason to live.”

“And what was that?” Simon said.

Firdy closed his mind with such effectiveness that Simon's head hurt. He flinched and Sarah moved against him, making him aware that his arms and back were sore from sitting.

In the meantime, Firdy stood and moved to the window. He stood there for nearly an hour, clearing his mind, staying awake, watching the sky grow dark. Simon turned the book over and over in his hands and read the pages where it fell open naturally.

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN A DREAM AND A MEMORY. I'M KILLING MY SON. I HOLD HIM UNDERWATER IN THE BATH, IN THE SINK, IN A PUDDLE IN THE ROAD. HE'S A BABY. HE'S KICKING. I CHANGE MY MIND, BUT I CAN'T LET GO. I WATCH HIM DROWN ...

“I can tell you're very upset,” Firdy said eventually. “It wasn't my intention. I thought you should know the truth about your father. You were almost there anyway.”

... I WATCH HIM DROWNING BUT HE DOESNT DIE HE GOES ON SCREAMING GULPING WATER CHOKING VOMITING BUBBLES ...

“Your dad thought of it as a monster, which is probably why you call it The Creature. That's not really the case.

“It's very old, that's all. So it sees the big picture. With that kind of perspective, we couldn't possibly understand it. Not completely.”

“Are you trying to convince me or yourself?” Simon asked and Firdy's mouth snapped shut. The clack of his teeth was enough to rouse Sarah from her feverish dream. Her eyes flickered open.

Gradually, she realised that she was awake.

Gradually, she remembered how wrong life could feel.

“Welcome back,” said Firdy.

She reached for the handle jutting from her shoulder and Simon swatted her hand.

“It hurts,” she said.

“I know,” said Simon. “But I need you to focus and to stay calm. There's something here.”

The cat looked up, knowing that they were talking about it. It gazed at Sarah and seemed to settle on her in some way, as if it had worked out her part in all this. If Simon was the lever, then she was the fulcrum.

“I told you,” Firdy said. “She holds a grudge. You took one of ours, she wants one of yours.”

“Just keep it away from her.”

“That's up to you, Simon. That's up to you both.”

“What is it?” Sarah said. She was rubbing her eyes, hoping that she was not yet fully awake. “What the fuck is that?” It sat on its hind legs so that its head was up above the edge of the sofa. Despite its bedraggled fur, it moved proudly. It yawned, showing off its teeth.

“I won't let it hurt you,” Simon said, sensing Sarah's scream rising.

The Third was also rising. It had been coiled like a snake in the recesses of their consciousness and now it was unfurling its great length, swimming up as if through black water. It was gleaming; excited and anxious and electrified. It was a deep breath held for many minutes and their heads pounded.

Like a soldier, Firdy responded without hesitation.

“Get her up,” he said. “Let's do this.” He appeared to be obeying an instruction as he took Simon's jacket and searched it for weapons. “Empty your trouser pockets,” he demanded as he worked. “Take off your belt too.”

Seeing Firdy thus animated, the Cat rose to its full height, arched its back and shivered. This was evidently what it had been waiting for.

When Simon was three sharp objects lighter, Firdy returned his jacket.

“Hang on to me,” Simon told Sarah and the Third was there, underneath his breath, in between his words. He couldn't afford to rest his mind any longer. Not only was he being watched, but he was back on duty.

“Where are we going?” Sarah asked. She sounded like she was thirteen years old again. He'd taken her to school, because their father had been out all night and their mother had failed to rise from her bed during an uncharacteristic display of depression. She hadn't wanted to go, but he had forced her. He wanted her to have options that he didn't. Their family was coming apart around them and, since she was the best of them all, he was determined that she be the one left standing when it was over.

“You need to move,” Simon said. “Now.”

“I don't want to go anywhere,” Sarah said. “I want to sleep.”

“Get up,” Firdy said, “or I'll -”

Sarah rose. She was unable to hide her pain but refused to show any sign of weakness. Simon wanted to congratulate her, but the Third was there, riding the thought like a wave.

He folded himself up. Turned the key. Put himself away.

The Third was keener than ever. It had wound itself tight and when it released its energy, which was sure to happen soon, he didn't want to be anywhere near its path. Connected as they were, however, it was impossible for him to avoid it.

The kitchen swayed into focus around Sarah even as Simon marched her through it. She glanced at the cat again. It was real. It was all real. This was really happening.

Firdy opened the door and they followed him out, the cat bringing up the rear to prevent escape. The foul thing kept its head low and trotted into the gloom. The approaching darkness was its territory. Now that it was away from the grounding decoration of their home, it looked less like a monster, she thought, but more like a killer. The movement of its body gathered shadows. Moment by moment it became increasingly difficult to see.

Somehow, she knew for certain that she was going to die today. It was the cold on the wind. She was less afraid of dying than she was of how it might happen. She wanted it to be quick. And if they both had to die then she wanted to go before Simon. She knew that that was selfish, but she couldn't bear to be alone, however briefly.

Halted at the van, she looked back at the house. She had never seen it so clearly as she did now, knowing that this was the last time she'd see it. She had thought of it as their family home, it had been important to her, but now she saw it as cold, dead bricks, grey in the dark, piled up on each other like the walls of a tomb. Both Simon's window and the kitchen window had been smashed. Since Firdy had arrived, the house had stopped breathing. Now it had finally stopped pretending to be a home. A home was where people lived, not where they waited to die.

The van's locks clicked.

"Her first," Firdy said.

Simon gestured for Sarah to get in. She couldn't help hoping that Simon would give her a coded message. She was terrified that he would call her Rabbit again and yet, understanding what that would mean this time, she longed for it.

"This is our last chance," she said, as if he didn't know it. Instead of a reply, there was his hand, empty, not so much helping her up as jutting out like a dead branch. She turned away from him so he wouldn't see her tears and pulled herself up into the stinking cab.

PART THREE

Chapter Thirty-One

Will sat at the kitchen table, head in his hands. The Third had been present all evening, but, unusually, it hadn't seemed bothered with him. Until now.

He was drunk and it was not best pleased.

He didn't usually drink. Not only did the Third want its subjects clean, but alcohol didn't go well with his medication. After half a litre of Vodka he was well on his way to oblivion.

Fuck it, he had thought. If I'm going to die tonight, I may as well enjoy a drink. And another. And another.

It wasn't for certain that he was going to die, but if half of what Firdy had told him was true, it was a safe bet. Three days ago, Firdy had introduced himself and his dog and had talked for an hour without a pause.

"It's so frustrating having to live like this," he had said. "Always in the shadows. You don't mind if I sit and talk with you for a while, do you?"

"No," Will had said. "Of course not."

He had listened as Firdy talked without pause, speaking of the future as a means to rewrite the past. He rubbed his gloved hands together and outlined Will's role in his plan.

"You're not the only one," he had said. "There are six others. But only you and Simon have to make the extra sacrifice."

"Why does it want my son?"

"Because you have one. He might be there to make up the numbers for all I know, I don't ask the Third questions, but you should prepare yourself. And him."

"Why are you telling me this?" Will had asked. He had been chewing on the inside of his cheek and swallowed a mouthful of blood.

"Because there's nothing you can do about it," Firdy had said, "and because I've wanted to tell somebody for a long time. I've been carrying it around all on my own; I want to get it out of my head, to see what it looks like."

Who better to divulge a secret to than someone who wasn't going to live to repeat it.

*

Knowing that he was thinking in circles, he attempted to clear his mind, but he was too pissed. He ran over and over what was going to happen when his ex-wife realised that their son was missing. By quitting the drinking and taking the pills, he'd managed to assuage her concerns enough to create a false sense of security. Tonight he had destroyed any hope of redemption.

He imagined his ex's panic rising each time she phoned them and got their outgoing voicemail messages.

"This is the voicemail service for ... William Gordon ... Please leave a message after the tone."

No doubt she would call him a crazy bastard and say that if anything happened to Zak she'd kill him.

"Zak here. I can't get to the phone right now. Leave a message and I'll get back to you. Or not. See ya."

He imagined police at the station listening to the stored messages, dutifully transcribing them, saving the documents.

Eventually his ex would turn up at the flat, probably with her sister. It wouldn't be the first time. They'd hammer on the door and the window, but by then it would be too late. He and Zak would already be gone. The neighbours would ignore the noise. They'd got used to the banging and the shouting and the crying. He was the crazy bastard next door after all. Everyone knew it.

It was as clear to him as if it had already happened. The only variable was whether or not he left a note.

He had managed to write 'Vanessa' at the top of the page. Now he scribbled that out and wrote 'V'. Then he crossed that out too and rewrote 'Vanessa'.

If he was in her position, he'd want to know not to look for the bodies, but how do you put something like that into words? To a mother? How could he leave a note on a scrap of paper that was more suited to a shopping list than this?

Maybe it was better to go without saying goodbye after all.

He picked up the bottle of vodka for a hearty swig and felt the Third squeeze, which caused him to drop it. It hit the floor.

"Okay, okay," he said. "Damn."

The Third was tunnelling in and out of his mind, its comparative subtlety of recent years abandoned.

Unable to think, there was nothing more he could do but wait, so he let his forehead drop against the cool surface of the table. He imagined the laminate siphoning confusion from him along with his warmth.

Later, cheek against the surface, his ear pressed to the wood, he heard waves and, as ever, table or no table, he heard the whispers, almost-recognisable shapes and patterns that folded in on themselves, dividing, disintegrating, like him.

A growl rose steadily.

It was the sound of an engine.

Idling.

Stopping.

"Okay," he told the Third, his palm pressed against his head. "I'm doing it, aren't I? I'm doing it." He made his way to the rear of the flat, using the walls for support.

It was silent at the bedroom door. When Zak's friends were quiet, it generally meant that they were up to something, but with Zak what you saw, or heard, was what you got. He was trusting and upfront. If he wanted something, he asked for it. On the one occasion that Zak had broken something in the flat – the CD changer - he had said: "Sorry, dad, but I did warn you." Bold, courageous and honest, he was all the things his father was not.

Will unlocked the door.

His son was asleep in front of the playstation. He was still holding the control in one hand. The television screen was showing static, a strange lullaby.

If he could have taken his son's place, he would have done it in a moment, but the Third wanted both of them.

It squeezed again.

"Okay, you fucking thing, okay."

Will didn't waste time with a garbled goodbye. He'd taken care of that on the way here. As far as he was concerned, they had both ceased to exist the moment they entered his flat.

Someone knocked on the door using their knuckles.

“Wake up,” Will said and gently slapped Zak's face. “It's time we weren't here, mate.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

It was a two storey building, purpose-built as two flats, sitting in the middle of a short row of similar buildings. The upper flat had a small balcony with flowers and a hanging basket. A small, black cat tapped its way over the railing and eyed Simon curiously. The lower flat, with which he was concerned, had a small yard, too overgrown and cluttered with black bags to be called a garden. One bag had been gutted, probably by the cat, and its contents – tea bags, spaghetti, fast food containers – lay strewn over the bottom steps down to the door

After knocking, Simon felt himself sway and grabbed the wall to steady himself.

Get it over with, he told himself, though he didn't quite know why.

Get on with it.

Forget about goodbyes.

By the time the door opened he was holding on to the wall with both hands to stop himself falling. His shock at seeing Will sobered him somewhat. It had only been a day since he had seen the man at the edge of the cliff, weeping and tripping over his feet in the dark, swinging torchlight left and right, clothes muddy and torn. Today, if it was possible, he looked worse than he had then. His white shirt was saturated with sweat and his skin was eerily pale. Where he had colour, he was blotchy. He looked as if he was about to throw up.

“Firdy sent you?” Will said. “He's laughing at you.”

“Are you ready?” said Simon.

Will reached behind him and a skinny boy in a grey tracksuit approached them. He didn't appear to be into his teens. He had his father's eyes, red from crying or lack of sleep, or both.

In the hallway, Simon noticed a mess of unopened letters in plastic supermarket carrier bags. There were dozens of bags and cardboard boxes stacked up on top of each other, sinking into the ones beneath. There was a sense of the walls closing in.

“Where is Firdy?” asked Will.

“He's in the van.”

Will's eyes were wide and haunted as he gazed at the two heads visible through the windscreen; Firdy and Sarah.

Simon smelled the alcohol on Will and realised that this was the source of his nausea. It also explained Firdy's sloppy driving on the way here. It hadn't just been nerves. Thanks to Will, they were all drunk. Whatever the Third was doing, it had connected them. He could feel Will's nausea, his anxiety, his desire to let go and have this all over with, quickly. Knowing their origin, he reeled away from the feelings and succeeded in maintaining his sense of self.

He wondered if Will's inebriation was part of the reason for Firdy's self-disclosure with the diary. For better or worse, the truth had emerged. He only hoped that Sarah never found out what happened to their father.

As Will lead the boy out of the flat, he turned to Simon and said:

“Did you do what I said? Did you tell her you loved her?”

“It's time we weren't here, mate,” Simon said and Will backed away from him, from his words. They both looked confused, disappointed and afraid.

*

As Firidy slid open the side door, Will strained to see what was in the darkness. They all heard the slither of the thing dragging its rope over the wood panel floor. Its eyes glinted. Otherwise, the back of the van was in total darkness.

“In,” said Firidy. When neither Will nor Zak moved, Firidy grabbed the boy by an arm.

“Okay, okay,” Will said. “Let's get this over with.” He shoved his son inside -

“What's going on, Dad? What's in here? What is it?”

- and followed him in.

“It's going to be okay.”

The familiar lie.

Firidy shut the door on them, sealing them in darkness.

“Economy class,” he said. “Room for three more.”

*

Sarah couldn't breathe; her thoughts choked her. She asked Simon to wind down his window, but the wind roaring at them made her demand to have it shut again.

Firidy wrenched the wheel left and the van lurched. A scream came from behind. Zak, presumably. The sound was muffled. Will, presumably.

Simon faced forward, relaxed but alert. He appeared to have accepted his part in all this, which frightened Sarah most of all.

She was the only one who could make a difference. Whatever it was that turned Simon into this thing, this automaton, it could read his mind, but she remained free to think. Whether they lived or died was her responsibility, she realised, and the knowledge weighed heavily on her. She would only make things worse if her plan went wrong. First, however, she needed a plan.

She tried to reassure herself with the knowledge that a fate worse than death might be waiting for them. It worked.

The element of surprise, Simon used to tell her, would make up for what she lacked in size. Don't let them see it coming.

See what coming? she thought.

A sudden change in direction threw her from her scheming into Simon's shoulder, who sat steadfastly throughout the turn, having anticipated the bend. The jolt to her shoulder sent shockwaves through her. She felt faint.

They were off the main road now and Firidy weaved the van through backstreets, over speed bumps and between cars that were parked bumper to bumper on either side. They rolled beneath overhanging branches, around blind corners. After six or seven minutes descending ever deeper into this suburban terrain, Firidy stopped the van and told Simon to get out.

Sarah wanted to whisper to him that it was going to be okay, that she would take care of this, the way he had taken care of them since their mother died and their father disappeared, but nothing came out. Her eyes were closing.

“Go to sleep,” Simon said and she did.

*

When she woke, they were moving again. It was strangely comforting. As long as they were moving they were okay, she supposed, until she heard wailing behind her.

It had been muffled, but it was a woman's voice, not Zak.

Simon's arms were folded tight across his chest and his head nodded to a slow rhythm, the only signs of his effort to remain calm. His eyes appeared to be fixed on the road ahead, but they were glazed over; not without light, but far, far away.

Firdy looked up at the moon. There was a sense of pieces being slotted into place. They were all part of his game. His lips had drawn back into something halfway between a grimace and a smile. Sarah hoped that they might be pulled over by the police for speeding and she fantasised for a moment how that might play out, but was disappointed by what she saw. Firdy would go through the motions, politely answering all of their questions until ultimately he agreed to open up the back of the van, at which point he'd release the thing on the rope.

Nothing could stop Firdy now. He was tapping a drumbeat on the wheel.

The van bumped up a kerb and stopped sharply.

"Watch her," Firdy told Simon and then got out.

He had parked in a gravel wasteland, flanked by ageing trees, dead grass and dirt. Three storeys of a fire-bombed building loomed over them. According to the fragment of a sign that remained it had once been a tacky nightclub and, judging by wording revealed by the fire, it had once had a life as a warehouse.

"What now?" Sarah whispered to herself as she watched Firdy walk around the building until he was out of sight. She jumped when Simon answered.

"I don't know what happens now," he said.

"More people?"

Simon shook his head.

Without the grumble of the engine, the van was pervaded by an silence. Gradually, Sarah became aware of voices in the back. She couldn't make out the words, only the tone: urgent, furious, desperate.

"Who's back there?" Sarah asked.

They had seen Will enter with his son, Zak, but three others had joined them while Sarah slept. Firdy had collected them from three different locations and had ushered them into the van where Simon stayed to guard his sister, ready to assist Firdy if necessary. As each person approached the van, Simon met with a level gaze.

There were two men and woman. The men were polar opposites in many ways. The far taller of the two, Jonathan, never Jon or Jonny, had been dressed in a sharp, business suit, as if he was on his way to head office rather than a Transit van and dirt roads. A briefcase and umbrella would have completed his image. His mind, thrumming now in the back of the van, was a circuit board of ones and zeros. He was a man of few desires and made his decisions quickly. He didn't see them as decisions at all. Some alternatives were weightier than others. He went with the flow. It made him an efficient worker for the Third. He had delivered a lot of people and he had no more idea about what happened to them than Simon had. In his mind, these people had glowed until he had turned them off. He had known that his turn would come and now that it was here it wasn't so bad. He saw nothingness in his future. Becoming nothing, he thought, wasn't so bad.

Simon closed his eyes. He didn't want to know this, but stray thoughts were close all around. Their mental boundaries were dissipating and it became normal for one person's thought to spill into the mind of another.

The other man called himself Moody. Moody was probably his last name, but it had stuck, not only because of his disposition, but because of his love of all things military. When Firdy picked him up, he had been dressed in combat trousers and an army surplus jacket and, unlike

Simon, had also opted for full camouflage. Even now he was imagining that he was being transported in an armoured personnel vehicle and that the driver had paused while the track ahead was checked for mines. In his mind, there were distant explosions.

He had nobody to leave behind. There had been no obvious leverage to get him here. Firdy had probably convinced him that this was his purpose. Be all you can be. Be someone you can be.

He was a good soldier, he was a weapon and he was willing to see the night through to its conclusion, no matter how sour for him. He only wished he had been asked to kill more people before the end had come.

The woman was the most focussed of the passengers. All her thoughts were edged with a desire to escape and the knowledge that what was happening to her was not fair. She had done as the Third had asked, despite her growing distress, and yet she was here anyway in the back of the van with that thing. She had to get free. She had to get free. This wasn't fair. She had a little girl named Olivia; she was only three years old. She had to get free.

Her anger raged through her like a forest fire. It flickered through them all.

"How many of us are there?" Sarah asked.

"Four like me," Simon said. "We're all connected. And there's the boy, Zak, like you; dragged into this by no fault of his own."

"It's not your fault," Sarah said. "It's not."

A tumble in the back made the van shiver.

"They're talking about escaping," Simon said, staring out at the gutted building. "Any second now, they'll ask me to help."

A bang rattled the metal wall that divided the rear of the van from the cab. The woman Sarah had heard earlier yelled:

"Get me out of here. Let me out. You in the front. I know you can hear me. You've got to let me out of here."

"Maybe she's -"

"They can't run," Simon snapped. "There's nowhere to run to."

It doesn't matter, she realised. It didn't matter that there was nowhere to hide. She would run and this time she would keep going for as long as she could, because even an hour more might be enough to prevent Firdy seeing out his plan for them.

Before he could stop her, Sarah slid across the van into the driving seat.

"No, Sarah."

Her hand found the handle.

"The cat will find you," Simon said and reached for her, but she slipped away from him.

"I have to go," she said. "For all of us."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Beyond a litter and glass-strewn alley, two young men eyed Firdy and sucked their teeth. Their dog, a muscular Staffordshire Terrier, strained on its lead and barked. The man holding the lead yelled at the dog to shut up, while the other laughed and said:

“Good boy! No offence, mate.”

Firdy kept his head down. He had never been one for confrontations. He didn't have the heart for it, but people – and their dogs - took a dislike to his appearance. In the past, that had served as reason enough for people to spit in his direction, to call him a freak, to shove him from behind in the hope that he'd topple. That was why he only came out at night when he was able, with the spiders and the rats and the slugs.

He followed a one-way street that took a winding route downhill towards a row of unhappy tenements, differentiated only by the colours of their doors. The standard was brown and while some people had opted for new paint jobs, new windows, new knockers, this had evidently happened a long time ago. The sea air had done the buildings no good at all.

Each house had been converted into flats, with separate doors for upstairs and downstairs. Aside from their coastal location, individual access points had been a major factor in Firdy's decision to live here. Also important was that his flat had been unoccupied for at least a couple of years.

Pretty much in the middle of the row, Firdy shouldered open a red door and squeezed inside.

Nobody had challenged him when he moved in, although he had heard a couple of neighbours refer to him as 'the junkie'. He was quiet and he didn't have loud parties, unlike the people living beneath him. Those who had noticed him at all were probably aware that he was squatting, but, like him, nobody made a fuss about it.

A few others had shown an interest in squatting the place themselves. The first time it happened, Firdy had simply told them that it was taken and asked them to leave. They had. On the other occasion, he had summoned the Dog. They left too.

He had tried to think of the dog's death as collateral damage, but he couldn't shake the feeling that it had been personal, that Simon had enjoyed destroying something that belonged to him. Considering what would happen tonight, perhaps that was fair. He shouldn't begrudge him a small victory. But he did.

When he reached the top of the stairs, he glanced at the living area on his way to the 'kitchen'. Against one wall was a sofa, basically a cheap wooden frame with tough, fibrous material stretched over it. He had seen these before, always in the cheapest rental properties. Despite its severe angles, it had turned out to be better for his back than the bed and it was just long enough, so he sometimes slept there instead of in the bedroom.

This is not going to be an issue anymore, he thought, looking at it for the last time.

He had set up a small, battery-powered television on a table made from bricks and a broken palette. Television hadn't afforded him much in the way of release though. It provided noise, but not distraction. It marked the hours, but didn't rush them along. In the end, he'd only seen the worst traits of the worst kinds of people. Their willingness to be humiliated and tortured in return

for popularity dismayed him. He had often asked himself what he would be prepared to do to be a part of a group. He was answering that question now and he admitted that it frightened him. He wasn't so different from them after all.

He sat down in the kitchen and pulled his 'collected works' from his jacket pocket. The book felt strange now that Simon had touched it. The magic of it had dissipated somewhat. He had considered the words a spell that would somehow set him free, but he didn't believe it anymore. Now it was only a journal.

The Third had made him and the Third would set him free. Not the book.

He flipped through the pages, his handwriting jumping out at him.

ALL DEAD

ONE BY ONE

CAN'T HIDE

IT'S OVER

He turned the pages until he reached the first blank one, thinking that it would be fitting to finally make a personal entry. Although he was an amalgamation of strange thoughts and ideas, the dreams and nightmares of people he had never met, a part of him was individual. Over the years, he had assembled abstract pieces, sharpened up hazy recollections and tested memories, and still there was a gap into which none of these things fit and that gap had named itself Firdy.

After tonight, he was unsure how much of him would be left. Perhaps there was only so much to go around. Maybe the soul was finite after all. The Third seemed to think so.

He picked up his pen to add his voice to the semi-permanent record. An analogue clock punctuated the seconds and then the minutes. The words had come easy when the thoughts had been someone else's.

'I am Firdy,' he wrote and to his dismay the letters came out in long, spidery ribbons. He stared at the scribble, unable to go on. This mess was what happened when his hand and mind were unguided.

His fingers ached from squeezing the biro. He had anticipated a deluge, but a lifetime of guarding his thoughts had helped render him incapable of letting go.

Deep inside, on the surface, all around, The Third grew increasingly impatient. She was almost ready to take over and his free will was about to come to an end.

A couple of minutes more would have been useful.

It was like not being able to pee while standing at a urinal next to a taller man. If only he would go away.

He wondered whether The Third was that man.

Or Simon.

Maybe someone inside, or someone he had yet to meet, or someone he had yet to be.

FIRDY. IT'S TIME. I'M READY FOR THEM.

In a final bid to focus he projected himself into the future. He imagined himself walking out of the icy water, naked; new body, new mind. In that circumstance, he thought, in a week, a month, a year from now, if he found himself compelled to come here and pull up the floorboard near the socket in the bedroom, what would he want to know about his previous existence?

After a moment's thought, he tore a page from the book. And then another. Then another.

Nothing, he thought.

He ripped page after page from the book and then set to work on the individual pages, tearing them into halves. When it was done, his fingers felt as though they were on fire, but he took comfort in the knowledge that tomorrow he would have new hands, new arms, new memories; perhaps no more nightmares.

NOW, FIRDY. NOW. NOW. I'VE MADE EVERYTHING READY.

He felt the Third shift and was more aware than ever of his cargo in the van: Will, Naomi, Ian Moody and Jonathan. He felt the Cat, waiting, watching, wanting them. Most of all, he felt connected to Simon. It didn't frighten him anymore.

Despite their differences, every one of them shared an eagerness to move things on to the next stage, in one way or another.

He put his head around the bedroom door. Sheets of cardboard clung to the bay window. A broken bulb hung from the ceiling. Damp crept up and down the walls, meeting in the middle wherever it could.

There was nothing to take with him. Even the loose panel where he had been intending to leave his memoirs seemed nothing special now.

It was time to be reborn.

He skipped down the stairs, then paused at the front door. He took a deep breath, surprised by his hesitation, then walked out into the night for the last time, his head pounding.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Sarah thought she could slip away, but Simon snatched her by the forearm. He held her effortlessly. Despite the pain in her shoulder, she pulled away, not only with her desire to be free but with revulsion.

"This is our last chance," she said. "Let me go."

"This isn't the way," Simon said.

"I've got to try," she said. "Someone's got to do something."

Simon sighed. He seemed to change his mind and as if illustrating his decision, he released his sister. She had been pulling so hard that she slammed into the driver door.

She didn't waste time saying goodbye. She threw open the door and swung her legs out.

Firdy offered her his hand.

"Out," he said.

He had removed his glasses and Sarah saw his eyes clearly; one large and brown, the other nothing but a milky slit with a grey dot in the centre.

She slid down to the ground. Like sewage.

Layer by layer, she succumbed to the cold.

Without an exchange of words, Simon hopped out of the van on the passenger side, took Sarah by the wrist and they joined Firdy at the rear. Simon gripped her so tightly that he was restricting the blood to her hand. She knew that he wouldn't loosen his grip unless she stopped trying to pull away, but she couldn't help herself.

Firdy unlocked the rear doors and pulled one open. The smell of piss. Sweat. Meat. Vomit.

"Out," he said.

One by one, his cargo clambered out of the van, Zak first, blinking and rubbing his face. He had his hood up and was doing his best to appear calm, but he was clearly terrified. Firdy thought that he was impressionable, but easy enough to control. He'd let the Cat do something to one of them and then he'd be no trouble at all, like his father, who came next, shambolic and dishevelled, hair unkempt now as he climbed down from the van. His trousers were wet with piss and he stank accordingly.

"You're a fucking disgrace," Firdy wanted to say, but his jeans hadn't reached this hour unsullied either; he swallowed bile and told him to keep moving.

Jonathan stepped out next, in polished shoes and a crisp business suit. There had been no chasing him from town to town. Firdy had sent him a message and he had replied to say he would be waiting. In his office, he would have fit like a knife into a block, but now his brushed hair and immaculate attire couldn't have been more out of place.

It didn't matter. It was what was under the clothes that counted.

The man moved slowly and apparently without fear, in the manner of a remorseless serial killer being prepared for his execution.

That's what he is, Sarah thought. They're serial killers. They're Simons.

Effectively, Ian Moody was the opposite of Jonathan. Dressed from head to toe in army gear, he would draw attention to himself everywhere but the forest. He sat on his bottom and slid

out of the van. He was muscular and squat, but his boots gave him an inch or two on Firdy. Firdy hoped that the Third would discount any information about his size in favour of his deep skin tone. He didn't want to get burnt every year.

Naomi climbed down last of all. Her eyes flicked between Simon and Firdy and her anger was clear on her face, as were fresh, red slashes from the Cat. Blood ran down her neck and into her vest.

Firdy thought that she would complicate the procedure, but the Third had insisted that she be part of this. He wondered which part of Naomi the Third wanted. Maybe her liquid, deep eyes, throwing reflections back at anyone who stared at her. Maybe she admired her strength of will. Or maybe she was just the right blood group.

Sarah knew that if they could have rushed Firdy at once, while the Cat was still tied up, they would be unstoppable. There were six of them, seven including Simon, but they were allowing themselves to be herded. Zak was quivering against his father's body, but even though he was slight he could fight. If he was like her, as Simon had said, then his mind was free; perhaps if she could get away from Simon, the two of them could tackle Firdy.

Firdy had climbed into the back of the van while, to Sarah's dismay, the seven of them had waited for him to untie the cat. Naomi took a single step towards the van door before she stopped and groaned as if she had been punched in the stomach. Of all the Simons, she was the one who most wanted to get out of here, but there was no way that she could fight the Creature.

And so Sarah knew that it was up to her to stop Firdy, with or without help.

Her urge to fight diminished when the Cat dropped down from the back of the van. It was easily the size of an adult Alsatian and it hissed, revealing incisors like knife blades.

Yes, they could all rush it, but who wanted to be first to, to lose a finger? An eye?

Firdy jumped down after it, no less dangerous and without mercy.

Sarah glanced at her brother, unable to stop feeling sickened that he was assisting Firdy. The Simon she knew had peeked out in the van, but since Firdy had returned he was gone again. This Simon was hurting her hand. This Simon would kill her if he had to. She was going to do as he said.

Firdy's moves were bold and purposeful. The sound of him slamming the doors shut reverberated through them all. He demanded that they walk under the cover of the nearby trees, where he then ordered everyone to hold hands. There was an exchange of looks, particularly between Sarah and Naomi, but nobody took the initiative to fight or to run. They did as they were told. They held hands.

Firdy took the lead, because he was the only one of them, aside from the cat, who knew where they were going and could see perfectly well in the dark. Simon followed, leading Sarah. She didn't know the name of the man whose hand she was holding, only that his grip on her was painfully tight and that he was trembling.

They marched through the trees, making their own path. They had all done it before at some time in their lives and so they moved quickly, even as the darkness thickened. Black leaves shivered all around them and twigs cracked underfoot and they did not stop. When Zak stumbled, the group dragged him and then hauled him back to his feet.

"Where are you taking us?" Sarah asked. Firdy ignored her and nobody else volunteered an answer.

The Cat had taken up the rear in case anyone broke off and ran into the deep dark.

Nobody did.

Simon saw no benefit in dwelling on their fate, as some of the others did. There was the will of the Third and there was putting one foot in front of the other until it was done. That was all. Or at least, so he had been telling himself, but it was increasingly difficult to focus. The thoughts of the group drifted through his mind, curling around him and clouding his ability to separate himself. The new thoughts that resulted were strange things and unwelcome.

Although the trees and clouds had conspired to cut out much of the moonlight, he was able to see Sarah and the rest of the group clearly. Sarah was marching with exaggerated steps so she wouldn't trip over vines or fallen branches. Her eyes were searching for safe places to put her feet, but it was impossible because they were moving so quickly. The knife was still in her shoulder and she was as pale as he had ever seen her. Her breathing was ragged and she looked like she might pass out. And yet, he felt almost nothing. In fact, he was glad.

Behind her, Will plodded on, his wild hair snagged by branches. Simon felt revulsion rising in him and forced himself to look beyond Will, to his son, Zak, the waste-of-space gamer, hood down now, crying to himself, struggling to keep up. Ian Moody was next, fitting in at last with his combat gear, grim determination on his face, and he was followed by Jonathan the businessman, looking somewhat like a lobotomised John Cleese with his perfectly soulless facial expression. Naomi was last in line, attempting to spy the Cat, but failing, because it was several metres behind her and to their left, appearing every now and then through the cover of thicker foliage.

He saw them all clearly, although it lasted only for a few seconds. Somehow he had experienced the scene through Firdy. Then he was stumbling in the gloom again, but now he knew that the one called Moody had delivered animals, dogs and cats and a few birds, as well as three people. Jonathan had begun his service delivering dogs and had progressed to people later. He had been working for the Third for less than two years. But nobody had been doing this for as long as Naomi; she had delivered more people than all of them. She had a large, extended family and it was looking after her little girl until she was 'right' again. Each one of them had things to lose, but she had the most.

Simon shook his head, but the foreign thoughts crowded him and infiltrated again.

"It's okay," Firdy was thinking now. "It's going to be alright." Simon didn't know whether the thought was directed at him or not.

A series of thoughts followed. He felt them almost as if they were his own.

"I don't know what to do. What am I meant to do?"

"I did everything I could, but it wasn't enough."

"I want this to be over."

"Today's a good day to die. I wish it was warmer though."

"... Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three ..."

"No loose ends."

"Those bastards. Those absolute, fucking bastards."

When Simon tried to differentiate one thinker from another, the thoughts multiplied and attempting to discard one only caused it to attach itself elsewhere.

"I'm dying," another thought came. "I don't want to die. I don't want to die."

In an attempt to prevent his mind being overcome, Simon concentrated on something tangible, the feel of Firdy's fingers locked around his wrist. The feel of Firdy's hand was the only part of the man that resembled Simon's father, a tight unmoving fist around his bony wrist, hurting him, hauling him through the dark. His father had welcomed him to his new life in this manner three years ago and now it was happening again.

Although he began to feel as though he was back inside his body again, he discerned his surroundings as though in a dream. He seemed to be walking freely, trotting through the undergrowth, and yet he could feel Firdy's gloved fingers against his wrist. He no longer knew whether he was holding Sarah's arm or whether she was holding him and he didn't dare experiment with the sensation in case he lost hold of her and didn't get her back. He wanted to stop and get his bearings, as did some of the other thinkers, but Firdy gave them no choice but to go on.

"No choice; it's what you've been saying all along," he thought.

And: "Where are we going?"

And: "You need me."

And: "He's crushing my fucking hand."

He wanted to lie down and run and cry and laugh. Once more, he was on the brink of losing himself.

He attempted to focus on the sound of waves, which had begun to overpower the rustling of leaves.

He suspected that Firdy was leading them straight to the edge of a cliff and that when they got there there would be no climbing down. He was finally going to find out what happened when he threw people into the water.

The ground was descending, so the group found it increasingly difficult to stay upright. Firdy had picked up the pace and they were almost jogging now. Tripping was inevitable, but although they stumbled, nobody let go of the hand of the person in front.

They entered a fog, which grew rapidly thicker with each step. It muffled the sounds all around them. Firdy kept pulling and each one followed the person in front, their footsteps no longer crunching dirt but making little kisses and finally splashing. Simon concluded that they were walking through very shallow water, a small waterfall perhaps, but he couldn't see the ground at all anymore. He thought about stopping, but Firdy yanked on his arm to dissuade him.

The ground was still steep and Simon thought that perhaps they were following a natural path down to the sea, but he didn't believe that. Something was making his hairs stand on end.

Thankfully, they slowed their pace, but they kept moving, on and down, splashing in the dark. Firdy's grip loosened.

The waves had become hushed and the whispering of the trees had faded away to nothing. The sound of their breathing returned to them. Somebody sneezed and the noise reverberated as though they were in an enclosed space.

Simon considered that maybe they had entered a tunnel. He was almost sure that if he had been able to raise his hands he could have touched the roof.

The answer to what was happening bobbed in front of him for a long time, perhaps floating up from Firdy, before he was able to accept it.

"Keep up," Firdy thought and Simon knew that its two-pronged meaning was directed at him.

"We're here, aren't we?" Simon thought.

He had broadcasted to everyone, so the wrong people replied.

"We're where?"

"Where's here?"

"We're stopping? Why are we stopping here? It's nowhere."

"End of the road."

"I can't feel him. I can't feel me."

“Let's get this over with.”

The voices whirled. Losing his mind amid theirs again, Simon did all he could to focus on Firdy, reaching for him like a lifeline. He thought of Firdy's hand curled around his wrist and sought his thoughts in the blackness.

“You're nearly there,” Firdy was thinking. Again, the layers of meaning.

Simon was decoding the message when another consciousness joined them at their level and scattered all other thoughts like ants.

It said:

I'VE BEEN WAITING.

Cold invaded Simon's skin, flesh and bones. He thought he might actually freeze.

I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR THIS.

They were indoors and the room was thinking:

I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR THIS FOR SO LONG.

The room was alive.

She was alive.

She was the Third.

*

STOP.

A cascade.

“Stop.”

“Stop.”

“Stop.”

“Stop.”

“Stop.”

“Stop.”

“Stop.”

“Stop.”

The sky and the ground had long departed from sight. The darkness was complete. Now there was only the smell of sweat and piss and salt water. The sound of tears, flowing water, obscenely similar to a garden water feature, and tremulous breathing.

When Firdy released Simon's arm, he should have been lost in the darkness, like the others, but he thought again of the gloved hand, the crooked nose, the broken teeth and he was able to see, watching through Firdy. The largest thing in his vision was a ghostlike figure. He had the eyes of a man washed up on a beach; someone who had seen too much but had got away, until now. His hair was tangled and the lower part of his face was covered in stubble, while his clothes were covered with dirt. Despite his beaten appearance, it seemed that one should be wary of him. More. He had to be destroyed, one way or another, otherwise the fear of him would never go away.

Sarah was standing behind this man and Simon realised that he had been observing himself through Firdy. Firdy's fear of him had been off the scale. He immediately plumbed for the answer to why Firdy found him such a threat.

“Get out of my fucking head,” Firdy thought, but it was an impossible command. Everything was connected here.

Furious, Firdy ordered the group to let go of each other. When they refused, he strode from hand to hand, separating them by force. There were complaints, shouts and screams as each person lost their small measure of personal safety. Their yells echoed off the walls, layering

confusion on confusion. The walls distorted their voices, as if toying with their pitch and shape and volume and then the cacophony stopped with a suddenness that was like a physical blow and caused Simon's viewpoint to snap back into his body.

A luminescence began to come from the walls themselves then, giving Simon the impression that the room was round. In the burgeoning, silvery haze he was able to make out outlines of the others in the group. Will and Jonathan were standing to his right, while the Cat had pinned Naomi against the wall to his left. It had dug its claws into her; blood stained one thigh of her jeans. She didn't scream, though she wanted to. She and Sarah had that in common. Sarah was with Zak in the centre of the room, with her good arm around the boy's shoulder.

Simon moved towards her and Firdy shoved him back. Like the others, he fell against the wall. Into the wall. When he tried to move he was stuck, as if he had been glued. Although it appeared to be water - his back, arms and legs were partly absorbed by it - he felt dry. Where it grasped him it was turning blue and green and rippling

He looked at the others and saw confusion and horror on their faces as one by one they too were attached to the wall. Firdy shoved Moody into place. Jonathan stepped back of his own accord. When Will attempted to reach Zak, a glistening 'arm' leapt from the wall and seized him by the nape of the neck. It reeled him in while he threw his arms out and made useless noises, a stunned expression on his face. It dragged him. It was horrible to see. Even Jonathan looked away. Only Firdy watched, with a smile on his lips.

Transformations continued all around. The brightest of the blue-green light emanated from the top of their heads, like halos, and then grew, spreading over the entire surface of the ceiling and down the wall. Dozens and then hundreds of veins became visible, whipping silver tails. The strands wriggled across the floor, connecting to each other.

Zak buried his face against Sarah. They both got the message that there was nowhere to run from something like this. There never had been.

"Now," Firdy yelled. "Do it now."

I'M DYING, the Third thought.

"Take them," Firdy thought. "You can do it. We're doing it together this time."

WHERE'S SHARONNE? ...

"She's not coming. It won't work with her. She's sick. We have to make do with what we have."

WE HAVE TO MAKE DO.

"Yeah."

WE.

"Yes."

IT HAS TO WORK THIS TIME. I DON'T HAVE THE ENERGY TO TRY AGAIN IF I FAIL.

"We only need one more chance."

I DON'T WANT TO DIE DOWN HERE. ANOTHER YEAR ALONE ... I'LL DIE DOWN HERE.

"You aren't alone," Firdy thought. "You have me. But I know."

WHERE ARE THE OTHERS LIKE ME?

"They're gone. You know that."

'GONE.'

WHEN WILL THEY COME BACK?

FOR ME.

“Please. You have to stay focused.”

THEY'RE NOT COMING BACK, ARE THEY.

“Are you ready? You can do this.”

THEY LEFT ME AND NOW I'M DYING.

“We're wasting time. Let's do this.”

THERE WERE THREE OF US. I WAS THE THIRD.

“Now. Please. Before you're too weak.”

I'VE DONE THIS BEFORE. SO MANY TIMES. IT NEVER WORKS. THEY DID IT, DIDN'T THEY? THE OTHERS. THEY MOVED ON. I NEVER HAD THE KNACK FOR IT. THEY NEVER SHOWED ME HOW.

The walls darkened.

“You've never tried it like this before,” thought Firdy. “We've got all the people that you've already touched. You know them better than they know themselves. We have Simon. You told me you must have Simon for it work.”

YES.

“And I got his sister too, to fill in any gaps.”

YES.

“And you have me.”

Silence, but the walls began to shimmer.

The walls rippled.

“You can do it again. Now.”

YES.

The wall undulated, infused with pink and orange and red, like rain falling in all directions, fanning out hypnotically.

The centre of the ceiling was a whirlpool in the making. Sarah knew that it was for her. A point formed in the centre, descending like a stalactite, shimmering as it crept towards her head. She squinted at it, her eyes ringed red, her lips tinged blue. Apart from her breath, which emerged in visible plumes, she could have passed for a corpse.

Firdy stood to one side, shielding his eye from what was a glare to him, as more whirlpools formed above. There would be one for each of them. They emerged like creations on an inverse potter's wheel.

The protrusion in the centre divided into two. One for Zak; one for Sarah. They continued to descend, separating, probing the salty air like lovers' tongues. Strands of Sarah's hair stood on end to meet one of them. In a few moments, it had a handful of her hair and it kept descending, inch by agonising inch, until it darted to make up the remaining distance, attaching itself to her scalp.

Sarah's eyes rolled in their sockets, her expression one of disgust. She looked as though she was trying to scream, but could not make the sound. It was unnecessary though, because now that she was connected to the Third, they all felt her terror. They all felt that she had answered a question that had been plaguing her: yes, what was going to happen was worse than dying. She was becoming something new, something beyond her control.

Ribs of light shimmered through the elongated thing, moving first from the ceiling towards her head and then, a minute or two later, in reverse, drawing something from her, draining her. The light rippled across the ceiling. The walls shivered.

Sarah strained to see what was happening to Zak, but her body was paralysed. It was perhaps for the best. Zak's half of the watery probe had plunged into his mouth. His eyes bulged.

Like a parasite, Simon thought, vomiting into its victim to prepare it for consuming.

Zak soiled himself and his eyes rolled back in their sockets. It wasn't long before his muscles gave out completely. The tube of light cracked like a whip and stiffened, holding him upright.

"It's going to be okay, Zak," Firdy thought. "We're going to be fine, mate."

As it had with Sarah, intense light passed in waves from the ceiling into Zak's mouth and later from his body and up into the ceiling, through the walls, across the floor.

Entwined as he was with Firdy in particular, Simon could not help but see that what was happening was beautiful.

Firdy played with his fingers as Sarah and Zak became one with the Third. It was going well so far. No rejections. He had known it would work. If it had worked for Simon and Will, it was unlikely that there would be a problem with Sarah and Zak. It was happening. And with the added information they could provide, the Third could use them.

Sarah was beginning to convulse, but Firdy knew that that was normal. The handle of his knife, which protruded from her shoulder, slid out of her, an inch first, then another and then the entire thing. Blade clean, it fell, through the floor, disappearing from sight without as much as a plop.

The puncture hole remained in Sarah's jacket, but Firdy knew that there would no longer be a wound beneath. The Third had learnt a lot. Fixing Sarah had been like rubbing out a mistake and filling in a new line in pencil. Surgery completed, future complications prevented, The Third continued to drink up all the information she could. She wasted nothing.

The flesh.

The bone.

The muscle.

Good places to eat.

Dates.

Numbers.

Colours.

Birthdays.

Ideas waiting to happen.

Nerve by tingling nerve, it navigated her electrical impulses.

It stored the memories she thought she had forgotten.

The protein.

The acids.

Carbon.

Stories, badly remembered, but retold just the same.

Best friends, lost and found and lost again.

Things that happened a long time ago.

The colour of the womb.

The best shade of nail varnish.

The smell of the room where her mother had killed herself.

The Canterbury Tales.

A distrust of mobile phones.

How to speak French and get by in German.

How to pass exams.

The Characteristics of a Living Organism.

It drank up that thing that people had yet to agree existed. The elusive thing that held everything together, but had destroyed the Third's previous attempts to recreate life. It had always been the most difficult thing to manipulate; how much to push aside, how to keep hold of what was left.

It took the wasted time. Wasted life.

It took her memories of Simon.

Whether he wanted it or not, Simon saw through Firidy's point of view consistently now, so he had no choice but to watch as Sarah was read and thus consumed. Something similar had happened to him three years ago, enabling the Third to enter his mind at will, but it would go further this time. Now it didn't only want access to their minds; it demanded their minds and their bodies in full, to use in the creation of something new.

A dim vision entered Simon's consciousness. His father was lying on the floor of a room similar to this, only tinged amber and yellow. He was naked and apparently unconscious as the floor rose and fell. There were three others in a similar state, another man and two women, none of whom Simon recognised. They lay in a rough circle, almost head to toe, around his viewpoint.

Translucent hoses descended from the ceiling and attached themselves to the bodies. Like umbilical cords, he thought. In the centre of the circle, the thing that afforded him this unique view looked down and saw itself. Half-formed, it was nerves biting, lungs burning. Its arms were bone and sinew, not yet topped with flesh or skin. One hand ended in constricted fingers that resembled claws. With the other bony hand, it fingered its genitalia, exploring its large penis and heavy scrotum, which hid labia beneath.

It looked at the men and women, prone on the floor, and knew that they were being consumed so it could live.

Feed, it thought. Feed.

Every object appeared in shades of brown and there were amber veins all around, obscuring his view at times. Simon realised that the viewpoint was within a cocoon. He was looking out as the thing that would become Firidy ...

“Get out, Simon. Get out of my fucking head.”

She had had to build her vessel from scratch, using the four as a template. She had succeeded in creating life, but she had either been unable or had decided not to instil itself into the body. She had rejected it.

“Simon. Get out now. Let it go.”

She had been shocked when her aborted offspring didn't die. Its tenacity inspired her to try again, as she was doing now.

It could be done, she thought, but she needed more bodies than before: first as subjects to examine, to strip apart and to attempt to put back together; and then as templates from which to work, to create her masterpiece.

No more hybrids, because they wouldn't go unnoticed.

No more wombs. No more vaginas. There was too much to go wrong.

This was the last chance. She had to keep it simple, because she really was ...

“Get out.”

... dying.

Firidy slapped Simon hard across the face, but he felt nothing. Firidy, however, looked shocked.

“Now you know everything,” Firidy thought. “Enjoy our new life.”

Above, the proboscises had become cone-shaped. They were each almost two feet long and wriggled now, seeking the tops of their heads.

Firdy watched with fascination, horror and joy. He had done all he could. He had delivered them as he had been asked and now it was up to the Third to do the rest, to take their bodies and minds and thoughts, their hearts and lungs and ropes of intestines, their blood, desires, passions and fears, their souls, and roll them all up into one perfect being inside which they could all live. This time it had to work, because if she had to face another year in the water, let alone another decade, she would allow herself to die, to go out like a light, like all the sea creatures around her.

“Don't give up,” Firdy thought. “We're nearly there.”

The hair on Simon's scalp rose to meet the probe that was meant for him.

“No!” he thought. The flow of light through the walls stuttered like a candle flame, but it did not stop.

“It's too late,” Firdy thought. “Let it go, Simon. You did everything you could... nothing.”

Simon fought against the wall. Firdy was right that it was too late, but he was wrong that he had done all he could. Walking Sarah to an execution was one thing, but this was no execution.

His body vibrated as all his remaining strength surged through him.

He managed to free one arm.

The others saw what was happening and Naomi started to fight again. Will began grunting to Simon's right and Ian Moody also attempted to free himself; in his own parlance, he hadn't signed up for this. Only Jonathan, the man in the black-blue business suit, was implacable. He neither looked at them, nor at the thing above, reaching for his skull. He looked dead ahead, having truly accepted his fate.

Simon focused only on reaching Firdy who stood only a couple of feet away, goading him with his proximity. He wanted to destroy the body that Firdy had stolen. With a roar and a ferocious twist, he managed to free his shoulder from the wall. His elbow followed with a snap of suction. And then his wrist and hand. He made a grab for Firdy, but the man stepped out of reach.

“Save your energy,” Firdy said, “we'll need it.”

And with that, the water worm silently attached itself to the back of Simon's neck.

*

The Third flicked through Simon's mind and body, such as they had become, as though she was shuffling a deck of cards. Never had she been so powerful nor Simon so powerless to resist her. His mouth, miles and miles away, was taut with shock. It was as though electricity was firing through him, twitching his limbs, tensing his muscles, extending him to his limit. He thought he would split apart, but not before the Third had found all she sought and had consumed all she could.

She separated him into piles, saw the connections and respected them. Not all of them made sense to her, even after all the people she had dissected. Like notes to herself in a margin, she made new connections, compromises here and there.

It hurt Simon, but it was not a physical pain. It was terrifying and seemed to go on and on, although he gathered that perhaps only seconds had passed, because no part of Firdy's grinning facial expression had changed since it began.

He didn't know how much he could bear, but he knew that that didn't matter to the Third. He wasn't meant to take it. This was the end of him and the beginning of someone new.

Through translucent images – his father saying goodnight, knowing that no-one would ever see him again; the French girl, falling, open-mouthed and silent; his mother, hung from a corner

bed post by a rope made from a bedsheet – he saw that Firdy was moving now, but as if in slow motion. He appeared to be surveying the room and its inhabitants, all of whom were hooked up to the Third, like batteries, giving up everything they had.

Far, far away, Firdy was in conversation with the Third. The thoughts floated towards Simon and clung to him like cobwebs. He didn't have the energy to blow them away.

“What about me?” Firdy thought. “I'm ready.”

A new whirlpool opened up directly above him. It gathered momentum and eventually it was reaching down, a wagging finger, extending towards Firdy's head.

ONE BODY.

“One body.”

ONE MIND.

“One mind. One mind.”

NO MORE EXPERIMENTS.

“No more.”

NO MORE MISTAKES.

Firdy opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He was the mistake the Third was referring to and he knew it, which meant that everyone in the room knew it. The Third's condemnation silenced him, but he knew it would all be over soon. One final indignity and he'd be allowed to move on.

He may have been an experiment gone wrong, but without him this wouldn't have happened. He'd watched behind the scenes, cleaned up after them when necessary, picked up the pieces when the Third dropped out. He had manipulated the Third's helpers, as necessary, and he had got them all here tonight, with Sarah and Zak into the bargain. He'd been loyal. Becoming one with the Third was more than his reward, it was his right.

As the shimmering thing reared, preparing to make contact with Firdy, Simon knew that his chance to make some kind of stand had come and gone. He didn't know when the moment should have been; perhaps just after the Third had returned, the moment Sarah had placed a knife into his hand, while Firdy had been on his back, paralysed and orgasmic.

“Kill it,” Sarah had said.

If he had plunged it into him then, perhaps the consequences would have been better than this. Maybe some chance was better than no chance at all.

He sensed the Third circling them, but she was interested in him in particular. He was in good physical shape, but probably no better than Naomi or Moody. It was his mind that she valued above all. Apparently, it was unlike the others. It had corridors and doors, stairs, straight lines, basements, keyed and coded but not unbreakable, low ceilings and, impressively, an attic with a single window to which no room led directly. It was always an effort of will to get something up into that room, but not so when moving things in the other direction.

Of the eight people in the room, his mind was most like that of Jonathan - except that all Jonathan's doors were double and triple-locked, with little movement in any direction - and Firdy, but whose stray memories were cracking the floorboards, smothering the skirting, taking over the walls.

The Third asked herself if Simon's mind was too strong. Was Firdy's too weak?

Would the two of them linger? And if so, would they reject each other?

Balance was everything. Everything.

With the plans for Simon laid out so explicitly, he knew that there would be no life worth living on the other side of this experience, should he survive it, and he only had one weapon left to upset the process for everyone, if not stop it entirely.

Before the Third could interrupt him, it was out in the wild.

“She won't take you,” Simon thought.

Firdy curled his lip in an approximation of an insolent smile. The worm was almost touching his furrowed, scarred forehead. He shielded his eye from its light with his hand.

“No more experiments,” Simon thought. “No more mistakes.”

Firdy's upturned face glowed with silver light reflected from above. The watery cord that would connect him to The Third was hovering.

“... Do it!” Firdy thought. “Don't listen to him.”

“Experiment and mistake,” Simon persisted; “you're both.”

Firdy had been holding his breath, but now he sighed and stared aghast as the Third withdrew her tendril from him. It shrank back as though he were poison.

“You can't do this,” Firdy yelled, but the room absorbed his words. His mouth continued to rage in silence: “I'm your son! Your real son! I did all this for you! You owe me!”

The proboscis that had been meant for Firdy slipped into the ceiling like a snail's head into its shell and it became as though it had never existed.

SIMON'S RIGHT, thought the Third.

Simon felt the heat of Firdy's rage, sudden and alien and boundless. It accelerated through his system and brought tears to his eyes. Within moments, it felt beyond his control and more powerful than any emotion he had ever felt, even his love for Sarah, at once filial and paternal. There would be no reasoning him down from this fury. It had come from a very long way away.

Firdy strode towards Simon.

NO MORE EXPERIMENTS.

To punctuate the thought, the floor opened up beneath the Cat. In one moment, it had been crouched beside Naomi, keeping guard, hopeful that there would be some prime scraps of warm skin left over when the process was over, and in the next moment the ground beneath it lost its solidity. The Cat scabbled uselessly for a moment and then the floor became solid again, a ceiling as far as she was concerned. For a few seconds, she was a black figure on the outside of the Third, drowning, and then she was gone.

NO MORE MISTAKES.

Firdy started running for Simon. He almost made it, but his final step met no resistance. He threw his hands out, the good hand and the clawed fingers, and they latched onto Simon's leg. He began the agonising business of hauling himself up, finding purchase on his jacket and skin and hair. Simon threw punches down onto Firdy's head and shoulders, but he hadn't realised how weak he had become over the last 48 hours, or how strong Firdy could be in the midst of his rage. Firdy was not to be deterred. He climbed, hand over withered hand, until they were face to face.

Firdy yelled, flecks of spit flying from his mouth, but again the sound was lost.

“You ruined it! I can't believe you ruined it! This was my only chance.”

He planted both his hands around Simon's throat. He squeezed.

Simon attempted to prise away the leather-clad fingers, but he was already losing consciousness. This time, he would not be joining a communal mind. This time he was sliding towards death.

He mustered enough energy to throw a final punch at Firdy's face and succeeded in drawing blood, but that was all. His nose didn't break. Far from it. Firdy spat blood in Simon's face and tightening his grip.

Eyes closing, Simon put his hands around Firdy's neck too and pressed his thumbs as hard as he could into the space where his Adam's apple should have been. He felt nothing. He pushed and squeezed with all his remaining strength, with all his rage, allowing it to spring up from all his hiding places, he squeezed with all the life he had left. He was furious, with himself, with the Third, with everyone. It wasn't meant to be like this.

He felt Firdy's grip slipping. Not only was Firdy's hold strangling him, but it was keeping him from falling. If he dropped, he would fall through the Third and drown. Simon knew that if he could stay alive for another minute, maybe thirty seconds more, he could survive this.

Having failed to protect Sarah, his goal now was to remain with her for as long as he could. He hadn't told her that he loved her, but that didn't matter down here. Connected through the Third, she would feel his love for her. Despite his failures, she'd know that he loved her.

He did his best to keep pressure on Firdy's throat, but he could not draw the breath that would have given him the strength to go on.

The blackness was dotted with stars.

"I'm losing," he thought and was stunned. Somewhere, deep inside, in a chest in a basement, he had believed that everything would be okay in the end.

With that thought, he was overpowered.

"If I don't get to live," Firdy thought, "neither do you."

LET GO NOW.

Lights shot across the sky.

LET GO.

It was a white sky, peppered with black stars.

LET HIM GO.

On the moonlit horizon; a ghost ship sailing.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Pain rushed through his skull. It was the intense pressure of The Third's consciousness, but more powerful than ever. She had interrupted the process of her transformation in order to make the men release each other. Simon would have screamed, but with Firdy's hands around his throat he was still unable to draw a breath. Instead he waited for it to be over.

It was a wail and a screech and a roar, a wave of nails dragging itself through his head.

For the final time that night, his viewpoint was from outside his body. He became one, not with the Third, but with the blackness. To his relief, he felt no more physical sensation, but he still had to do battle with emotion.

Most of all, he regretted having obstructed Sarah's attempts to run. Even though she would have been caught, he could have allowed her the chance to make her own choice, to fight; to die with self-respect, unlike him. He had allowed the uncertain future he had feared to become no future at all.

He hoped that the Third's transformation would be impossible without him, but he didn't believe that was the case. The Third was desperate and so she would try, with or without him. Sarah's future, her lack of it, remained fixed.

He wanted to go back for her, but there was no back or forward or anything. There was only blackness, accepting him whole.

He waited to disappear.

He waited a long time.

A white dot crossed his path. Again. Above. Below.

It appeared to be circling him.

A full stop, he thought.

The object was approaching, slightly bigger each time.

He willed himself to keep it in focus and after achieving some success he realised that the object wasn't moving; he was. Through will and persistence, he managed to stop spinning and then, having confirmed that he could move somehow, he willed himself towards the light. There was nothing else.

The light had many arms, beckoning him. For a moment, he considered that this might be the Third as seen from the outside, but he felt peace, not panic, and allowed himself to continue. Having resisted death for so long, he was relieved to succumb. All that was left was to hope that Sarah and the others would not suffer for much longer.

He slid interminably, focusing on the mouth of the tunnel ahead. Every now and then it winked out of view and he felt a flush of fear, but it returned each time, saving him from thoughts of being trapped in the dark with nothing but his thoughts - of Sarah and of all the lives he had destroyed. A pang of loneliness weighed on him from all sides, crushing him.

When he next saw the entrance to the tunnel it was shining more brightly than before. Octopus-like rays stretched out from it, setting the darkness alight ...

... His head broke the surface of water. He choked and coughed and vomited as a wave washed over him. His lungs burned and his chest ached, his head spun, but he kicked and kept

his head up. Soon, he was able to breathe again, though it hurt to do so. The moon shone down on him long enough for him to realise that it had served as his beacon, then it hid behind a cloud.

He was alive.

He saw the cliff that Firdy had walked them to. The Third had reached up a watery tentacle and had taken them inside it, down into the water. And he'd survived it.

He willed himself towards the rocky coast as he had willed himself towards the moon. Underwater his legs were moving, but he was so cold that he could hardly feel them.

Minute by minute, the beach came nearer. The rocks glistened as waves crashed over them and shrank back. Bubbles exploded between stones.

He didn't think he would make it, but he had thought that several times tonight and he was still here. He focussed on the rocks until nothing else existed to him. An undertow kept pulling him away from the shore, but the distance he covered between its attacks meant that he was making small progress each time. As he weakened, it almost seemed that he was swimming the same length over and over, but eventually, he was able to stop kicking and waded the rest of the way onto the beach. Out of the water to his thighs, a final wave crashed against his back and he fell onto the jagged rocks. He bled, but he was beyond caring. He was alive. He shouldn't be. He had been given a second chance and he was going to make the most of it.

*

Not half a mile out to sea, Firdy reached the surface, his head thrown up out of the water, buoy-like, and his body floating, so that he looked like a bin bag full of junk, buffeted by the waves and carried further out to sea.

He tried to move in the direction of the beach, but it was hard enough staying afloat. The waves swamped him each of the few times he managed to take a lungful of air, winding him and sending salt water down his throat. The sea was like a living thing, wearing him down. He kicked as hard as he could, but all he achieved was a slow pirouette.

There was a large rock to his left. He tried to kick himself towards it and then half-stretched, half-threw himself onto it. His gloved hand slipped, found purchase, slid again. He threw his other hand out, but it struck the rock like a dead thing. The current pulled him away from the temporary sanctuary and tugged him out.

It pulled him under.

When he screamed, in frustration rather than fear, it sounded like he was gargling. He sucked in a painful, watery breath, reached for the surface and yelped with an explosion of bubbles.

The only consolation, he thought, was that he had killed Simon before he died.

"I should have killed them all," he admitted as he spiralled away.

*

Simon crawled on his hands and knees, inch by inch, foot by foot, knowing that Sarah was still down there, under the surface, probably still inside the Third.

He wanted to get to his feet, but he lacked the strength to push himself up. He had to rest, for a few minutes at least, qne he had to get warm or the cold would finish the job that Firdy had started.

As he rolled onto his back, panting, he considered effecting further upset in the room below using his connection to the Third, but with the thought he realised, with certainty, that the connection was not there. His mind was unobserved, as clear as it was on those merciful days when the Third had been busy, dredging, slicing, splicing, and had left him alone until she

needed more meat and more minds. Her presence was gone and he might have been pleased if it hadn't left him without a means of getting Sarah back.

He watched the waves, thinking that if something was wrong with the Third, Sarah might float up the way that he had.

The oily sea was oozed and sucked, like a living thing, weeping. He knew that Sarah could be anywhere out there and he wouldn't necessarily see her. The same applied to the Third.

A rock tumbled towards him.

"Sarah?"

No. This sound had been made deliberately. He saw a woman in a long, leather coat, black, over black jeans and dark boots. The wind caught her scarf and it flapped like a flag beneath her pallid face. Under her knitted hat was the only thing of colour: an escapee; a strand of red hair.

Clare unwound the scarf and shoved it, handful by handful, into her left coat pocket. Then she removed a plastic bag from her right coat pocket, opened it and carefully descended the rocks towards Simon.

"You missed it," Simon said, on his feet now.

He recognised the look in her eyes. He had seen it in the mirror: making deliveries; following orders.

"You don't have to do this," he said. His words were familiar. They had both heard that line before. Between them, they could probably rank pleas. Sometimes the things their victims said must have been true, but it didn't matter, because there was no way to tell and no choice either way.

Until now.

"Think about this," Simon said. "If I'm alive, something must have gone wrong. Can you feel the Third? I can't."

A few steps above him, she paused.

"Like I said: you don't have to do this."

"Firidy told me you'd say that," Clare said. "He was very specific. He said that if anyone else made it, I could let them go. It's only you he wants dead."

Simon laughed, but it came out as a cough.

"So you take your orders from Firidy?" he said.

"If he finds out that I didn't do my job here," Clare said, "there are people I care about who are going to get hurt ... you know the score."

"Yeah. I do."

"You can't talk me down. The only reason you're still alive is that you're one of us. I thought I'd give you a minute."

"A minute for what?"

She looked as though she was going to say more, but her mouth snapped shut. That was it. If anything was going through her mind, it remained unsaid.

They listened to the black waves destroying themselves on the shore, breathing in and out, wheezing and sighing.

He counted the crashes out of habit.

Six.

Seven.

Eight.

He sensed that she had finished thinking.

"It'll be quick," she said and hopped down from her rock. Before her feet touched the ground, Simon rushed her, hoping he would get there before she could correct her stance, but the beach slipped away from him and was replaced with the dark blue sky. He felt rocks stab his back and smash into the back of his head, and there was another pain in his arm, which Clare must have used to overbalance him. He didn't have long to think about what happened. His last breath out expelled a cry of pain and then the plastic bag was over his head. He heard the wheeze of the drawstring and when he attempted to breathe in the clear plastic entered his mouth, shrink-wrapping him. He reached for Clare, knowing that even if his hands could have found her he was too weak to do anything, but knowing also that he would fight this time, from beginning to end, pointless as it may be.

"Don't fight," Clare said. She tightened the drawstring until it cut into his neck.

"No," Simon thought. He grabbed Clare's hands and tore at her fingers. He sent loose rocks shooting down into the water with his feet. He could sense her rising panic as she lost control of the situation.

Managing to pry one of her hands loose, he flipped over onto his side, but before he could get his bearings a blow struck the side of his head. He heard the rock discarded, but to him it sounded like an avalanche and he was part of it, gathering momentum, taking out villages and families along the way.

*

The Third rose through the water, a vortex of her own creation. She grabbed Firdy's body and remade the hollow so he could breathe within her, but she was too late. He was gone.

She had been prepared to reject him. She knew that. But then Simon had put his hands around his throat and now he was dead. It wasn't the same thing. She felt strange about it. It was unpleasant.

She had been in too many places at once and too slow to react. She had been inside Sarah and Zak and Ian and Naomi and Jonathan and Will and Simon, unravelling them and attempting to tie them together; lost in the details.

Now she was only lost.

The Others like her had left what felt like centuries ago. They had taken a swimmer and they had gone, first one and then the other, but after years of thefts, increasingly selective, she never discovered the trick. If it was a test, she had failed. If it was punishment for something long-forgotten, it ought to be over now. In a single act, she had killed, had been killed and had lost her son.

She was bewildered.

And alone again.

I'LL DIE, she thought.

ANOTHER YEAR ALONE.

ANOTHER NIGHT.

I'LL DIE.

*

Simon attempted to grab Clare's face, but she looked up and that was enough to take her out of his range. He would have grabbed her hair, but she had tied it up underneath her hat. She had him belly down. He had nothing to grab onto and so no way to free himself.

He thought of Sarah. After years of thinking that he had protected her, he had actually been preserving her, to be used, used up and discarded. If he had known it would end like this, he would have killed her himself.

But how could he have known? He had had hope.

The sky was brightening. This would be the last thing he saw.

From the corner of his eye, he discerned a flash.

And then another.

In the periphery of his vision, fireworks exploded silently in reds and blues and greens.

As the colours intensified, Clare released her grip and to Simon's surprise he was able to get his fingers underneath the drawstring and snatch a shallow breath. He set both hands to work opening the plastic bag. Whatever the reason for Clare's lack of care, he didn't have the breath to play dead. He tore at the opening and managed to pull the bag up over his mouth.

For the second time in minutes, he fell on the rocks, gasping.

Clare stared out to sea, which Simon gradually realised was being illuminated from below. Red and pink and orange light rose to the surface, the colours alternating. The sea seemed to swell each time a colour reached a peak of brightness. A large, pink wave rolled towards them and broke over the stones with a sigh. It was followed closely by a red wave, which broke too soon, before it had even reached the shore and sent a loud hiss up into the night. The foam from the wave crawled between the rocks and whispered. The rivulets sought him out and he back-pedalled, avoiding most of them although they travelled much further than seemed natural. A single rivulet splashed one of his trainers and he was paralysed by a pang of distress. Every part of him ached for a second. For that moment, he wanted to die so intently that he could have thrown himself face down into the water, but then it was over.

A third wave approached, gathering itself up with more violence than the others, ragged and rolling.

"Come away," Simon said, getting to his feet.

"Listen," Clare said. There were voices in the water. Neither male nor female.

"Dead," the wave was saying. "Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead ..."

"Come away," Simon repeated and staggered back, but Clare remained transfixed. She gasped as the wave struck her at chest height and knocked her off her feet.

It washed over her completely, tossing her hat aside and drenching her. As the wave drew back, she was sitting on her bottom, legs splayed. The water latched onto stones and pulled a few out with it, but it left Clare where she was.

On a rock above, Simon watched Clare sink her head between her knees and hug herself.

She wept.

"You okay?" Simon asked.

She didn't answer for a long time, but then she said:

"I've never felt it ... her ... before."

"How was it for you?" Simon said.

"Lonely," she said.

*

It took Simon twenty minutes to find Clare's car, but when he did it was what he had expected. A small, non-descript hatchback, parked up beneath an ominous conifer. Three doors. The boot was locked, but he tried the driver's side door and it clicked open. Inside, he pushed the button for the boot and then went round the back.

He found car maintenance tools, some of which could have doubled as weapons, a reflective, yellow vest, a warning triangle, bottled water, a box of dry goods, a Highlander rucksack, bars of chocolate, some rope, a tartan blanket, some black tarpaulin and a first aid kit. If this wasn't her stuff, she had stolen the car from a serial killer.

He opened up the rucksack and found a change of clothes inside: a pair of blue jeans, a plain, grey t-shirt and a dark blue sweater. He stripped off to his bare chest and used the sweater to dry himself off before stretching the t-shirt over his torso. Then he pulled on the sweater, accidentally ripping it in the process. He sized up the jeans. No chance. He'd have to make do with his wet trousers.

There was a waxy, black raincoat in the back, but this was also too small. He dumped his wet clothes in the boot, availed himself of a bar of chocolate and jogged back to the rocks.

He expected Clare to be gone, but she hadn't moved except to stand. Her arms were folded tight. The waves had diminished. They were back to normal, but she was not.

"Coming?" Simon said, descending the rock face.

"She's dead," Clare said.

He thought she meant Sarah and slid on the loose ground.

"Firdy died inside her," she continued, her voice almost a monotone. "It flicked a switch in her and she caved in. She let herself die."

"Hallelujah," he said. He wanted to ask her if she'd felt Sarah's presence when the Third's wave washed over her, but he didn't trust her, so instead he said: "Be reassured that this is great news."

She bit her lip. "She couldn't face being alone," she said.

"I could," said Simon, "so are you coming with me or not?" He extended his hand. She took it, but ultimately it was she who helped him back up the slope, picking him up when he fell.

*

Clare turned her key in the ignition and set the heaters to full. She poured Simon black coffee from a flask, but he couldn't hold the cup. She offered to put it to his lips, but he refused.

"Do you know why we were down there?" he asked.

"I know enough so that I'm glad I was up here," Clare said.

"Firdy said that he couldn't use you. Why not?"

"I'm sick," she said. "It's terminal." They held each other's gaze. "What was it like being inside her?" Clare said.

"Like drowning," he replied, without hesitation.

She nodded. That made sense to her.

She glanced over her left shoulder and then, as she drew her seatbelt, she took in the remaining area. Satisfied that they were alone, she put the car into gear.

"When the wave hit me," she said, "I didn't feel Sarah or any of the others."

"I realise that she's probably dead," Simon said, "but I have to look. I need to find her. That's all I have to do."

"I'll help you," she said.

"You don't have to help me."

"Yeah," she said. "I do."

*

"She could be anywhere," Simon admitted, looking out to sea.

"We'll find her," Clare told him. "One way or another."

She seemed to understand what was required and he needed no more reason than that to accept her help. She had driven them to a vantage point with a clear view of the beach where Simon had made his approach and a good distance of beach either side.

She stood at the edge of the promontory, the toe of her right boot resting on a clump of dirt that looked like it might give way at any moment, and she scanned the beach with a compact pair of binoculars.

Simon sat in the car with the door open and his legs out, taking an enforced break, resting his body, because his mind gave him no relief. He had the tartan blanket around his shoulders and Clare had insisted that he take her scarf too. He sipped his coffee and felt marginally restored while Clare moved seamlessly with the binoculars, pivoting at the waist.

"How are you sick?" Simon asked.

Her tracing of the beach stuttered. She couldn't help it, even though she'd suspected the question would come again.

"Cancer," she said, as though that would end all further questions. It didn't. Simon opened his mouth to speak, but she waved him over. He stood beside her at the edge of the promontory and she passed him the binoculars.

Below, trees jutted out of the cliff. The face was crawling with weeds. He'd probably be able to get a handhold on something if he fell, but it was a long way to the bottom.

"I don't expect you to trust me," Clare said. "I'm not going to ask you to. You'll do what you think is best. And so will I."

He took the binoculars. She used her hand on his arm to correct his direction and she told him to relax his eyes.

All he saw was rocks, their bodies smoothed by the black sea, naked and glistening and still, as wave after wave rolled over them. Clouds passed over the moon, slowly, slowly, until light shone down through a tear.

"There," said Clare.

Simon noticed a shape moving among the rocks.

"I don't believe it," he said.

*

Clare got there first.

"It's not her," she said as Simon caught up.

"It's Will," Simon said and dropped to his knees beside him.

Will's body shook with a coughing fit and then he rolled onto his back and wailed. He was still fully-dressed, except for having lost a shoe, and was drenched. He pushed his fingers through his muddy hair and cried.

"What happened to Zak?" Simon said.

Will's eyes darted around, but they didn't take in Simon or Clare, the beach or the sky. He shook his head and the stones beneath it skittering from side to side.

"Could Zak have made it?" Simon asked.

"Dead," said Will. "Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead ..."

The Third's sorrow had left its imprint on him. Simon and Clare had both recovered from the energy that touched them on the beach, so Simon hoped that Will would too. Maybe it would improve in an hour, maybe (never) a day, maybe (never) a week.

"Get him back to the car," Simon said.

"... No-fuckin'-way," Clare said.

"We can't leave him here."

“Why not?”

Simon gazed down at Will's sodden body. The answer to Clare's question seemed obvious to him and yet he couldn't put it into words. Then it was her turn to gaze down at Will, his chest rising and falling. He was still mouthing the word 'dead' over and over, but she was thankful that he had fallen silent.

“I need to keep looking for Sarah,” Simon said. “But I can't leave him here.”

“We'll be seen,” Clare told him.

“I can't leave him.”

Clare sighed deeply. “Can you get him up?”

By cajoling him, she was able to make Will put one foot in front of the other and stagger where she directed him. Though he stumbled and they fell frequently, she got him up the beach and back towards the car while Simon continued to search for Sarah alone.

Simon was unaware of time passing, except to note that the sky was getting lighter and so he was able to see further. He knew Clare would not see it that way. She'd been unhappy when he had called out for Sarah, his voice echoing into the night, but he did it again now, and again. He didn't care about the 'authorities'. He only had to know, one way or another, whether or not Sarah had survived.

The uneven ground made his progress especially slow and painful, and he walked in the knowledge that he may be moving in the wrong direction. He'd had to make a choice. Walking where they had found Will had made the most sense to him at the time, but now he reminded himself that she could be anywhere.

He walked until he had to sit. He removed his trainers, but he couldn't feel his feet. That was probably for the best, he thought dimly. He closed his eyes and half-slept for a few minutes.

When he was ready to go on, he pulled on his wet trainers and prepared to head back the way he had come. First, however, he scoured the horizon for signs of (a body) Sarah and that was when he saw (Sarah) someone in the water.

In his hurry to put the binoculars to his eyes, he dropped them, then snatched them back up. He searched left and right, unsure of himself. It seemed that he had been mistaken, but after a few seconds the thing surfaced again.

It was a woman's body, buffeted by waves. They spun her. They sucked her down. She came back up.

It was Naomi. He could see her plaits. She wasn't far away and normally Simon could have swum out to pull her in, but he knew that he might not make it back this time and so he stood his ground. After a time, he became sure that she was dead.

The waves didn't bring her any closer to the shore. They dragged and threw her around, ultimately pulling her under for increasingly long periods until he lost sight of her.

The episode left him with mixed feelings. On the one hand, he was horrified that someone he had been with not two hours ago had bobbed up as a corpse. The Third had never told him to kill anyone and so, with the exception of funerals, he had only ever seen one dead body before; his mother, the day she killed herself. Seeing Naomi's body left him physically shaking. He had touched her, when he had helped Firdy drag her into the van. Later, she had hammered on the partition and asked him for help, for her sake and for that of her family. He had ignored her. Now she was nothing.

He was appalled by what he had allowed to happen, what he had facilitated.

But Naomi's lifeless body brought with it the promise of closure for him. He and Will and Naomi had all come to the surface near the beach and so it was possible that Sarah would turn up too. At least then he'd be certain of her fate; as Clare had put it: one way or another.

It would take him about an hour to get back to where he had started. He wondered if Clare would be waiting for him with Will, or if she had disposed of him instead.

Maybe it would be best to hole up somewhere and get some rest. If Sarah hadn't washed up yet, she might (never) do later.

With grim plans jostling for position, he headed back the way he had come. He had been walking a few minutes when he saw Sarah walking away from him, ghostly, in the shallows. He thought he should approach her cautiously in case he startled her, but he couldn't help himself and began running so quickly that he slipped and lost his balance. His face cracked against the rocks, but he got up and she was still there. She didn't turn to see what had caused the clatter. Her arms hung at her sides and the wind was toying with her although Simon couldn't feel it at all. The sleeve of her fatigue jacket had been torn off, but otherwise she was dressed as she had been on entering The Third.

When he reached her, she looked through him. Her face was waiting for an expression to take hold of it.

"Sarah?" he said and brushed droplets from her nose and forehead. Her hair clung to her shoulders and neck, thick with mud, blonde streaked with black. "Can you see me?" he said. He held her by the shoulders and put his face close to hers. "Can you hear me?"

Her eyes refocussed.

"Sarah," he said. "It's Simon." And he wished that one of her friends had been here instead of him, Geraldine, perhaps, someone who cared about her and had been able to show it. "I'm going to get you home," he told her. "You're going to be okay."

"De-ad," she whispered.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Simon dreamt that he was underwater. Everything was blue and cold. He didn't know what he was and nor did anything else. A host of sea creatures came to see. A shark. A swordfish. Dolphins. An entire shoal of minnows. A gargantuan octopus descended and somewhere beneath him he saw the shadowy back of a blue whale. Nothing came too close. They seemed to understand that the cold was emanating from him and that that was wrong.

The dolphin came nearest. It paused in front of him and asked: "What the fuck are you?"

He opened his mouth to speak and one word came out.

"De-ad."

The dolphin's smile shattered and it sank, a cadaver. The fishes' eyes went black. The whale hit bottom, sending dust up and up and up, hiding everything, but not well enough.

DEAD DEAD DEAD DEAD.

He woke with a scream in his throat. He was in the back of Clare's car. The engine was working hard.

DEAD DEAD DEAD.

Will was sitting on his right, with his head leaned up against the window. His eyes were open, but he only stared into the back of the seat ahead. He had the tartan blanket wrapped around him and Clare had dried his hair off.

DEAD DEAD.

Sarah was in the front passenger seat. Clare had given her her jumper and long, black coat, otherwise she was naked, but at least she was dry and warm air was humming through the vents. Simon leaned forward. Sarah looked terrible, washed out and set aside. She didn't turn to look at him, so he didn't see the glaze of her eyes. He was glad. He couldn't face that yet.

DEAD.

"Any progress from these two?" he asked.

"Nothing," Clare said. "Just that one word over and over. It's been driving me mad. I'm glad you're awake."

"Me too," Simon said. According to the digital clock on the dashboard, it wasn't yet six. He hadn't been asleep long, but he had hoped that something would be different upon waking.

"Is it time to try what we discussed?" Clare asked.

Simon unclashed his seatbelt and got into a comfortable position.

"Do you want the Mag-Lite?" she asked.

"No," Simon said and he pulled Will so he was upright. "Will," he said. "Will." The man's pupils remained fixed. Simon sighed and slapped him hard across the cheek. He waited for a reaction. He waited a long time.

"Anything?" Clare asked.

"Nothing."

"Do you want me to try?"

Simon hit him again. The sound of the contact was greater this time. Will's head snapped around and his face hit the window with a thunk.

"I was too late," he said and moaned. "I was too late! He died inside me. He's dead." Simon and Clare exchanged looks of surprise in the rear view mirror. "Who's dead?" he said.

"Firdy."

"And why do you care about that?"

"Because he's my ... he's my ..." Will rubbed his temple. "My head," he said. He lowered his head and sat that way for a long time. If he could have put his head between his knees he would have done it. Simon lay his hand on Will's back, between the shoulder blades, but the physical contact felt strange. Gently, he drew his hand back.

"Zak," Will said.

"I didn't find him," Simon admitted. "But we can go back." Clare glared at him.

"Nothing to go back for," Will said. "He's dead. Died in my arms."

Will slotted in some missing pieces for Simon and Clare. When Simon and Firdy had fought, the Third had pulled her probes from everyone. It had had the effect of pulling plugs from computers. Some of them had been fine: Will, the army guy, Sarah. Others – Zak, Naomi, the tall guy – had keeled over. They literally dropped dead.

"The light in his eyes ..." Will said. "He wasn't really conscious when it happened. The only good thing is that it was quick for him."

"I'm sorry," Simon said and Will shrugged. There was nothing anyone could say or do that would undo what had happened. They all understood this.

"Where are we going, Will?" Clare asked.

"And who the fuck are you?"

"I just carried your arse a quarter of a mile. Uphill. The word is thankyou."

"You should have left me," Will said. Clare glared at Simon again. "I've got nothing to live for," he said.

Simon knew that it could easily have been Zak sitting in the front with Clare, with Sarah dead in the water. As they drove, he tried to imagine how that would feel. He couldn't do it. He was relieved that he didn't have to know how that felt.

"Will," Clare said. "Where are we going?"

"Home," he said. "Then prison. Then the nuthouse. Take a left here." Clare drove past the turning and he protested.

"I know a better way," she said and left it at that. She liked how it felt to have that hanging in the air between them.

Simon suggested that Will go somewhere where he wouldn't be alone, but Will was adamant that he wanted to go home, saying something about having a letter to finish. Clare didn't get involved and Simon gathered that as far as she was concerned, Will was a loose end that was about to tie itself up. It was neater than having to do it herself. She didn't say it; she didn't have to.

Her short cut took them off the main roads and cut out some early morning traffic that was building up. She let the car roll to a stop at the edge of a tidy park with a small children's playground and a perimeter fence made of wire. He was about ten minutes' walk from home. She wasn't prepared to stop outside his house and told him so. Simon agreed, but was relieved that he didn't have to say it.

Before Will got out of the car, he turned to Simon and said:

"Firdy told me what was coming and I didn't do anything. If anyone could have stopped this it was me."

“There was nothing you could do.”

“Remember you said that.”

He shrugged off the blanket and shoved his wet clothes into a recyclable carrier bag. In his damp shoes, trousers and shirt, he exited the car, slammed his door shut and paused at Clare's window. “I've got to ask,” he said, “otherwise, it'll dig away at me. Where were you when it was all kicking off down there? The Third was going to live instead of us. Firidy wanted a clean slate. That fucking cat wanted to eat what was left. What was in this for you?”

Clare's face was as calm as it had been when she descended the rocks with a plastic bag in one hand. She began the weary process of staring him down.

“It's not her fault either,” Simon said.

“Bull,” said Will.

“She had her orders. We all did.”

“Oh yeah?” Will said. “I suppose you're right. We can't have one rule for us and another rule for her. That wouldn't be right.”

“There are no rules anymore,” Simon said.

Will nodded. “Remember you said that too.” He looked past Clare then to look at Sarah, who was staring blankly through the windscreen. “Good luck with her,” he said, and Simon felt that he was being deliberately ambiguous. “See you in another life.” He slapped the roof.

As Clare drove away, Will held up a hand, as though they were dropping him off after a night on the town. He slung the carrier bag over his shoulder and started walking.

“What do you reckon?” Simon asked.

“Dead by morning,” Clare said. “You?”

“I'd like to disagree, but I know what I'd do if I was him.”

“I know,” she said. “So, what about Sarah? Do you want to hit her now?”

“No,” he said. He closed his eyes. “I'll give her more time.”

*

“Simon.”

“What?”

“We're here.”

He didn't know how long they had been sitting in the drive.

“Let's get her in,” said Clare.

Simon wanted to carry her, but acquiesced to Clare's demands that she be allowed to walk for herself. It would be less conspicuous should anyone see and perhaps stimulating her body would encourage her mind to follow.

The kitchen window and the window above were smashed, reminding him of the things he had done that hadn't been enough. The door was unlocked and Simon entered first with Sarah alongside. Clare shut the door behind her and took in the chaos.

The smell that they had suffered in the van lingered in the kitchen/diner. Firidy's smell; dust, dirt and dirty laundry. He had an urge to burn the chair that Firidy had slept on. The cat had been in here too, but he couldn't smell it now and there was no physical sign of its presence. It was Firidy who had left his mark and needed to be eradicated.

It would be easier to deal with Firidy's physical presence than the memories he evoked. Allowing himself to consider the last 48 hours, Simon's mind was flooded with images – from the appearance of Firidy to the revelation of his dream diary, the eyes of the Cat and their journey into the Third. It was difficult to believe that it had taken place so quickly, but it was harder to believe that it was all over.

The Third was dead. He and Will and Clare had each felt it to some degree. He and Clare had seen it too. And yet, as Simon walked Sarah barefoot through the kitchen, he couldn't help wondering if the Third was inside her, watching, learning, clinging to life.

He repeated her name a few times and clicked. She struggled to focus on his fingers. Progress of a sort. Her eyelids flickered.

"Let's get you to bed," he said and helped her up the stairs.

He thought that seeing her bedroom might give her the jolt she needed to come to the surface, but he had forgotten that Firdy had trashed the room twice. Her photos, ripped from the walls, lay in pieces on the floor, mixed in with her bedsheets and books and papers. Her table was overturned. Her computer was smashed in the corner. From somewhere came the stench of shit.

He shut the door.

"You're going to sleep in my room," he said. She said nothing.

He pushed open his door.

In the corner of the room was the dog. He stumbled, thinking that it was going to attack him, but then he saw the rope and the blood and was reassured that it was never going to get up again.

"Dead," Sarah said.

"Yeah," said Simon. "Dead."

He kicked aside broken glass and threw a blanket over the dog, glancing back at Sarah to see her reaction. There was none. For once, he was thankful.

He patched up the broken window using a cork board and then sat Sarah down on his camp bed. Within minutes, she was curled up in the foetal position, asleep and dreaming. She was wearing Clare's sweater and long, black coat and he didn't try to remove them as he didn't have a blanket for her. He crept out of the room, leaving the door ajar, trying not to feel as though he was abandoning her. Failing.

Downstairs, Clare had made them a pot of coffee.

"I haven't had time to get milk," Simon said.

"That's okay," she said. "I don't take it either." Simon stopped short of her. "It's sort of a game," she explained, crossing the distance between them to hand him his coffee in his preferred mug. The Third had controlled him by threatening the people he cared about and so he had made a conscious effort not to care too much about anyone or anything. He was good at it, but one of the few things he'd retained an affection for was this mug. It was large with a couple of hairline cracks from top to bottom, glazed with a looping pattern of blue on white. Sarah had made it in class years ago. "When I didn't want to think too much," Clare continued, "I learnt to be observant. I projected my thoughts outwards. I started making stuff up about people, but it would turn out to be dead right. Ask me about myself, however, and I draw a blank. I don't even have a favourite colour anymore. How is she doing?"

"Asleep."

"Good."

"You think?"

"She's in shock. And exhausted. Keep an eye on her. I think she'll be fine."

"And what about you?"

Clare took a sip from her coffee cup. "What about me?"

"Will you be fine?"

"I'll get back home," she said, "keep up the pretence; show my face in the café."

"Are there others? Like us."

“As far as I'm aware, it's you, me and Will now.”

“Did anyone else make it? Ian? Naomi?”

“I don't know any more than you.”

“What were you going to do when The Third had finished with us?”

“Whatever she told me to do.”

Simon refilled his mug, prompting Clare to tell him that he should rest. She appeared relaxed on one of the kitchen stools with one leg crossed over the other, one foot swinging gently back and forth. She'd given Sarah her sweater, so she was down to a black t-shirt now, tucked into her dark, skin-tight jeans. He could see that she was strong, though small. He wondered if she was strong enough to withstand whatever was next for her.

“Are you warm enough?” he said when she caught him looking.

She nodded.

His eyes began closing despite himself. He could feel his tiredness creeping over him, seeping into his joints, weighing down his limbs. Its vengeance would be slow and devastating and sweet.

“We should find the van and move it,” he mused. “Slow down the investigations.”

“Taken care of,” said Clare.

He allowed his eyes to close, but his journey towards sleep was accompanied by a falling sensation and his body jerked.

“I should probably go,” Clare said.

Simon shook his head. “I have questions.” His words were slurred.

“You need to rest.”

“How long did the Third have you?”

“Half as long as you. Long enough.”

“What did you do?”

“We've been through this.”

“Tell me again.”

She told him that in the beginning she had delivered to the Third, as he had, but then her job had become to help Firdy. As the deliveries increased, he had deemed it necessary to carry out some of the Third's threats and she had delivered people's loved ones to him. She had done it more often than she wanted to remember. People had needed convincing that the Third meant business.

“Forgive me for saying it,” she said, “but I think you were right to do everything you did. What choice did you have? Firdy enjoyed his work. He always went too far.”

“Tell me. How many times did you take people to him?” Simon said.

“How many people did you throw into the water?”

He opened his mouth to reel off a figure, but he couldn't provide the estimate. It felt like more than a dozen. Could it have been as many as two dozen? More? Perhaps he could determine how many he had (killed) delivered in the last year if he worked out an average per month, and then multiplied that by three. His stomach turned.

She said: “You could see every one of their faces if you really tried and you probably will over the years. They'll come floating up when you don't want them. They're all in there. But for now, you've blocked them out. Don't blame me for doing the same. You don't keep count, you stay sane.”

Simon looked into her eyes and thought about what she had said. She seemed to have everything well thought out. Her manner was very casual and he thought that maybe it was a

front, but he also wondered if she had been inside their house before, inside their kitchen, on that very stool, carrying out orders, checking on Sarah, phoning in her observations.

The rising sun lit the kitchen area through the double doors and smashed window. The battered blinds split the amber light into horizontal lines, which crept towards the seated couple. They had both noticed it and were watching it reach for them when they heard Sarah wake with a gasp.

By the time Simon was on the stairs, she was screaming, repeatedly and hysterically.

She was sitting on the camp bed, knees drawn up to her chest.

“He died inside her!” she said, wailing. She grabbed Simon. “He's dead! Dead!”

“You're safe,” Simon said. She looked at him, not through him, for the first time since he had been ejected from the Third and into the sea. “We're safe. We're at home.”

“So lonely,” she muttered and buried her face in his shoulder.

Although she was suffering the Third's grief, he felt relief rushing through every part of him. He had a chance to connect with her again. He had done significant damage, and it would take time to heal, but things would get better. He'd see to that. He could deal with this.

Her breath hitched.

“What's she doing here?”

Clare was standing in the doorway. She dropped her gaze and backed onto the landing.

“You'd better leave,” Simon said. Clare nodded and descended the stairs. “Look at me,” Simon told Sarah. “It's alright. It's over.”

“Thank God you're back,” Sarah said and held him again. Over his shoulder, her eyes flicked towards the empty doorway. “What is she doing here?” she said. “In our home.”

He didn't know how to answer her, but he knew that he needed a second chance, and if he couldn't give Clare a break, why should he be allowed one?

*

Clare reversed out of the drive and took off before she could change her mind. She had done enough damage. It was time to get back to London, show her face in the usual circles. Act natural.

The truth, though she tried to deny it, was that she was terrified. She felt as though everything was happening for the first time. She was checking the mirror, as a free woman. She was making a right turn, as a free woman. She was tidying loose strands of hair, tucking them underneath her hat, as a free woman.

She had lived most of her life in freedom, but it had never been so palpable. Every breath was delicious, but when she released them she was shuddering. She lit a cigarette while she drove and pulled on it hard in an attempt to calm down.

Working for the Third had afforded her an otherness that made her feel superior to everyone else. Part of her had enjoyed walking among them, guided and protected by the Third's distant gaze through her. She remembered that the Third had needed her in the beginning. It used to enter her mind and they'd go for walks together, shopping for souls.

Not so much after Firdy came knocking. Not so much then.

But even Firdy's presence had had some advantages. He provided everything she needed so that she no longer had to keep down a job. In all the time she had spent in her flat in London, she had seen her landlord twice: once to introduce Firdy to him and explain that the rent he had been receiving was going to stop, and again some months later, as he crossed to the other side of the street, pretending not to have seen her.

She paid a high price for these boons though, these boosts to her self-esteem. She had had to give up her life to the Third and then to Firdy. Now that she had it back she didn't know what to do with it. Her current plans would keep her occupied for a day or so, but then what?

She considered that maybe it was time for her to try to make friends who didn't kill people, but she didn't know who she was anymore. Every one of her names felt fake. She couldn't tell anybody about the things she had done for the Third, so any future relationship would be based on a lie. What was the point?

She stopped at the side of the road and lit up a second cigarette and then a third, hands shaking. Her mind turned to Will, wondering if he had written his letter or if he had gone straight to killing himself. She thought that Simon would check on him, despite the risk, because The Third was dead and Simon seemed to consider that everyone touched by her had a responsibility to each other now.

The Third had died.

"My God," she thought. "I'm really alone again."

She couldn't pretend to have arrived back at Simon's house by accident. She knew the area too well. Her journey had unfolded of its own accord, but she had gone along with it. Like her mental journey, it had been circuitous, but it had led firmly to his door.

There was danger here. There was a lot to be afraid of, not least of all rejection, but she had to try. If she was going to begin again, then here was a foundation of shared experience. Here was the only person she wouldn't have to lie to.

As she rolled the car to a stop, Simon opened the door. He was wearing a blue dressing gown, tied at the waist. He appeared unfazed by her return. She tried to gauge his expression more deeply, but felt ashamed and could not hold his gaze. Unsure of what to do, she rolled down her window. Cold air crept in and she waited.

"When I said that you should leave," Simon said, "I meant leave the room."

"I know you did," Clare said. "How is Sarah?"

She saw him smile for the first time. He seemed unable to help himself. And there was no need. She reminded herself that there was no need to keep her guard up either. Maybe one day, she'd let it go, but not yet. She noted that Simon didn't seem to have suffered her loss of confidence since the Third had died, but then he had Sarah. He had someone to care for and someone to care for him. It made all the difference, she guessed.

"I came to apologise," she said spontaneously.

Simon waited, his smile waning.

"To you and to Sarah," she added.

"She can't hear you out there," he said. "You'd better come in."

*

Something was cooking in the microwave. The sweet smell made Clare want to cry. Wanting to cry made her want to run. Her mind flitted to the Olive Tree. They did a good mango ice cream. She could still get there before lunchtime.

Sarah was sitting at the breakfast counter in a mauve dressing gown. Her hair was wrapped in a white towel. When Clare had handed her over to Firdy, Sarah's eyes had been like melting chocolate. Now they were red-ringed and could have been carved out of wood. They penetrated her and made her want to lie, about everything, to slide back where she felt safest.

"Sarah," she said and attempted to hold her gaze steady. "I'm sorry that I gave you to Firdy. I didn't think I had a choice."

"You didn't," Sarah said.

“There's something else.” She tried very hard to say what she was thinking. She tried to admit out loud that she had enjoyed handing Sarah over, because it demonstrated her loyalty and usefulness, ensuring her a role in the Third's future, except that there wasn't going to be one anymore, because she had felt her Gods die, one inside the other. Her lips moved, but she didn't make a sound.

“I understand,” Sarah said, though her eyes told another story. Clare supposed that she was saying this for Simon's sake.

“Thank you, Sarah,” said Clare.

“What are you going to do now?” Sarah said.

“I haven't thought about it much.”

“We can think about it together.” Sarah pushed out a stool with her bare foot. Her eyes hadn't become any more gentle and Clare could see that it had been an act of will to make that gesture.

Simon concurred by nodding towards the stool, so Clare sat down. She could feel them exchanging looks behind her back, but it was okay, she had decided not to stay.

Thirty minutes later, however, they were eating home-made cereal bars and laughing. She was trying not to cry at the same time, because she found that she didn't want to leave after all, but she knew that she probably should.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

“There is a spare room upstairs,” Simon said, “but we never go in there. To be honest, we don't go in this room either, but we're going to open it for you.”

A cobweb stretched and broke as he pushed open the door.

The room was piled high with things that, for one reason or another, Sarah had been unwilling to let Simon get rid of. She had regarded this room with grudging reverence, whereas Simon could not have cared less if every stick of furniture had been used as firewood. The thought occurred to him now that it was the season to carry out such a purge, but without Firdy to oil the gears, they would have to find legitimate ways of making money and he considered that they could live off the proceeds of this room for several months.

He had blocked the contents of this room from memory so completely that he was shocked by the smell of old books and antique furniture. He saw brass handles that he used to tug on when he was a boy and a writing desk where he had sometimes done his homework, back when things had been more sane.

Clare admired an enormous landscape painting that had been lent up against an old chest of drawers. In the corner, an ornate silver mirror faced the wall.

“Sorry about the mess,” he said. “I'd forgotten.”

“It's cool,” Clare said and she wiped dust from a hardback. She fingered the raised, silver lettering. “Do you mind?”

It felt strange, her being here.

He said: “No.”

“I miss reading,” she said. “Maybe I can borrow a few.”

“You can stay,” he assured her. “Not only tonight.”

Her eyes flicked towards the kitchen.

“It would be good for Sarah if you stayed,” he added.

“How so?”

“She could do with someone to talk to about what happened. Someone other than me. I think she'd open up to you.”

Clare nodded thoughtfully. “And what about you?” she asked.

“I could do with your help,” he said, avoiding the true meaning of what she had asked him. She seemed disappointed by his answer, but he didn't think that he would be ready to open up for a while. Not to her; not to anybody.

*

The three of them disposed of the dead dog in Simon's room using gloves, a mop and a couple of heavy duty rubble sacks. Sarah insisted on helping them and Simon agreed on the condition that they swap rooms for a few nights, while he returned some semblance of order to her bedroom. Later, when she lay down to sleep in his bed, he went to her room and stood in the doorway, observing the chaos that Firdy had created. After a pause to take in the enormity of the job ahead, he set to work, beginning by putting scattered photographs in piles, separating them roughly into

family, strangers he assumed were her friends, and photos that were damaged but repairable. He disposed of those that Firdy had destroyed or defiled.

Many items were saturated with piss, some with shit. Among the worst casualties was a photo of Sarah, Simon and their father, taken by their mother outside the entrance to a cave. Simon picked it up between the finger and thumb of a rubber glove.

He was not quite 20 years old in the photo. The family had been hiking through the forest. Sarah and their mother had lagged behind, exhausted, but his father had taken him by the wrist and hauled him down to the bottom of a hill, where the stream they had been following split into two paths, one continuing through the forest and the other reaching into a hole in the rock face and on into darkness. At the time, Simon had thought that he was confused, because it had appeared that the second of the channels ran uphill. With hindsight he knew that he had seen the Third for the first time.

His father dragged him into the cave, a few feet into the darkness had been enough, and threw him to the floor, at which point the water had grabbed him. Almost all Simon could remember about the experience was that the water had held him, inside and out. He had choked on it.

“Don't fight,” his father said, “and it'll be over quicker.”

He couldn't have been more wrong.

“Where have you been?” Sarah had asked them when she caught up.

“Man talk,” their father had said and grinned, holding Simon by the shoulder hard enough to bruise him.

Sarah had demanded that someone take a photograph. Her father was smiling and she wanted to preserve it, even if it was a lie. She had successfully ignored the lines that had encroached upon his face over the last eighteen months and she had managed to look away whenever he passed a weary, almost hateful look to one of the others. She needed his smiles, because every week there were fewer than the week before and she worried that one day they would stop coming completely.

In this photograph, everything was fake except for Sarah's smile, which was desperate but genuine. It would have been worth keeping it for that alone if Firdy hadn't done such a good job of soiling it. When Simon dropped it into the rubbish bag, he had to shake it from his gloved finger.

He slumped to the floor with his back against the wall, recalling that three days after his mother took that picture, she had had to report their father missing and she had surprised herself by crying for him every night. Simon regretted that he hadn't been much comfort to her or his sister at that time, but he had been preoccupied. He had been learning about the thing to which his father had introduced him. The thing had been busy learning about him. It didn't take him long to understand that his future was in its hands.

Now he was free, but there were a few more things he had to do before he could rest. He had to eradicate Firdy's presence from the house, starting with this room. He had to sweep up the broken things that Firdy had kicked around the floor, shove wet sheets into bags for dumping or burning, reclaim the room for Sarah. It was too little ... too late ... but he had to make her feel safe again ... he had to ... with no surprises ... this time ...

no hiding ...

no ... no hiding ...

no more ...

Chapter Thirty-Eight

When he woke, he was stiff and on edge. He heard crackling and pushed himself up from the floor. His arms, legs and neck were aching, but he limped towards the window, where he confirmed that it really was night time.

As he crossed the landing, a loud crack came from the street. When laughter followed, he realised that boys were setting off fireworks and his heart began to slow its pace.

He found Sarah downstairs with Clare, in her new room, discussing books that they had uncovered.

“Hi,” the women said and they smiled at him. He almost stopped on the threshold, because he didn't want to ruin the moment. Already, the house had started to feel like a home.

“Sleep well?” asked Sarah.

“A firework woke me. Must have been a big one.”

“Me too,” Sarah said. “I got up, because I wanted to see. Something normal. The world goes on.”

“And so do we,” said Clare.

Simon looked in the direction of the kitchen door. “Shall we go?” he said.

“Yeah,” said Sarah. “I'd like that.”

*

Local school children had made an effigy of Guy Fawkes using sacks stuffed with what appeared to be hollow fibre and straw. It stood at about six feet tall and had marker pen 'X's for eyes. Its nose was a backwards 'L' and whoever had drawn the mouth had diplomatically opted for a straight line.

Over two hundred people had gathered to watch him burn. An ice cream van was parked off to one side, a shiny fire engine sat to another.

The bonfire was tall enough so that everyone would have a decent view of the burning.

“Actually, it's sort of sickening,” Sarah said.

“Sort of?” said Clare.

A government official made an announcement, but his loudspeaker wasn't working, so they could barely hear him. A ripple of clapping and cheering worked its way from the front of the crowd. They joined in half-heartedly.

At last, Clare was feeling in control again. She wouldn't have said that she was back in her element, but here she was, walking among people as though she hadn't seen the things she had seen or done the things that she had done. She continued to clap, empowered by her secrets.

She had never felt like she belonged in society, even before the Third. She didn't want to belong. Except now she'd met Simon and that was different.

When a little boy smiled up at her, she smiled back and felt a momentary schizophrenia. Her smile had been automatic, but did that make it real or something well-practised? Was anything about her real?

The boy took a swig from his can of fizzy drink and was then weaving between the bodies to get nearer to the front.

“Look,” Sarah said.

A local teen, supervised by a fireman, used a flaming torch to set light to the bonfire. Once done, the crowd gave him a cheer and then cheered again as two men used torches to get the blaze really going.

As Clare had, Sarah found herself watching the crowd more than the fire itself. The children shrieked with pleasure as flames stretched up and up and up and leapt and cracked and barked and grabbed the Guy by the ankles, twisting and roaring and pulling sticks apart to lick at his hollow fibre body. All the while, his grim mouth was set with determination.

“It's going to be okay,” Sarah thought bitterly and laughed. Clare put an arm around her then.

Sarah found that she didn't mind it.

“It is going to be okay,” she thought. “This time, it really is.”

The crowd rippled and rolled like an animal, retreating from the growing flames, until the three of them were no longer lost in the middle, but standing very near to the front. Sarah was glad of the warmth on her face. Despite a hot shower, this was the first time she had felt warmed since the intense cold of the Third. She reached out for Simon's hand and when he took it her warmth was complete.

Three firemen were now standing in front of their vehicle with their arms folded. Like Simon, they were unsmiling. The fire had taken on its own life now and would burn unassisted for a good time to come. It created and recreated itself, finding new sources of fuel and using them up, throwing smoke into the air and ash to the embers. The belly of the fire roared, orange and blue and red, white and green.

The Guy's head was a flame, his fiery crown spiralling up and up and exploding above him. Amber sparks leapt like grasshoppers, turning the grass black.

Unlike the firemen, Simon saw things in the flames that he reasoned could not possibly be there. He watched Firdy's arm reach up out of the embers, the gloved hand melting, ringed with fire, seeking a grip on the world. He saw the Third, a tidal wave of fury, crashing over her son, then drawing back, like fingernails digging great grooves into the world. He saw Naomi and Ian Moody and Jonathan, rolling in the ash among jaws and teeth and claws, turning over among smacking lips, tongues ...

A hand seized his arm.

Not Firdy this time.

One of the firemen.

Hauling him back.

Sarah holding him too.

Tugging at his sleeve.

Nine years old again. She'd always be nine years old to him.

“What were you doing?” she asked. “What were you looking at?”

Clare was also watching him intently.

He thought for a moment what to tell them and decided to tell them the truth, that he had imagined terrible things in the fire and that he had been afraid, but in the middle of it, as furious as the flames themselves, he had seen himself with the two of them, carving paths through the future, leaving the past behind.

End

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About the Author

Dean Clayton Edwards writes in the South of France with his wife and two daughters. For more books by Dean, including free publications, sign up for updates at <http://deancedwards.com>

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