

THIRTY

KRIS BROOKER

Copyright © 2017 by Kris Brooker

1

JONAS

I didn't ask for any of this. The Fates never intended me to have a choice. I was always theirs to manipulate and mould, to terrorise and tease. I've had a lifetime to try and understand, why? Of all the moments and decisions there is only one that stands out. A singularly weak and pathetic moment where I was unable to take control of my life. A split-second of indecision on a crossroad in life; where I hesitated and faltered. Where my life became fated and when a monster was born.

I can still see his face. Still smell the sweat on his body. I can hear the snuffles and snorts of the Devil as he slept.

Just do it, kill the pig, make him sleep forever. End this, Jonas. Finish it now, whilst he sleeps.

It was my father that I stared down on. The man who had gifted me life. Who had brought me up in that God-forsaken place.

Just do it.

I stood above the snoring dragon, blade in my hand. All I could see was red. Red, red, red, everything in the room had been splattered with red. So why didn't I do it? As my hand flexed and clawed at the hilt, my sweaty palms intent to strike. I couldn't do it. Even now I ask myself why? Why, why, why didn't act upon the urge? Why did I allow him to live? My life would have been reborn with that man's demise.

Why?

I've blamed my mother, the woman who slept in turmoil beside him. In which whose womb I flourished and grew; before she delivered me into the light. Cast me out into terror. Dear Mother, in all ways she was my world. My light. My one true-love. How could I have turned her world red?

No, I don't blame her, that's a lie. The truth of my life is not in doubt. I was a coward in that moment. A frightened little boy; a child imprisoned by the sins of his father. Forced to see the world through a demon's eyes. I was a minor, weened upon the terrible deeds that man encouraged me to share. I was driven by the fear he mustered. Aroused by the terror he purveyed.

I faced a choice that night, between good and evil. One small sin, and how many would have been spared. His life for mine. For all the others who were yet to be. I see it all now; how our lives are precariously balanced. Our souls weighed heavily by our deeds. Good and evil; the qualities by which we judge ourselves. But do either really exist?

Ask God, and he will tell you that they do, He has to, how else can He pass judgment? Why else does He exist? But ask the Creator if it was His will that gave rise to either, or both, and He will be forced to say no. For He is neither . . . He is God.

Life, *He* says, is just a vessel in which we ride the equitable tides of fate. "*Paddle harder, it's good for your soul.*" But if that's true, and God says that it is, then I have to reason, had my birth been in a different place, or my soul delivered at a different time, then I too would have drifted upon different tides.

By *His* logic I have to believe, and I do with all my heart, that I could have been someone else. That I could have lived a different life. My soul weighed heavy with light, and not been burdened by darkness. Hooked on a drip of shadows that bound me toward evil intent.

So yes, I blame *Him*, God! For all that I am. Because it was in that moment, *my moment*, that I understood I was my father's son. My abuser, my master, my father; all his cravings and desires, all passed on to me. Fate had decreed that I should be spawned by a monster, that I should act like a monster, that I would be a monster. And so it is a monster's life I've endured.

Jonas lowered his glasses and closed the journal on his lap.

Do I have company out here?

A rustling of leaves somewhere in the undergrowth amongst the many trees suggested he did. Something was moving in the darkness. There, again, he listened.

Not large enough to be human. So an animal, perhaps a raccoon foraging? Or just a cat patrolling its turf. How ironic, do I have a predator stalking me? High pitched shrieks and savage gnarls. Huh, a fight, how wonderful.

The two animals went at each other tooth and claw. Total rampage through the leaves and shrubs. A fight to the death, all over in a moment as one animal fled, and the other gave chase.

Go get him, finish the job. Have your moment!

The chase faded from earshot and silence returned. Just the murk of a dark night and black shadows of trees. Ferns dressed the nest Jonas had made; his place to sit and watch whilst the temperature dropped. The night closing more quickly than anticipated had brought with it a frost that had thickened on the ground beyond and left a creeping mist in the street below. Street lamps barely able to breach the gloom. This weather was better suited to the dead than the living.

Jonas removed his glasses and folded the temples closed, then put them carefully in a leather bound case. He lifted the night sight hung from his neck and pulled the strap tight about head. *Click*. The houses below came closer into view. *Click*. One home in particular between the nearest haze of the lamps. *Click*. A front door set with flat panels, the number seventy-two came fully into focus.

The last time he'd watched, and planned, Jonas' vigil had been warmer. His concealment more cosy on the inside and not sat amongst the damp foliage of the copse. The light had been more ample; the air scented with sweet treats. The sounds of children at play. They were a boisterous rabble, a delightful muse to ferment his blood and excite his senses. He could still see them if he closed his eyes.

Who doesn't like to watch children at play; it's such an indulgence. A sweet candy parade. A child's playtime, so full of excitement and fun, of energy and innocence, it fills the playground and makes us . . . makes me, feel alive.

She was down there, waiting. Welcoming. Fast asleep and dreaming of him, no doubt.

Alice!

The girl who always smiled. He wanted to go now.

So much innocence, so much love. I only have eyes for you, dear, sweet, Alice. Even your name fills me anticipation. You glow, radiate, call out to me; and I cannot deny. We chose each other, Alice . . . the girl with the golden hair.

The night was changing. Preparing itself for Jonas. Setting the scene for the work he needed to do. Jonas checked his watch. 19:31 The church bus would arrive soon. A heavenly place to gather all the children. A Christian fair filled with virgin-candy.

Every Wednesday the bus would travel the same route. The children would climb aboard, wave goodbye, and be transported to the hall to be sheltered and protected by God's representatives. Between the hours of six and seven forty-five they would play, and sing. Send rivers of spiritual energy to please their angry God. *Such a waste.*

The bus would return the children safe and close to their homes. One parent always waiting. A sensible precaution in a world filled with bad people.

Click.

The ocular unit turned the world below a Hob-Goblin green. No heat signatures below; no-one out on a night like this.

Click.

Only predators who sought prey.

Click.

Number seventy-two barely readable as the mist thickened. Jonas loosened the unit and lowered it back to his chest.

It must be tonight, Alice. I'm prepared. Ready. I'll come for you tonight.

Tonight was a good night, Alice a fine choice. Each child had to be chosen with care. Not a stone left unturned, nothing left to chance; the family's secret exposed.

He'd met the parents once, a few months previous. They were good parents, with fine character. Well-educated and from excellent stock. Pillars of their community, neither one had a criminal blemish to their name. A pity about their dark, dirty secret.

Not long now, Alice. Jonas is here. Jonas is coming to save you.

The houses below had all but disappeared in the vapour. Only two lamps visible now, the others obscured by the thickening haze. This was a perfect night. He could still see the house on the corner. Number seventy-two. Not yet surrendered fully to the fog.

20:01

I hear them. The purr of the bus engine, as punctual as ever. The driver should be applauded for his time keeping.

The yellow carriage rolled fully into view. Its bright headlamps pierced the smog with tunnels of light. *Toot-toot.* The driver heralded his arrival. It was a call to arms. A flash of adrenaline as the cab lit internally. His anticipation bolstered by the sounds of children as the bus doors hissed apart. Jonas raised himself to one knee. The door to number seventy-two opened to release the hallway's light. The mother stepped out and hurried to the kerbside.

How he wished it was his arms that reached out for Alice. His lips that kissed her rosy cheek in warm welcome.

Wild banter from the bus hushed as its door closed. The engine growled and the bus rolled away as the mother waved whilst lifting her child into her arms. How happy the two of them seemed; but Jonas knew the truth as they headed back to the warm glow and shelter of number seventy-two. A secure sanctuary for Alice, that would soon be put to the test.

You're such a child, Jonas. So filled with the glow of excitement. Huh, can you smell it? Oh my, Jonas, can you smell it?

It wasn't his imagination. The subtle breeze brought with it the sweet scent of dear Alice. His nasal trunk craved her faint perfume. The intoxication of her scent.

Tell them about the party, Alice. Tell them about the music, and the food. Tell them how happy the night has made you. Fill their hearts with happiness one last time.

Jonas was already walking the plan. Stepping through the house, every variable considered.

Drink your milk. Kiss your father goodnight. Go upstairs to your room. It's a pretty room, fit for a Princess. A Disney Princess. I wish all your toys could come, I do. But there's only room for you. So snuggle down, close your eyes, and let your slumber drift you away. When the house falls silent, Jonas will come for you.

John and Gayna Freeman were sticklers for routine. Of their three children, Alice was the oldest; she would be in bed by eight thirty. The hard working parents would retire by ten. In all the time that Jonas had watched the house their habits had never changed. No reason to assume tonight would be different. Jonas could feel his emotions rise, his nerves tingle, a host of chemicals were leaking into play. The time was almost upon them.

Alice would wash and change. It was Sunday, she would slip her young body below her Ariel nightdress. He could see the redheaded Mermaid glow as Alice read beneath the covers, lit by torch-light. Enjoying the large print, the simple words, the bold and colourful pictures. Her shelves were awash with all things Disney. But tiredness would close her eyes. Take her from a world under the sea. Send her tumbling from reality into the land of dreams.

Patience. Jonas closed his eyes. *Sleep well dear Alice, I'm here now.* He reached out through the damp leaves. *I can see you. Not long and I'll be able to touch your golden hair.*

In a few short hours Jonas knew he would be be stood closer, beside her bed.

4
JACK

‘Look at this place, it’s huge,’ Jack was honestly impressed.

‘Maybe you should take the kids out more often,’ said Jill.

Snipe? That was a snipe. Has she broken the truce already? Since when did cinemas become this extravagant?

There were twenty screens to choose from, an array of double doors that beckoned. The walls were a gallery of posters that promised to rock everyone’s world. Truth be told, Jack was glad he didn’t have to pick the movie, there were way too many to choose from.

He looked forlornly toward the foyer, the open arena awash with sounds. A dozen long queues filled with mums and children all baying for food. It resembled a refugee camp. Maybe he should have worn sunglasses; the light reflecting from all this glass, it was enough to make him squint.

‘Shall we join a queue?’

‘We’re already in one, Jack.’

Really? At least it was moving forward, slowly. And the kids looked excited. Ben, Kirsty, their friends; seven kids in all. It had been a while since they’d all been out together like this. Too long. Where had it all gone wrong?

Hey, look at that, they’re rebooting Aliens. All the movies on one night. I like the poster. How much for the poster?

‘No,’ said Jill, ‘you don’t need one.’

‘Need one?’

There’s the look. That’s a snipe by proxy.

‘Never crossed my mind,’ he lied

‘Yeah, course not.’

Jill had spoken. Jack would obey. He'd already experienced too much recollection lately anyway. Memories, they were dire tools that served to remind him of his age; forty-eight, hardly old, not these days.

He'd decided that on an undisclosed and spiteful day his brain had collected one memory too many, one more than it could handle, which in turn had bastardised the rest. Each flash of the past was now a constant reminder that where age was concerned, he was fucked.

'Can I help you, sir?' A girl's voice. Her obvious impatience brought him back to the lights, and the smell of hotdogs and popcorn.

Don't look at the prices Jack. He had to, couldn't help himself. 'You've got to be joking?' he said out loud. 'Ow!' Did Jill just elbow him in the ribs?

'It's worth every penny,' she added. 'We all are. Now who wants popcorn?' she called out.

No holding back as a half-dozen hungry kids put their hands in the air.

Do they think money grows on trees?

Kirsty was waving furiously, and it wasn't even her birthday treat.

Kirsty was five when Jack had first met Jill. She was ten now, and the sensible half of the twins. The adorable one too, and she knew it. He wasn't sure where, or when, she'd learnt to pout. He suspected that cable TV was responsible.

She had her mother's looks, the pinched nose and lightly freckled cheeks. Blue eyes that could slide into puppy mode on a whim. A look that neither of them could bare to say, 'no' to.

But today was about Ben. It was his birthday; the older sibling by half an hour. Thirty minutes that took them either side of a day. Today the kids could have all the popcorn they could eat. Why not? Jack's bank account could have kittens later. No reason for anyone to super-max their orders though.

'Make them all large, honey. It's a treat.'

Bitch. It's like she can read my mind.

'And no, you can't share mine.'

It never crossed my mind.

'Super-max the order, for everyone,' Jack added his best smile.

She was enjoying this. Ever since they'd met, Jill had been able to read Jack like a book. 'Keep smiling honey,' she said. 'Now would anyone like soda? You kids will need something to wash the bits out of your teeth.'

Yeah, and the credits off my plastic. More hands rose in the air. *Nice one Jill.*

‘That’s what I like to see. We’re all here to have fun, right? And who wants ice cream half-way through? Hands up for Jack to do the dairy dash.’

Seriously, all of you? What about your teeth?

‘Happy birthday, baby-boy.’ Jill gave Ben a big fat juicy unwelcome kiss in front of his friends. Not that he minded as much as he let on; even he seemed excited today.

Ben didn’t do the puppy dog; he’d perfected the hang-dog expression instead. He was creeping overweight and had stopped brushing his hair. Jill was pretty sure that Ben was avoiding soap too. They both hoped it was a phase. You can hope, right?

‘Make mine a regular,’ Ben said, and smiled at mum. There was a handsome, if somewhat spotty face below the unkempt mop above. ‘Save Jack a few bucks,’ he added. ‘Don’t want to leave him short for Wendy’s afterwards.’

Wendy’s?

‘Make them all regulars so we have some cash left to pay for their teeth,’ said Jack with a pained grin directed at Jill.

Yeah, he’d heard all the jokes as the order was topped off with an espresso. ‘And make sure you fill the cartons, Judy is it?’ He should have worn his glasses, the attendant’s name tags were too small.

She was a skinny kid, obviously no concessions for the staff. And by the look on her face she’d enacted this scenario a zillion times before; no sense of humour as the pop was shovelled out from a vast well of corn.

‘Thanks, Judy.’ Caffeine always helped. And Jack had promised himself a day without a frown, so he’d honour the promise. Hell, it was Ben’s day after all. A celebration of his birthday, all be it three weeks early owing to a school trip on the actual day. The Grand Canyon, lucky kid; he’d never been himself.

What the hell? Jack resolved to make this a good day. *You never know what’s around the corner.* He was pretty sure that it wasn’t a Lottery win. And hey, Jack hadn’t bitched with Jill, or vice versa. Not once since they’d woken up this morning. This was progress as cartons changed hands, and he passed Judy a hundred dollar bill.

When did it happen? He asked himself. *When did we run out of things to talk about? For crying out loud it’s only been six years.*

He could still see her face, that first time, sat across the table in the restaurant. Giuseppe’s, that was its name. Or was it? It was something Italian. Her hair was shorter then, not so dark. She wore a lot less makeup back then. He was interviewing Jill for the paper he still worked

for. Short stories on local authors. She'd had a novel published since then.

Jill had been keen, bubbly, got a bit drunk. They were in bed together within two hours of the meal. Five passionate and sweaty weeks later they got hitched. Crazy, right? Jill had just ended a ten year marriage to an asshole, and she'd married Jack on the re-bound. Probably frightened of bringing up two small kids alone, not that she'd ever admit it.

Not that Jack was squeaky clean. He'd never told her the real reason he'd left a big-city newspaper to become a hack for the local rag. He'd never hinted at the problems that still haunted him, that had sent him over the edge, and into treatment. She knew about the car crash, sure, but that wasn't the half of it.

'Sir . . . Sir, your change.'

'What? Oh right, thanks.'

Seriously? Ben Franklin just morphed into a handful of George Washingtons.

The lukewarm espresso was downed. A deep breath taken. Time to watch the movie. Jack's eyes darting about the seething crowd.

'Err, Judy. Did you see where my kids went?'

Twenty doors led to twenty screens, and Jack couldn't remember what film they'd come to see.

The buck-toothed kid who stood guard directed Jack to follow the procession ahead. 'Screen six, enjoy the film,' he said.

Jack heard the same words repeated over before the boy was out of earshot. Above the doors was a poster, "Snow White and the Huntsman," starring Kirsten Stewart, the love of Ben's young life. So that's where he'd seen the poster; a smaller version on Ben's bedroom wall. *Hey, Charlize Theron, she's the Wicked Witch. Maybe this won't be such a bad film after all.* He did wonder how many dwarfs were going to get their throats cut to feed this young audience's lust for blood and violence.

Seven kids and an adult, shouldn't be that hard to find in there. He should have waited for an usher and a torch. Holy shit, it's packed in here. Five bucks for a film really brings them in. Dark silhouettes and faceless heads moving everywhere. *They're in here somewhere . . .* 'Oh, I'm so sorry. That was my fault.' *Pay attention, Jack.*

'No, please,' a woman replied. 'It was entirely my fault,' she said. Her voice soft, apologetic, and hinting at an accent.

'No, no, my fault,' Jack replied. Too many people around him. But that smell; floral and vibrant. Jack's goosebumps were more than aroused. He looked up from his popcorn, now covering the floor. Where was she? In the doorway framed by the light outside. A woman smiled at him in a black dress. *That's her.* Shit, or was it grandma wearing the lycra pants who stood next to him. *Please be the dress.* Jack grinned at Grandma. 'Sorry, you want me to move?' He stood aside, more kids surrounding him, his eyes drawn back to the doorway. *Where is she?*

Jack gave the half empty carton to the nearest kid. He insisted. Then waded through the bodies to the doors, not sure why. It was a melee of youth circling around four double doors. Further down the long hall he

saw her, walking away. The woman in the black dress. Or was it a black hole? Its super-massive gravity reeling him to follow.

She was five eight, maybe nine, with dark shoulder-length hair. She was slim, and being coveted by the dress she wore, that stopped above her knees. It hugged every curve of her body on the way down. He couldn't help but stare, and didn't know why. He really shouldn't. But he did. At that moment the crowd in the foyer seemed to dissipate. The fractious burble of excitement faded to a whimsical hum. Jack's vision tunneled in on the dress and he gorged himself on her image, unsure as to why. It was disrespectful, a bit creepy. He needed to walk away. *Is that a small bell and ribbon tattooed around her left ankle?*

Jack didn't expect what happened next. The bright red stilettos she wore, stopped, and spun on their heels. Jack's eyes ascended unable to look away.

Gravity girl smiled at him. *Don't smile back you idiot.* Shit, he was old enough to be her dad. Late teens, no, older, maybe twenty-one, maybe? She gave no indication of being offended. On the contrary, her grey eyes lit up and her lips parted as if she'd been waiting for Jack to come home.

'Hey, are you coming in?' Words followed by a sharp tug on Jack's arm.

'What? Oh, Ben, yeah. Hey, two sec's, okay.'

Where'd she go?

Gravity Girl was gone. Replaced by a herd of overweight mums whose kids gnawed the carcasses of hot dogs and nachos. Their noise level rose sharply and Jack's ardour fizzled away.

'Jack?' It was Jill's turn to pull at her ex-husband's arm, encouraging movement back toward the cinema. 'Honey, the Dwarfs are waiting for you.'

'They are?'

'Jack, are you all right?'

He was being pulled. Not fair, Jack didn't want to look at adverts on a big screen.

Who the hell was that? What on Earth was I doing, stalking her? Jack backed away, went along with arm that urged him to follow. *Where did she go? Why do I care? Oh God, I can still smell her.*

'Can you smell something, Jill?' he asked.

'Eurgh, Jack's let one go and wants us to smell it,' shouted Ben.

'No, he hasn't, and that's disgusting,' said Kirsty. 'Mum, tell Ben to shut his cake-hole. And tell him to move over, I want to sit at this end.'

‘Both of you, behave yourselves,’ said Jill, ever the interventionist. ‘Kirsty, you and your friend move up. Ben, let Jack sit on the aisle. Ben, move. How else can Jack get ice-cream during the film. Come and sit with Mummy, down here at the other end.’

‘Awe, mum?’

Oh goody, I’m the other bookend. What ice-cream?

Adverts flashed up onto the big screen. The same ones Jack could have watched at home. The popcorn and coke brigade shuffled around in their seats.

Popcorn? He could see it all covering the carpet.

‘Jack, please, sit down,’ Jill’s voice. ‘Jack, are you listening to me. Jack?’

Seven kids, and not a sound. That was worth the entrance fee alone. What was it about exploding blood vessels that kids enjoyed watching so much? This wasn't a movie, it was a blood fest. And why had Jack assumed there would be Dwarf's?

He understood why Ben wanted to see an old movie, he had a crush on Kirsten Stewart. She was the *only* reason he'd agreed to spend time with the oldies for his birthday treat. Bless him, he looked happy enough perched on his seat, totally enthralled. All of them, even Jill, had succumbed to the silver screen. So why was Jack so restless? Why wasn't the dubious acting, or the gorgeous Charlise, enough to keep his attention. Jack's mind was clearly elsewhere.

'Just going to nip out and take a, you know what,' Jack whispered down the line.

'Aww Mum, tell Jack we all heard that. Eurgh, I think I'm gonna hurl.'

'Shh, Kirsty,' Ben insisted, 'Kirsten's talking.'

'Oh grow up you douchebag. She's a hag.'

'Mum, tell Kirsty to be quiet. And she called me a douchebag.'

'Seriously? Me taking a, you know, is more disturbing than the film?'

'Jack, the kids.'

'Jack, shh, Kirsten.'

'Seriously? Fine, let me know when Super-Barbie cuts out the Wicked Queen's heart. Take a still. Email it to me from your phone.'

'Shh.'

'Shh.'

'Shhhh.'

'Okay, going, quietly.'

'Mum, who's Barbie?' Asked Ben.

‘Don’t worry about it; Jack’s stuck in the eighties. Sounds like his prostate’s there too.’

‘Eugh, Mum, I don’t know what that is, but it sounds disgusting.’

‘It is, Ben. Now everyone watch the film. Jack won’t be long, will you. And he’ll bring ice-cream for everyone, won’t you.’

There was look. Even from six seats away and in the dark. He felt it.

‘Shh, mum, Kirsten’s talking.’

‘Sorry darling.’

Follow the lights on the floor, Jack. Find the big doors. Get outside before they nag you to death.

Jack didn’t really want the little boy’s room; he just wanted air. Maybe stick his head under a tap. Anything to erase the image that had lodged inside his head. That woman. Every hugged curve of that dress was stuck in his head. Well and truly jammed between the frontal lobe . . . and the pleasure zones.

Switch off, Jack. You’re being ridiculous.

Forget the ice-cream, he needed a cold shower.

The foyer had gained a weird kind of silence. Just a mother and three well behaved children waiting at a counter to be served.

Why is it so hot in here? Why am I sweating?

A tall unkempt looking man exited the toilet. Big hands being wiped down a Motorhead t-shirt.

I need some air. This is the male menopause, I know it. Should I start smoking again?

‘Hi,’ a voice from behind, ‘you’re not a fan of Snow White, no?’

Eight words strung beautifully together with a faint, but familiar accent. Jack’s blood went cold.

Oh crap, that’s her.

‘I understand,’ she said. ‘I don’t think Walt Disney would have approved of such a violent adaptation.’

‘He’d turn in his cryogenic grave.’

Jill said he opened his mouth before thinking. He’d just proved her right, and gone all menopausal again. Jack turned to see her, the woman stuck in his pleasure zone. He held out a sweaty hand.

‘Hi,’ Jack said. ‘Have we met before?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’ She took his hand. ‘My name is . . .’

‘Chalise,’ said Jack.

‘Yes, I’m pleased to meet you.’

How the hell did I know that?

She was five eight, nine at a pinch. There wasn't an ounce of fat or muscle where it shouldn't have been. And the dress. *Stop looking at the dress.* It clung to her body as if frightened to let go.

Stop staring Jack. 'Err, were you waiting for me?' *Nice opener, Jack. Accuse the woman of stalking you.*

'I'm so sorry, yes I was. Please, is there a place that we can go.'

'Go?' *You and me? No way, the kids are in there watching a movie. I can't go anywhere with you.* Was she French? Was that what he could hear embedded in the background of her speech? It certainly gave her tone something sexy; provocative even. *Don't you dare say yes, Jack. Don't you dare . . . You tell her to phone the office.*

'Sure,' he replied, 'got anywhere in mind?'

'Oh no, I don't want to spoil your time with the children.'

Children?

'We can meet, perhaps tomorrow? Say you will. Please.'

Christ, she makes begging sound naughty. 'Yeah, sure, tomorrow.' *What part of say no . . .* He took the piece of paper she held out.

'My number, you will call, yes? Jack, it's very important that we talk.'

'Yeah, sure, talk. Err, can I ask what about?'

'I have a story to tell you, Jack. It is a tale unlike anything you have ever heard. Please, say you will call. Say you will listen to what I have to tell.'

'Sure, err yeah, on this number, I can do that.'

Their fingers touched as he took the note. Her hand held onto his for like, ten minutes at least. The feeling he got wasn't menopausal, no way, it was something else that highjacked his nervous system. He'd just been tasered.

'Jack. Call me Chali.'

'Charlie?'

'Non, no, it is Chali. With the shh, like Shali.'

Sure, Shali? 'I'm Jack.' But he wasn't Jack. He was *Shhack*. Somehow her accent hung onto the front of his name. It sounded so much better when she said it. *Shhack . . .*

'Call me?' She said.

'Yeah, sure. You've got a story.'

Hawk-eyes tuned in to Chali's movement. All senses spell bound by the click of her heels on the marble floor. The glass entrance opened on auto, and she paused her gait. She looked back and gave Jack a smile. Those lips. He watched every step of those heels until she was gone, and still his gaze lingered.

Air, he needed air. *Breathe Jack, breathe.* A sudden rush of oxygen that was quickly followed by a wave of guilt. *The kids . . . Jill?* How long had he been out here? He needed to get back before they sent another search party.

7
00:59

The mist had thickened to a fog. The upstairs light at number seventy-two, the Freeman parent's bedroom, had flitted off several hours earlier.

01:00 - It was time.

Jonas left the cover of the ferns and slowly descended the hill. Several hundred yards of undulating ground covered in wet grass. Each stride through the Hob Goblin world that brought him closer to the house.

He understood the need for stealth, for patience, they were tools well practiced. There would be no secrets, no surprises, for he had planned his assault with care. Jonas crossed the road and opened the gate. Each step toward the house heightened the tension, fuelled his desire. Crossing the lawn left foot prints in the damp dew, it couldn't be helped as he stepped up onto the decking and peered in through the glass door through which he intended entry to the kitchen.

Jonas removed the night sight and placed it in a bag strapped from his shoulder, then slung the bag behind his back. *Deep breath Jonas. This isn't your first time.* But he hoped it would be his last. The nervous thrill that held him was undeniable

Both his hands felt for the straps that circled his head. The mask that slipped down to cover his face. Jonas' heart rate raced as the avatar stared back from the glass in the door. It was unexpected, a sudden reminder of the mask's previous owner. A moment to stare, and to recollect.

I remember you.

The mask had long been hung on a hook in a very secret place. Edward had called it, the Bunker. Even now, all these years later, he was still frightened by that place. What he'd witnessed. What that man, Edward, had done there . . . *father was a complicated man.*

He remembered the tale. How Edward had come upon the image that stared back now in reflection. *It was a poster, yes, at the State Mutual Assurance offices in Massachusetts.* Edward had been fascinated by the image. He'd known instantly what it meant. The year was nineteen sixty-six. How ironic that years later the picture would become so popular, and with the words 'have a nice day' written below. It was the only thing Father had left him. The mask, and his secret place, the Bunker.

Of course the yellow dye was faded now. The blackened features much harder to see. But even now 'Smiley' brought a grin to Jonas' lips. But now was hardly the time to think about, him.

Deep breath, Jonas.

The lock gave way to the turn of a key. He'd oiled the lock and the door's hinges on a previous visit; to be sure his entry was silent.

Five steps to cross the galley kitchen, one more to enter the lounge. Jonas crossed, then paused at the foot of the stairs. Alice would be the penultimate one. One step closer to ending the years of nothing; of living a lie. He was so close to achieving his dream. *Go now. Take her. Do what has to be done.* Jonas' foot took the first step, then froze as he heard sound drifting down through the stairwell.

Someone's awake? Jonas's heart rate doubled. Smiley listed to one side as he strained to hear. *Is someone awake up there?* His hand lifted and reached below his jacket. It drew a long hunting knife from a hidden sheaf strapped below. *Is that music?*

Jonas took one careful step at a time as he ascended toward the landing. *It was music.* Coming from the boy's room, first door on the right. Always left slightly ajar. The knife pressed against the comic poster pinned to the door and eased it slowly inward. Smiley peered around.

A small lamp on a shelf offered a shimmer of light. Besides it a square clock radio with big luminous numbers showing the time, playing a gentle melody of soft music. *Look at them, not a care as they sleep.* Two beds, each occupied by a young boy, their guard down, each deep in restful sleep. Smiley watched. Imagined what could have been, if the fates had been kinder to him.

The older brother, Jacob, had wrapped himself tightly within his quilt. The younger, Nathan, was hung hap hazard half over the mattress, his covers on the floor. *Sweet boys.* Both blonde, just like Alice. Jonas felt the hairs on his body rise, tickled proud by a sudden rush of chemicals flooding through his body. The urge to sit and watch these young, handsome boys, it was strong. But not tonight. They were not a part of the

greater plan. Best for them both to remain benign in their asleep. Jonas backed away. He eased the door closed and moved on.

The door to John and Gayna's room was open, the room inside was dark. It was nice that they slept facing one another, feeling each other's breath in their dreams.

Look at you, so ignorant in your slumber. Your progeny defenceless in their sleep. I wonder, will you know that something is wrong? Will you rouse from your bed aware of the danger? You should. But you won't . . . they never do. So what use are these people if they can't protect their young? Unaware until it is too late.

John Freeman snuffled and stretched out his arm. Jonas' goose bumps swelled, this time with alarm. The sharp blade lifted toward the sleeping man, its agent nimble and swift to the bedside. John Freeman mumbled again. He groaned, shuffled, and then settled as the blade lowered to a hair's width from the father's face. The same weapon that had refused to drop on Jonas' father would not decline to kill Peter Freeman, or his wife.

Smiley listed. Jonas' gaze drawn by the image of Gayna Freeman. There was something deeply familiar about the woman as she lay next to her husband. She was attractive; fair haired and pale skinned. Something about her hair as it clung to the pillow. The sound she made with each life giving breath. A curious resemblance, quite by chance. She reminded him of *Mummy*.

This wasn't right. She shouldn't be here. Jonas trailed the blade around the bedcovers. As a child he would sneak into Edward's bedroom and climb under the covers with his mother. *Mummy?* The resemblance was undeniable. *No, it's not her.* He reached for the cover. *Reach out, Jonas.*

He wanted to. Very much so. To touch her face and stroke her hair. Take a moment to snuggle down beside her. The male snorted again, sucked in and made a sound like a pig.

'Daddy?' Shush! For fuck's sake, keep your mouth shut. The thick blade rose toward the bed. *No, this isn't possible. The pig has gone . . .* Or had he? The man snuffled aloud. One sharp disgusting sound after another; followed by a chorus of rasps as if his dreams would stifle him. *No, not true. Daddy's gone.* So why then did Jonas' hand claw at the hilt of the knife. Why did the room turn red.

No, not now. The bed, it's not theirs. The pig, he is someone else.

The sounds of wind chimes outside. A familiar scent that floated in on a warm breeze. This wasn't right, the Freeman woman didn't wear Ju-

niper? That was Mummy. And Mummy was gone. Still, the resemblance .

..

Like Mummy, she was pale, her hair washed with Juniper. I can smell it, the Juniper, laced in the fabric of the pillow.

His hand stroked the cotton. He could see it all now. The bow fronted cabinet below the window where Daddy kept his guns. That big old dresser parked in the corner, its walnut drawers warped and unable to fully close. The cracked mirror where Mummy would sit and brush her hair. The essence of Juniper was everywhere.

It's all going red; so very red. Red, red, red.

More snuffles from the pig.

Listen to him, to the pig grunt.

The knife trailed back towards the Freeman man.

He's never going away. Never going to leave me be.

'Daddy?' He whispered.

Do it, Jonas. Do it.

'It's all so red.'

Do it, before he wakes.

'Yes, end it.'

Jonas reached out for the quilt.

Take it . . . take it away. Make holes in the pig and watch him bleed. Make it red, Jonas. Paint the room red with his entrails. Do it, Jonas. Do it, do it, do it!

The knife flashed violently in a downward arc.

No, it's not him. Not part of the plan. Back the fuck away. This man is not for you.

This was not the first time he'd got confused. Found it difficult to dissemble the images of the past from what presented in the here and now. Jonas' hand had begun to tremble.

Look around you, Jonas. See what's real.

It was floral paper on the bedroom walls, not the damp cracked plaster of a lifetime ago. A picture of birds in flight hung above the Freeman's bed, not the shotgun owned by his grandfather.

Jonas backed away, the knife held out still pointed at the bed. Five careful steps that took him back out into the hall. *Stay focused. It's Alice we've come for.* The couple in the bed were restful, save the deep throaty breaths of the man. *Alice.* Hot sweat clung to Jonas' body as his gloved hand eased the door shut.

Take a breath. Find the calm space. Smiley turned to look down the hall. *I'm not here for them. Find Alice.* Jonas felt the memories shed, the feelings drain. A moment later the red had slipped away. Smiley turned toward the last door. Alice's room.

Say her name, Jonas . . . 'Alice,' he whispered. *Can you feel her? 'Yes.'* His hand wrapped the door knob; turned and pushed the door slowly inward. Entering her room was like walking into sunshine.

Alice's bedroom, just as he remembered. Even better than before. The dear sweet child lay on her side in her bed; shrouded in a Mermaid covered quilt.

Bless her; she was purring. Fast asleep and lost in a land of lullabies. The Princess torch she'd read by still switched on and fallen to the fluffy rug beside her bed.

What's the book you've been reading? He picked it up. *My Little Mermaid, a fine choice. I've read it many times.*

Jonas placed the book back on the dresser. Picked up the torch and switched it off. This was always the hardest part. Excitement fused with trepidation, and a yearning. *Take her.* It was the same old doubts nipping and bitching at him as if this were his first time. It wasn't. There had been many before. *What if she opens her eyes?* There could be no more distractions. *Do it now.*

Jonas couldn't bear the thought of Alice being frightened. He pulled a plastic bag from inside his jacket.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered. 'It has to be this way.'

The bag moved to cover Alice's face.

Jonas opened the zip lock, careful to keep the cloth within at arms length. He raised it gently toward Alice's open mouth.

'Take a deep breath, sweet child.'

Do it quickly. Do it . . . No! Alice opened her eyes. *Fuck.* She was looking straight up at him. *Don't let her scream.* The cloth covered the child's lips before she could cry out.

'Forgive me,' he begged.

Alice tore at the cloth, her screams muffled. Her tiny frame fought against his hands. '*Shhhh*, go to sleep. Don't be frightened,' he urged.

Her big blue eyes screamed in silent terror, and insisted Jonas was wrong. She was terrified.

Dear sweet Alice, her face all red and filled with panic. Her eyes streamed with tears, her body flapping and distraught. She fought him, desperate to break free.

'Stop, you mustn't struggle.'

Stop her Jonas. Hold her down.

She kicked, squirmed, tried to pull away. She was strong for a child so small. But the effort was futile and the drug took hold.

'Shush, it's all right, don't fight me. I promise there'll be no pain. *Shhhh*, that's better. Calm yourself, go to sleep. *Shhhh*.'

The drug filled her delicate lungs; the harder she fought to breathe the deeper it was inhaled. Rampant chemicals that raced through Alice's veins suppressed her will to fight. Slowly, inevitably, the darkness swept across her eyes.

Shh, shut them tight and sleep, Alice. Make happy dreams with little Mermaids. 'Under the sea,' he sang, 'under the sea. Darling it's better, down where it's wetter. Take it from me . . . *shhhh*.' Her hands slipped from his. It was over. Alice lay still.

Smiley lowered; listened. The child's breathing was faint. *Fuck, what a mess.* Waking the child was unforgivable. It was unproductive. Smiley turned toward the open door, a sudden realisation. A wave of tingling panic. Had anyone heard? A hundred thousand nerves fired electrical missiles to blanket-bomb his body.

For fuck's sake, this shouldn't have happened. Not good, Jonas. Not good. You're better than this. He looked at his hands. *Fuck, I'm shaking.*

'Fuck.'

Why did she have to wake up?

Jonas checked the landing. Smiley stared at the hall. Had the Freemans heard the sounds? Had they become aware of his presence? Any moment now the father could run down the hall. It could turn into a bloodbath.

Nothing, the house remained calm. Just the faint sound of music from the boys' radio. Jonas realised he'd stopped breathing.

He placed the cloth back inside the bag, certain now that the house continued its slumber. What a rush. What a ride. The adrenaline drained from his body, Smiley turned back toward Alice.

He lifted the child from her bed. How wonderful to touch her for the first time. Sure, he'd held her hand. He'd even dared to brush her hair. But that was all in his head. All part of the fantasy. This was reality, and she felt, soft, warm, just as he'd imagined.

He breathed in the faint fragrance from her clothes. Bless her; she was wearing the nightgown with the yellow roses. The one he'd chosen to pack for her. Was it fate?

Jonas pulled Alice's limp frame up close to his chest. The faint breath from her lips warm on his neck. Her heart rhythm was strong but slow.

Be careful Jonas, Alice is delicate.

'I've got her.'

He held her as if she was woven from glass.

This little girl was perfect; beyond reproach. She was a flawless gem. Just like all the others.

Jack threw the towel onto the bed, drip drying would be quicker. If the fluffy projectile had an American Indian name it would be 'Towel that doesn't dry.' And really, Pineapple Fizz? Everyone else just bought towels that were yellow. No, nobody brought towels that were yellow.

Hey Sweetie.

Jill didn't reciprocate his smile.

Staying at the ex's wouldn't be appropriate for most divorcees, but Jack and Jill had an understanding. They were still friends, and sometimes there were 'benefits' they both enjoyed. It wasn't anything exclusive, not even regular. The kids didn't seem to mind him staying over.

'Would it be too much trouble to change in the bathroom?' Asked Jill. 'To dry yourself without making a ring on my carpet.'

Your carpet?

'And you're not the only one who needs to use the bathroom. I'm going to be late now.'

For crying out loud he'd only been in the shower for two minutes. No, not this morning, he wasn't going to do that dance. She could carry on pursing her lipstick at the mirror, and not at Jack.

There was a time when 'Man Walks Naked in Steam' would have been irresistible. She'd have jumped him the moment he'd left the bathroom. Now she just looked at him like he was in the way. Once the passion was doused he felt like a lodger in his own house. How come it was, that *he'd* moved out. That *he* had the crappy apartment whilst Jill kept the house. The sudden sound of two kids squabbling downstairs answered his question.

That was the third dress she'd tried on. A sigh each time she passed him, to let Jack know he was in the way. Last night was good, wasn't it?

She'd climaxed twice, he was sure of it. So why such a feisty mood? Predictably followed by being petty.

Jack sighed too. When did things change? When did Jack become out of place? He only had to look at the room. Look how her half of the Dreamy Daffodil bedcover sported a precision fold, military style. Jack's was, well, slept in, normal. The female side of the pastel palace was immaculate; she waited for Jack to leave the bathroom before she'd swing into action. Half dressed, one sigh after the another, full on tidy up after Jack mode.

'I'm going to be late,' she scolded him.

Two minutes, I was in there two minutes.

'This is why I use the bathroom first. You're not the only one who has to get to work.' She grabbed her hair brush from inside the bathroom.

Okay, maybe I was a tad more than two minutes.

'Oh, and Jack darling.'

'Hmm?'

'Why don't you spit it out?'

'Spit?'

'Whatever it is that's been bugging you since last night.'

The brush stroked languidly through her auburn hair. Which he probably should have mentioned looked full bodied and shiny this morning.

'You've hardly said a word since we got back.' She turned and stared. 'Out with it, what's wrong?'

'Nothing, everything's fine.' Best if he didn't mention the adorably hot young woman that still occupied his head space. *Oh God, she knows. I'm a bad man. I was thinking of, her, last night, when Jill was . . .* 'Your hair looks really lovely,' he said.

'Just get dressed, and don't avoid the question.'

'I'm fine, honest, great even. Are you wearing that suit today?'

'Yes, why? Is there something wrong with it?'

'No, it's great. Just been a while since I've seen you wear it.' *Sorry I asked.* 'It looks, nice.'

'You still haven't answered my question.'

His jeans were there, on the floor. Socks too. How quick could he get dressed.

'Hey, did the kids enjoy the film?'

Uh-oh, why is she giving me, the look? He used to find it adorable; the way she announced her imminent displeasure. Hands planted on hips, head turned and lowered, with those, I want to swing for you eyes. *Uh-oh, here it comes. Incoming!*

Jill sighed.

‘You were there, Jack. We all went together, remember? What the hell is wrong with you? Scratch that, stupid question, what isn’t wrong with you these days? Is there something you’re not telling me, Jack?’ She stopped brushing. ‘Jack, you are all right?’

‘Have you seen my socks?’

‘Jack, what’s going on?’

He had to lie, couldn’t tell her. Well, he might have if Jill wasn’t looking at him like that. He just couldn’t get that woman, Chali, out of his head. Should he mention how hot she was? No, not a good idea.

Chali had been in his head space whilst he’d slept. She’d been rubbing him down with the sponge whilst he showered. He could still recall the highlights of his steamy dream. Chali, hot and dirty, and there was something about warm sponges, and a Mexican hat. It had all faded fast.

‘Jack?’ Jill snapped her fingers several times. ‘Earth calling, Jack.’

‘Hmm?’

‘You’re doing it again.’ Snap, snap. She seemed to be practicing all of her more loveable quirks this morning. ‘Over here, Jack?’

‘Sorry. Hey, how about *I* drive the kids to school this morning?’ *That should get her off my back.*

‘It’s Tuesday, Jack. It *is* your day to do the school run. Oh no, Jack, you haven’t. Shit, have you stopped taking your pills again? You promised me last time you wouldn’t do it again. Do you remember last time, Jack?’

How could I forget darling, you’re always here to remind me.

He opened the rucksack that he took everywhere and pulled out a plastic bottle sandwiched between his glasses and a folder. ‘Here, look.’ He flipped the top up and tipped. A little blue pill dropped onto his palm. ‘Pill, tongue, gone.’

Some years ago he’d been diagnosed with a rare form of Dysternios . . . is. Or was it Dystrodoo-doo? Something he was damn sure that grown ups caught from teenagers. The doctors had said it could be a delayed reaction from the accident. That he’d experienced a mild dysfunction between his brain and mouth coordination. Jill had put it more tactfully. ‘Taking a shit through your mouth before your brain can flush.’ That did kinda sum it up sometimes. The pills helped, big time, and Jill insisted that he took them. But they made him feel crappy.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘Just checking. Look, Jack,’ His name was followed by a love-sigh. Never a good sign. ‘We need to talk, properly, like adults.’ A big brush dabbed powder onto her cheeks. ‘I’ve been doing a lot of

thinking lately. I've got a busy week of research ahead, but maybe we can talk, on Saturday? Both the kids are on sleepovers. We could go for a meal, a bottle of wine. Jack, Jack, are you listening to me? Dear God lots of wine before, during, and after. Jack!' Snap, snap.

'Sure,' *Stop clicking your fingers at me.* 'It's important. Saturday. I'll clear my diary.'

'It might help if you actually used the ones I buy you.' Gloss was dabbed, lips were puckered. It was a talent most wives have. Scold husband whilst applying makeup. Look fucking awesome when done. She tied her hair back and took one last look in the mirror. 'I'll see you tonight, yeah? Kiss, kiss.'

'Later,' Jack replied puckering his own lips. Then he spat something blue out onto the pillow on Jill's side of the bed.

‘Hey, move it.’ The driver’s door window was going down, Jack’s head leaning out. *Blart, Blart*. Excessive use of the horn followed.

‘Jack, you shouldn’t use your horn outside of school. It’s against the rules.’

‘Kirsty, if the retard in front would get out of the way, I wouldn’t have to.’

‘Jack, Mum says that’s a politically incorrect label to use.’

‘Kirsty, you’re quite right.’ *Blart, blart*. ‘Hey moron, get a move on, we have to park. Oh, finally. Hey, you guys ready to evac or what?’

‘Jack, can you carry my bag in for me,’ asked Ben.

‘Can I what?’

‘I’ll tell Mum you called Mrs Rheinman a retard.’

‘And a moron,’ Kirsty chipped in.

‘Mrs who? Oh, the old girl in front.’

‘She drops Gilly off before parking round back,’ said Ben.

‘Round back?’ *Shit*. ‘Is Mrs Rheinhardt a teacher?’

‘It’s Mrs *Rheinman*, and yes, she teaches history. Kirsty heard you say it. Tell him you heard it, Kirsty.’

‘Don’t worry; I recorded it all on my phone.’

She had as well. The recording was already being played back. The four letter words, the sarcasm, all recorded for posterity on Kirsty’s cell. Absolute proof and no denying it; he’d been busted by a smart phone and its ten year old owner.

‘I’m joking,’ she added. ‘Mrs Rheinman’s old and deaf, she probably didn’t even hear you.’

‘But I heard you, *Jack*.’

‘Yeah well, *Ben*. This isn’t a taxi, so out, both of you. And carry your own bag.’

‘Mum says you are a taxi. That’s what grown-ups are for.’ Ben held his hand out. ‘Mum said to tax you for five bucks, your turn to pay for the canteen. Mum said so.’

Did she? ‘Five bucks?’ Really, for a school meal? ‘Why didn’t you bring your lunch-box?’

‘Mum said she was running late because of you, and that you’d treat us.’

‘Oh did she?’ He looked at Kirsty, who nodded. ‘Really, five bucks? Is that each?’

The bills he offered were plucked away. Ben was out the rear door and running to join his friends. Kirsty slid across the back seat.

‘Jack, are you all right? You seem stressed lately.’

‘Me? Yeah, maybe. It’s just work stuff. Long days and late nights. And I guess I miss you guys, kinda, just a bit.’

‘You’d better, or else. You know, you could back together with Mum.’

‘Your mum and I are friends, Kirst. It’s better that way, trust me. Go on, beat it. You don’t want to be late for school.’

She threw her arms around Jack and hugged him.

‘I love you, Jack. And Mum does too, I know she does.’ She gave Jack a big sucky kiss on his cheek. Then bailed. ‘Hey douchebag, wait up.’

‘I love you too,’ Jack said. But she didn’t hear. Kirsty was running across the wide grass verge between the road and the school steps.

She was right, He was tired. Not taking his pills did that, it was a side effect. Use them, or lose them. That argument was getting old. He was fine, really. No, better than fine. *Fuck them*. Who said he needed pharmaceuticals anyway. *Fucking doctors, what do they know?* If he stayed calm he’d be in control. Damn it, he was calm. It had been over a week now and he was absolutely fine.

Besides, there were more important issues at hand. Like that woman from last night. She’d made quite an impression. So much so he couldn’t get her out of his head. And it was really starting to piss him off.

‘Not Charlie, it’s *Shali*.’

What the fuck, had she cursed him or something?

Chali, Chali.

Had she sprinkled something on his popcorn?

Chali, Chali, Chali.

A sharp tap, tap, tap on his window.

‘Mr Lottman?’

Oh crap, parking control. Jack lowered the glass again. She was old, dressed in luminous green, obviously spoiling for a fight. 'Hi Mrs Chali. Sorry, I was just leaving. But really nice to see you.'

'It's Ms Prentice, dear. Pr,en,tice. And you know you can't stop for more than thirty-seconds.'

Prentice, that's what I said. Don't smile at me like that, you'll frighten the kids.

'Really, has it been thirty-seconds already?' A car horn blared out from behind. 'They're not supposed to beep horns,' Jack said. 'It's against school rules.' The horn sounded again, more impatiently. 'Excuse me Ms Prentice. Hey A-hole, quit with the horn before I . . .'

The horn blasted long and harsh, a female voice ranted. Jack heard the words asshole, exhaust, and suppository. He didn't need the rest of the sentence. A queue of cars had formed in the rear-view. Another horn blared.

'Some people are so impatient,' he said, and added his best smile.

'Mr Lottman, I'm writing you up for a ticket.'

'What? Why?' *She is too.* Pen and pad were already in use. 'Seriously?' he turned the wheel and hit the gas.

'I'll post it to you, Mr Lottman?' The last words Jack heard as his Honda pulled out into the road.

A mile or so from school Jack pulled the car into a lay-by.

Chali. I called Ms Prentice, Chali?

The name was like the last tune he'd heard before leaving the car, and couldn't stop humming.

Chali.

The way she turned and looked at him last night.

Chali, Chali.

Her smile. And that dress. *Fuck, my head.* A bad one. He hadn't had a headache like this for years. Chali, Chali . . . 'Enough,' he barked. *She's a woman, Jack. You've seen one before.* He was staring at the piece of paper; the phone number she'd written down and put in his hand. *Just call her, Jack. It might lead to a good story.*

'No, and stop talking to yourself. She's trouble, big trouble, I can feel it.' *Do not pick up the phone.*

Last night he'd been bushwhacked, he was damn sure of that.

'Jack, anyone who follows you to the movies; they're a stalker.'

He was doing it again, having a conversation with himself. But isn't that normal? Especially in the car. Maybe not so loud. Jack reached for his rucksack, the water in the side. He unzipped the pocket at the front

and plucked out the same small plastic bottle he'd shown Jill. Maybe he should take his pills. *Shit, my head.* Might stop the pain.

No, who knew what long term damage they'd do. The time had come to stop, to take control. Sort himself out without pharmaceutical help. What happened, happened and a long time ago. Jack dropped the pills back in the pocket and took a hard swallow from the water in the bottle.

'Phone her and find out what she wants.' What harm could it do? Besides, he *was* curious. "A story," she'd said. Like nothing he'd ever heard before. *Unlikely.* Jack had been around the block a few times. He took his phone from his pocket.

On the other hand, she did stalk me. Don't be stupid, Jack. She's hot and you're not.

He had that same image flashing up in his minds-eye. That dress. And the way she said his name. 'Shhack . . .'

'Think of Jill. Think of nuns, and gooseberry pie.'

Another thought stung him as he dialled the numbers from the the paper.

Does this woman know who I am?

The conversation gained a more serious edge.

No, not possible; I've left that life behind.

Wichita, Kansas, it was the most obscure destination he could find on the map. Not even Jill knew who Jack really was. Not that he was a spy or anything. A sharp pain dug into Jack's head as he refused to remember. Souvenirs from the past best left where they were.

He'd thought about telling Jill. About explaining everything before they'd got married. Not the sort of thing you brought up on a first-date. Nor any of the others, apparently.

Jack opened the car door and swung his legs out in an effort to placate a sudden feeling of nausea. He didn't want to remember. Nor did he want to forget. The memories were like tumble-weed when they got going. Graphic, and in vivid Technicolor. Every synapse eager to fry itself on the past. All aboard the Big Dipper as images of doctors and hospitals spun around his head.

I should have told Jill. I should have; but I didn't. There should never be secrets between a husband and his wife. He felt again for the pills. Took them in his fingers. *Shit, all this because a woman called me Shhaak?*

Dial, don't dial. Why did he have a growing sense of unease? And the sense that calling this number would make his head stop hurting? He knew damn well that if he was taking his pills this conversation wouldn't be happening.

For crying out loud, dial the fucking number.

The bottom line was Jack was a journalist. He'd always been a journalist. It was in his blood.

Jack dabbed in the last three numbers, and pressed dial. Somewhere out there another phone began to ring.

12
CHALISE

Chali. Jack could hear her name, louder in his head now between each ring. *Chali . . .* The ringing stopped, *her* voice answered.

‘Hi Jack. (Shhak) I wasn’t sure you’d call.’

Her voice was soft, it sounded relieved.

‘Jack, are you there?’

French. I think she’s French.

The way her voice hung onto the words. How the sentences tended to end in a whisper. She definitely wasn’t American.

‘Can you hear me, Jack? Please say you can hear me.’

‘Err, yeah. Sorry, bad line,’ he lied. ‘You said you had a story.’

‘Oui, yes. I’m so glad you called. Someone must know, Jack. Someone must listen. Can we meet?’

Meet?

‘Sure,’ he’d need a cold shower first. ‘I can be in my office in about . . .’

‘Non, please, not there. Do you know Starbucks on Fourth? Meet me there, thirty minutes. Jack, please come.’

‘Sure, I . . .’

She’d hung up.

‘Starbucks, thirty minutes, nice chat.’

It was done. Meet mysterious woman in coffee house. Drink caffeine and listen to story. How much trouble could he get in? A whoop whoop to his rear was followed by a brief flash of blue lights. Had Ms Whatsher-name called for reinforcements? Jack waved at the police officer.

‘I’m moving,’ he mouthed, and gave a thumbs up.

The Honda’s indicator winked, and for the second time the rear wheels screeched the little car away.

Morning traffic was slow. Parking was quicker. The sign above him read 'Welcome to Starbucks' as he entered.

It was busy this morning, a cross section of customers for their early morning caffeine fix. Four young faces behind the bar, each smiled in turn as he approached the counter.

Is she here? Jack scanned the coffee-shop

There, by the window, staring through it at the people who walked past on the other side. She looked different. Every bit as attractive, but in an alternate way. The young vibrant woman he'd met last night, so stunning in her tight dark dress, sat in jeans and army boots, her torso covered by a chequered jacket, its sleeves too long and rolled back beyond her wrists.

Jack felt himself drawn to her again, but not by the same hormones that had craved his attention the first time they'd met. This woman looked sad, vulnerable. Her long soft mane no longer hung free, now bound and tied by what looked like a purple shoe-lace.

'Hi, can I help you?' a voice from behind. The girl at the counter seemed expectant.

'No, thanks,' he replied. There were two takeaway coffees on Chali's table. 'We're sorted,' he said.

She hadn't noticed him, not yet. He wasn't sure why he stood and stared. Her slender fingers held that cup as if it were a wounded bird in her hands. A broken heart reflected by the light in her eyes. *Is she talking to herself?* Barely noticeable as she stared at the people passing by outside. It could have been another girl sat there, but it wasn't. She was every bit as attractive as last night. Less by design, more nature.

Jack wanted to walk up to Chali and throw his arms around her. He had that tingly, pitter-patter feeling, now gnawing ferociously at his stomach. *Stop staring.* But who wouldn't? She was lovely. Everything about her was fresh, her lips narrow and painted. The woman's skin lightly tanned, a gift from forebears who'd lived in a Mediterranean sun. *For crying out loud, Jack, get a grip.* Feelings like this weren't normal. He'd only met her last night. It was embarrassing. *I'm old enough to be her dad.*

This was a bad idea, he should probably leave. Such heightened emotions, they made him feel ill. What was it she found so interesting on the other side of that pane of glass? *This is a bad idea, leave.*

Too late as Chali's eyes lifted to greet his. Affection that launched a smile of welcome.

Chali waved him over.

'Sorry,' he said, 'traffic's manic at this time. Hmm, coffee smells good. Is one of those for me?'

'I ordered for you,' she said. 'A skinny latte with an extra shot.'

'Yeah, thanks.' *How did you?* Three hundred variations of coffee at the counter. *Lucky guess?*

'I'm so glad you came. You must have thought me very forward last night.'

'No, not at all,' he lied. 'It's not unusual to get approached out of hours.' *In fact you're the first.* 'You mind if I take notes?' He took a pen and pad from his jacket. *At least try to look professional.* Inside he was a kid, all excited and ready to play. 'Can I ask, what were you looking at a moment ago? Through the window?'

'Oh, just the people. So many of them. They all share the same space, but they never interact. Isn't that odd? I'm sorry, I don't get out much.'

'Neither do they, obviously.' That was the second person to stare at Jack through the glass?

She took off her jacket, below was a tight blue jumper; its collar hugging warmly at her slender neck. Two silver earrings with tiny charms dangled from each ear. He liked that she didn't wear much make-up. And she seemed happier now that he'd joined her. The sadness had fled from her eyes, they seemed content to linger on his, then somehow shy away.

Jack had never met anyone with grey eyes. Not blue, bluish, or a shade of green with a tint. They were grey, like autumn clouds. The kind that gather to precede a storm.

'I have something to show you,' she said lifting a plastic bag from the seat beside her, placing it on the table. 'Did you enjoy the film?'

'Film? Oh, film. Not really. I've always had a deep mistrust of short hairy men wielding axes.'

There, that smile. It breached her lips and then withdrew as if embarrassed with a turn of her head. I have that fear also.' She bit her lip as she grinned. 'But there are some things that frighten me more.'

'Does it involve ten year olds who are smarter than me?' He asked. 'No, sorry, never mind.' *Stop staring.* Jack felt like this was his first assignment. Or was it a first date? It was neither. *What's in the bag?* 'Err, you said you had a story?'

'Oui, yes.'

Ah, definitely French. Or maybe Canadian? ‘Good, okay, start at the beginning.’ *With where they made you?* ‘What’s this all about?’

‘It’s about a man, Jack. Non, not a man, a monster. A devil who has abducted and murdered children for over forty years.’

Jack looked up from his pad.

‘Forty years? You want to have a chat, about a serial killer?’

‘Oui, yes. Jack, you have to help me stop him.’

‘A serial killer?’

‘Yes, Jack. I want to tell you about a man who has been murdering children for many years. I need your help to stop him.’

‘Stop him?’

‘Yes.’

Jack’s turn to smile now. *Is this a wind up?*

‘Chali, I’m a reporter for a local newspaper; I’m not a private investigator.’

‘Please, Jack, I have nowhere else to turn.’

‘Chali, if you have information about a serial killer, you need to go to the police.’

‘I cannot,’ she said.

‘Why not?’

‘They would not listen.’

Jack closed his pad. Placed both it and his pen on the table. *Okay, I’ll bite.* ‘Why won’t the police listen to you?’

‘Because the man that is doing these monstrous deeds . . . he is dead.’

‘Dead?’ In went Jack’s deepest breath of the day. *Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks into mine.* It was Jack’s favourite film. *Shit, she’s a whack job.*

‘You don’t believe me, I understand. I do. But I can prove that everything I’ll tell you is true. Please, just listen to me. Jack, I beg you.’

No, it wasn’t working, the *Shhack* thing. The allure of the girl he’d met last night must have skipped out back, just as Jack intended to do. He reached for his pen and pad. Chali grabbed his hand.

‘Jack, listen to me. What I have to tell you is the truth. You’re the only person I can trust. I beg you, please, help me.’

Uh-oh, tingly arm. And not just his arm. *Do not encourage this. Get up and walk away. Do not encourage her, Jack!* The problem was, she clearly believed in everything she was saying. Maybe he should listen. It wouldn't hurt to hear what she had to say. *Jack, you're going to regret this.*

'Start at the beginning,' he said.

Chali opened the plastic bag.

Please don't have a gun in there.

Paper, it was just folded papers. Chali spread them out onto the table.

'These are from his diary, Jack. I have more, but not here. You must read them.' She slid the mess of papers over. 'Please Jack, just read them.'

It was difficult to say no, she looked so desperate. It wouldn't hurt to have a quick look. *Just a quick look then.* He fingered the pages around between the cups. Five pages in all, the paper old, the writing faint but readable. Jack lifted his gaze to Chali, it was her turn to stare. He looked down and began to read.

Father said I was sinful. That I was spawned by the Devil, and not by his seed. He told me often it was why I tempted him. Why he came to my bedroom and gave me his love. But I know now that lied. Unlike him, I understand what I am. A reminder of how weak a man he really was.

Daddy told me often. "To prove a man has power in this world he must hammer his will upon others." That was another lie.

I believe my father subjected those women to the same fear and pain that consumed his own mind. It was his weakness, and not his strength that put a knife in his hand. That drew a sharp blade across innocent flesh. I've watched him do it many times. God help me, I was present. Forgive me Father for I have sinned. I held their hands as the blade made so many cuts.

'What is this? Where did you get these?'

The paper and ink seemed genuine as he offered the page up to the light. And why was the woman outside staring? Fat, red-haired, wearing a long coat, caught peering through the glass at them. Huh, and Kirsty said that *he* needed a shave. Jack picked up a second page from the table. Was it possible that she wrote these herself?

I had nothing but hate and contempt for the contents of that box as it was lowered into the ground. As the soil was shovelled down to fill his grave. By then the damage had been done. I knew well that my father's seed ran wild and unchecked within me. I recognised the violence, the arrogance, and the

self obsession. And I was ready to prove that I was every bit as clever, meticulous, and cunning, as he ever was. I had long-since resolved to love my victims with the same infinite passion that he had given to his. That he had lavished upon me.

‘Are these for real?’ Jack asked.

‘Yes, read them. There are many more.’

I never believed my mother when she said she loved him. On the contrary, I know in my heart that she hated him more than I, and for good reason.

When a husband beats and rapes his wife, fear and guilt become the rock below which she hides. It becomes a sharp-barbed bond that neither party will dare to break. Despite the violence she never spoke of it aloud.

Even now I feel my hand shake as I write the truth. About her, my mother. About me, his son. What kind of love flows from a father to his son that should only be shared with his wife?

When they pulled Edward from that river, I prayed that the water would wash us all of his sins. When I watched that box lower into the ground I already knew that wish could never come true.

Last night I took my first steps to a better future; it was, terrifying, but exhilarating too. I know for sure now that I can make my own way in this world. I have realised that like childhood, the past is forever behind me. I understand now that that I never had a choice. There was only ever one direction. I proved beyond any reasonable doubt last night, that I am truly my father’s son.

And what of my father now? Sometimes I see him, and if I listen intently, I can hear his voice. He is gentler now, more distant to me, he only speaks in whispers. But I believe that he has finally found pride in his offspring. I believe that returning home has saved my life. Finding my father’s secret place has offered me redemption. What my father began, I have now pledged myself to finish. Innocent blood is on my hands. I have made my first cut. I have given myself to the Thirty.

‘Thirty? What does *Thirty* mean?’

‘Evil,’ said Chali. ‘It means evil has been reborn.’

Evil is reborn, of course it does.

‘And you say you have more of these?’

‘Yes.’

They are kind of interesting, and they look authentic. Old, at least.

Jack read the remaining pages. They left him with a deep sense of foreboding. His instincts told him they were real.

‘Where did you get them?’ No response. ‘Can I see the rest?’ She nodded her head.

‘Can I see them now?’

‘Yes, of course. I only have pages, not the complete journal. But there are more. And I have other proof. Help me, Jack. You and I, we can stop this man. We can end his terror.’

‘Look, maybe there’s something in this, maybe not. Give me a minute will you.’ Jack’s feet hit the aisle, he headed toward the counter.

Is she crazy? Are those pages for real?

A young slip of a girl welcomed him. Her name tag read, Jessie.

‘Hi, two skinny cappuccinos to go,’ he said, ‘make them both wet.’

‘Yes sir, what size would you like them?’

‘Size?’

‘Tall, grande, vente or trente?’

‘Err, grande is fine. Take them to the table by the window. See the girl in the blue sweater.’ He wiggled his fingers toward the far window.

‘You did say two, sir?’

‘Yeah. You got a little-boy’s room?’

She pointed towards a brown door.

‘Up the stairs and turn right. Straight ahead. That’ll be eight dollars twenty.’

‘Seriously?’ *Since when does coffee cost nearly four bucks?* He gave her a twenty. ‘Leave the change with the lady.’

‘Lady, sir?’

‘By the window. Blue sweater.’ *Do you have to be death to work in these places?*

It was last piece of cake syndrome. Jack felt he couldn’t say no. He shook, zipped, and turned on the tap. Found himself staring into a mirror with a long crack through its centre.

What are you doing, Jack? Even if she’s for real, it’s a job for the cops. Let it go.

But what if it *was* true? What if there was some psycho out there on a killing spree? That would be a story worth looking into. Besides, it was his civic duty. He’d sleep better at night knowing that he’d checked it out.

No, this has to be bullshit. The hand-drier whirred and hot air burned at his fingers. *Don’t do it Jack. Walk out the back and don’t get involved.*

It had started to rain outside when he sat back down. 'I'll need to see what else you have,' he said. 'More diary pages? Newspaper clippings, police reports? Don't suppose you have an eye-witness?'

'We'll have to go to my place. I'll show you everything I have.'

'Sure,' *Your place?* 'Okay.' *This had better not be a wild goose.* 'I can do that. Shall we go?'

'Thank you, Jack. You don't now what this means to me.'

'I said I'd look, that's all.' He fingered the papers toward her, pausing at the last one. 'Do you know what this is; this symbol in the corner?' *It's like a crosshair.* 'What about the ones on the other pages, any of them mean anything to you?' *I've seen similar somewhere before. Where?*

'No, I don't know. There are more, one on every page.'

'I need to see them.' *So familiar.* 'I'll follow you to your place.'

'I came by bus.'

Of course you did. 'You want a ride?' Jack picked up his change from the table. 'Hey, don't forget your . . .' *Great, that's four bucks in a cup you're leaving.*

Jack's ageing Honda pulled off the road, above the access swung a sign, the Eagle Star Hotel. He didn't think much of the decor as he drove into the carpark.

Individual cabins ringed the tarmac. Throwbacks to the sixties in dire need of paint, or even demolition. At the far end, steps led up to what he assumed was the owner's residence.

'This is where you live?' He asked.

'It's not much,' Chali said, she seemed embarrassed.

'It's got character.' *I'm glad I showered today.* 'Been staying here long?'

'A while. It's cheap and no-one bothers me.'

I'll bet they don't. If she were luring him to his demise, this would be the place.

Jack steered the Honda past reception, its outer wall circled with decking and a white picket rail, an old woman asleep in a big old carver style chair. His passenger directed him off the broken asphalt onto a track pointing him toward the farthest cabin. Its shingled roof ran up and over, protruding out above a porch that ran the entire length. The front door was black, its number, thirteen. The original cabin in the woods below the canopy of tall trees.

'It's quaint,' he said. *Who the hell is this girl?*

* * *

Inside, the cabin fared little better. Wallpaper peeled at the corners, and was a victim of a more flamboyant era. The paint had been dulled by age. The wood burner in the centre of the room was nice, dirty, but nice. And judging by the mess of cartons and boxes the occupier was living on take-out.

The two women he'd met seemed at odds. Last night Chali had been trim, sharp, and uber sexy. Her alter ego, well, lived in a squat. And a new horror awaited his attention, the kind that would set kids screaming and stamping their feet. Where was the television?

'Can I get you something?' She asked. 'Tea, coffee? I think I've got a beer in the fridge.'

Jack followed her direction. The original fridge next to the breakfast bar, mostly hidden below old take-outs; the obvious source of a colourful odour. He supposed it was nice here, once. Plenty of cupboard space above the dual sink, an old strip light fixed to the ceiling. A duster and a mop, a dozen black sacks, the cabin would spruce up. She had more space here than he had in his apartment.

'I'll put the kettle on shall I?' He said.

The work surface in the small kitchenette was clean, sort of. He didn't care to examine the contents of the sink. She obviously lived like a teenager. 'Cups in here?' He opened one of the cupboards on the wall. Clanked two mugs out and onto the drainer.

Open some windows and a fresh coat of paint? He wondered what the rent was like? Only a twenty minute drive from town.

'Everything I have, Jack. It's all in the other room.'

'Sure, okay, right behind you.'

He stepped through the doorway behind her. A click of the switch on the wall and two shaded lamps, one either side of the bed, half lit the room. She'd painted in here, recently, the walls an easy shade of lilac. Silk sheets adorned a double bed. And then things got interesting.

Jack paused in the doorway all eyes for the décor on the far wall. Newspaper clippings jammed onto every inch. The word 'obsession' sprang immediately to mind.

'Come in, Jack. Come and see.'

He paused. Took it all in. There were boxes stacked haphazardly, and newspapers in untidy piles.

'What is all this?' Not what he'd expected.

'Jack, they're all here.'

'Who are?'

'The children this man has murdered. Names, dates, locations, it's all up here, and over here. I have all the evidence in these boxes. Photos, forensics, autopsy records. Look, Jack, I have newspaper accounts, police reports. We just have to . . .'

'Stop.' *That's what.*

'Jack? Is there something wrong?'

‘You have to ask? Chali, what is all this?’

‘Proof. Come, look. It’s everything I can find, as far back as nineteen sixty-four.’

‘Sixty-four? Chali, how long have you been at this?’

She looked away. ‘A while,’ she said. ‘I, we, have to stop him.’

All of this, it hadn’t been assembled in a few weeks, or even months. It would take a team of cops *forever* to put a wall like that together. A map of America at its heart. The faces of so many kids pinned around it. Lists of details hung below each one. The entire two walls he stared at were top to bottom with paperwork and photos. Her entire bedroom was dedicated to the hunt for her mystery murderer.

Only a single clothes rail, the kind you’d find in a smart boutique, showed any semblance of normality. On it hung the dress she’d worn last night. It hung like a prosthetic without the woman dressed inside.

‘I’m not crazy, Jack,’ she said.

‘I didn’t say that.’ Sudden memories. Flashbacks of the hospital. ‘I’m not here to judge.’ He couldn’t take his eyes off the wall.

‘Chali, how old are you? Twenty, twenty-one?’

‘Older,’ she replied.

‘Is that right? Then my ex-wife needs your face cream.’

Look at all of this? What the hell is going on here?

The wall was impressive. The Feds would be proud of her tenacity, and technique. It had got Jack here, and he was more than interested. This was no joke for her, though it was clearly an obsession. What if it were true?

‘Jack, come inside.’ She came back to the door and took his hand. ‘Please, let me show you. The children. I have time-lines, police reports. Look at the map, the dates, the . . .’

‘Chali, I said stop. Just for moment.’

‘Oui, yes, of course. I should start at the beginning. Look, I’ll show you copies of the original files, back in the sixties. His first victim.’

There was no stopping her. But something had caught Jack’s eye. Large clips that hung from the other wall, one above the other. Each held several pages like the ones he’d seen at the coffeeshop. Jack moved closer. Maybe a dozen pages held by each clip, a dozen clips in all. Some had dates, others had been scribbled out. It was the symbols on each page, what was it? He’d seen them before, but where?

‘Who’s your source?’ he asked.

‘My source?’

‘Yeah, who gave you these? They’re old, Chali. You don’t get paper like this anymore. And this ink, it’s faded. Someone gave you these, who?’ *Cat got your tongue?* ‘You didn’t do all this on your own. Someone’s helping you.’

‘There’s no-one else. It’s just me, and now you.’

He watched her fidget, constant flexing of her fingers. Her manner was twitchy; eyes constantly scanning the walls, as if trying to decide the best way forward. What to explain first? If he didn’t know better, which he didn’t, he’d say she was starting to look strung out.

‘Fine, whatever. D’you mind if I look in the boxes?’ He was coaxing her. ‘Look through some of this stuff. If you don’t want to reveal your source, that’s okay. I get it.’ She’d tell him eventually. ‘Can I use the floor?’ It looked fairly sanitised compared to the lounge. ‘Thanks,’ he started on the closest box, four lapels unfolded as he took the contents out piece by piece, placing them where he could best see. This was going to be a long day.

‘Do you mind if I take a shower?’ Asked Chali.

‘Sure, take your time. I’ve got plenty here to keep me occupied.’ It was a relief that this trove, of whatever it was, was weaning him off his own obsession, namely her. There had to be something in this, right? There just had to be.

* * *

Chali closed the door and slipped the bolt into place. She felt the wall as it slid down her back. Her head in her hands, trembling.

Shall I tell him the truth? Oh Jack, can you handle the truth? Would you believe me? Stop shaking you stupid girl. Stick to the plan. ‘He must find out for himself.’ *Concentrate, Chali, pull yourself together. He’s here, it’s finally begun.*

Chali lifted herself from the tiled floor. No more doubts as she willed her hands to be still. Willed them to reach for the shower lever and lift it clockwise, releasing a steady stream of hot water that tumbled down into the tray. Almost instantly a warm mist began to rise.

Chali stepped into the shower. Within seconds her clothes had soaked up the hot water, the deluge filling her shoes. It felt good to feel the clothes sag against her body.

One by one the apparel dropped to the floor. The water flowed through her hair as it danced across her face. A hundred tumultuous rivers ran wild across her body as she kicked off her shoes, water

splashed out onto the bathroom floor. She'd never felt as alive as she did right now.

Jack will believe, I know he will. This was exciting. Jack was exciting. *I've found an ally now, and perhaps even a friend.*

Or could it be more?

She closed her eyes again, imagined him opening the door. His naked, muscular body. *Look at him.* His features rugged and attractive. *Yes, he is very handsome.* The image dispersed like the water. *What is he thinking out there?* She'd waited so long for him, for Jack. *Believe in me Jack . . . you have to believe.* Inside that man was a passion, a tenacious and dogged personality, that could help her succeed. And there was more; she felt it last night at the cinema. She saw it in his eyes too. They'd made a deep connection.

So many unexpected feelings. Her stomach rampant with a tingle; a warm shimmy that she'd never felt before. She could barely believe he was here, and how good he felt. And there was something else, as Chali's eyelids drifted closed again, as the hot torrent ran unrestrained across her naked curves. It had happened when she'd touched him. It had been such a long time since her body had felt so alive. She wasn't even sure she'd ever been aroused in such a way.

Feelings buried deep, buried long ago, had resurfaced. It was proof beyond doubt that *he* was the one. That Jack was who she'd waited so long for.

Is this how it's supposed to feel?

The way that she touched herself. How she allowed her fingers to have their way. Each tip keen to explore her body. She wasn't sure how anymore, as the shower danced excitedly across her face, it roused the blood in her veins.

Shorter breaths followed as her fingers stroked her body. Such a long time since she'd felt like this. Like a woman. Chali slammed her hands against the shower walls, her eyes engaged the door.

'Jack,' she whispered aloud. *I want to feel your lips.* Dark thoughts, summoned by undeniable feelings. 'Jack,' she called in a hush. *Touch me.* She'd seen the way he looked at her, or wouldn't. It meant the same thing. *Dare I encourage this?*

Why not?

It was time, always time; always against her. Never enough time.

The water coursed down her soft skin and began to drive the urge. Feelings stirred and a need to fulfil them. Her body had needs, no, it had demands, that she'd thought impossible to ever arouse again. But Jack

had stirred them. He had found them. And she would use them against him, if there was no other way.

Jack, you're going to help me. I'm not going to give you a choice.

She may never get the chance again. No choice now but to take it all the way. See this through to the bitter end

Okay, he'd made a mess. But that's what she wanted, right? Jack knee deep in all of this. Three boxes were on the floor, their contents spread, strung out by date, top to bottom, left to right. Paperwork that went back to the sixties; crime scenes, newspaper articles. How could anyone get away with these for so long, without being discovered?

The modus operandi was the same each time. The parent's tucked their child into bed and by the morning another kid was gone. No physical evidence left behind at the scene, no obvious point of entry. It seemed this guy was a ghost.

Jack glanced up at the wall. The white pins had a number denoting the time line; a green string attached to show the location.

Twenty-eight kids had been taken over forty years. So what made her think it was the same guy? And what was the deal with the diary pages strung on what looked like a washing line from one end of the room to the other? Writing something down showed a thought process, but not necessarily a crime. Plenty of people fantasise about stuff. Even a sick shit like this. For crying out loud the delusion could be her's, Chali's. A disturbed young woman who wanted all this to be true.

No, there was too much here just to be a fantasy. But if that were so, then why weren't the police involved. Why wasn't law enforcement examining the evidence? And where did she get all this stuff anyway? Was a family member an ex-cop, or an amateur sleuth? Had she taken up where someone else had left-off? His gaze fell on the symbols again. Each diary page had one.

What is it with those freaking symbols? Come on Jack, it's in here somewhere. Where have I seen them before?

'Christ in a cupcake!' Jack jerked himself away from a figure with long hair and no face.

Chali swept her hair back. 'I'm sorry, did I startle you?'

'No, no,' he said. 'I didn't hear you come back in, that's all.' Now his breath had caught up, his blood pressure began to rise. *Are you naked under that shirt?* A long shirt down to her knees, the top buttons not done up. He couldn't see anywhere she could hide a knife.

'I can't see my carpet,' she joked.

'Carpet? Oh, yeah, sorry about this.' *Stop staring, Jack.* 'It just seemed the easiest way to . . . *Oh wow . . .* see it all.'

This wasn't fair. How was he supposed to concentrate when she was standing there in what he wished was *his* old shirt? Boy, she had nice legs; toned and tanned. Had he begun to dribble yet? Clearing his throat made him feel obvious, but it had the desired affect. It allowed Jack to speak.

'All of this,' he asked. 'What's the common link?'

She needed to do one more button up on that shirt. Put her collarbone away; stop it being so suggestive.

Look away. Is it hot in here? Look away. It's really hot in here. The fabric clung to just enough of her breasts to be decent. He wasn't staring, he wasn't. *What the fuck is wrong with me?* Jack looked up at the wall, to the photos of the children. His ardour drained safely back toward the carpet.

This was wrong, and in so many ways. He was acting like a love-sick puppy. He looked at his empty coffee cup, then touched his stomach. *No, that's really paranoid.* 'I should go,' he said.

'No, please, here, look, the diary,' she pulled pages from a peg. 'Please Jack, don't leave me.'

Leave you? He should; he wanted to. Chali's hand touched his, her eyes pleading. He didn't want to leave, not really.

'This is all, well, interesting.' He moved his hand from hers and rubbed gently at the skin with his fingers. 'But it's just random cases of abduction. Where's the link?' That was the second time he'd cleared his throat. 'You have male and female, black, white and Asian. And we're countrywide here. The timeline is over forty years. I don't see it.'

'You're not looking,' she said.

Yeah, I think I was. Grow up, Jack. Stop staring at her fucking boobs. This could be serious.

'There is one thing that links all of these abductions,' Chali added.

'And what is that?'

'Look at the abduction dates, Jack.' Written below each child's photo.

‘They’re all different,’ he said. ‘Different days of the month, mostly. Some were taken in the same month, but there are only twelve months in a year. And then we have big gaps, of up to several years between abductions. If they’re actually abductions? I don’t see a link. So where’s his type? Or is he an eclectic killer? Serial-killers have signatures, and I’m not seeing any.’

‘It’s the children, Jack. Look at their dates of birth.’

There was a list somewhere specifically detailing all the children’s dates of birth. He found it. Now where was that list of abduction dates? He found that too; both on the floor next to each other.

‘What? I don’t see . . .’ The penny dropped, and from a great height. ‘Shit, is this right? Every one of these kids was abducted within fourteen days of their birthday?’

‘Yes, Jack, their eleventh birthday. *That* is what links them.’

‘There’s something else as well.’ He started moving through the papers, searching; found it. The diary extract he’d read in Starbucks earlier. He read the relevant part aloud.

“Returning home has saved me. Finding his work has redeemed me. What my father began, I have now pledged myself to finish.” Jack paused. “I have given myself, to the Thirty.”

‘Oui, now you believe me. You must believe me. Jack, this monster has to be stopped.’

Frankly, Jack didn’t know what to believe.

‘All right, I get it, all of this.’ The evidence was everywhere, on the floor, the walls; all very persuasive. ‘But Jonas writes that his father liked to torture and abuse women, so what was a child doing in his trunk? The woman I get. But why a child? Did Edward like kids, or women?’

Chali shrugged. ‘Where does evil begin and end?’ she asked.

She was right, of course. But did Edward drive all that way for the woman, or the child? Did one, or the other, disturb Edward that night? There was something *off* about all of this, not that he could concentrate. She’d sat herself on the bed and begun to strain her fingers through wet hair, the shirt she wore lifting to each accompanying movement of her arm. *Amazing thighs*. Jack was awash with tiny tingly things across his skin, all heading for the same place. Down there. It really was time to go.

‘I should leave. There’s a lot to think about. It’s probably best that I do it elsewhere.’

‘Jack.’

He loved it when she said his name. She turned the J into a shh sound. Shhack, it gave him goosebumps. Shhack, there really wasn't any room left for them to grow.

'We can work together on this. It is important, yes?'

'Yes, no, I don't know. I'm not making any promises.' *Oh for crying out loud.* She was on all fours on the bed and leaning forward, pointing to the nearest stack of papers. Her hand swept through her hair and the shirt fell loose. Everything was smooth, well rounded. *For fuck's sake, Jack, get out of here.*

'Look,' she said. What else would he be doing? 'I have found all of this, and I have found you. I believe it is fate for us, Shhack.'

Chali slid feet first from the bed, her eyes on the floor as she circled around behind him. No need to watch, he was high wired, dialled in, and could feel her coming alongside. Longitude and latitude were veering in on the same bearing; collision was imminent. Shit, were there klaxons sounding?

Jack felt his universe ignite. They weren't hands that touched his neck, they were electrodes, that flushed wild energy throughout his body. Jack's motor was running hot. Four idling cylinders suddenly pimped to be a V8. Three hundred cubic inches were growling and keen to burn rubber. Poor little mouse, something was being sprinkled on his popcorn again. The diary extract slipped from his fingers.

'Shhack.' She was a fire-breathing dragon. Her breath roasting the tiny hairs on his neck. 'We found each other for a reason.' Her voice melted his will to resist, as her lips whispered magic into his ears.

'I have, have to think about this,' his mouth working hard to speak. 'Probably, best, if I go.'

Well, come on then.

No chance. Dragon had turned chipmunk and was nibbling at his ear, fingernails were drawing gently up his chest. Call the fire-fighters, forest-fire raging out of control.

So fucking what? Jack was content to go down in flames.

Not too tight, Jonas.

Despite the soft lining around the metal he was careful that the manacle wouldn't pinch at Alice's ankle. A gentle tug on the chain attached was more for his peace of mind than to test its strength. A chain that ran across the concrete to a ring cemented deep into the ground. He could do no more. Everything was as it should be.

Jonas knew Alice would be hungry when she awoke. They were always hungry. Each child reacted differently to the medication, and Alice's dose had been stronger than most. She'd fought him. He didn't like it when they fought. And the trip itself had been longer than anticipated. Somehow an alert had been triggered. Roads were blocked across the state. He'd had to take the alternative routes with Alice hidden inside the van. The child had been asleep for two days that had seemed an eternity. But success brought reward, and none of that mattered any more. Jonas had done all he could.

He'd washed Alice. Scrubbed her nightdress and re-dressed the child. Jonas left the small room, and then returned with a plate which he placed on the small dresser beside the bed on which Alice lay.

Cookies; children liked cookies, and Alice would be hungry when she awoke. She'd feel groggy, and perhaps a little nauseous, but she'd recover and feel refreshed. She looked so peaceful lying there on her back. Her hands folded onto her chest.

Sleep, little Alice. I'll be here when you open your eyes. Jonas will be waiting.

The longer she slept the easier it would be when she awoke. The more time her subconscious would have to prepare her. He truly believed that. Jonas slid a curtain across the opening, but left enough of a gap to see her feet. He left Alice to her slumber.

The sitting room was warm, sixty-four degrees; it never dropped below nor rose above. The mood lighting was his own work, a dozen low energy bulbs discreetly placed to give a red, furnace like effect. He found it soothing. It was a calming light that comforted children.

Breaking up the heavily planked bench and burying Daddy's tools had been a pleasure. The blades seemed mediaeval, his tools from the Inquisition. Wrapped in sacks, a deep hole had been dug, they'd never be used again. Father's chair had been much harder to remove. It's four iron legs bolted into the concrete. The air had stunk of sweat and lubricant; each turn of the thread a tiresome affair. This entire place, its twenty odd years of neglect, had been cut back, pulled out and sprayed to make sure it was dead. Jonas had fixed the place up just fine. Not that Father would have approved. He liked to work in the gloom with nothing but the chair and his tools. The dim light of an old miner's lamp that dangled free from the ceiling.

To a small boy this rat-hole in the ground was a place filled with fear, where dark memories still lingered. Not fear of the acts that were perpetrated, but of *him*, the man. Even now he could hear Edward's voice, hear his whisper in the shadows. And there were the voices, the women, the victims that his father had loved. Hapless souls broken in that chair. Jonas could hear them if he listened. Restless voices that begged the little boy for help. But he never did. Never would. It was fascination and fear that compelled him to watch his daddy work naked below that old leather apron, his face covered, always wearing Smiley. A muscular figure who glistened with sweat as he tortured, raped, and then murdered. The only way he was ever able to share his love.

As much as Jonas hated his father, he had to relent, admire even, the man's commitment to his cause. What Edward did was a passion, some would say a calling.

The chair was gone now. The holes in the concrete covered by a rug. Jonas had brought comfort to this hole below the ground.

He'd brought the bed Alice slept in at the same place as the plush old Chesterfield chair he'd relaxed into. The coffee table and the book case had seen better days; rather like the old lady he'd bought them from at a garage sale in Jefferson City. Nice old girl, he hadn't bothered to haggle the price. The rug had an art deco pattern and was thrown in for free, and now lay as a centrepiece on the concrete floor. Yes, he'd made this place homely, and not at all as he remembered as a child. This wasn't Edward's special place any more, it was his.

Jonas lifted his journal from the coffee table beside the chair. He opened it and began to write.

I was a child when this room was in use. I've told you a lot about what my father used to do down here. But I was here too, and I want to tell you about me, how it was for me, down here in Daddy's Netherworld.

Edward would never allow me to shy from a terrified gaze. Every woman he brought down here begged at some point for the little boy to help. I never did. Although I have to admit I was tempted by some. But fear doesn't come from the pain; it comes from the love of the man who inflicts it. My father loved his women with a razor sharp blade. He caressed them with whispers of lust, and promises of abuse. To receive my father's love, was true fear. So neither screams of infliction, nor sobs of remission, could ever move me enough to disobey my father. I learned well, from an early age, that I was never to interrupt the master at work. Then one day my father encouraged me to pass him the tools of his passion.

'I still hear them, Father,' he said. 'They're still here, your lovers.' Jonas lifted his feet onto the table. He was in thoughtful mood. 'They'll never leave me, not like you.' The memories still whispered to him. Still asked him for help. 'Memories can't hurt me any more, Father. I make my own way now. I'm making my own memories. She, Alice, is the penultimate. One more will make Thirty, and then you'll see. You'll recognise who the master really is. The world will understand how big this is going to be.'

The pen lowered and he began to write again.

There was one occasion, just the once, that I touched one of his women. I remember how she held onto my hand. Grasped it as if she were drowning, which I suppose she was. I don't know her name. I never knew any of their names; I never thought to ask. But I recollect she had long slim fingers, and a plain silver band around her thumb. The word 'connected' was inscribed into the metal. I remember how her flesh glowed from the light of that lamp. An adrenaline fuelled sweat that covered her entire body.

They were all like that. The light gave their naked bodies an almost Holy reflection. I wondered why my daddy would swing the lamp whenever he left us to go smoke outside. Was it for my benefit, or for theirs?

He would never take long outside. Just a breath of air and a cigarette. I would sit and stare. But this once, I stepped closer to the woman. Nervous

and excited I reached out for her hand. I wondered, was this what all men lusted for? Would I lust for it too?

I did feel stirrings in all my manly places as I absorbed every curve of her flesh. He'd lashed her by the neck, her head fixed, both hands strapped down by her side. The chair had been tipped at an angle, her legs spread, her chastity offered up for my father's pleasure.

I was surprised how cold her hand felt. My heart leaped like a baby rabbit in spring each time I heard a sound. I remember my shock when she opened her eyes. I'd thought her dead, but somehow she'd returned.

'Help me,' she was barely able to speak, 'please.'

I couldn't take my eyes from hers; something about them. I believe now that they were filled with hope, that I had come to set her free. And then the way her eyes turned inward when that hope was stolen. Stripped from her by a boy who's hand reached out to touch her breasts. I wanted to know what they felt like. I'll never forget those eyes, gazing at me as a mother would, bitterly disappointed with her child; I remember a tear slid down her cheek.

I couldn't have helped her. He would have been furious. So my hand pushed on through the sweat, its quest to finger every flow and curve of that women's skin was insatiable. How would it be, I wondered, if she were to touch me? Please God, don't let him come back, not yet. I lifted her hand and fumbled with the buttons on my trousers. Now I was the one who pumped an adrenaline fuelled sweat. It seemed an eternity to part the button from its hole but when I did I pushed her hand down inside the fabric of my shorts. I felt the power granted to me by the love of a woman.

And to this day I have never been so aroused, so focused, so willing to release my love. I felt the world whip into a frenzy, and my body shudder in a way it had never done before. My only regret was that it ended too quickly and that I never knew her name. But I have continued to remember her, to this day, because she was the first woman in my life apart from my mother. After her, I touched them all. And I have no doubt that Edward had planned it so.

The pencil stopped writing. Jonas would be the first to admit that it was hardly a normal childhood. But then, what is nowadays? Heavy lids fluttered and threatened to close. The last few days had been emotionally draining. He tried to resist the lack of sleep, but the effort was proving futile. Too little and too late as the tiredness reined him in, and then won him over.

But sleep for Jonas shared no respite from the memories.

‘Mummy, come quickly, a car’s pulled up outside. I think Father’s home.’

‘Are you sure? But he’s two days early. No, Jonas, wait.’

‘What is it?’ he asked. ‘Don’t you want to see Father?’

‘Of course I do, dear. Come here, give Mummy a hug first.’

I always had a hug for my mother. It was always offered in earnest and filled with chocolates and flowers. I ran back into her bedroom and leapt onto her bed to hear its aged springs creak aloud as I landed. It didn’t matter that the sheets stank of sweat and nicotine as I gave my mummy the biggest hug a boy could ever share.

‘He’s early Jonas. Why has he come back early?’

I didn’t know. Why was she asking me? ‘Mummy, what’s wrong?’ I pulled away, her hands still clutched in mine. She had that look of concern and confusion she wore every time Father came home. She drew me close again. ‘Pray with me, Jonas. Pray that your Daddy did real good out on the road this time. Let’s hope he comes with vim and vigour, his targets well attained.’ Her arms wrapped me up tight as a blanket. ‘Daddy treats us well if he’s done good,’ she whispered.

I think I knew, even at that age, that she prepared herself for the worst. I’d heard her talk about hard times, about the economy. How my father travelled further afield, spending more and more time on the road. I saw the trepidation in her eyes each time he returned. Times were hard. She was right, they were better when my father was away.

Such a slender woman, her hug felt more bone than meat. The pride she took in her long blonde hair a distant memory; now darkened and straggled much like her zest for life. Sorrow had grained itself deep into her face.

Poor woman, age had come upon her too early. Twenty-four wasn't old, and yet I assumed it was, because she was the only woman I really knew. Marriage to my father had smothered the rose and left it to wilt.

I had to remind her that I needed air to breathe, her hug felt so tight.

'Whatever mood your daddy's in,' she said petting me between words, 'you make sure you give him an extra special hug, and a kiss. You hear me now? A big kiss on his cheek cause he's your daddy.' I nodded. 'Now go. Oh, and Jonas, if he's in *thoughtful* mood. You leave the house and go play in the woods. You promise me now, you'll go play in the woods.'

I nodded, smiled, and was off the bed and away to the front door. Filled with hope that Daddy *had* done good. I prayed that my father had done good. That maybe he'd brought us gifts. But I dallied in the hall as I saw the front door. The other thought hit home. What if he hadn't done good?

I spat on my fingers and pulled them through my hair. My shirt was fresh on yesterday, my shorts clean. Maybe I should wait. Just to be sure. As heavy boots walked onto the planking outside the door, I realised my breathing had quickened. My heart had begun to race. As I heard the front door-handle turn and then open. Maybe I should wait. I closed the thin panelled door of their bedroom to a crack, and tried not to be seen.

'Jonas, what are you doing?' Mummy asked.

One eye remained on the bed and the other through the crack to the hall. I sure hoped that Father had done good. I backed away to the bed and put my arms about Mummy.

There, I loved it when she smiled; I knew the effort that it took her. I so hated her frailness. Her need to depend on me. The way God had seen fit to treat her so badly.

Most of all I hated the strange looking bottles by her bedside. A concoction of sizes and colours, each jar filled with a different pill, another potion. Some prescribed, others not. A glass of water always at hand.

Mummy was ill, I knew that, why else would she take so many pills? I only had to look to see how much pain she constantly endured. That's what the pills were for . . . why else would she have them, right?

'Pass me some water, Jonas.'

I poured a glass as shaky hands tapped pills onto the bedside table. It was a ritual I'd seen often as another two were swallowed. I wondered, how many she truly took to smooth the edges of her world. And it was a harsh world that had slowly packed and imprisoned her here in this room. Another sip, a deep breath, as Mummy pulled on her nightdress, then raised a smile for the door in expectation.

Expectation of what? She knew well, as did I. Not that I wanted to admit it. Mummy's world was filled with anticipation and exhilaration, of violence and abuse, all proffered by the man she called, husband. And as much as they both tried to convince me this was normal, somehow I knew it was not.

'Jonas,' Mummy whispered, 'go to your daddy. Go on boy. You know he likes to be greeted.'

She turned and reached for another small pot of pills. The black one that stood out amongst all the others. Her fingers barely strong enough to turn the cap.

'No, I can do it. I'm fine, run along now. And find Julius, you should greet your daddy together.'

'Julius?'

'Yes, go find your brother. Jonas, what is it?'

She never remembered. I think that was good. I wanted to say sorry, but she began to cough; a chesty rasping affair with wheezing in-between.

'Go,' she said. 'I'll be fine, *cough, cough*, just fine.' Her head was down the pillow over her mouth as I opened the door. She'd be okay, this was normal. She'd be fine.

Two steps into the hall and I heard a chair scrape the oak-beam floor in our kitchen. No-one else lived hereabouts, not for miles in any given direction. Not even the mail-man came this far out from town. Our house was deep inside the forest. Like so many others in these parts, we lived in a bubble we called home. The kitchen door swung open.

Father was a tall man, most would say gangly; he looked down on us all. I in turn looked down at the carpet through habit, unwilling to greet his study. A formidable gaze from a man who's face offered tales of a hard life. He had deep set eyes that were dark, angry. It was the face of a man who rarely smiled. I looked back at the bedroom door, and then at my father. I sank in the ominous feelings that his trip had not gone to plan.

Stand still, let him pass. Maybe he won't notice that I'm here.

I felt my back against the wall as Father lumbered past. Not a look or sound passed my way as he went into his bedroom. 'You're home early,' I heard Mummy say, her voice keen to welcome. The door clicked closed behind him.

It was mumbled voices that carried through from the other side. It was best that I just stood here and waited. The truth was I wanted to listen. I wanted to hear what was said, and then I wished that I hadn't.

Mummy began shouting. ‘Don’t you touch me, can’t you see I’m ill.’ She was coughing, badly. I had my answer. I guessed that things had not been good on the road as the volume raised. Each word raised squeezed my tummy tighter until it wound tightly in a ball. And then I heard the sound of a slap echo through the door and past me down the hall. She’d struck him. Then again, followed by shouting. I tried not to picture the scene. I concentrated hard to made the images small, the sounds more distant.

Another palm cracked against face, the hand of my father this time, striking out against his wife, quickly followed by a muted groan. My blood flowed south to meet my feet; two anchors that weighed me to the floor as a punch was thrown, followed by others. I would have cursed him, if I’d had the courage. I even lifted my own hands as if to fend off the blows, despite them not being for me. And then silence as I realised I was doing it again; my butterfly thing. That’s what I called it when I began to shrink. To climb inside my imaginary chrysalis. Like walking into the eye of a storm.

‘Fucking bitch.’ The door flew open and so did my eyes. I felt fear shrink me and draw me two steps backward, my shoulders planted hard against the aged floral paper. My head began to tick and I lost all use of my limbs at the sound of his stomping boots.

Please God, don’t let me look up as he passes.

‘What the fuck are you looking at?’

I’m not. I wasn’t. Dear God I was staring at him. *Look away, Jonas. For God’s sake look away.* I couldn’t. My head began a merry jig; panic stricken and unable to be still. I think spit dangled from my lips.

‘God forgive us for rearing a retard,’ he said. ‘Woman, come get your fucking retard.’

Mummy? I could see inside, she was lying on the bed. She sobbed, her body bent awkward upon the sheets. He’d flung open the curtains, why? He’d deliberately exposed her to daylight knowing how she favoured the dark. I lifted my arm as if to help her reach her pills, and felt it slapped down by his powerful hand.

‘Why do you look like that, boy?’

I wasn’t. I daren’t.

I was Mister Potato Head staring down the hall toward Mummy, not at him. But maybe that was the point as he lurched me away from the wall, my arm in his vice-like grip. My feet barely able to keep pace with my body as I was pulled. I heard the creak of my bedroom door before

feeling myself thrown inside. I stumbled, reached out, but refused to fall. The door slammed shut behind me.

‘You fucking little bitch,’ he sounded angry. ‘Whore of fucking Babylon.’ I knew well what those words meant. The intensity in their tone. They flicked a switch in my head and I sank into limp-mode.

Let it happen, no choice, this is how it has to be. The sting of his hand across my head felt vicious.

‘Get undressed.’

Do as he says.

I heard his belt fall to the floor. *He’s my daddy.* Strange, how my fingers had stopped trembling. *I’m his little boy.*

I barely heard the words he muttered, ranted almost, as I dropped my shirt to the floor. Who was he speaking to, me? It sounded like me, but I wasn’t convinced. But when the rambling stopped; it was as if the window had blown open on a cold Winter’s night. All I saw was my bed, it’s chequered blanket, and pillow that waited to stifle my breath. Why wouldn’t my fingers take instruction, as they fumbled at my belt. I felt my shorts hauled down around my ankles.

It was okay, I was ready. *I was.* The outside twisted inward and my senses shut down. I had finally arrived. Crawled inside my chrysalis where I was safe.

‘Shhhh,’ Father whispered. ‘Close your eyes.’

The instruction was pointless, his rough hands had already forced me onto the bed. My father’s love would always begin in denial. It would always end with anger.

I’m a butterfly. I’m beautiful.

‘Satan’s inside you, boy. He must be driven out.’ I believed him as my body was hauled across the bed. As I stared at the cowboys on the paper that covered my walls. It was my best rabbit in a headlamp stare, and I had no idea why I turned it towards him.

‘Don’t you look at me. Don’t you fucking look at me.’

The pillow came quickly as my face was forced down, the smell of alcohol panting heavily against my cheek. Nothing to do now but pray as I felt the weight of my father’s love, try to tear me.

I had seen this man use a knife and a hammer to proffer love to a stranger. He used a different tool to show his family affection. Its penetration was brutal and bruising, and forced me to tears. More and more with each thrust and grunt until they spilled down my cheeks and threatened to drown me.

‘You’re, a, fucking, retard.’

Father was drunk, he was angry too. I understood that, even if I didn't understand why. It was his way of showing me his love, I suppose. What else could it be? The whip of his tongue, and the vile words it shared with me. Proof, from an undeniable source, that I was bad to the core.

With each thrust of my father's love came a savage yank on my hair. Tugged so hard it pulled strands from my scalp. But I didn't feel them. I wasn't there. *I am a butterfly*. I didn't hear the man's lustful breaths as they preached his unique brand of love. *I am beautiful*. Though my head jarred with each lunge of the man. *I am a son of God*. Though the world He'd created for me was brutal and harsh.

'Mummy,' I called out for her, and she came. Kneeling beside me and looking as happy as I'd ever seen her. She took my hand in hers, and that was when it happened. Through her, God allowed me the gift that He only ever shared with the dead. I began to fly. The ground drifting away as my beautiful wings lifted me up, up, and away into the freedom of the sky. *I'm free*.

It didn't matter that it was cold outside, how else would it be when you were raised this high. The entire country now stretched out below and painted white. White with snow that had come early. Fresh white snow that covered the fields and trees to make the world an innocent place again.

Everything was fresh, fresh, fresh again; the stale smell of my life was gone and the sun began to warm me. A sudden breeze surged below and encouraged me fly high. And I swore, that the next time I would bring Mummy, I would not leave her behind again.

But I knew that wasn't true. I'd left her, back there, with him.

Unexpected turbulence sent a tremor through my wings; I began to lose height and descend. A strong voice carried on the breeze and I felt the tears well deep in my eyes again. It was like a dream this freedom, always too short, even when a lifetime had already unfurled. I heard the voice amplify as if it were right behind me, whispering in my ear.

'Put your head back you bitch and open your mouth . . . open it.' No longer a whisper, but a demand. 'Don't you look at me, boy. You close those fucking eyes. Close them.' I did as I was told. I was a good boy. Why? Because he told me so.

'Good boy . . . my boy . . . you're Daddy's little boy. You take it all now, you hear me. You take it, all, like . . . huh . . . huh . . . hahhhhhh.'

The cold cramped at my delicate wings, I was falling. Too fast, I fell too fast. *Help me*. The clean fresh carpet of snow was closing too fast; I plummeted, I couldn't bear the weight of gravity on my back.

I felt a slap. A hand drag me fast from the sky

‘Fuck you, for making me weak, boy.’ One deep final lunge and I couldn’t breathe. I was gagging, seeing stars. Couldn’t breathe, only swallow. I felt a warm trickle run down my cheek and then the sting of a hand turn my face back toward my pillow. I started to sob as I felt the pain; a pain that should never be felt, not by any child.

I curled my body into a ball, and not a moment too soon as the blows rained down onto my back and body. The heady cocktail of lust and booze had exploded with ravenous guilt as palm and fist terrorised my young body and I felt the bruising swell like angry waves.

I thank God that the beating was quick, if harsh. But it was my fault, always my fault; I shouldn’t have looked at him like that. I *am* a whore, but my father loves me. I even managed a smile, to Mummy who lay beside me. She looked happy as she held my hand. And I was grateful, for I knew just how much effort it took her to smile.

Jonas forced his eyes open as a flood of emotion swept away the dream. The pencil still held in his hand. Everything was red again, furnace red, a deep crimson, lovely red. He took a deep sharp breath before he realised he was back where he belonged. He’d dropped off, gone back in time. Hardly surprising, there were so many memories in this place.

Jonas snuggled into the chair, his heavy eyes closing again. It had been a long testing couple of days. But he was back now. Safe in his special place. He closed his eyes. Maybe this time he wouldn’t dream. He wouldn’t remember. Maybe for the first time in his life, he would find peace.

Shit, weird dream or what?

Jack opened his eyes; he took a deep breath and stretched his arms. He felt good, his karma in a nice place, and he could smell coffee. Odd thing though, he didn't remember his bedroom ceiling having a large crack running from wall to wall. Was someone singing?

Jack lifted his head. *Chali?* Damn she looked good. Crap, she sounded awful.

'I'm going back to the corner where it all began. I'm gonna camp out in my sleeping bag and I'm never gonna move. I'm gonna . . .' The voice stopped. 'Jack, you're awake,' Chali giggled. 'Sorry, I don't sing so well.'

She jumped onto the bed. Her bed. Wait, it was all coming back. So, *not a dream then?*

'I can't sing whilst you watch me.' Chali slid under the covers, her head on his shoulder. Instinct curled his arm around her body, whilst somewhere in the background a radio played the song she'd been singing.

'Nice song,' he said. 'Is it the Script?'

Chali nodded, smiled, and kissed his lips.

Go me, I just named the band. Kirsty'd be impressed.

'Do you like the song? I do. I think he sings about a girl.' She nuzzled up tighter, her leg over his. 'It's about a place where he finds his peace.'

Peace? Jack was at peace. And last night was flooding back into his memory banks. *Holy shit.* The reason he felt spent; why his batteries were depleted. It hadn't just been sex, two random units going at each other. He'd experienced a coupling; a euphoria. It was possible they'd achieved evolutionary perfection. Even his back felt great. So why, as he looked at the cracked plaster above, did he feel this scenario wasn't quite as perfect as it seemed?

As Jack's fingers combed gently through Chali's hair, he knew why. Some well entombed program was forcing its way past his slumbering endorphin defence. Like those musical tunes that enshrine our deepest and most cherished memories. Jack's moment of nirvana was beginning to conduct a darker symphony all of its own. Or maybe he was just coming down on some feelings of guilt, that should frankly mind their own business. He felt her fingers turn his face.

'What are you thinking?' She asked.

Nothing. Everything. That last night, or was it this afternoon, neither should have happened. It was unprofessional. *Jill?*

'Jack?'

'Do you have a place?' He asked. 'Like the one in the song.'

Why did she look away?

'Chali?'

'Oui, Jack, I do. But it was a long time ago. And some places do not have such happy endings.'

She's sad. Why are you sad? 'Tell me about it. I want to . . .'

Chali placed a finger on his lips.

'There is only one place that we can ever truly find peace,' she whispered. 'It is a place where sleep descends into eternal dream. A place that comes with sorrow, and a headstone.'

Well, that's a bit morbid. I was thinking a villa in the sun.

Her fingers teased up and down his chest. No, not fingers, they were wands, that spread the gift of youth throughout his body. He put his hand on hers to stop their movement.

'I was dreaming?' He wasn't really sure. 'There was something . . .'

'All that matters is us. You and I, Jack,' her wands were casting spells again. All round Jack's nipples, and down to his navel. Fingertips that spread indecision, confusion; more endorphins. She slipped her thigh over his and rose up like a serpent, all sexy and sleek. Sliding herself about him, kissing at his neck.

Breathe, Jack, breathe. He was purring like a kitten.

She was soft, warm, sensual. Her fingers gliding up his thigh, through the light perspiration not yet dried, still clinging. Still leaking with excitement.

Jack grabbed her face in both hands. How many times had they . . . His finger was in her mouth, so suggestive, irresistible. No faking it, she wanted to him. Her lips released their hostage.

'It was fate,' she said.

'It was?'

‘Yes, that brought us together.’

‘Okay, fate.’

‘I want to please you, Jack.’ The Shh was still there. “Shhack.” He loved it, the way she said his name. He actually wanted to tell her how pleased he was, but knew it would come out wrong. He’d open his big mouth in some moronic fashion and say it like a big kid, eyes all bright, babbling on while he cradled his slim, soft, bag of sweeties. Jack pulled her lips to his and kissed them instead. A kiss that lingered and explored.

Chali pulled away, hair trailing on his face, she lifted herself and straddled him. She kissed him again and again, then slipped away and left the bed.

Where are you going? His optics followed, full surveillance mode, their shutters clicking relentlessly across her wonderful and elegant design. The way she curved from neck to shoulders, and all the way down her back. Her skin glistened and flowed.

Okay, so all women do that, but Chali, she was flawless.

Chali took a clean shirt from the hanger.

Aww. A baggy blue shirt that covered her from neck to backside and ruined everything. She turned clicking buttons into place.

‘Jack, we need to talk.’

‘Talk?’ *I’ve heard that phrase before.* And who’d said it. *Shit, Jill?* He’d promised to call this morning and confirm Saturday.

‘Jack, what is it? What are you thinking?’

‘Nothing,’ he lied. ‘You want my help; this serial killer thing?’ That could have come out better. *Fuck, is that what last night was about? To get me on board?*

‘What are you doing?’

‘I need to get dressed.’ He was out of bed and hopping on one foot, briefs found and already half on.

‘Are you leaving?’

‘No, yes. I promised I’d do something, that’s all.’

‘Oh, of course. Yes, I understand.’ She was drawing the shirt closed at the collar. Eyes down, unable to take his gaze. ‘I should get dressed,’ she said.

‘Chali, it’s not like that. I just have to sort something.’ He grabbed his t-shirt. Managed to get both arms and head through the holes before he took her in his arms. ‘Chali, please, look at me.’ *Shit, why are you crying?* ‘I’m not leaving,’ he said. ‘Well, I am, but I’ll be back. I just have to make a call.’ Jack thumbed at her tears, then wrapped her gently in his arms.

His gaze settled on the wall. To the hundreds of clippings and the collage of strings; the black and white photos of the kids.

‘Give me two minutes . . .’ *Where’s my phone?* ‘We’ll talk, okay.’

‘Yes,’ she took his cheeks in her hands. ‘Everything I’ve said. I swear to you, it’s the truth. Everything!’ The passion in those stormy grey eyes, now given way to a vulnerable young woman. They closed as her lips found his again.

‘Hey, I’ll send a text. Why don’t you make some more coffee.’

‘What’s with the red strings?’ Jack asked. They weren’t there before he’d slept. Numerous bits of coloured twine woven back and forth across the map like a doily. ‘Where’s this?’ he pointed to a place where all the red threads crossed.

Chali picked her way across the papers on the floor.

‘The white pins denote the sites of the abductions. The red strings show what happens if we run a line from each abduction site, to a site that is its exact *opposite*.’ She began plucking at the webbing. ‘Look, from South Dakota to Alabama. Wisconsin to Texas. Wyoming to South Carolina.’ She picked up each hanging thread and tied them off to the pin opposite. ‘Tell me you see?’

A pretty pattern forming? ‘I’m not sure,’ he said.

‘Look at the board, Jack, not at me.’ She kissed him and lifted his face. ‘Tell me what you see.’ Her energy had returned as she plucked at the threads. ‘All the red chords pass through . . .’

‘The same place,’ Jack got it. He didn’t normally need things pointed out to him, but the last few hours were an exception.

She was right. Abduction sites from all over the country, seemingly haphazard and unconnected. The red strings pulled from one site to their opposite on the map, and they all crossed at one point.

‘An indication of an epicentre,’ he said.

‘Every abduction site has a mirror image. Jack, this has to be relevant.’

‘Or a coincidence?’

‘No, Jack, no. You can’t believe that. Not a coincidence.’

‘Do you have a more detailed map of that area. The exact point where they meet?’

‘Yes, yes,’ she rummaged through another box, ‘in here. I have everything we need in here.’

She was talking in the plural again. *We. All the time, we.* He tried not to look at the bed whenever she said it. It was distracting. Giving off snapshots of the plural on its mattress, all hot and sweaty. No denying it now, they were a cast iron, *WE.* He felt his gut turn, stirred by a spoon. No, it was a ladle hand-forged from extracts of guilt.

Jill?

‘Jack,’ Chali kissed him again, ‘are you okay?’

Are you psychic? ‘Sure,’ he tried to sound convincing. *Concentrate Jack. Threads, Serial killer. Chali . . .* ‘Where is this, Missouri?’

‘Yes,’ the map hurriedly pinned to the wall, ‘I used Google Earth,’ she said. ‘A few other internet tools to get a better grid reference. Jack, look. The abductions seem random on the larger map, until you run the lines from each abduction site to their mirror image. This is their centre. All the lines converge here.’ She jabbed her finger against the paper. ‘They cross here, at this point, in Christian County. Just south of Springfield, Missouri. And there’s more. I searched through every local paper for the last forty years, and I found this.’

‘Every paper for forty years, how?’

‘A computer. Just a few key-words.’

Okay, I knew that.

Jack knew a lot of things. One of them was she would tear that box apart if she didn’t find what she was looking for. He was appreciative that her love making was more sensual. In either case he struggled to keep up. Another pang bit at his stomach. Hardly surprising as he felt sandwiched between the certainty of family damnation, and the spell weaved by his new found passion; a neurotic Siren. A girl with a thing for serial-killers. This was not how he’d envisaged spending his day.

Jack took a couple of steps closer to the wall. *Can it really be as simple as that? Has she found a psycho working through a hundred and eighty degrees?*

‘That’s a lot of ground to cover,’ he said. ‘Most serial-killers don’t track so far from home. Maybe he’s a truck driver, or works for an airline?’

‘Yes, yes, my thoughts too. Here, I have it. I copied this at the library. Come, look.’ She patted the bed, then spread the pages across the cover. She crawled to the pillows and sat crossed-legged, looking pleased with herself. ‘This is him, Jack. I know it.’

The bed again. Twenty-four hours ago it had been a different bed; Jill’s bed. Which was, technically, still *their* bed.

Jack, what are you doing? What have you done?

Jack was making comparisons. He didn't want to, it just happened. And now he was thinking about the kids. What if they found out? What if Jill finds out?

Oh shit, Jack. What are you doing?

* * *

'Jack, are you all right?' *Go to him, hold him. Don't let him feel for anyone but you.* Chali reached out but his focus had shifted again. *I know, it's not fair, but I have no choice.* She shifted towards him. Felt her hand tremble as she reached out; it hadn't before. The time spent together below these covers, they hadn't trembled then. But that hadn't been a lie. She'd wanted him, unexpectedly, undeniably. Sleeping with Jack wasn't part of the plan. *Touch him. Hold him.* What she felt was real.

She liked that he was taller than she. It was nice to reach up and kiss his neck and feel the warmth of his back as she did so. Her hands slid like silken scarves across his shoulders.

'Don't think of them, Jack,' she whispered. 'Think only of me, of no-one but me. I'm yours.' He had a strong heart; she could feel its beat as his chest rose and fell with each inhalation. How wonderful his body felt as she circled him, as her nails dragged gently on his flesh. He was firm again, aroused, compliant. Their lips met and his tongue sought out hers. She was sure now, as their passions met. She was sure that Jack was hers.

Something else too, and so unexpected. A warm tingle that spread from her lips down deep into her tummy as Jack lifted her into his arms.

* * *

Hmm, coffee's good. She was picking up all the papers that had been flung off the bed. The long shirt now buttoned back into place, minus a few.

'Are you going to pay attention now?' she teased. 'Come, sit up. I'll put a face to our killer.'

'Hmm? Probably best if you give me the highlights,' he said.

A couple of red strings still hung loose from the abstract assimilation on the wall. But it all made sense, kinda. Everything up there fitted, sort of. No more guilt in the house either. Just a serene sense of belonging. And a wonderful weariness he planned to repeat.

I could stay here forever. Hmm?

Chali had begun to read aloud holding a newspaper cutting.

‘Edward Critch,’ she read, ‘a thirty-seven year old salesman and resident of Wildfowl, Christian County, was fished out of Springfield Lake on Friday night. After his vehicle careered off the bridge. Officers of the Springfield Police Department had previously flagged down the driver of the vehicle for a stop-light offence. On hearing a sound from the rear of Critch’s car, Officers Jeb Taylor and Lance Hartman ordered the driver to exit his vehicle. Both their weapons were subsequently drawn. Their intention to conduct a more thorough search of the vehicle. The suspect drove off at high speed with the officers in pursuit. After a twenty-two mile chase involving three law enforcement vehicles the suspect’s car crashed through the bridge’s barriers over Beaufort River, and plunged into the water below. Lifting gear later removed the car from the river and found Edward Critch drowned at the wheel. They discovered two, as yet, unidentified bodies in the vehicle’s trunk. Sources reveal that the police have taken two female bodies, one adult, and one child, to the Springfield morgue. Both bodies were of caucasian origin.’

‘What date was that?’ Jack asked. ‘What’s the date on the article?’

‘July fifth, nineteen seventy-two.’

‘Nineteen seventy-two? So what makes you think he’s our boy? Our killer takes kids, not their parents.’

‘The woman wasn’t the mother of Jessica Taylor. She was identified as the girl’s nanny. Jessica was taken from here, Tulsa, in Oklahoma. From a city suburb named Jenks. Jack, I don’t believe she was Edward Critch’s first victim.’

‘So why the nanny then? How did the nanny end up in the trunk?’

‘Collateral damage? Maybe she woke up and heard the abduction? Wrong time wrong place? I don’t know.’

‘So why Critch? What connects him to these other abductions?’

‘Another child went missing, here in St Louis, Illinois?’ Her fingers took a strand of red and hooked the pin into St Louis on the map, then pulled it taught and wrapped it around the pin stuck in Tulsa. ‘A straight line, Jack,’ she said, ‘right through here, our central point. I believe the nanny was collateral damage. An accident even? Perhaps a sudden urge? We may never know. But that straight line, look where it goes, straight through the centre of Springfield. That proves Edward Critch is our killer.’

She was so sure, and so compelling. So pretty. Had she slept with him just to seal the deal? Did it really matter?

Head out of the gutter, Jack. This is all pretty impressive. Hard to deny.

‘Just one thing,’ he said. ‘A flaw in your argument. Didn’t you say the police found Edward Critch at the wheel of his car? That it was pulled from a river.’

‘Yes.’

‘So Edward Critch is dead.’

‘Oui, yes. The police chased Critch’s car for over twenty miles, and yet he never deviated from heading south. He was trying to get home, Jack. Even as they closed in on him. Why? There must have been a reason for that.’

‘You’re not listening, Chali. They found Edward Critch. He’s dead.’

‘When the police searched the Critch residence they found nothing. No sign of any children. There were no clothes, no hair fibres, no trophies. Forensics found nothing. They found nothing, Jack.’

‘So he took the kids somewhere else. Chali, Edward is dead.’

‘Critch lived in the hills, in an area covered with forest. He was trying to get somewhere he knew well; somewhere he felt compelled to run to. Somewhere he hoped to hide.’

‘I get it, I do.’ *But once more for the hard of hearing.* ‘Edward Critch, he’s dead.’ *Are you listening to me?*

‘The police report mentioned something that the newspapers didn’t know, Jack. One of the officers mentioned seeing someone else hiding inside the car. As the car sped off he saw a slight figure look up from the rear seats. His colleague wasn’t able to substantiate the claim. No-one else was found in the car, but . . .’

‘But you think he had an accomplice?’

‘Remember the diary entry?’ She was rustling through the papers again. ‘Returning home has saved me,’ she read aloud. ‘Finding his work has redeemed me. What my father began, I have now pledged myself to finish.’

‘Jack, Edward was married. His wife died a year before the accident. An overdose, I think. But they had a child; a son, Jonas, born in nineteen sixty-one. They didn’t find him at the house, Jack. Jonas was never found. The police concluded that Edward must have murdered his own son, maybe buried him somewhere in the forest.’ She shook the papers at him like a fist. ‘They were wrong. It was *Jonas* in the car with his father. Jack, I think Jonas returned, and has carried on his father’s work.’

‘Right, I get it. That’s why the police aren’t interested isn’t it. Abductions spread over forty years, in more than a dozen states, and by people that are *officially dead*. Who’d want to do the leg-work on that one?’

‘They were very nice to me,’ she shrugged. ‘But they looked at me then, just as you look at me now.’

‘Chali, I get it. I do. Why the cops, the Feds, they’re not interested.’ He couldn’t take his eyes off the walls. ‘Where the hell did you get all of this anyway? Where did you get the journal entries?’

Fine, don’t answer. His gaze settled on the photo of a little girl. Two thousand and fifteen, the last victim on the wall.

‘Jack, help me.’

All those red strings, every one of them passing through that same point on the map. I’m gonna regret this. ‘I guess I do have more free time than law enforcement,’ he said. ‘Shit, I think you’re onto something here.’ *She must be.*

‘Oh Jack, thank you.’ She sprang into his arms, legs wrapped tightly around him. *Kiss, kiss, kiss.* It was a frontal assault, frenetic and passionate. Her face hugged his as if he’d just saved the world. *Kiss, kiss, kiss.* ‘Now we are truly partners?’

Jack, what have you got yourself mixed up in? He peeled her off.

‘So, the working theory here is that Edward had somewhere, a place he took the kids, and the women. A lair of some kind. And you think the prodigal son has resurrected, what, one half of the family business?’

‘Yes, exactly.’

‘You might want to let go of me now.’

‘Yes, sorry,’ *Kiss.* ‘Thank you.’ *Kiss.* ‘We’ll make a great team.’ *Kiss, kiss.*

‘Tell me what you know about Edward Critch. Who was he? Where did he work? Family, hobbies, interests? Have you been to Springfield and checked him out with the locals? Someone must have known him, or at least remember him from back then. Law enforcement was pretty backward in the seventies. Cops had donuts, not computers. Pooling resources wasn’t so popular. Still isn’t, come to think of it. The FBI was in its infancy where behavioural analysis was involved,’ he ran his finger down a thread. ‘Those poor kids. I doubt anyone had even heard of an Amber Alert back then.’ She looked like small child waiting for a lolly. ‘We need to start by finding out who Edward Critch really was. *You need to go to Springfield.*’

What? Why the face? What did I say?

‘I can’t go to Springfield, Jack. I was hoping that, that you would go.’

‘Me? I can’t just take a road trip to Missouri. How do I square that with my boss?’ *What would I tell, Jill? Shit, Jill?* ‘Look, Chali, I have to go. I need to get my head straight about all this.’ *About us?* ‘Don’t look

like that, I'll be back. Mind if I take these?' he grabbed his bag and pulled out his phone. 'I'll need to take some photos of the walls, and familiarise myself with all of this, is that okay? Maybe I could interest my editor in the story.'

Maybe I can lie through my teeth to my ex whilst I'm at it. Jack, what the hell are you doing?

'Where am I?' asked Alice. Stood in the doorway, her wavy blonde hair flat on one side from such a long sleep, her face patterned by the pillow. 'Where am I?' she asked again. 'Where's Mummy?' Little eyes welling with tears.

Jonas lowered the book he read. He understood the caution in her tone. The frailness of her voice as tiny hands rubbed away confusion and sleep from her eyes. Wide staring blue eyes, cold like mountain springs, toward him. Jonas rose from his chair.

'Don't be frightened,' he said. 'I promise, I won't hurt you.'

'Who are you?'

'You must be hungry.' The children were always hungry. 'I'll get you some milk,' he said. 'It's fresh, and cold.'

The small fridge was in an adjoining area. What was once a cupboard, was now a simple kitchen. Two cupboards and a short work-surface. A fridge from the seventies; inside were several bottles of beer, a carton of milk and a sandwich Jonas had bought at a gas station en-route.

'You were in my room,' said Alice. 'You took me.'

'I was careless,' Jonas' voice apologetic. 'You woke up. That shouldn't have happened.'

He kept her in sight at all times. The little girl in the nightgown with the yellow roses, that he'd washed and pressed especially for her. She looked so cute, hands clenched below her chin. Gazing all around his room; doubtless looking for the way out. Jonas understood she was frightened. He'd talk to her. Assuage her fears. Milk and cookies would help.

'I want to go home.' Alice looked down at her ankle, at the chain that trailed behind.

‘The bracelet on your ankle is for your protection.’ Jonas said. ‘I hope you don’t mind but I’ve only got full fat?’

Alice didn’t respond, but that was okay. She was trying to understand, he could see it in her features. A rounded little face brimmed innocence. It was the first time he’d seen her without a smile. Where was she? What was going on? Who is the man?

‘No, please don’t.’ Tears looked to be imminent. The last thing Jonas wanted was for Alice to cry. ‘Cookies,’ he said, lifting the plate in his hand. ‘Oatmeal and raisin, I brought them especially for you. They’re your favourite.’ Her lips were quivering rapidly. ‘I’m sorry; this is a lot to take in. But you must be brave.’ Her big blue eyes started to well with tears. ‘Try not to be frightened,’ he pleaded.

‘Mummy?’ She croaked.

‘She’s not here, so I’ll be looking after you for a while. And I promise, hand on my heart, that no-one will ever hurt you again.’

‘Mummy?’ Alice repeated, this time with more grit in her voice. ‘Where’s my mummy?’ Tears broke free of their reservoir and began to stream down rosy cheeks. ‘I want my mummy?’

This was always difficult. *How to deal with this?* Calm, he must remain calm. *Don’t shout like last time.* More tears, more crying. He’d always found the females hardest to pacify. He held out the milk as Alice sobbed, her petite lips trembling, each breath more broken than the one previous. Alice yanked on the chain and started to bawl. Full volume was being achieved; violent yanking of the metal adding fresh frenzy.

‘Mummy, Mummy, Mummy!’

The child was hysterical. Was it a side effect of the drug? Mostly they were tearful; some cried, whilst others withdrew and said nothing. He liked those ones the best. Why was this child fitting like this?

As Jonas stepped forward, Alice stepped back. Then again taking herself fully out of the room. He yanked the curtain across between them, hoping by removing himself from her sight it would quieten Alice down.

It wasn’t that anyone could hear her. No, that was impossible. No-one ever heard what happened down here. It was the screech, the pitch of the cries; it began to grate on him. More so as the intensity of her noise rose.

This has to stop. ‘You have to stop, Alice.’ *Stop . . . stop.* ‘Alice, you must be quiet.’

Jonas liked the quiet. If you are quiet you are invisible. No sound, no presence, no-one knows that you exist. Jonas put his hands to his ears; he had to block it out. *Lah, lah.* Make it go away. *Lah, lah, lah.* This

hadn't happened since the Asian girl, back in ninety-six. 'Please, be quiet.' *This has to stop.* 'Alice, you have to end this.' *This has to stop.*

Jonas' hand reached for the curtain and gathered the fabric in his fist. He ripped the barrier aside.

Alice screamed louder as if her world were about to end.

The man who held her hand had said his name was Jonas. He seemed nice. He'd given her tissues to wipe away the tears, and spoke softly to her to ease her fear. And she liked the bear he'd given her, its name was Barney. Such a nice bear with big paws and orange eyes. Alice hugged Barney like an old friend.

For a while Alice had felt sick. Then she'd become hungry. Her tummy had grumbled like granddad's snoring when he slept in his chair. "You must never talk to strangers. Never follow a stranger anywhere. Never take sweets from people you don't know." No-one had said she couldn't take cookies.

The cookies she ate were just like the ones that Mummy bought, as she reached for her third. He'd said she could eat as many as she liked, which was nice. But the man, Jonas, couldn't really be nice because he'd locked a bracelet around her ankle. She didn't like the bracelet, nor the chain attached. It wasn't very heavy, but it made her feel like she'd done something wrong, that she'd been naughty, which of course she hadn't. But she did like cookies.

Alice put the biscuit down and gave Barney another hug. She'd tried to feed him a cookie, but Barney wasn't keen. He didn't like the room either, it was too small, and too smelly.

Am I underground? It smelled like she was. *Badgers live underground.* Alice didn't think she'd like living with badgers. And she'd never been in a room without windows. Barney didn't like that either.

The room she sat in had one door, blocked by an old curtain. Even the bed was aged, its white painted legs rusted by time. The bed covers had been knitted, the kind she'd see in school books. The ones with pictures about the past. She didn't like the slim dresser to its side, nor the old lamp on top that had no shade. None of the colours matched. *Not a nice*

bedroom. It's not nice at all. Alice put the half eaten cookie down. Barney wanted to go loo-loo and she wanted to go with him.

The chain made a chinking sound as she got off the bed. She went down on all fours and crawled to the curtain. Jonas had said she shouldn't come out, but maybe just a peek beyond the curtain?

'Are we in a basement, Barney?'

It wasn't like the basement at home. That room had proper walls. They weren't made from mud and stones, and it certainly didn't have plants growing out between the timbers on the ceiling. Barney thought the plants were scary. Alice encouraged him to be brave.

She told him she'd watch over him if he peeked a little further to see if Jonas was still out there.

'Don't touch it, Barney, it smells. Just look through the gap and see if he's on the other side.'

It was weird out there; everything a shade of red. And not a nice red, not like Mummy's car. On the floor were three thick black wires, one of which came along the wall into her room. The lamp on the side was plugged into the socket at the end.

Alice dared to finger the curtain further. Barney was scared, so she turned him to face her tummy, then made the hole large enough to see the far end of the room beyond. A big room, as big as the lounge at home. She could see the side of a large, old fashioned chair, its covering old and scarred. On the floor was a large piece of carpet, as old as the chair and not very pretty. 'It's all right Barney, I've got you. Yes, I'll ask the man.' She poked her head slowly beyond the curtain. 'Jonas, are you there? Barney wants loo-loo,' she said in a hush. Then noticed a bookcase. There were more books stacked in piles on the floor. 'Barney, I think we're in a library.'

The Pastor at church had told all the children that, "Reading was a sport practiced by wise men."

'Do you think Jonas is a wise man? Yes, I think you're right, Barney. Even wise people can be scary. Don't look up.'

There were markings on the wall above her head. Like an animal had clawed at the hard mud. The more she blinked the clearer the scratchings appeared in the ruby light. Very strange symbols. *Disney would never make pictures like those. Huh, not unless the Wicked Witch made them?* 'Barney, I hope the Wicked Witch doesn't live here.'

Alice froze. The further she went the more sick she felt. It was that cookie, maybe. Her legs still felt very heavy, and she had a headache. Poor Barney, he felt the same.

As she stared at the strange markings Alice became aware of something else. Her heart sank as she heard whispering. Someone else, *something else*, was in the room with them. The whispers gained intensity. They sounded angry. Her little heart sank as Jonas stood up from the chair; she hadn't seen him. He strode toward the bookcase at the far end of the room. He seemed angry, muttering, dismissive of the whispers. She wasn't sure if he spoke to himself, or there were others hidden in the room.

Well, Alice wanted to be angry too. She tried, but that emotion was hiding. Anchored somewhere below the cold-cowering instinct that prevailed. She didn't like this, not any of it. Why had he brought her here to this place? What had she done wrong for someone to come and steal her away like this?

Mummy, please, come and find me.

She sat up and hugged Barney even tighter, unaware how she rocked back and forth. She should go back to the bed before he saw her. When grown up get angry, children should give them space. But the way the chain lay between her and the curtain, it would make too much noise.

Stay still, Barney; he hasn't noticed us yet. If we don't look up he won't see us.

Jonas was pointing. No, not pointing, waving. He waved his finger with purpose. But at who? There was no-one else in the room.

Why is he so angry?

'No,' he shouted and startled her. 'You should go. Go now. Go away, I'm not listening.'

Alice didn't like it when adults shouted. This strange man, in this ruby red place. She wanted to cry again, and Barney wanted loo-loo very badly. But she didn't want to ask.

'I don't believe you,' Jonas shouted. 'No, it's not fair. You can't just come and go like this. I won't allow it. I won't. Oh really, I don't have a choice. This is my fucking place; it's not for you. Not for any of you. It's mine, d'you hear me. It's mine, mine!'

Say the Lord's Prayer? Sing a happy hymn. Be brave like a lion. The tune flowed silently in her head. Then faltered as Jonas shouted again. He was using vile, naughty words. Alice put her hands over Barney's ears. She didn't feel like a lion, more like a mouse, as she hugged Barney tight.

Did she look that silly when she stamped her feet? *No, no, no.* That's what she'd said at dinner because she didn't want to eat greens. *I won't eat them.* She'd said. The last words she'd said to Mummy. Tight

mouthed and horrible, that's how she'd been before being sent to bed. She'd even turned away as Mummy kissed her goodnight.

Mummy?

It was the last thing she remembered before waking up to see *him*.

I want Mummy.

'I don't exist any more,' Jonas shouted. 'They think I'm dead, and that's the way it stays. No, no, I don't believe you.' His finger wagged toward the bookcase. It stabbed and pointed. 'You lie,' he shouted, and began to pace back and forth.

Alice shrank. *Please don't look this way.* She hunkered closer to the wall.

'Go away,' Jonas screamed. 'Leave me alone. Lah-lah-lah-lah-lah.'

Who doesn't he want to listen to? Alice's eyes darted from one side of the room to the other, then settled on the shadow in the doorway. *A grown up making the lah-lah noise?*

'Don't you bring them into this. Of course I see them; don't you think I see them? I see their faces every day. I don't forget, not any of them. They're all up here, and when I go, I'll take them all with me. No, no, don't you bring her into this. I'm not listening. No, no, no . . . she was perfect, she wasn't like him. Edward was evil. She was, pure.'

Jonas paced around the chair, and then to the bookcase.

'I told you, I'm not going to listen. Fuck off back to where you came from.' His hand browsed along the spines as if it might distract him. 'No, don't you bring *her* into this.' His head lowered and rested against the books. 'She was a flower.' His voice no longer laced with anger. 'Mother was a flower that Edward wouldn't allow to bloom. Please, don't blame her. It wasn't her. She didn't have a choice. None of us had a choice. I was a child.'

Barney couldn't breath as Alice cuddled him so firm. Jonas stood motionless, looked spent. For a long moment there was silence. Then he began to speak again. More self assured now, with a meanness in his tone.

'Who's coming?' Jonas asked.

Someone's coming? Have they come to find me?

'Who did they tell?'

Has Mummy come to get me?

'No, that's not possible. No-one knows my true identity. No-one knows about Jonas.'

Alice put her hand to her mouth as he turned toward her. Eyes angered as if everything were her fault. She shouldn't have left the room.

He'd told her not to leave. He'd pointed his finger at her and made it very clear. "It is very naughty to leave this room."

Jonas stared directly toward her, then turned away. He mumbled and grumbled, his hands filled with dismissive motions.

Why didn't he see me?

'It's not fair.' Jonas' voice a whisper again, which was somehow worse. *Whisper, whisper, whisper.* She couldn't hear the words.

Jonas reached for a book on the first shelf, pulled down a slim volume that he stared at thoughtfully. Then, as he sat on the arm of the chair, Jonas opened the book and began to write.

Alice knew what that was. She had a book very similar, but not as big. Hers had a lock, and pictures; My Little Mermaid printed on the cover. Alice wondered what a man like Jonas would write in a diary. She wondered why the floor was suddenly wet.

Alice doesn't need loo-loo anymore.

Another drawer slammed shut in the kitchen. Another sign that Jill wasn't happy.

'Jack darling, I know you have issues with your back but do you have to keep so many supplements here? You'll glow in the dark. And these are prescription drugs, they should be locked away. Jesus, Jack, you have more pills than a bloody pharmacy. Codeine, Prilosec, Celebrex. What the hell is Celebrex? And don't frustrated housewives use Pregabalin? Jack, are you listening to me? Jack, I want my drawer back.'

Jack couldn't hear, he had the roar of the vacuum in his ears. Besides, he had his own, bigger problems to worry about. Like, why the hose on this thing wasn't long enough, and why did they buy this frigging thing anyway?

'Fucking Dyson cleaners,' he shouted. The TV ad promised there would never be any loss of suction. 'Lying bastards,' he scowled. 'Why did we buy such a stupid, fluffy, carpet?'

Duck Egg blue, for crying out loud? He'd forgotten that it blended with the *sea breeze whisper* paint that Jill had made him roller throughout the lounge. He clunked the sucky end of the vacuum into the coffee table legs, and then again. Clunk-clunk-clunk.

Take a breath, Jack.

'Mum,' Ben hollered. 'Dad's cleaning the house; he's breaking things.'

Busted by the house's whistle-blower.

'Hey, Ben. Shoes go on outside, and doing that with your face instead of your finger is still offensive. In fact, here, you do this.'

'Yeah, right? See ya,' shouted Ben.

'Jack?' Great, now Jill wanted to crowd his cleaning space. 'What's going on?' she asked.

What does that mean, going on? Nothing's going on. I'm being helpful. Nothing to hide.

'Just thought I'd vacuum,' he said.

He could vacuum until Christmas, it wouldn't lessen the guilt. He'd slept with another woman, and less than twenty-four hours after sleeping with Jill. But they were split, right? He'd moved out. It had been months. So why was he vacuuming the bloody carpet?

'Jack?'

Yes, dear? 'Thought you'd gone.'

'What's going on?' she asked. 'The last couple of days, you've been, well, odd.'

'Odd?'

'Yes, odd?' Her eyes narrowed. 'What's going on, Jack?'

She crossed the lounge and reached for the Dyson. She took the handle and switched the motor off.

'The last time you acted like this you'd borrowed my car, and it came back broken.'

'That wasn't my fault. I explained about the old person and the rabbit. It wasn't my fault.'

'So it's not my car then. So what's wrong?'

'The downstairs is vacuumed and the kitchen is salmonella free. Did I mention how much I love those lemon fresh wipes?' He flapped one in front of himself to prove it was true. 'Two secs and I'll be upstairs giving the kids' rooms the exact same treatment. Hey, if I'm not down in an hour, call a hazmat team.' She wasn't smiling. 'Any idea where the rubber gloves are?'

'Jack, what's going on?'

A chill wind blew in from Alaska. It blew south and whistled straight up his shorts.

'Am I that obvious?'

'Completely.'

Think fast, think slippery. Suddenly it was out there.

'I'm going away on assignment for a few days, maybe a week. Could even be two.'

'Assignment?'

'Big story,' he wasn't lying. 'Boss wants a headline on the football. It's the semi final of the MidWest . . .' *Something or other.*

'Fine, call me when you get back.'

What, is that it? You don't want to know where? No, I'll miss you honey, or, I'll pine for you whilst you're gone. Just, fine, call me?

Jill seemed to reflect on the statement. She took a step back.

Yeah, say you'll miss me. I dare you.

'I'm not stupid, Jack. I know exactly what you're doing.'

There she blows. The same Alaskan gale, this time down his spine.

'You're doing this to be away on Saturday, aren't you?'

Saturday?

'You're a complete and utter git, Jack.'

I am?

'Saturday, Jack. *Us time*, remember?' Her hand went to her chest, another sigh set free.

Saturday? Oh shit, I forgot.

'You son of a bitch, Jack. No, don't bother, it's fine. Go. Really, get lost.' She was off, arm in the air and really pissed off. 'Oh, and I may not be here when you get back; I may be on a cruise having some *us time* with the kids.' She left the room. Three seconds later she hissed. 'Empty the drawer, Jack.'

Drawer?

'What drawer?'

‘Come with me,’ Jack pleaded. ‘We’re supposed to be a team, remember? We’ll be in Springfield by nightfall.’ He took Chali’s arm and ushered her over to the seats by the wall. People were staring again, through the window at them. ‘Six hours,’ he said, ‘maybe seven with a couple of potty breaks. Chali, I don’t want to go without you.’

‘I’ll join you, I promise. Just not now. I can’t leave, it’s my grand-mama. She’s ill, Jack. But I’ll find someone to stay with her. Give me a day, maybe two. I so want to be with you.’ She wrapped her hands around his. ‘Believe me, I want to come. I do.’

He wanted to hold her, kiss her, again and again. Last night had been the worst, being away from her. Jill kept asking him what was wrong. She’d wanted to know why he was perspiring. Being so twitchy and solemn.

The sounds on the TV had driven him mad. Bang, bang, scream. “I’ll get you mother-fucker.” “Stab the bitch in the eye.” Since when did cartoons get so bloody intense? Ben loved them. Jill was happy reading by the lamplight. Kirsty was upstairs online.

Eventually Jill had told him to just “spit-it-out.” But how could he? Not the sort of thing you drop into bedroom conversation. No honey, work was fine. I even managed to mow the lawn, take out the garbage, buy a paper . . . Oh, did I mention? I’m humping a young nubile nut-job that I met at the cinema. Yes, that’s right, when I was taking you and the kids out. He’d just upped and left. Grabbed his coat and announced he had stuff to do at the office.

The moment his car hit the tarmac he’d speed-dialled Chali. Her voice was barely enough to bring him down. Thirty minutes later he was at the cabin. He’d almost bust the door from its hinges in his eagerness. He’d

found her lying in bed, she was waiting to take him in her arms. Last night was pure passion, it was bliss.

‘Jack, are you listening to me?’

‘Yes, sorry, miles away.’

‘You must find out what you can about Edward, and his son. Phone me every day, I want to hear your voice. I’ll *sext* you every night, how does that sound?’

That sounded grrrrreat. He had absolutely no idea what it meant.

‘Give me two days, maybe three. I will come, I promise.’

He stretched over and kissed her on the lips. He wanted to stick his tongue in her mouth and suck the saliva from hers. But an old man with white hair was eyeballing them. His ancient wife, all wrinkles and blue rinse, stared too. Jack gave them both a teenage grin.

‘Maybe they are too old to remember what passion is like.’ Chali’s fingers encouraged his gaze back to her. ‘I don’t want to get old, Jack.’

‘Who does?’ He poked his tongue out in the oldies direction.

‘Jack, stop that.’ Her words cushioned by amusement. ‘He might come over and give you what for.’

‘Just so long as his wife doesn’t. Eurrgh, repel borders.’

‘Ha, ha, don’t be so mean. I’m sure she’s a very respectable woman.’

‘She needs to stare at someone else, nosy cow.’

‘Perhaps she wants you as her toy-boy?’

‘Then I’ll point her towards a toy-shop. Chali, phone an agency, please. Get a nurse to watch granny. Let’s leave together, tomorrow.’

‘No, today, Jack, it must be today. Go to Springfield. Find out what you can about Edward Critch. Through him we will find Jonas. I swear, *kiss*, I will come, *kiss, kiss*, as soon as I can.’

Starbucks seemed a long drive ago as Jack shifted in his seat again. The little Honda idling in a parking spot outside Danny's Diner, somewhere in Missouri. Simply Red played a mellow mood in the background, a song about money being too tight to mention. *So why mention it?* He'd sat for twenty minutes, maudlin about his situation, and looking at the damn phone in the hope it would ring. *Ring!* He was busting for the toilet as well, whilst the last couple of days circled around in his head.

He was parked, God knows where, some two hundred and fifty miles from home. Jill wasn't talking to him, and who could blame her, leaving the house like that and driving off. Boy, was he gonna get it when he got back. Jack dabbed recall on his cell-phone again.

Why doesn't she answer? The further Jack had got from Chali, the more agitated he'd become. He'd got it bad, whatever *it* was. *One minute I'm at the movies, and then I'm crossing state-lines looking for a serial killer.* Much more of this and he was going to start smoking again.

Beep, beep. A text announced its arrival. His fingers worked quicker at the screen than a teenager's thumbs in an online death match. The text opened.

I want to feel your body against me, your lips pressed hard against mine. I so wish I was with you now. Soon, Jack, soon. Be patient. Find out what you can. Wait for me. Xxx

He wanted to reply. Why couldn't he reply? *Fuck it.* He pressed speed dial number two. At least Jill was still number one.

"The number you are calling is unavailable," the message repeated itself. He hung up, dialled again, got the same outcome.

'Shit, didn't the state of Missouri use satellites?' *Missouri?* 'What the hell am I doing in Missouri?' Jack clicked his phone off, and probably saved it from imminent destruction.

The sun was setting outside on a near empty carpark, adjacent a desolate looking road, which ran for as far as his eyes could see both ways. Looking at the diner didn't help. A square building boxed by glazing all around. The thought of food only served to make him hungry. One last look at his phone, still no service. The Diner lights more enticing by the second. Jack needed coffee, and maybe some eggs, a side of bacon, some beans. Most of the food categories that Jill had banned from his diet. He doubted they'd serve up a Quorn steak covered with free range eggs and vegetables.

Maybe road trips aren't that bad.

The Honda's door creaked open, grit crunched beneath his boots. The light of the diner inviting as he walked toward the front door.

Inside was warm, and the smell of sweet syrup and pancakes. A hint of bitter coffee hung in the air. Before his cheeks had formally checked into the vinyl covered booth a waitress appeared with a menu.

'Coffee?' She asked.

'Looks good,' he said. 'I'm a man in need.'

'I never met a man who wasn't,' she mused. 'The refills are free. Today's specials are on the board,' she added. 'Check out the menu, but anything written in black stopped at six. Give me a wave when you're ready.'

Jack's cup was being filled by a woman whose hair took her height barely above five feet. She wore a pink uniform, and a hat over frizzy locks tied back into a tail. She was slim, pert, and handsome for her age; which Jack guessed to be around fifty. The coffee she served was hot nectar for a road-weary man. A gentle slurp confirmed it was fresh, and served to aggravate his bladder. Two hundred and fifty miles without a pee, that had to be some kind of record.

The last time he'd driven from one state into another he'd been a teenager. That road-trip, more fun than this one. He hadn't realised that Kansas was so flat. Field after field, that was mostly sown with corn. A few cows scattered over the land like sprinkles on a cup cake.

More coffee, getting low, what did she say? Wave?

Best to mind his P's and Q's, as Missouri was officially inside the Bible Belt. The further east you travel across the US the more devout America becomes. Bible sales peak, and preachers walk the streets; God tries to convert any poor sap that crosses his path. Jack frowned at the thought. He was no fan of religion.

Any further east and the Amish would want to take his car away. Trade it for a pony and cart. Head south now and the Baptists would try

to save his soul. Best of luck to them, it had already been sold. Jack took a last gulp, then his hand went in the air. Somewhere in the back of his head he was remembering an article he read, that suggested religion was mainly for show in Missouri. The state was becoming better known for drug dealers and gambling. Guess he'd find out soon enough. Another wave of his hand brought the response he craved.

'You ready for that re-fill already?'

'Fill me up,' he said, and watched the hot steamy liquid pour like gravy into his cup.

'Just passing through?' She asked.

'I've got business in the area.'

'You buying or selling?'

He thought for a moment. 'Accumulating,' he said. 'Researching for information.'

'Then you'd best find yourself a library, Honey. Unless you need help with your motorcycle.' She inadvertently nodded toward some bikers who'd just become rowdy. A roar that softened to a hearty laughter. 'Don't mind them; they just like to make a noise. Now, can I get you something to eat?'

'I'm good with coffee, but thank you.'

Jack barely noticed her leave. He was looking for a sign, a plaque, anything that suggested urinal relief. Nothing obvious; just white walls covered with posters. Images of retro food and gasoline. Was that ZZ Top playing in the background.

A couple of truckers sat three booths up, their rigs parked outside. By the door a gaggle of aged rednecks sat deep in hushed conversation. Odd looking men, aged and skinny, with faces that only their dogs would kiss. Probably plotting the return of the Confederacy.

Was Missouri in the Confederacy?

A safe distance away were a half dozen rowdy bikers, all leather clad and facial hair, their Harley hoes drinking in a booth. They seemed content to shoot pool below a plastic canopy that lit a red baize. Jack noted the occasional looks of suspicion toward a law enforcement officer sat at the bar. All shiny boots and six shooter, sat talking to a man wearing an apron who cleaned glasses.

One more sip from the steamy cup, then he *would* check out the menu. Or maybe not? *Just gotta close my eyes for a moment.* His head rested on his arms. *Just for a moment.* Sleep reached out for Jack.

The waves broke one after another. A sedate whoosh of a sound as they reached up the sand, and then were dragged away.

Jack was laughing, and he wasn't alone judging by the footprints that covered the fine sand. He felt someone grab his shorts and pull them.

'Hey, ease up, we're not alone out here.' He laughed as the warm sunshine pinched at his butt cheeks, quick hands keen to retrieve his dignity. 'Where are you going?'

Jack gave chase to the tanned shapely blonde who absconded, she was laughing too much to run with any serious intent to flee.

'You're not going to get away with that,' Jack laughed. 'You can't escape . . .' His feet stumbled forward, one hand attached to his shorts the other reaching out for Jenny. He loved the way she laughed; that naughty infectious sound she made.

He could overtake her, but why would he? Not with such a glorious vantage. Firm and round they rocked beneath a cling-film bikini. Her long legs and tanned body, half coated in sand, from when they'd rolled through the edge of the surf together. A love clinch that Jack was keen to reenact, as she ran laughing in the long grass of the dunes. Then he had her, lifted into his arms, and then sprawled into a lovers clinch in the sand. Happiness in paradise, until a dog barked its owner's approach.

Ripped paper carpeted the wooden floor, presents left in all corners of the room. Everyone was so happy. Little Evie was ablaze with smiles and giggles. What three year old wouldn't as the gaggle of kids that ringed the table burst into another song.

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you . . ."

'Blow the candles out, Evie.' Jack was more excited than his baby girl. 'Blow Evie, blow . . . Yaaay, big wish for the birthday girl.' A round of applause ensued.

Look at her, at *all* the happy faces. Evie's features were lit with joy, her eyes bright like burning candles. Big and blue, and full of sparkle, just like her mommy's. *I love you*. He mouthed to Jenny. He could tell she was overjoyed, and who wouldn't be when they had a family as perfect as this.

The room was a snapshot of pure pleasure. Grandparents, parents, friends and neighbours. All the girls from the Kindergarten to share the day, as the noisy kids filled their faces with jelly and ice-cream. Balloons and bunting all around. It was pure heaven, with Evie taking centre stage.

But despite the melee there was only one person that Jack had eyes for. Mom, Jenny, her family pride pinned like a badge of honour.

‘Hey handsome, you want some jelly and ice-cream when the kids go to bed?’

‘Uh huh, uh huh.’ What big kid wouldn’t? He felt her arms slip around his waist. A gentle kiss on his cheek. The words ‘*I love you too*’ whispered in his ear.

‘Are you sure you know where you’re going, Jack?’

‘Hey Jack-Nav never gets his girls lost.’ He was lying of course. Déjà vu was creeping up on him again. Each avenue of forest pines looked like the last, and now the darkness had rolled in to confuse him even more. So they’d spend a little longer in the car, that was okay. The cab was warm from the heater, and he could smell Chanel, Jenny’s favourite perfume. The Volvo’s auto headlamps switched themselves on and the long dashboard glowed in a calming blue.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Jenny, ‘you’ll enjoy putting the tent up in the dark. Evie and I will find a nice comfy place to sit, watch, oh and criticise. Isn’t that right sweetie? Sweetie? Aww Jack, she’s fallen asleep.’

She had too. Evie was slumped forward on her booster, strapped in by the belt. Her blonde mop hanging; she was a marionette without the strings. Six years old and obviously overcome with excitement about her first trip into the wilds. ‘Aww, she’s snoring, that’s so cute. Jack, can you hear her, she’s snoring.’

‘Yeah, just like her mom.’

‘Huh? I don’t snore. Jack, I don’t believe you said that.’ Neither did he. ‘Now, if you want to talk about someone snoring.’

‘Cute . . . she’s cute when she sleeps. Cute like her mom.’ He gave a big smile and impersonated a nodding dog. ‘Cute, that’s all I’m saying.’

‘Good save,’ said Jenny.

Hey, he kept goal for the Gazette’s soccer team. Safest hands in the squad.

‘Guess you don’t have to sleep with one eye open tonight,’ she added. ‘Now remind me, how clever you feel about being lost?’ She had her bare feet up on the dash; another mint was popped onto her tongue, which was being poked out in Jack’s direction.

He didn’t want to say it. There was just no way avoid it.

Just spit it out, Jack.

‘Jenny darling. In the glove box there’s a small plastic box.’ *Deep breath, Jack.* ‘I may need it’s contents.’ *Yep, here it comes.*

‘I knew it; Ha, Jack-Nav finally admits he doesn’t know where he is.’

‘Just need to check my longitudes are in harmony with my latitudes, that’s all. There’s no need to be alarmed.’

‘Aww, that’s okay, Jenny still loves her Jacky-wacky, even if he is losty-wosty. Shall I get it out for you darlin?’

Do I detect sarcasm in your voice?

‘No SatNav in here,’ she said.

‘No? Did I leave it behind the seat again?’ He reached, couldn’t quite get to it. ‘And I’m not really lost, you do know that.’

Her nod was a bit too affirming as his finger tips touched the wire, so close, he nearly had it.

‘Do you think we’ll see grizzlies?’ He asked.

‘Jack, let’s think more Bambi than Jurassic Park. Oh, and some of those cute little furry things. You know, the ones with the buck teeth.’

‘Gophers?’ *She wants to see gophers?* He turned his head back to see why that bloody SatNav wouldn’t shift from the net. *Pull it Jack . . . Pull the damn thing out.*

‘Jack . . .’ *Jenny’s hand, her voice full of panic? Screaming.* ‘You’ve drifted . . .’ Her head turned toward him; her eyes stayed fixed ahead.

Jack’s adrenaline surged and instinct turned at the wheel before his eyes even knew why.

As his gaze lifted, a leviathan filled the windscreen. The oncoming face of death filling the glass as it flashed out unholy light from its headlamps. A terrible horn roared to precede the impact that hit Jack’s car with biblical authority.

Jack shot forward, his seatbelt determined to resist his momentum. It gauged deep into his flesh. Not a joint was spared as the car twisted like a diver leapt out into the air from a high-board. Lights flashed, images blurred, Jack danced like a crash test dummy. His body threatened to tear itself apart as the world outside was torn away. The car’s tyres lifted, the cab’s momentum thrown sideways, then up and over. Confused, disorientated, devastated, the grind and crunch of metal carnally brutal.

A hammer slammed into Jack’s face and the world stopped spinning. Chanel No.5, the last thing he sensed. ‘*JENNY*,’ the last word he spoke before the darkness came.

‘Jenny?’

‘What?’ Jack’s head jerked up to the name. A woman’s voice, but not hers. Not Jenny’s.

‘You must be psychic,’ she said, ‘you know my name?’

Dreaming, he’d been dreaming. Only it was never *just* a dream.

‘I can be your Jenny,’ the woman said, her voice filled with twang; it barely bothered to disguise a mocking tone.

The woman stood before him was six foot, maybe taller. *Why are you staring at me?* ‘What do you want?’ Jack asked.

‘Don’t be cranky, Honey. I thought,’ she kept looking away, smiling. ‘you looked lonely. Figured you might want to buy a girl a drink.’

‘No,’ he cleared his throat, ‘thank you. Go away.’

‘Go away? I’m just trying to be friendly.’

‘Then do it somewhere else, please.’

‘You’re not very hospitable are you? A girl comes over to say hello and you . . . well, you insult me?’

‘Lady, are you hard of hearing?’

‘No, and I ain’t rude either. Hey, don’t you sigh at me. Hey Bull? Bull, this man’s being mean to me.’

Bull? Who the fuck’s Bull?

The woman stood hands-on-hips. Her face pinched, with a dimple in the cheek. Her green eyes highlighted by thick black eye-liner, and she smelled of something familiar. A nice scent. Jack got a better view now his eyes were awake and focused. His uninvited guest was in her late-twenties with dark hair, and she looked mean. A gum chewing, downright unfriendly image, who stood over him. Had he just killed her pet rabbit or something?

She turned away and called out again. ‘Bull? Hey, Bull.’

Who the hell was Bull? One thing he knew for sure was a woman with an ass that big shouldn't wear jeans that tight.

'Lady, please, I'm tired. Play with someone else.'

'I'll see that grin wiped off your face, Mister.'

'Is he bothering you, sweet-cheeks?'

Sweet-cheeks?

Jack could see why his name was Bull. The man was big, more side-ways than up, and his arms bore more hair than was natural for any man. The leather waistcoat he wore stopped fitting properly a good few years back.

'You got a problem, Mister?' Asked Bull.

'No. No, problem. Your woman just took a wrong turn. No harm no foul. But if you don't mind, I was just flipping through the family album.'

His squint showed that Bull had no idea what that meant, which only served to annoy him. Bull's beer bottle clunked down onto the table with a menacing thud. 'Not a problem,' he said, 'just buy Shelley, and me, a drink. Apology accepted.'

Uh-oh, two ton of sorry assed bikers drinking Bud were now drifting toward his booth. He counted, one, two, three . . . it was the entire herd. Bull seemed to have housewife's stare, and directed solely at Jack. He didn't like this, not one bit.

'A drink?' Jack asked. 'And you'll take her away?'

'It's the polite thing to do, Mister.'

'Sure. Tell you what boys; I'll buy everyone a drink, how's that sound?' They seemed impressed. 'Everyone except for . . . you.' Jack pointed his coffee cup at Bull. Hey, the herd seemed to like that too as they jostled for position to gain a better view.

'Are you gonna let him talk to you like that, Bull?'

'Shut your hole, Shelley. You got a big mouth, punk.'

'Bull, you need to get those arms waxed. They're unsightly, and frankly, a little unsettling.'

The entire herd closed in. Several members shook their heads.

'Bull, you smack this guy. Make him buy me a beer,' said Shelley.

'Sure, listen to Shelley. Mother knows best.' Jack helped himself to Bull's beer and took a long gulp from the neck.

Some oohs, and uh-oh's from the herd. From the resulting grins this was obviously way better than shooting pool.

'Tell me something, *Bull*.' Jack tried to bite his lip. Force the muscle in his mouth to be still. 'Are you doing her? Shelley, I mean. She's not what I'd call pretty, but I see the attractions.' He cupped both hands in front of

his chest. 'I bet they're soft, *really, really soft.*' The size of Bull's pupils as they dilated did nothing to cease the voice coming from Jack's mouth. 'You should know something, Bull.' He swallowed hard on the last of his Bud. 'You're not the only one she's doing.'

Half the herd chortled. The other fifty percent shook their heads.

Jack leaned forward and took a good sniff of Shelley. She backed away.

'That's a nice perfume, Shelley,' said Jack. 'The one you're trying to drown under the patchouli oil. Can *you* smell it, Bull? I can. It's Bolt of Lightning from, Jar Parfums. It's very popular with young frisky executives. Lawyers, banker's, anyone that can afford seven hundred dollars a pop.' He could sense Bull's need to sniff his partner. 'Wow, seven hundred bucks? That shit must be brewed by Warlocks and mined by Dwarves in a frosty canyon. But once it's on the skin, it can take days to fade. Shelley, you should shower more often.'

This was good, Jack and Bull were bonding.

'Guess what else I can smell, *Bull?*' He had to stop saying his name like that. 'A man who rolls his own. Well, Shelley's been with someone that smokes cigars. Cuban cigars. Those big, brown smelly ones. You know anyone that smokes cigars, Bull? Ahh, you do don't you? I can see it in your eyes. He's blonde too, isn't he Bull. See the hair on her t-shirt? Just by the collar.'

Shelly reached for her neckline. Bull turned his head away from Jack.

'You see boys, Bull here is ginger. He dyes it black and hides it well, but there's no way they'll let him into the master-race.'

The herd especially liked that. It was roused with expectation at an imminent hospital visit for the loud mouthed fucker who just drank Bull's Bud.

'You got a big fucking mouth, asshole.'

'You got a girl that's cheating on you, *Bull.* Who looks more *stoopid?*'

The spoon in the coffee cup, Jack. Cut your tongue out with the spoon. Do it, and do it now before he kills you.

'Bull . . . he's lying Bull. You gonna let him talk to you like that. You son of a bitch . . . Bull, he's a fucking liar.'

'Shut the fuck up, Shelley. If you've been turning tricks again?'

'So I'm right. Hah, bet she's got more whiskers in her bra and panties. You want me to check for you?'

More 'ooh's', and a 'holy shit,' from the herd. Jack's adrenaline pumped hotter than a steam locomotive. His eagerness to talk crap as-

piring to reach its full velocity. Bull was having a hot flush. The herd tried to whip up the action.

‘Beat this sucker.’

‘Rip his arse with respect.’

‘Kick this fucker into touch.’

‘Bull, are you really ginger?’

‘I ain’t fucking ginger,’ Bull spat the reply. ‘I’m gonna settle with you later, Shelley. First I’m going to bust this bitch a new one.’

Bull was raging up into Hulk-want-to-smash mode.

‘Easy there, Bull.’ Jack slid further across the vinyl only to find a wall barred his way. ‘You have to face facts. Some girls prefer to get a ride in a sports car, than on the seat of a Harley. I’m told the ape hangers get stuck up your arse.’

‘You son of a . . .’

Bull stopped mid lunge toward Jack. All eyes turned towards the bar area, a slow rhythm being struck on the wooden surface. Jack looked up, a dozen leather jackets turned to see. Law enforcement had finally decided to intervene. Jack took a silent, but very deep breath.

‘Calm down boys, this man is leaving.’

Thank you Lord. And thank all lawmen who wear six guns and stetsons.

Jack lifted himself over the bench whilst his new friends were distracted by the Sheriff. He’d been increasingly convinced that the law *wasn’t* going to intervene.

‘You’re in the wrong county, Sheriff,’ Bull bitched. ‘You got no jurisdiction here.’ His comrades seemed to agree. How dare he interrupt a lynching, especially one as popular as Jack’s seemed to be.

‘I’d like to remind you gentlemen that attacking an Officer of the Law is an offence in any state.’ The Sheriff took his hat from the bar and unclipped the holster tab from his weapon. ‘It is also an offence against God,’ he said. ‘Mister, please accompany me to the door. And do not say another word before you exit this building, or I will shoot you.’

Jack didn’t need asking twice. He dropped ten bucks on the table and made a b-line for Sheriff Friendly.

‘Son, I don’t know what part of your brain is controlling your mouth,’ he said as Jack passed, ‘but it needs recalibrating.’

‘Yes sir. And may I say what a nice hat that is.’

‘You may. Now take a walk outside, I will join you presently.’

Never argue with the law. Jack backed out of the diner. Thirty seconds later the Honda purred like a kitten, the transmission jammed into first, his foot hard down on the clutch. The vehicle idled on pause.

‘Good going, Jack. Upset the local Neanderthals.’ His palm bounced off the steering wheel. ‘Cigar, he says. Perfume, he says. Stick your tongue in his drink he does. For Christ’s sake those people carry knives, and guns. And he was all dark and hairy.’

That was stupid, Jack. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Jack thumbed his wrist to check his pulse, and confirmed what he already knew. Heart rate was rampant. Respiratory function was gusting force nine to ten. His underpants were filled with sweat.

That bloody Disto-boo-boo-jaja was going to get him in serious trouble one of these days. *What the fuck was that diagnosis?* Right hand reached for glove box and snapped it down. A blind rummage brought pills into view; little blue sweeties that half filled the bottle. *Take the fucking pills, Jack.*

Jack startled; he spilled the bottle as the driver’s side window was rapped upon.

‘Am I interrupting you?’ A big Stetson outside the glass.

‘Absolutely, no.’

The Sheriff’s hand encouraged Jack to wind down the glass.

‘Son, I hope those are prescription drugs you’re trying to hide.’

‘Err, yes sir. Yes, they are.’

‘Then I think you should take more of them.’ He lowered his face to Jack’s. ‘I don’t know why you were trying to start a fight in there, and frankly I don’t give a shit. But you need to leave, now. And just so’s I can’t be there when you arrive, tell me *exactly* where you’re headed.’

‘South,’ Jack was watching an eager exodus of bikers move down the diner’s steps. Every other face in the diner had moved to find a window seat, ‘Don’t suppose you’ve heard of a place called Wildfowl?’ He asked.

‘I have. It’s in Christian County, that’s a few miles further south of here. Just take a right up there and follow the Sixty-Five. May I ask what business you have in Wildfowl?’

Sure, why not?

‘I’m looking for a friend.’

‘I’d be surprised if you had any, but that’s your business.’ He seemed to reflect on the statement. ‘Stop in at the Sheriff’s office when you get to Wildfowl. He’s a friend of mine; knows most everyone in those parts. You tell him that Sheriff Walter Whalen sent you. He’ll help you if he can. Now, you drive your car in that direction.’ He pointed south. ‘You keep to the speed limit and stay safe.’

‘Yes sir. Err, will you be okay? They don’t look very happy.’

‘Goodbye mister.’ The lawman’s hand tapped twice on the Honda’s roof and he turned back towards the diner.

Jack didn’t feel bad enough to ask twice. Not that he could fight a damn anyways. A few windmills with his fists at best.

The clutch lifted and the Honda whined forward.

Look at them. Half a dozen motorbikes. The type men lounge on when they ride. The abnormally long front ends were lined up like ducks at a gallery. One sharp jerk of his wheel. *Go on Jack, do it, run them down.*

Maybe not, the Sheriff was still watching. His fingers tapped on his weapon as if he were about to draw. Jack watched the lawman fade in his mirror.

The tarmac of route Sixty-Five ended the gravelly displacement of the car park. South it was then as the diner’s lighting dimmed in the distance, Jack’s foot down, an eye on the rearview just in case.

In a little over an hour the Honda's headlamps illuminated a welcome sign.

Wildfowl
Population six hundred and fifty three
Drive safely.

Someone had tried to replace the three with a four. The 'O' in Wildfowl was now a smiley face. Jack wondered if Bull's parents had been so happy when he'd arrived?

Since the diner Jack had pondered hard on the situation. How quickly things had happened since meeting Chali. The passion released. A road-trip to Missouri to find a serial killer. A quick glance toward his phone on the passenger seat hoping she'd ring.

Then there was, Jill. The two of them still hanging-out for each other. Sleep overs that ended with squabbles. The kids? He knew they both wanted Jack to be with Jill.

Another look toward the phone. Maybe he should check the signal strength. Make sure the volume was turned up full. Pull over and make the call. Eyes back on the road. He didn't like the road. It had been just like this when . . .

He tried not to remember as the Honda's headlamps drilled boreholes into the darkness ahead. The rear view reflecting nothing but endless black. An unexpected sign roused him.

Last Rites Hotel
Next left

An arrow pointed the way with the promise of a warm bed. The steering wheel took a gentle left and the Honda left the Sixty-Five. Jack saw no point in finding Wildfowl whilst it was dark.

For two miles the road was smooth, and then it wasn't. Ten miles per hour, then down to eight with the front wheels bumped across an increasingly bad surface. More darkness ahead, and scary trees. Branches that reached down with menace. Where was he, Sleepy Hollow? Jack recalled the name on the sign, Last Rites. Who'd name a hotel, Last Rites?

Another gauntlet of bumps offended the Honda's suspension. The rear view confirming that the world behind had been cut from existence, just as lights from a building came into view. Flat tarmac ending the Honda's turmoil as Jack parked up.

Gloomy was his first impression of the small reception. A single chair, a mirror above. A broad unmanned desk with a half-dozen pigeon holes stood behind, and a red fire extinguisher hung on the wall. A book lay open on the desk with a pen rested in the spine.

'Hello?' Jack called out and got a silent reply. 'Is anyone here? Help . . . Police . . . FIRE?'

The prospect of sleeping in the car was far from appealing, and then he saw it. A bowl on the chair with two fobs, keys attached, and a note written in big letters. 'Reception is closed. Please sign the book and help yourself. Room twenty, or twenty-one.'

Jack scrawled his signature with the pen provided, then grabbed fob twenty. Something else hand written on the note, an arrow below: Rooms 20 – 22, this way.

A short walk from the main building, Jack found room twenty. He pulled out his laptop, then dropped the rucksack to the floor. Spare clothes could stay squashed in, he'd unpack tomorrow. *Bed, sleep.* Jack crawled across the firm mattress and placed his phone on the night stand.

Why won't you ring?

Chali should be here. "Problems," she'd said, "Grandmother, ill, dying." Not the sort of excuse he could argue with. But why start this if she wasn't going to come. He'd been angry; felt a bit guilty. Now he was here, in the middle of nowhere, staring at his phone. What was it about that girl? He'd known her, what, five minutes. Just thinking about her made his stomach ache. All he could see when he closed his eyes was Chali's face. Soft lips smiling at him. *Beautiful eyes; so full of mischief and desire.* Desire for Jack. He couldn't help himself as he peeled away her

clothing, one piece at a time. Ran his hand down her soft skin. Began to kiss . . .

The phone buzzed twice. Jack sat upright and stared at the screen. No backlight, no sign of a message. Exhaustion was playing tricks with his mind. He slumped back staring at the ceiling, to hear the nightstand buzz again. This time the phone flashed, he saw it, it wasn't his imagination.

Jack's right hand shot out, he was up and sitting, his thumb dabbing digits to release the text.

'Chali . . . about time.'

Text scrolled out across the screen.

Jack, I wish I was with you. I wish I was there in your arms. I want to feel you hold me. I want to kiss you. I want to make love to you and wake to feel your breath on my face. Forgive me, please. I'll be with you soon. Soon Jack.

Goodnight.

P.S. Dream of me, Jack. I promise, I will dream of you. xxxx

Jack stabbed out a reply with rapier speed.

He waited.

Maybe he should have added a few kisses? Jack was up and pacing, staring back at the screen. Damn it, he was so tired.

The phone vibrated again.

We were unable to deliver your text.

'What? You are joking.' His thumb dabbed down at the screen. Pressed send. *Come on.* The phone buzzed almost instantly.

We were unable to deliver your text.

'For fuck's sake.' *Wall, phone, error corrected.* Breaking his phone wasn't going to help. Jack walked around the room holding his phone up, hoping. All the hype his provider had offered. Super-doooper-fast-and-secure. 'Fuck you!' He tossed the phone onto the bed. *Please let there be booze in the mini-bar.*

A quart bottle of Jack Daniels smiled at him from the chiller. A small tumbler was appropriated from the bathroom. The sting of the alcohol bit deep at the soft tissue of his throat. Several more shots followed as Jack prowled the room; eyes on his phone, content to wind himself up.

He felt like PacMan stuck in a loop, one side of the bed around to the other, stopping only to fiddle with the curtains. Outside nothing had changed. It was still dark and ominous as another nip slid down his throat.

Jack walked into the bathroom to change the view, and found himself staring in the mirror. *What's wrong with you?* His reflection looked dumbfounded by the question. *What are you doing out here?* Another sip, direct from the bottle this time. He started to undress. *You're like a teenager pumped with hormones.* He flipped his shorts into the shower with his foot. *Why doesn't she ring?* Jack grabbed hold of the sink, the booze already taking affect. A moment later he was sat on the edge of the bed. A minute more and he'd curled up around his cell-phone. Two minutes after that, Jack was out for the count.

The cranial lump in Jack's hands was enduring a hard wire thumping sensation. It took a moment to fathom where he was.

Wildfowl, hotel . . . shit.

Jack Daniels stood half empty on the side, and made sense of why gravity had such a downer on his senses. The need to pee encouraged tired feet to swing over and find the floor.

You're such an idiot.

He grabbed his phone from the pillow. No messages. Four deliberate steps, a groping hand, and his rucksack was plucked from where he'd dropped it last night by the door. Inside was a small plastic bottle. Flipping open the lid, he dry swallowed two white pills from inside, and was startled by a knock on the door, that he ignored. Two more pills were popped from their foil, much bigger tablets than the first. Jack hesitated as he emptied several blue pills from a second container. The door was knocked again; louder.

'Just a minute,' he growled.

The door knocked a third time.

'I hear you,' he returned the blues, clasping down the plastic lid.

The deadlock on the door was turned back. The handle pushed down. Jack opened the door to a rather stern looking woman wearing a grey suit. She was in her sixties, wearing unfashionably square glasses.

'Yes?'

'Good morning sir, my name is Maddy. I'm the owner of this establishment. I wanted to tell you how very pleased we are to have you staying with us.'

'You woke me to say, *Hi?*' She had long hair, he presumed, it was all neatly bundled on top of her head. 'Do you have any Aspirin?' he asked.

'No,' a firm reply.

‘Codeine? How about Fentanyl? I’ll buy them, not a problem.’ The look on her face soured. *I’m not asking for cocaine.* ‘Okay, fine, can you send over a hot drink? Room,’ he looked at the outside of the door, ‘twenty. Maybe a bagel and some jam?’ Jack realised he was relying too obviously on the door for support, so he stood taller. Attempted a smile, that felt more of a grimace. Gravity was playing up again.

‘This isn’t a pharmacy,’ she said, her voice as stern as her face. ‘Unfortunately we don’t offer room service either,’ she added.

‘Then why are you knocking on my door? It must be, what, four in the morning?’

‘It’s eight thirty, Mr Lottman. I thought you might like breakfast, and was keen to welcome you to the Last Rites. I assumed, incorrectly, that you would be more agreeable. You may leave the room fee in the honesty bowl where you found the key. It’s forty dollars a night. I do not allow animals, or loose women. All breakages must be paid for,’ she began to walk away. ‘If you prefer coffee with your breakfast, please instruct the staff. Food is now being served in the rotunda’

In the where? ‘Yes, please, coffee’s good.’ *How do you know my name?*

‘Oh,’ Maddy stopped, ‘one final thing. It’s a very small consideration. You could even say a custom in these parts. Gentlemen tend to cover up their inconvenience when answering the door.’

Their what? Jack followed her eyes down. ‘Christ!’ Instant adrenaline rush, hands swiftly cupped. *Oh my God.* Jack backed away from the door, tripped, rolled without showing his modesty. ‘Shit, I’m so sorry. Hey, lady?’ *Where is she?* His voice lowered to a whimper. ‘Please don’t call the cops.’

Jack kicked the door shut. *Fuck, fuck . . .* somewhere on the floor were his shorts; maybe in the bathroom. In the sink? He grabbed them, quickly followed by the rest of his clothing heaped on the floor. *Fuck!*

* * *

Fully clothed Jack left the room. He had to find her; to explain. Hope she hadn’t calling the law. *No, no way.* She hadn’t looked too shocked. *Very small consideration?* ‘Cheeky cow.’ *Which way?* Everywhere was covered in wood panels and chintz wallpaper, with tasselled lamps hanging from walls. More nineteen fifties than he’d noticed last night. *What the fuck am I even doing here?*

Expectation fizzled as he found the front desk, unattended. Reception much bigger than he remembered. The desk had been an entire tree; an-

other toppled to hold it up. Rows of empty pigeon holes lined the walls behind, either side of an open door. Jack peeked within, but found no-one home. There was no mail, no notes, not so much as a key in the empty holes. There was a brass desk bell.

That wasn't there last night.

The front door opened, and the familiar flat tone of the owner's voice. 'Mr Lottman, I'm pleased to see you've dressed for breakfast.'

'Maam, please, I'd like to apologise.' He really did. 'I was tired, I drank too much. My brain doesn't work as well as it should do. I am so very sorry.' *Please don't report me, it will never happen again.*

'Mr Lottman, I had eight brothers. I saw nothing down there that would give me, goose-pimples.'

Goose-pimples? Okay, he wasn't sure how to take that. But no sirens or cops to be seen out in the carpark.

'If you'd like to follow me,' she said and looked at her watch. 'Breakfast is still being served; you may join the other guests.'

The rotunda was lovely. A dozen tables dressed down in white linen, above them a canopy of glass. Beyond was a sea-blue morning sky with the promise of a beautiful day. Maddy directed Jack to sit by the window.

I must be late? The suggestion that he talk to the other guests seemed a slight exaggeration. There were none. And why was she staring at him? Jack returned her more than professional smile, as a man wearing black pants and a white shirt entered. Coffee pot in hand.

‘This is Nathaniel, he’ll prepare breakfast for you.’

Jack hoped he cooked better than he looked. Both were of similar age but Maddy had weathered far less stormy seas. Nathaniel looked as if he’d seen a few interventions in his life. His ponytail and clean shirt would work better with a face that had shaved recently. He poured coffee into a china cup, sat on a matching saucer. Jack wondered if the cutlery and condiments were as silver as they looked.

‘Continental or American?’ Nathaniel asked.

‘Err . . .’

‘Danish or pancakes?’ He added.

‘I’m good with coffee, thanks.’

‘Let me know if you require more.’

‘Sure, thanks.’ *Got to be family.* ‘Maddy, did you say?’ Jack asked.

‘Yes, short for Madeline. If we are to be personable may I know your Christian name?’

Personable?

‘Jack,’ he said, ‘call me Jack.’

‘Very well, Jack. Welcome to Last Rites hotel. Please enjoy your stay with us. If I can be of any further assistance, you may refer yourself to the front desk.’

‘There is one thing before you go.’ Maddy’s head tilted with expectation. ‘Your age, maybe you can help.’

‘My age?’

Hmm, nice coffee. ‘I’m guessing you’ve been around for a while?’

‘I beg your pardon.’

Is she hard of hearing? Jack raised his voice slightly. ‘Were you born in these parts? It’s just, I’m doing some research. A family that lived round here.’

‘Since you ask so eloquently. Yes, I was born in Wildfowl’s Community Hall, some time ago. The hall however was pulled down in Nineteen eighty-nine. Would you like to *chat* about the town?’

‘Er no, maybe later?’ *Soften her up, maybe a compliment or two.* ‘You smell nice,’ he said. ‘Your perfume,’ Jack leant forward and sniffed. Maddy looked bemused. ‘Robert Piquet, yes? A very distinctive blend.’

‘Actually, yes. You surprise me,’ she added. The gaze down her glasses wasn’t a look of surprise.

‘Calypso? Floral and feisty, it’s very nice.’ The smile he offered was partially reciprocated. ‘Nice coffee,’ he said.

‘Mr Lottman, If you have a point, please get to it.’

‘So you’re a local girl? Lived here all your life?’ *Sip* Coffee really was good. ‘It’s very beautiful, the countryside. I look forward to seeing it in the daylight.’ *Sip, sip.* ‘I bet this place gets lively in the evenings?’ he said. ‘Local trades, customers, all chatting at the bar.’

‘I live alone, Jack. We don’t get much custom these days. You are in point of fact, our first customer this week.’

A look about the rotunda and he believed her.

Old stony face had no intention of being cooperative. Maybe he should just ask her about the shenanigans that went on back in seventy-two. Broach the name, Edward Critch; ask her what she knew about the bodies in the trunk.

‘You miss him don’t you?’ Jack said.

‘Miss whom?’

‘Your husband.’

There it was, a crack in the armour.

‘My husband passed some time back,’ she said.

‘He’s still here though, isn’t he? You talk with him in the evenings, in the quiet time before you fall asleep. He was taken far too early, and he’s very sorry about that.’

The edges of her eyes narrowed and drew Jack into sharper focus. He suspected death-rays were about to flash from behind her glasses.

Maddy was pretty easy to read. Single woman, living in this hotel as if it were a time-capsule. The perfume thing was a party-trick. Ever since the accident, there wasn't a scent he couldn't pull apart and put a name to. Now he'd got her attention, probably best to soften the blow.

'I'm sorry,' Jack said. 'That was inappropriate. It's just, well, something happened to me a few years ago. An accident, and ever since, well, it's like I can feel things.'

'Mr Lottman . . . Jack. When my husband died, half of my life was removed. A hole was left residing where my heart used to be. I assure you that I have seen clairvoyants, spiritualists, and a great number of do-gooders, not to mention some outright charlatans. You have nothing to say that I want to listen to. Now, shall I call Nathaniel back? Do you require anything else for breakfast? And no, he does not have a bagel.'

'Okay, I get it.' *Frosty bitch.* 'I'm sorry.' *So much for being honest.* He'd just wanted her to open up. Get Maddy chatty and talking about the past. *I must be losing my charm.* 'Truth is,' he said, 'I'm trying to find out about a family that used to live in these parts.'

'Then may I direct you to the local library. Or, if you've time, they have a much larger repository of knowledge in Spokane. It's not far in the car. Perhaps you'll find what you need there.'

'Wildfowl has a library? Does the Town Hall keep records of the natives?'

'It does, yes. We also have tourist information in the post office; they have a very fine rack of leaflets on places to go and things to do. Mister Lottman, I tend to mind my own business, and require that others do the same whilst under my roof. Once again, is there anything else that the *hotel* can do for you?'

'Err, no. Think we've covered everything.' *Wait, there is one thing.* 'The mini-bar, could you re-stock it for me. Oh, and the sheets on the bed, have them changed, they're a bit damp. Had a bit of leakage last night.'

Sweaty as hell, must have been the Jack-D.

'I'll see to it.'

She was staring again. 'Thanks,' he said, and raised his cup. *Sip* Almost dropped it when his phone rang. 'Excuse me.' The legs of Jack's chair scraped across the hardwood. Chali had flashed up in big black letters on the screen. 'Where are you?' he whispered. 'I've been waiting for you to ring.'

Jack, I'm so sorry. How are you?'

Taking a walk down memory lane. Never mind, are you on your way?’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘I have to be here with Grandmama, Jack. But I do have good news. I’ve spoke to an agency about someone, to care for her. For a few days.’

‘So you are coming?’ *This is fantastic.* ‘When?’

‘Soon, Jack.’

‘Soon? When is soon? Chali, I need you here.’ *I can’t do this on my own.* ‘A box of papers and a hard drive are no substitute for the brain that compiled them.’

‘I know, be patient. Two days at the most. Have you found anything yet?’

‘Hold on a second.’ Old Stony face was watching. So much for minding her own business as Jack turned his back. ‘All I know at the moment is Wildfowl has tourist information at the post office.’

‘Jack?’

‘The locals are being awkward. I’ll head into town in an hour or so, see what I can find. I do have one lead though. I’ve been told the Sheriff may be helpful. I’ll check out the library as first, search through local history, maybe turn up something interesting on the Critch family.’

‘Jack. We have to find Jonas.’

‘We will.’

‘Promise me.’

‘We will, together. What, what is it?’

‘He’s taken another girl.’

‘He’s what? When?’

‘Two days ago a girl named Alice went missing from Chattanooga, Tennessee.’

‘Tennessee. Are you sure it’s our man?’

‘Oui, it has to be. Alice is the right age, and she was taken in the middle of the night.’

‘That doesn’t prove she’s one of ours.’

‘She was two weeks shy of her eleventh birthday.’

‘Shit.’

‘And I’ve realised something else. Jack, Jack, are you there?’

‘Yeah, I’m here.’

‘This girl, Alice. She’s Jonas’ twenty-ninth victim. Remember what the diary entry said. That Jonas has given himself, to the Thirty. Alice may be his penultimate abduction.’

‘Something else too. If we’re right, that means Alice is here in Wildfowl.’

‘Oh Jack, you have to find her.’

‘Shit.’ *No pressure then.* ‘We have to figure out what he’s doing with these kids. Why he takes them a few weeks before their birthday? It may suggest how long he keeps them alive?’ *There has to be a reason.* ‘There’s obviously some sick plan involved. If we can figure out what that is, maybe we can track him. I’ll take a run out to the family home. See if I can shake a few truths out of the trees around here. And I have someone in mind with *whom* to start.’ He gave Maddy a little wave.

‘Do we know anything about Alice?’ He asked.

‘Not much, she was fourteen days short of her eleventh birthday. Jonas took her from her bed whilst she slept. Jack, Alice has special needs. She has learning difficulties. Poor baby, you have to find her. We have to find Alice, before . . .’

Jack didn’t need convincing. He also didn’t want to think about why this psycho was taking kids. Was Jonas sexually assaulting these children? If so, then why have such a vast hunting ground? Most predators found their victims closer to home. Why risk so much to bring them back here? And what gave with the three-sixty abductions on the map? Why mirror the directions with his base as a central hub? What meaning did it all hold for this sick individual? Jack had a horrible feeling this was ritualistic. Whatever the reasons, the answers were here, in Wildfowl. They had to be.

‘Jack, are you still there?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I have to tell you, something strange has happened. Something wonderful. All I can think about is you. Even more than all of this, my thoughts are only of you. Just forty-eight hours, no more, I promise. I want to be with you my love. My body aches; I need you to soothe me. Just another forty-eight hours and I will come. I love you, Shhack.’

Did someone pump antifreeze into Jack’s veins? Felt like it. Did Chali just use the love word.

The phone beeped. Call waiting. The name on the screen, *Oh shit*, the caller ID. It was Jill.

‘Jack, I have to go now. Remember, I love you.’

‘Chali, wait. Don’t go.’

Her voice was gone, the line silent. The phone beeped again, louder this time, as if impatient that he answer. “*I love you,*” she’d said it twice.

Uh-oh Maddy alert. She was coming over, his phone still beeping. Old stony face was closing in, only a step away.

‘She said she loved me,’ Jack blurted.

‘I’m very pleased.’ She didn’t look it. ‘Are you going to answer your phone?’

‘It’s my ex-wife.’

‘I see. And does she love you too?’ That was a good question. ‘The person you were enquiring about, if you would like to ask at the front desk.’ She gave that same sweep of the arm, that Jack followed, then she left.

Phone was still beeping. Jack raised his finger to the screen. Green or red options. Jack pressed red.

The foyer was empty. The timber decor hung over from a Hitchcock movie. He knew exactly which one as he stared at the bell on the desk.

Waited.

Alice is here. She's in Wildfowl. But where? Where does that psycho take them? There was a lot of country out there. “*Every woman he brought down here begged at some point for the little boy to help.*” He remembered that line from the diary. *Is it underground. Maybe?*

‘Mr Lottman, you rang my bell?’

‘Yes, I have a question for you. Do you remember a local family that lived round here? The Critch family? The father was Edward Critch. He had at least one son, Jonas?’

Now that *was* a reaction.

‘Are you a reporter?’ Maddy asked. ‘Do you work for a tabloid, or one of those tittle-tattle magazines?’

‘No,’ he lied. It wasn’t really a lie; he had taken a week’s leave from the Gazette. The question had been strictly freelance. *Tittle-tattle?*

‘You remember them, the Critches. The guy who drove off the bridge with two bodies in the trunk. I guess it was big news for Sleepy Hollow.’

‘I’m sure that I don’t understand the reference, Mr Lottman. And the people in these parts will not welcome you dredging up, *that name*. Nor do I. Now please, excuse me, I have work to do. I have other, less demanding guests to see to.’

‘Fine.’ Fresh air was probably a good idea anyway. ‘Would directions to the Sheriff’s office be too much to ask?’

‘It would not.’ Maddy pulled a brochure from below the desk. Spun it over and pointed. ‘Back to the main road and turn left, three miles on you will come to a right-turn, it’s clearly sign posted.’ She slid the glossy

paper across to him. 'Welcome to Wildfowl, Mr Lottman. You have a good day now.'

'Thank you. What time did you say dinner was served?'

'You may join the other guests at six.' She replied.

'Fine.' *What other guests?* 'Catch you later.' He and Maddy were going to talk. Not now, but it would happen.

Jack headed for the car-park. Someone in town would want to dish the dirt on Edward Critch. They always did.

* * *

The receiver lifted from the cradle on the black Bakelite phone. The pencil in Maddy's hand engaged with the dial as each spin gave a short calming purr. It rang at the other end and was answered.

'Sheriff's office, how may I help you?'

'Sheriff, its Madeline Pierce from the Last Rites.'

'Hi Maddy, how can I help you.'

'I thought you should know that I have guest.'

'That's great Maddy, I'm pleased for you. Has he murdered someone?'

'No, that is, I don't think so.'

'Then why are you calling me on this line? Maddy, this number is for official business. Use my cell-phone, remember, we agreed last time.'

'This is official business, Sheriff. I think I have a criminal staying at the hotel.'

'A criminal? And why would you think that, Maddy.'

'He was asking me to sell him drugs.'

'Drugs? What sort of drugs? Cocaine... heroin?'

'Aspirin, and something called Fentanyl'

Silence.

'I know what you're thinking Sheriff. But he was naked when he tried to procure them.'

'He exposed himself to you?'

'Yes, . . . well, no, not exactly. I'm not sure that he was compos mentis to the fact.'

'Look, Maddy?'

'There's something else Sheriff. Something I didn't like about him. He spoke to someone on his cell-phone.'

'Maddy, it's what people do.'

'But it didn't ring first.'

'They vibrate now, Maddy. Some just whisper, or flash a light. Did you see the light flash on the screen, Maddy?'

'No, I don't think so. I'm not sure.'

'Folk have them on silent when they're working.'

'They can ring silently?'

'It's modern technology. You have to go with the flow these days. They've even made me install a computer here at the office. God knows what's wrong with pencil and paper.'

'Please don't take the Lord's name in vain, Sheriff. I have to report that he also asked me my age.'

'The fiend. Where is he? I'll bring him in and beat the crap out of him.'

'Sheriff, you're not taking me seriously,' she paused. 'He also asked me about Edward Critch.'

Silence.

'Sheriff, are you still there?'

'What does this man look like, Maddy?'

'Oh, he's a mite taller than I. Well framed. I expect some women may find him ruggedly handsome. He has dark hair, oh, and blue eyes. He's a boorish man to talk to, quite rude in fact.'

'Okay Maddy, I think I know the man in question.'

'You do?'

'Yes, I got a heads-up he might be coming this way. You done good, been of great help. I'll take it from here.'

'Sheriff . . . am I safe if he comes back?'

'I'm sure you are, Maddy. Tell you what, I'll check him through my computer anyway, just to be sure. Now, is there anything else I can do for you? No, well will you please get off this line, someone may actually need it to report a crime.'

Jill had been remarkably calm. They'd chatted about Ben, his upcoming trip to the Grand Canyon with the school. Kirsty was miffed because she wasn't going. But said she'd like a pony for her birthday instead, and got quite sulky when Jill had said, "Over my dead body." There had been an error on the credit card bill, but that was sorted now. Not a word about his leaving, or where exactly he was, or even when he was coming back. So that was good, right? A sign ahead read.

Entering Wildfowl
Population six hundred and fifty four

Jack cruised at a steady fifteen miles per hour between the colonial style terraced buildings on either side. They were mostly shop frontals, heavy on the coloured shiplap with a lot of glazing. Some had balustrades and awnings. The town's architecture was a throw back to General Washington's days.

Jack parked up outside 'Barbara's Pastries'. An aged man sat on a bench eating what looked like a pasty. He seemed well matured; looked like he had roots in these parts. Jack reached over and wound down the passenger side window.

'Hi,' he said.

No response as the old man took another bite.

'Would you know where I can find Sheriff Whalen?'

This was a small town. A stranger was asking directions for the Sheriff's office. It was a reasonable assumption that he'd be curious as to why. He was sure to invite conversation.

'Indeed I do,' the man's hoarse voice replied.

'I may need more than that, if you don't mind.'

The man pointed down the street.

What gives with these people? Jack exited the car.

‘Hey, how you doing? My name’s Jack.’

‘Ethan,’ he replied, finally lowering what Jack could now see was a chocolate croissant. ‘Most people that come to Wildfowl are either lost, or related to the indigenous population. And seeing as how relatives that leave rarely come back, I guess you must be the latter. Where you heading, son?’

‘Actually I’m staying here for a while, at a place called the Last Rites. Nice place. I just thought I’d take in the sights of your lovely town.’

‘Sights, eh? Well, you’re looking at one right now. I’ll smile if you want to take my photo?’

‘Err, not really.’

‘Then I’m offended.’ Ethan took another bite of his pastry.

Is that it, conversation over?

‘May I ask why a tourist would need the Sheriff’s office? I happen to know he’s a busy man.’

Ha, I knew you’d ask.

Another look down the street confirmed there was nothing busy about Wildfowl. He’d seen five, maybe six people; most of them had noticed *him* now. Jack was fast becoming an attraction himself.

‘I’m sure he’s a busy man, but I was hoping to find out about some relatives I had living in these parts. I’m doing some genealogy research on my family. Maybe *you* knew them.’

‘Maybe, I’ve been around for a while. What’s the family name?’

‘Critch, you heard of them?’

Ethan sat back and crossed his arms. He appeared to share a private joke with himself, then taking another bite from the pastry. ‘Son, you got some seriously disturbed genes. You do know who the Critches were?’

Jack gave a slight shrug of his shoulders; a bemused shake of the head. It seemed an Oscar winning performance.

‘So you’re a reporter?’

Do I have a sign on my chest?

‘I can’t see the Critches being of much interest to anyone other than a reporter, except maybe an historian, or a psychiatrist. No, you look like a reporter to me.’

‘I’m just interested in my family tree.’

‘Sure you are. You work for Aphrodite Jones? Is what I know worth money to me?’

‘That depends on what you know? I could you buy you coffee, another pie.’

‘Coffee sounds good.’

‘Shall I throw in some milk and sugar to seal the deal.’

‘Take a seat, son. Tell Ethan what you want to know about Edward Critch.’

‘Usual stuff, I suppose. What was he like?’ that seemed a good question to begin with.

‘Critch was a bad man, that’s what he was like. He lived over there in Busiek Forest. Lot a land, lot a trees. You can hide a heap of misgivings in a place like that.’

Ethan relaxed his posture, took another bite and chewed.

‘Is that all I get for my coffee? Would twenty bucks help an old man’s memory?’ he asked.

‘Forty would cure me of dementia.’

‘If only it were that easy,’ Jack replied, and opened his wallet. Two twenties were extended Ethan’s way. He didn’t let go when the old man took hold. ‘This pays for a cure, not a relapse.’

Ethan smiled. ‘Praise the Lord, I do believe I’ve been cured,’ he yanked the money from Jack’s grasp. ‘Old Edward eh, I haven’t thought about him for some years. That man spent a lot of time on the road. He was a salesman, did you know that.’

Jack shook his head.

‘Not a very good one by all accounts. That man was a drinker, and a practiced bully. As sure as the sun rises in the West, that man beat on his wife.’

West?

‘Poor Helen, that was his wife. Such a pretty thing she was. Had a face like a lemon, oval like; with big green eyes over sharpened cheeks. I guess that don’t sound too attractive to a feller, but she was. I’d say it was her imperfections that stood her out,’ he was smiling. ‘Helen was soft, somewhat coy, by nature. She drew a man like a butterfly to silk. But in those days we didn’t make our own match, if you know what I mean. Helen was Parker’s kid, him being her daddy. It was Parker that made the match, and it surprised a lot of folk around here. Edward was such an awkward feller, and not what you’d call handsome. Her all pretty and thin, and him all tall and ugly, there weren’t much right about that pairing.’

‘Sounds like you were opposed.’

‘None of my business, but it sat awkward with most round here. Don’t suppose Pa Parker ever gave that poor girl a choice. She sure wouldn’t have matched herself with that brute if she’d had one. I reckon it had something to do with Edward’s father, Nathaniel. He had all sorts of machinery up at his place. Pa Parker agreed to the match so’s he could borrow Nathaniel’s tractors, for his fields, Parker being a farmer. They had a small holding over the other side of Busiek. Just a few fields and a copse, if I remember.’

‘Did Edward and Helen have any children?’

‘Several, but only one survived long enough to see the hell that family slipped into. Name was Jonas. He was a likeable boy. Not very clever as I remember, no skills to speak of. He kept pretty much to himself. What paper did you say you worked for?’

Nice try.

‘Just looking through my family’s past, that’s all,’ Jack was pleased he amused the old man. ‘Tell me about the father. Tell me about Edward Critch.’ The name turned Nathan’s grin upside down.

‘Don’t know much about him personally,’ he replied. ‘My kind didn’t mix with his. They lived in the forest, see. My family lived here in the town. It was like that back then. You want to know who Edward and Helen Critch were; you’d best be asking Madeline Pierce. Her and Helen were friendly. She owns the Last Rites Hotel up there on highway Sixty-Five.’

‘Maddy Pierce? I’ll be sure to look her up. Hotel on the Sixty-Five you say?’

‘That’s right. Maddy knew the Critches better than most seeing as how she was a nurse, and did a lot of home visits out there. She’d bring medicine to the more remote homesteads around here. Not that anything’s remote nowadays. It’s all at the touch of a finger; everyone’s dib-dabbing on a tablet these days. You have that Face Twitterly thing on your cell? I got more use for dog-shit.’

Ethan slid a brown paper bag out from below the bench, and pulled a donut from within. He took a deep bite.

‘We used to have a phone box. Right there, where that street lamp is now. You want one of these, they’re good?’

‘No, thanks.’

‘They took it away because no-one used it. Gone now.’

‘I’m sorry for your loss. You said that *Maddy* was a nurse?’

‘Was till she stopped. Before she married Victor Pierce, the heir apparent to the Pierce family fortune. A well-to-do family around that time;

they owned the hotel. You may have seen it as you came into town, just off the Sixty-Five. Last Rites. Nice place. You could get a room up there pretty cheap.'

'I'll look into it, thank you. Did the Pierce's know the Critches?'

'Christ no, the Pierce family owned half of Christian County. Still do. They were bricks and mortar money, and looked less kindly on folk from the backwoods than we did,' a sudden loss of appetite dropped the half eaten donut back into the bag. 'Maddy and Victor, now there was another mismatch of family genes. How much did you say I was getting for the history lesson?'

'Enough for no relapses, remember.' Jack wondered if Ethan's slim build was a result of old age, or his diet.

'Victor's family were none too happy about the union. There were whispers, you see, about Maddy eating for two, if you get my meaning.'

'They had a love-child?'

'No, never did come to term. If it was true. You have to understand that this is a small town. It was even smaller back then. Rumours spread round here like an orange flame in a bush fire. Children outside of wedlock, well, that was a sin. And the Lord don't look too kindly on sinners.' The shake of Ethan's head relented, as he seemed to reflect more fondly. 'Maybe it was best that she never had their child. Lord never did see fit to give Maddy children, see. So the family didn't got an heir. Don't get me wrong, old Victor, he loved his wife with a passion. But when it was clear they weren't gonna have kids he started spreading his seed all over Wildfowl, hell, most of Christian County. I guess it didn't make Maddy too happy that Victor liked to share with married women. It would surprise me none if there were a lot of little Victors roaming around these parts. When Victor died, well, Maddy carried on as if nothing had happened. But her reputation was sullied by that man. She's lived out there on her own ever since.'

'So it's just Maddy running the hotel?'

It would explain the honesty bowl on the desk when he'd got there, and the key to the room left inside. It even explained her eagerness to welcome him.

Oh crap, I bet she's never had a welcome like that.

'Son, there is no-one up at that hotel, hasn't been for a decade or more. Maddy shuffles about that place pretending it's the Waldorf, or somewhere. She still talks to old Victor, least so's I hear. Just her and young Nathan. Nathaniel Splinter, he works part-time. Gardener, janitor, cook if anyone stays. Other than that, it's just Maddy.' His words passed

with genuine sympathy. 'She's another fine woman ruined by the man she married.'

Maddy Pierce was obviously a stone he'd have to chisel much harder at.

'I gotta move myself,' said Ethan, 'before Barbara in there has a mind to chew on my ear.'

'Worried you'll frighten off customers?'

'Nope, I got buns to bake and pastries to prepare. The same Barbara on the sign, is the woman that makes me happy in the bath, if you know what I mean. I get five minutes to eat, drink, and be merry. Times up,' he stood brushing crumbs from his shirt. Ethan pointed. 'You see the big building at the end. The board above says Royale Cinema and Dancing. Don't be put off, it closed in the eighties. You'll find the Sheriff camped inside. That's where he keeps the law. And thank you kindly for the distraction young man, and for the forty dollars.'

Did he wink at me?

He sure as hell was chuckling again.

Leaving the car where it was, Jack ambled down Wildfowl's quiet Main Street. Just a few inhabitants, most keen to stare at him. Not a single car went past as he took in the sights. In front of him was the cinema.

The clock tower rising above had big hands, and the wrong time. Unless it was five past four and Maddy had lied to him. Almost every building in the street sported a balcony; most sported wooden shutters on upstairs windows. The skyline was filled with short pitched roofs covered in old fashioned shingles. It was pleasant, decorative, untouched by the twenty-first century, if you ignored the electrical cables running overhead.

Jack growled at a passing child who continued to stare despite his mother pulling him across the road, insisting they keep their distance.

One side of the town to the other took less than five minutes to walk, but long enough to understand how Joseph Carey Merrick must have felt back in his day. Jack hoped the Sheriff would be more accommodating than Maddy Pierce.

Inside was enormous. A bird flight up to a ceiling supported by tall iron poles, each painted in red, topped by a floral capital. Nice staircase too, built with decorative heavy metal that swept up to a gallery and landing. Someone had liked red. It coated all the frames of the doors and windows. Jack was particularly attracted to the huge arched windows, all frosted at the bottom. The lowest of which had 'Sheriff' hand painted below. In front of him were several desks, two with monitors, keyboards, papers and pens; not exactly 'FIVE-O'. No cage for holding criminals. No rifles or shotguns ready to deploy. Was Wildfowl crime-free? Hold the front page he'd discovered a miracle in Missouri.

'Can I help you sir?'

'Hi,' Jack replied. He turned in response to a woman's voice.

She wore a deputy's uniform, the cloth squeezed by her bulk. A big girl, he wondered if she were as tough as she looked. She looked annoyed. Couldn't be Jack, no way, he'd only just got here.

'Can I help you?' she repeated.

'Yes ma'am, I met an officer of the law, name of Walter Whalen. He suggested that the Sheriff of Wildfowl may be able to help me.'

'Sheriff Whalen you say?'

'Yes ma'am.'

'Just a moment. Hey Walter, there's a fella down here come to see you.'

She had a pair of lungs that was for sure. And wasn't unattractive, despite her macho persona. Jack tried to imagine her with her hair down, baby in one arm, pumping iron with the other.

'Hey, Sheriff, get your butt down here now.'

The clank, clank of the stairwell attracted Jack's gaze back up the stairwell. A shiny pair of boots descending.

'That's him,' said the deputy. 'He's the man Sheriff Whalen told you to find. I hope you get better sense out of him than I have this morning.'

Well, well, it's Sheriff Friendly. All six-gun and cowboy-hat descending the final few steps. 'You're the Sheriff of Wildfowl?' Jack asked. He hadn't seen that coming.

'Oh yeah, he's the boss all right,' the deputy scolded, making a lame pretence to move things about her desk. 'I ask Sheriff Wonderful for *one* night off. Just one,' she gave Jack a look as if soliciting his support. 'Book Club night,' she said. 'It's been on the same night of every month for the last five years. It's Melissa Foster this month. Have you read any of her books? No, aww, I read *Sisters In Love*. It's filled with love, romance, and passion. Three qualities you will not find anywhere in this office.'

The Sheriff reached ground zero.

'Deputy Whalen, will you please ready the traffic camera for use on the Spokane Road. And can you remember to take the tripod this time?'

She mouthed the words, 'remember the tripod this time.'

'Please excuse Deputy Rosie, she sometimes doubles as my wife. Flower by name, thorny by nature.' Walter grinned at Jack. 'Thirty years of wedlock and I still want to wake up beside her. Hoping that she passed away in the night. Book club will have to wait, Rosie.'

'Shall I come back?' No way he was leaving.

'Take a seat, Jack. Tell me what's on your mind. As I remember, you were on your way to Wildfowl looking for someone. A friend was it?'

'Not really a friend,' he said, 'more a relation. Let's call him a *very* distant relative.' He may as well keep the ruse going. 'I've recently developed a thing for genealogy.'

'Uh-huh, is that right?' Sheriff didn't look too convinced. 'Rose . . . Rosie? Our guest requires coffee. If you're making him one, you may as make me one too. You want cream and sugar, Jack?'

‘Err, no sugar,’ Jack braced himself. He could read Rosie’s lips, ‘may as well make me one too.’

The Sheriff’s hands centred the pile of papers on his desk. ‘Coffee will be along shortly,’ he said.

Sheriff Walter Whalen looked bigger in daylight. A tall broad frame with a serious face attached. The man’s eyes moved, just, as did his jaw, but not much else. He was older than Jack, late fifties, but obviously worked out. He had a face of authority, and a voice to go with it.

‘Now, how’s about you tell me why you were antagonising the local Chapter of the Grateful Dead last night. And then you can let me see what’s in the bag you’ve brought with you.’

Sheriff was sharp. The truth was going to be awkward.

‘Let me start by thanking you, for saving my ass,’ Jack said, ‘I appreciate it.’

Hmm, arms folded, sitting back, he’s got that, getting ready to hear the same old bullshit pose. Have I really got that obvious in my middle age?

‘I’m a talker,’ Jack half-lied, ‘not much of a fighter. I was building up to go fully hysterical on them. People don’t tend to hit crazy guys where I’m from. They’re too worried they might catch something.’

‘And where are you from, Jack?’

‘Wichita, Kansas,’ he replied.

‘Where you from, originally?’

Sheriff not-so friendly then.

‘I was born in Santa Barbara, California.’

‘And you ended up in Wichita, interesting? Want to tell me how?’

‘I clicked my ruby slippers.’

What is this, a shake down?

‘Okay, I guess that’s none of my business, yet. But when a stranger comes to town, and I know first hand, that he likes to start trouble. I naturally want to know why? So tell me about the diner, Jack?’

‘There’s nothing to tell, not really. Boy meets girl, boy can’t afford to pay for girl. Girl gets cross and asks hairy boyfriend to thump him.’

‘Don’t bullshit me, Jack. I was a Corpsman attached to the marines for ten years, and I did a lot more than just basic EMT. When a man stares like a jackrabbit caught in a snare but shoots his mouth off like a fireman’s hose, well, I think one of two things. He’s either dumb as donkey shit, or he’s razor sharp and manipulating the situation. Which description fits you best?’

That was straight shooting, and not far from the mark, on either count.

‘I know a compulsive reaction disorder when I see it,’ Whalen said. ‘You had dilated pupils, an epidermal sheen, and you was full blown provocative-reactive-aggressive.’

I was what? Bullshit, you just made that up.

‘Why didn’t you just buy her a drink like any normal man would have?’ Walter sat forward chin leant on laced fingers, a more understanding approach adopted. ‘Try something new, Jack. Try telling the truth.’

Wow, Jack was having an Oprah moment. The truth was imminent. But what good did the truth serve?

‘I have a medical condition.’ Jack said, or blurted, depending on your point of view. ‘I can’t pronounce it, but it comes out of my mouth.’ That really didn’t sound right, but hey, it was out there now. ‘What I mean to say is, I get a bit agitated, when my pulse rate elevates too quickly. My brain scrambles a bit more than usual, and misfires. I get confused, and say things I really shouldn’t.’

‘You and me both, Jack, I know exactly what you mean,’ he wasn’t buying a word of it. ‘ROSIE? Where the hell is my coffee?’

‘I swear that tripod will go somewhere other than the trunk of my car if you don’t stop shouting at me, Walter.’

‘Drink will be along shortly, Jack. Can I get you an Oreo to go with it?’

‘Err, no. I’m fine.’

‘Okay, so we’ve established that you’re not an idiot. You got any particular reason for these misfires? Is it congenital, trauma based, did you take too many drugs as a teenager? I seem to remember you clutching a small plastic pot like it was your favourite teddy bear?’

Who is this guy, Quincy M.E.

‘Prescription,’ Jack was quick to add, ‘nothing you can hold me for. I had an accident some years ago, down Santa Barbara way,’ the truth it was then. ‘A head on collision. I’m prescribed some pretty decent painkillers.’

‘They make you feel better?’

‘Physically?’ Jack shrugged. ‘Mostly, I suppose.’ This was turning into a full on confessional. ‘I spent a year in critical care, most of it sleeping in a coma. When I woke up I had a serious headache. My back was fucked. Oh, and my wife and daughter were dead.’

How was that, Oprah?

Silence followed, with Walter drumming his fingers.

Son of a bitch, I'm not going to say out loud that I was the one driving. That I looked away. That I was responsible for killing my wife and child.

Say something Jack; anything, just change the subject.

The Sheriff sat back, a sudden motion, his posture more thoughtful. 'I'm very sorry to hear about your wife and child,' he said. 'Losing loved ones is a terrible thing,' Walter turned away. 'Rosie, coffee! Jack, forgive me for asking, but what you did with your slutty admirer, the perfume thing. You work in a fragrance factory?'

'Ha, no, that's a funny thing. I was on a lot of medication when I woke up. As it was reduced,' *how do I put this?* 'I found that my social skills had been dulled, but my senses had been heightened.'

'Ah, so you have superpowers?'

'Kinda, I woke up with a nose like a Bloodhound. I could smell every bad-boy poop done in the second floor bathroom. I even had a better memory.'

'But? There's always a but?'

'Sometimes I don't take my pills.' Jack tapped his head.

'Would they be the blue ones in the teddy bear pot?'

'Here you go, honey.' Jack's coffee came with a smile. The second mug the deputy held was bumped down with attitude. 'Sheriff,' she snarled.

'Thank you Rosie.'

Coffee, thank God. Jack was losing this interrogation. Spilling everything to the law. But it did kinda feel okay, him being a stranger, and a Sheriff. 'Wouldn't it be easier just to give her the night off?' Jack whispered.

'Yes, it would. And yes I will. But Rosie and me, we do this dance. It's not a Waltz, or a Smoothie; more a romantic rumble. The Sheriff of Wildfowl and his trusty deputy, we just fit.'

'Like her ass in those trousers.'

Why did I say that?

'Jack, you do see the gun my wife is wearing?'

'Yes, sir, I apologise. That was inappropriate.'

'Need some teddy bears do we?'

Jack nodded. They made him feel . . . lost.

'She is the *only* person in this town that thinks she's still a size fourteen,' said Whalen. 'I still can't help wanting to bite on those babies.'

He couldn't help it, Jack let go a snigger. Quickly followed by a frown as the Sheriff leant forward.

'Jack, you got till your coffee's cold to tell me why you're here. Who, and what you're looking for, and why? And don't give me any crap

about your genes, and your great grand-pappy, cause I'm a busy man.'

Walter's boots clunked up onto his desk as he sat back.

The floor belonged to Jack.

Tocatta and Fugue in D-Minor drifted out from the iPod sat in its docking port. The music of Johann Sebastian Bach, it was Jonas' favourite. He considered the Baroque musical scene to have peaked with this man's genius. No composer before or since could match the notes of Bach.

The great Mozart himself had refused to compose for nearly three months after hearing Bach's work for the first time. "Bach has said it all." Mozart told his peers. Surely Bach was the greatest architect of music there had ever been. An opiate for the mind. A chance to reflect whilst wrapped within the movements of the music. Clear and precise, not a note being struck without meaning or thought. A true artisan, just like him, like Jonas. He and Bach, they were brothers in arms. Working hand in hand, as together they prepared, planned, and executed their movements.

Movements that Bach would never have considered. That Jonas was imagining within his space, right now. Jonas wasn't alone.

An arm's length away someone else was enacted in the mirror.

'Smile Jonas,' he did. 'Now you see me, now you don't. See me, can't see me.'

The reflection made no sound and was content to reflect the image of the mask. Jonas held it over his face. Then took it away. 'Him or me? Is it him, or is it me?' Only the glass really knew, but refused to comment. 'Is he still in here?' Jonas touched the glass. Lifted Smiley to his face, and then away. 'No, only me. It's just you, and me. And that sound?' It was the second time he'd heard it. The mask was lifted again. *Him or me?* It was an easy question, wasn't it. After all these years. *Him, or me?*

That noise again, rising now to a source of irritation. A blemish on his mood. A reminder that his head ached, giving pressure behind his eyes. The noise again.

Alice, you shouldn't be awake. He'd given her a sedative in the sandwich, enough to make her sleep for hours. He didn't want her awake whilst he felt like this. Jonas needed some *me* time. Some peace and quiet. A few moments alone for Jonas and Johann. A chance to reflect, and to plan.

Alice cried out again.

Me, me, me, time. Is that too much to ask? Jonas headed to the bedroom. Looked at the little girl unsettled in her sleep.

'Shh,' he took a deep breath. *It's not her fault.* He took Alice's head in his hand, kissed her on the forehead. 'Shh, little girl. Hush now for Jonas.' She was uneasy, trying to wake herself. *Impressive for a little girl.*

'Shh, Alice. Jonas' little Angel. Go back to sleep.'

It was a blessing to feel her limbs falling limp. The little girl was finally giving herself to the sedative. 'Sleeeep Alice.'

Such warm, soft, skin. Jonas took her hand and kissed her fingers. Children were so frail at this age. This time in their lives as they began to loose their innocence. To see the world as it truly was, and try to fit in.

He had been that age. That time when he'd first . . . That time when all pretence at innocence had been lost. These children, they were the only way. Alice, she was the penultimate. A great prize to further his agenda. She stirred again, and then settled. Jonas lifted Alice into his arms. Her body felt frail, but her heart-beat was strong. He gently stroked her hair, and remembered. How it had been; how his mother would hold and embrace him and run her fingers through his hair. She'd whisper how she loved him. But what was love when it had to be shared? When it wasn't surrendered, devoted, given solely to one. To him, it should have been him.

Jonas let Alice slide from his embrace to lay awkward on the bed.

Alice. Dear sweet, Alice. Remember why she's here.

A single stroke of her hair. A final breath of her scent.

Sweet dear Alice, you'll sleep soon. In a place where no-one will ever hurt you. There's no need to be afraid.

No more music, not today. Perhaps he would read for a while. Maybe even leave Edward's place, take in some of air. It was fragrant this time of year. A sweet scent from the cones that hung on the trees.

Yes, take a walk. Was it day or night outside? Did he care if it were light or gloom; not really? *Take some air. Try to shake the weight in his head away.* No hurry. Time was on Jonas' side. The outside would always wait for Jonas. Down here . . . Down here it had to be shared.

The pain in his head was feeling its way through his brow again. And Jonas knew what came next when his head began to ache like this. The warning came too late. *He was back.*

'I keep telling you that you aren't welcome, why won't you listen. You never listen.' Perhaps he should turn up the sound. Drown out the voice.

No, Alice. Better that I am disturbed than her.

'You may as well leave,' he said. 'You can't stop me. You'll never steer me away.'

'I'm not listening, not this time'

'Really, you think that makes a difference? No, I'm the only one that makes a difference. Me, Jonas, just me.'

'What, you think I don't know about *him*.'

'Oh, really, you think *he* can find me, bring me down? Ha, ha, ha, Then you're a fool. He's up there, just like everyone else.'

Jonas' hand swept several volumes from the table and took a laptop in his hand. A silver shiny box, the words *Vaio* etched across its lid.

'See, it's all in here. You just have to know where to look.'

'No, you don't know. No!'

Calm Jonas; stay calm. Don't let them under your skin. It's only a sound, an echo, something that was and no longer is. You are the substance. You are the here and now. Don't let the voices confuse you.

'Not long,' he said. 'That girl in there, Alice, she's the last but one. The penultimate tool to finding salvation, to leaving *you* all behind. Just one more.'

'What? Ha, ha, ha, I know, I've seen him. I've been peeking through the pages of Jack Lottman's life. He's in here; you just have to know where to find him.' *Give the voices a lesson.*

The frayed chair felt comfortable as he sat. Old leather well supported by the cushion below. Jonas flipped the laptop's lid.

'Watch closely,' he said. 'Information is power. A bridge that leads me to Sanctuary. One more is hidden in here, waiting.'

Bach had an organ to create perfection. Jonas used a keyboard. Not as rhythmic perhaps, but in its own way, an instrument to behold. *His* masterful strokes were as subtle as Bach's. Just as well practised and precise. Jonas opened the laptop.

'Did you know?' He asked. His attention fully engaged by the screen; fingers working at the keys. 'Did you know that Jack was married? No, well, tut-tut, shame on you. Did you know that he killed his first wife, and his child, through negligence? Silly Jack, irresponsible Jack. Yes, I've been researching your new friend since you blabbed his presence. Take a look here, see what it says. See it? Jack's a bad-boy. A lost-boy clinging to a prescription crutch. Who's afraid of Junky-Jack?'

'Really, I don't think so. Take another look, there's so much more. I know about his parents, his schooling; even his a criminal record.'

'You didn't know about his criminal record? Ha, precious Jack. Junky-Jack had his file sealed as a juvenile.'

'I don't think so. You're just sore because I know more than you. Because I *always* know more than you.'

'Oh really? You think you're so clever, don't you. Well, no, not clever; not so clever as you think. I know Jack; I know Jack better than Jack knows Jack.'

The pain was expanding, closing around his eyes. *Don't listen to them, Jack's not a threat. He's a fucking fool for getting himself involved.*

Think of the Thirty. Yes, the Thirty. I'm so close. So very close. So fucking tired of it all.

'I heard you the first time. Jack, Jack, Jack.' *You shouldn't have got involved, Jack. Don't know what you're doing, Jack. Jack don't know jack,*

about Jonas. ‘Did you know that Jack remarried?’ he shouted, then looked toward the curtain. *Shh, Alice. Mustn’t wake her.* ‘Well, did you?’ voice more hushed this time. ‘Well?’ *Not feeling so chatty now? Not fair. Shouldn’t just up and go like that.* ‘I know you can still hear me,’ Jonas raised his finger and wagged it in a show of disdain. Then exaggerated the motion as he pressed the key marked ‘return’.

The picture of a woman filled his screen. She was fair haired, mid forties, smiling. The kind of portrait an author makes on the back of a book cover.

‘This woman interests me.’ *I know you can hear me.* ‘Do you know who she is?’ *Why should you? You’re too impulsive, too unprepared.* ‘I’ll tell you who she is, shall I?’ *Tell them. Tell them how clever you are, and how ignorant they’ve been.* ‘Her name is, Jill. She’s Jack’s second wife. An arrogant attempt to reset his life, and look here.’

More wagging of the finger as the screen split, two different photos on the screen this time. A girl and a boy.

‘Jill Lottman gave birth to twins, did you know that? They’re not Jack’s kids, but he loves them as if they are. And if you read their intimate emails, it’s clear they have a great fondness for him. And here’s the good bit. In eight days time Kirsty and Ben Lottman will celebrate their birthdays. Their eleventh birthdays,’ Jonas paused for effect. ‘Do you get it now? Can you see the irony?’

Jonas was up and moving. Pacing around the chair, voice elevated, needing to be heard.

‘You think Jack can stop me? No, Jack hasn’t come as my nemesis. He’s come as my salvation. Good for Jack . . . bad for Jack. Bad for anyone that’s close to Jack.’

The kid’s pictures were reduced to the tool bar. Jonas opened Firefox. Typed in some text; opened a familiar site.

‘Here’s the best bit, the bit I enjoy most. Facebook,’ he said. ‘What a wonderful place. Through this one digital portal, a man can roam between worlds. He can tiptoe through the lives of anyone who takes his fancy. It’s empowering to drift within the intimate realms of the ignorant. You know, a really bad person can roam with anonymity; prowl through the minds of the innocent. A *predator* who understands this anonymity, has the talent to use the tools at hand. He sees this world as a market of flesh, in which to gorge his execrable desires.’

‘Yes, I know. It’s hideous, diabolical, but undeniable. With the tools of love and understanding, passion and compassion. Hand them out like sweeties for the vulnerable to consume. Bon-Bons to coax their com-

plicity. This Brave-New-World of Social-Media. A web, wherein prowl so many spiders.’

‘Really? I think it’s a great place to meet the younger generation.’ Jonas began to type. ‘You really didn’t know anything about the twins, do you? You didn’t look any further than Jack. Well, I did, and this surely has to be fate; a sign from the Gods. And I have you *all* to thank.’

‘No, no, don’t you shirk your responsibility. You thought you were being clever. Well, watch and learn. See how a true artisan sculpts the world in which he lives. I’ve already laid the groundwork for this little girl to come running into my arms. It’s so much easier this way, if not as much fun. There, see, I believe her name is, Kirsty.’

Jonas clicked on an icon, and a page opened on his screen.

Facebook
Sign up.

‘Let’s ask shall we. Who lives behind a profile like this?’

First name . . . *HARRY*

‘Kind of old fashioned, but a trustful name. A name fit for a young man looking for a friend.’

Last name . . . *Stylish*

‘Cool, fresh, and full of fun and smiles. Don’t you think?’

Date of birth . . . 03/01/2005

‘The date is a happy coincidence. As for the year, well, a girl likes to be admired by an older man. Especially by this one.’

Email address . . . *One_D@Hotmail.com*

‘Harry has already made contact. We’ve had a brief, but welcoming encounter in a chat room. So let’s reaffirm the relationship by saying hello. I hope you’re not peeking.’

Password . . . *****

‘I’ll smile, say hi, send her a few piccies. We’ve got a few days to make things happen. If not, we’ll do it the old fashioned way. Just as we did with, Alice.’

A handsome young boy popped up on the screen, all smiles for the web cam. He looked a young twelve or thirteen.

‘I stole this from the web; an advert for skateboards. And it just so happens that Kirsty mentions skateboarding in her online diary. I think she’s caught the bug for a board,’ he stopped typing. ‘Do you remember back in the day, when parents urged their kid’s to use protection. Well, it’s *online* protection they need today,’ he took a lingered look toward the curtain, ‘from a much younger age.’

‘I’ve cloned some pictures of the young man vying for her affections. Meet Harry and his friends. Harry here with his family. They’ve got a dachshund named Frenchie, he’s sooo cute. Look, here’s Frenchie in a furry jacket, wearing gloves on his paws. Lots and lots of photos of Harry having fun. Everything needed to appeal to a girl named, Kirsty.’

‘You see, this is a concept you don’t understand: planning and preparation. All I need now is to press here, and he’s uploaded. A single dab, and he’s complete. One minute thirty-seconds to paint a personality that no pre-teen female can resist. Am I not the most delicious boy on the web? What ten year old girl could resist a request to be my friend?’

‘Oh really? No, I do not agree. When a child puts themselves out there in cyberspace, well, what do they expect?’

‘Really? By that logic you can only blame the parents. It’s *they* who don’t care. Busy Mrs Smith, she hasn’t got time for little *Jimmy*. Let Jimmy expose himself on the web of woe. And why wouldn’t he, there’s no attention for him at home. So he seeks it out there in a place that welcomes a lonely child. There’s so much for little Jimmy to experience online. An unlimited supply of new friends to reach out too. So many opportunities to get himself *stuck* in the web and become prey for the many predators who lie in wait.’

‘Oh, boo-hoo. Be quiet. I have a face to fit into my new account.’

How small the world was now, and how vast his reach had been over the last thirty years. Jonas had *friends* as far afield as China, and Japan. A favourite haunt were the chat-rooms of the old-Soviet-States, or whatever they called themselves now. There was so much innocence spread across this vast arena. All so eager to find a new acquaintance. Explore new friendships. Especially toward friends who lived in the West.

‘There’s so much to be learnt about a child just by studying the images of their bedroom. By rifling through their secret and silent

thoughts. The collation of information that reveals their deepest hidden desires. It's all here, once they connect. The moment they log on. They give it freely, and with such trust, to their computers and clouds.'

There, he'd found her, Kirsty Lottman.

Sweet, dear, Kirsty. Oh and such poor privacy settings. Tut, tut, security is everything, my dear. You really must try and block out strangers.

Kirsty's photo showed a young happy girl pulling a face. As luck would have it Kirsty was wearing a t-shirt with a picture of Harry Styles. What a coincidence? She wore a beanie hat on her head and had nothing but love in her eyes. She was laughing; such a beautifully captured moment. Jonas skimmed through her profile.

Dating . . . Nope.

Poor Kirsty, she needs some love.

Favourite band . . . One Direction.

Of course. If only Harry would call?

Best friend . . . Jackie.

Definitely not my type.

Likes . . . Harry, skateboards, dogs.

Well, who doesn't like all of the above.

Dislikes . . . Boys in general.

That's such a fib.

Everything was important, but Jonas had already trawled through her personal settings. He'd found a file named 'attractive, lmao,' it was interesting to peruse. Male models sporting swimwear, she was sharing the pictures with friends. *What a hoot, and such nice abs. Does Mummy know? Does Mummy know anything about Kirsty?*

Jonas did. He knew everything.

'Say hello to Harry, Kirsty. He's sending a request to be your friend. Remember me? We spoke a few days ago.'

He's a carefree boy. A local lad that you may have seen around. You'll recognise Harry. I found the pictures of him that you shared via your phone. Kirsty has a secret crush. Shame he's from another school, but only a short walk from home. Twenty minutes if you cross the park.

'Let's see if Harry and Kirsty can find a place to meet. Only Harry won't show. Poor Kirsty will be pissed. She'd have to take the long walk home; probably use the short cut through the park. Why wouldn't she? Though timing would be most unfortunate. Having given Harry twenty minutes, a little bit more, the sun will have set. The dark begun to descend. Anything can occur when it gets dark. The internet isn't the only place where bad things happen.'

‘Shout all you like it won’t make a difference.’

You couldn’t understand, how could you? That’s right, be silent. Jonas has things to do. Jonas doesn’t need you bitching in his head.

‘What? Why would I do that? What would possess me to consider that proposal? Still, go on, I’m listening.’

The light in the room faded and then raised itself to the familiar furnace like glow. A sign? No, more likely the generator was in need of re-fuelling.

The Sheriff had insisted Jack be direct, so he was. ‘What can you tell me about the Critch family? I understand they lived somewhere around here.’

‘Critch? Now there’s a name the locals won’t thank you for dragging up. You a reporter; looking to write a bestseller? I guess there’s a lot of money in that sort of thing; turning people’s lives upside down with a dollar rake. Is that what you’re here for, Jack? Out to make a quick-buck?’

‘I’m here to stop a maniac.’ Jack needed Sheriff Whalen inside. But how to burrow past the man’s defensive attitude? ‘A little girl’s life could be at stake.’ More importantly, he needed to end this line of invasive questioning.

‘What little girl?’ Asked Whalen.

‘Her name’s Alice. Look, I’m not here to cause any trouble. Wildfowl’s a beautiful town, what I’ve seen of it. And I’m sure the inhabitants are just as . . .’

‘Tell you what, Jack,’ Sheriff dropped his boots from the table. ‘When you and me start drinking together, we’ll talk about shit. But until then, just talk straight. You tell me what a city-boy like you is doing in our little town. And what in the world it has to do with Edward Critch. And what little girl?’

Fine, have it your way.

‘Edward Critch was a serial killer. And we believe his son, Jonas, is following in his daddy’s footsteps,’ Jack lifted his rucksack onto the table and unzipped. ‘Easy, Sheriff, it’s just paperwork and a laptop,’ Jack pulled out both. ‘Two days ago ten year old Alice Freeman was abducted from her home in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I believe Jonas Critch took her. And that he’s holding her somewhere close to Wildfowl.’

Gotcha. Jack lifted the file. *Wanna see more?*

‘So you think Jonas Critch is a serial killer?’ Sheriff sounded surprised.

‘Just like his daddy, yeah. Alice Freeman is the twenty-ninth kid he’s abducted. Each child taken a week before their eleventh birthday. It’s all in here. Son of a bitch took most of these kids whilst the rest of their family were asleep in the next room. Not one of them has ever been found.’

Walter Whalen’s eyes turned toward his deputy. She stared back at her husband.

‘Is that straight talking enough for you?’ Jack asked.

‘That’s a tall story. You say you have evidence?’

Jack pulled open his rucksack. One by one the photos of twenty-nine children were placed on the desk, then overlaid by a map of the US.

‘Every circle on the map is an abduction site. The number and date above each corresponds to the order in which the children were taken,’ he tapped the centre where the lines crossed. ‘Springfield,’ he said. ‘Jonas is abducting in a one-eighty-degree pattern. And before you ask, I have no idea why. But we’ve managed to identify other abductions by working down the line and finding kids taken two weeks before their eleventh birthday.’ Jack tapped the Map. ‘All the lines crisscross here, in Springfield,’ he let it sink in for a moment. ‘If I had a bigger map you’d see the exact area is just south of Springfield. A small town named, Wildfowl. Edward Critch lived here in Wildfowl, didn’t he?’

‘Wow, that is a very compelling argument, assuming the evidence that you’re showing me here is for real, and not some fantasy you’ve put together.’

‘Sheriff, I . . .’ Walter’s hand rose for Jack to be silent.

‘Are you writing a conspiracy novel, Jack? You often experience collusive or suspicious behaviour in other people?’

‘No, on both counts.’

‘Okay. Well, two things come immediately to mind. Firstly, why Jonas Critch? A pretty pattern and some missing kids, as disturbing as that is, does not prove the involvement of the Critch family, or anyone else from round here.’

‘Wally?’ Rosie wheeled her chair closer.

Jack followed her finger, which was pointing at the map.

‘Deputy, are you still here? I asked you to take the camera out onto Spokane Road.’

‘But Wally?’

‘Deputy, please?’

‘Fine,’ she parked her chair, grabbed a long suitcase and a clipboard. Rosie started for the door. ‘Do I get Friday off or not?’

‘We’ll talk later.’

‘Fine, whatever.’ Rosie Whalen exited the office.

‘Okay, Jack, you have my attention. But the second thing that comes to mind, is why aren’t the FBI involved? And I just thought of a third. Last I heard, both Edward and Jonas Critch were dead.’

‘Edward is, but no-one found Jonas’ body.’

‘This Sheriff’s office helped state troopers search the Critch family home, and the surrounding area. Conclusion was the boy was dead, probably buried somewhere. There’s a lot forest out there to hide a body. All the Sheriff had back then was a pack of hounds and half the town folk to search it. Trust me, Edward Critch was a big deal back then. I’ve flicked through the old reports; my predecessor was a thorough man.’

‘Please, I’m not implying he wasn’t. But they never found a body, so it is possible that Jonas survived. I don’t suppose the residing Sheriff back then is still alive? Still living in the area?’

‘The FBI, Jack? You were about to explain why you’re talking to me, and not the FBI.’

‘My partner approached them.’ *How to put this?* ‘They weren’t interested.’

‘Let me guess. On the grounds that both the accused are considered deceased.’

Something like that.

‘And would this partner be staying with you up at the Last Rites?’

So it was Maddy. Blabbermouth must have been on the phone the second my tail-pipe left the carpark. ‘My partner’s not caught up with me yet. She’s taking care of some old-business. Though I do expect her in the next day or so.’

Did Maddy mention anything else? The Sheriff’s cuffs were still hung from his belt.

Sheriff Walter Whalen got up and walked away. Was that it, conversation over? He opened up what looked like a closet and stepped inside. Moments later he returned with something big being wheeled out in tow.

‘I’ve never actually used this thing,’ he said. ‘Not a lot of crime in these parts. Least nothing that a phone call or a visit doesn’t usually resolve. Tell you what, why don’t you put what you’ve got up on this, and let me take a look. Let’s say you’ve aroused my curiosity.’

I have? 'As easy as that?' Jack welcomed the Sheriff's curiosity as a good place to start. *Why do I have the feeling you're not telling me something.*

Everything on the desk went up on the large white-board. He began with the map, pinned up with magnets. Each child's image pinned as close to the point of their abduction as he could manage.

'Got a felt tip?' Jack asked.

'Sure, as many as you like.'

Whalen opened a draw. He put a handful of coloured pens on the desk. Jack picked a red one and started drawing lines. The rest of the stuff in his bag couldn't come out quickly enough.

Jack wasn't sure how long it had taken. His coffee cup was empty, and several desks had been pulled together. He'd discovered the Sheriff liked to hum.

'Edward Critch was pulled over that night because a stop-lamp was faulty on his car. When the officers involved asked to look in the trunk, Edward made a break. They gave chase. Now Edward could have driven in any direction, but he didn't. He drove toward home, why was that?' *You can chip in at any time.* 'They found trophies in his home, proving he'd had those missing girls there.'

'Maybe Edward had a partner?'

'No, everything about Edward suggests he was a loner. Home life, work, there was no-one.'

'Edward liked girls. And he liked them older. Your alleged victims are all children.'

'All of the lines connect here, in Wildfowl. That's not a coincidence, it's by design.'

'Edward Critch is dead, that's a fact. They pulled his body from the car after it went into the river. And whilst all this is very compelling, you haven't shown me anything to suggest his son survived, let alone is abducting children.'

Jack pulled more paper from the front pocket of his bag.

'How about this?' Jack asked. 'Read the bottom paragraph.'

Sheriff Whalen took the paper Jack offered.

'Out loud?' He asked.

'Sure, why not?'

“Sometimes I see him” the Sheriff read. “If I listen, I hear his voice. Much gentler now, and more distant than ever before. I believe he’s finally found pride in his offspring.” What is this?’ Whalen asked.

‘Pages from Jonas’ diary. Keep reading.’

“Returning home has saved me. Finding my father’s secret place and what remained of his work has redeemed me. What my father began, I have since pledged myself to finish. I have given myself to the Thirty.” Whalen pointed to the board. ‘Twenty-nine kids missing. He’s keeping score?’

‘It means he has a purpose. Twenty-nine kids down, and apparently only one more to go.’

‘What happens when he reaches thirty?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Jack, supposing that all of this, it’s true. I’m not equipped to handle it. It would take a Task Force, man-power, computers, cleverer people than you and I.’

‘I get it, I do. At least give me some names. Some people I can talk to. Someone around here remembers Edward Critch. Maybe we can piece this thing together and work out where this *secret place* could be. We have to at least try. Sheriff, Alice Freeman is not a figment of anyone’s imagination.’ He tapped on the circled city, Chattanooga, and then drew his finger down the map. ‘Somewhere along this line another child *will* go missing. Sheriff, give me a place to start.’

‘You have to understand, this is the Bible Belt. People in these parts do not want to hear about serial-killers living in their community, especially when they’re dead ones.’

‘I’ll be discreet.’

‘You think you can keep this discreet? The moment you start suggesting, what it is you’re suggesting, the likelihood will be some of our older citizens will want to run you out of town, at gunpoint. A few of the younger ones may see an opportunity to cash in. Stir things up with the local papers. Shit, I can already see the headlines. Ghostly Killer, Child Molestation Ring. Wildfowl, in big black letters on every front page. We’d have every nut and conspiracy freak descending on our town.’

‘Are you about to warn me off, Sheriff?’

‘No sir, I am not. Last time I checked this was still a free country.’ Whalen took a lingered look toward the board. ‘I don’t know if this is fact or fantasy, but let me be clear. I will not allow it to descend into a circus.’

Did that mean Jack had the law on his side? He needed to press on whilst he had momentum.

‘Sheriff, I read a report that one of the officers that night saw someone else in the car; he reported it may have been a child.’

‘That was Jeb Taylor. I’m sorry to say that he died of cancer in two thousand and three.’

‘You knew him?’

‘I did. He was a fine deputy, and a good man. Lance Hartman was the other officer attending. He did not substantiate Jeb’s claim.’

‘Well, let’s go see him.’

‘Deputy Hartman transferred to state law enforcement in nineteen ninety-six. He was shot and killed in the line of duty two years later.’

‘Shit, then that’s it. There’s no-one left that attended the initial scene?’

‘Sheriff Ethan Sommers, my predecessor, he was there. And he’s still very much alive and living in Wildfowl.’

‘Well, that’s great, we can talk to him. See what he knows about Edward, about the site, the other officers attending. Hey, wait, did you say Ethan? As in Ethan and Barbara, who like pastries?’

‘That’s correct, and I do believe you had a conversation with him just about an hour or so ago.’

‘You know about that?’

‘This is a small town, Jack. It’s got a grapevine faster than a smart phone with 4G. But unfortunately for you, it’s after ten. Right about now Sheriff Ethan is busy baking for tomorrow’s bring-and-buy being held at the Community Hall. So best if we don’t disturb him, least not till Barbara takes her afternoon nap.’ He was staring hard at the board again. ‘I hope I don’t regret this, Jack. We could stir a hornet’s nest of animosity if we don’t keep this quiet. You’re in a small town, and its most famous resident was a man that everyone would rather forget. The Critch name is a sore that never healed in these parts. Besides, I have to get myself re-elected in less than two months, and I ain’t ready to retire, not just yet. You go shooting your mouth off, or doing *anything* inappropriate . . . am I clear?’

Jack mimicked a zip across his mouth.

‘There’s also Doc Rolins. We need to treat him with special care. He’s on the Town Council, and last time round I got his vote. Do not do, or say anything that may alter his opinion of me.’

‘Was the doctor familiar with the Critch family?’

‘Doc Rolins was, is, a practicing physician, and a psychiatrist. He tended to Helen Critch in the latter years of her illness. So he got to know the family, and I guess he got to know Edward as personally as anyone round here ever did. Doc got called in by the state to attend the postmortem of Edward, and the two bodies they discovered in the trunk. If anyone knows anything about Edward Critch and his family, it’ll be Doc Rolins.’

‘So where do I find him?’

‘He’ll be fishing up by Kealy Lake. That’s where he spends most of his time since Dandy died. Dandy was his wife of nearly fifty years. Doc took it bad when she passed. He still runs an afternoon clinic for the select few. Four days a week, but you have to be over seventy-five to attend. Doc’ll be open for business tomorrow, but he won’t be back from Kealy till early tomorrow morning. He likes to sleep a while; I’ll take you round and introduce you, not sure he’ll see you otherwise.’

‘What about the Critch house, any chance of a visit?’

‘I’ll take you up there, but there’s not much to see. That house hasn’t been lived in since all of this happened. Tell you what, why don’t you call me tomorrow on my cell.’ He handed Jack a card.

‘Tomorrow?’

‘Tomorrow. I need to make some enquiries of my own before we go Lone Ranger and Tonto on this.’

The Sheriff wanted to check him out. Jack supposed that was fair enough. Besides, there were other avenues of enquiry to pursue. Maddy.

‘Okay, tomorrow.’ Jack took a last glance at the board. ‘Sheriff, who did Rosie point to?’

Whalen stood and walked to the board. He took a photo down and stared at the girl’s face.

‘This little girl here,’ he said, ‘her name’s Samantha Gear.’

‘Yeah, you know her?’

‘Samantha is this town’s *other* big secret. Her family were born and bred around here, until James, Marsha, and their daughter Sam moved to Detroit. That was in nineteen eighty-four. Sam was abducted a year later, her body’s never been found.’

‘Locals, I didn’t know that.’

‘Well, now you do. The Grears came back to Wildfowl a year or so later. Poor Marsha was driven crazy with grief; ended up in an asylum and died there. James shot himself a few months after her death. Guess they never came to terms with losing their little girl. Who would? Sam was taken from the room next to theirs whilst they slept. Difficult thing

to live with, knowing you were just the other side of the door. So Jack, be assured that some folk may take it a mite personal if you go poking around.'

'Samantha's the reason you don't think I'm crazy?'

'You have a lot of kids on that board. I guess it wouldn't hurt to take a look.'

Somehow Jack had to get Maddy to open up. His host was undoubtedly a rich vein of information that he needed to tap. But how? She was hardly talkative. Jack pushed open the door to his room and threw his rucksack onto the bed. A large brown envelope lay on the carpet, FAO JACK, hand written in capitals on its face.

From Maddy? Somehow he doubted it. No post mark; no return label, no message on the back. Jack ripped the seal and peeked inside. *Stationery?* He emptied the contents onto the bed. What he saw took his breath away.

Definitely not from Maddy. He recognised the aged paper, and the handwriting neatly penned on each piece. He had pages just like them in his rucksack. Each one with the same curious symbols scrawled in the top left corner. Something else caught his eye. *Is that a badge?* Obviously old, its steel pin gone rusty.

Jack gingerly flipped it over. The design on the face was an original version of the smiley face, grinning back up at him. *Some sort of joke?* He wasn't laughing. *Who knows I'm here? That would be most of the town by now.* Jack perched on the side of the bed. *Who . . . why?* Only Chali and the Sheriff know about the diary. *Maddy?* A flash-bulletin ran the length of his nervous system. *Only one other person could know; would have more pages of the diary.* It was *his* diary after all. Another thought fuelled the ride along his spine. This wasn't a big room, just a desk and a mirror, the bedside table. Jack backed away from the bed. What if the previous owner had more than hand delivered the envelope? He was sure the bathroom door had been open when he'd left. Jack edged toward the bathroom, he eased the door back. At least the shower curtain was pulled back. Yeah, he'd seen that movie.

So non-one else was in the room. Standing in the doorway staring at his delivery didn't help. Or did it? He saw a piece of paper, more modern than the others, something hand-written on its surface. Jack picked it up and opened a half folded sheet of A4. Had Jack and Jonas become pen-pals? He didn't like what he read.

*'The fool is kept happily at a distance, the wise grows under his feet.'
You should have kept your distance, Jack.*

Another smiley face had been hand drawn below.

Fuck. How the hell does he know I'm here? Did Wildfowl's grapevine have a serial killer on speed-dial? *Breathe, Jack.* He'd realised his heart was beating a calypso. His head hurt as well. A pinch on the sciatic nerve and he'd have the entire repertoire.

Jack grabbed his rucksack and headed back to the bathroom. *So much for being incognito.* Front pocket zip was slid back. Pain killers and stomach settler popped into his palm; gone in a single swallow. The little blue ones winked at him through the plastic bottle. Was that Jill whispering in his right ear again? "Take the pills, Jack." *Hey, it isn't every-day a murderer sends you mail.* Not a good idea, they made his head pillow-soft and dulled his senses. They'd make him want to sleep and he needed to be alert. Especially now Jonas knew he was here.

Jack washed the pills down with water from the tap. Another thought added to his unease, and took him to the window to tease back the curtain.

Nothing outside but open space. No people, and no cars in the lot. A hundred or so yards away the thick tree-line looked more than ominous. Is Jonas watching? How would he know. Jack gave the trees the finger. 'Fuck you,' and let the curtain fall.

Who'd told the sick fuck I was here? Maddy? The suspect pool was larger than he'd realised. *The old boy, Ethan? Whatshisname, with the coffee, Nathaniel? Oh shit, the Sheriff?* Anyone they'd called, bumped into, or saw had seen him walking down Main Street.

How Jonas knew didn't matter. The fact that this sicko had reached out, that was a game-changer. A dangerous one. Jack read the note again. Was it a warning, or was it a death threat? Whichever, he felt it wise to use the lock on the door. *Easy Jack.* His hand reached for his cell. No missed calls, nothing on the screen. *Why give these to me?* Jack stared at the diary pages. It wasn't a complete diary, so why leave these particular pages? He began to read.

I've read extensively about people that kill, it's become a hobby of mine. An interest in the violence of others. And I've come to realise that it's not as easy to kill as people may think. Not if you intend it more than once. A murderous thought, a carnal urge, self defence. But these are fleeting moments, and not enough. For most who kill it was a singularly mad affair. A violent and bloody exercise. These people are animals, and should be put down.

Some, I admit, hold a fascination. There are killers who see the act as an art, as a form of self-expression, even an indulgence to be performed by a connoisseur. These people I am keen to understand. For them the act is a curtain that must be slowly drawn, and never ripped away. Theirs is a desire, a compulsion, a passion. For some it is thought and practice; above all, it is patience. Attributes that I have in abundance. Skill, I assume, I inherited from my daddy, Edward. In truth, I believe that I owe all that I am, to him.

I think about him often. About our time spent together. How he taught me from a young age, what it was to be like him. Of course I had no idea then that he was grooming me.

From that very first experience, that initial time. The night he came and stirred me awake. When I followed him blindly out there into the cold. I can still see my breath frozen in the air; the hollows in the snow left by my feet. It was the first of many times that he took me out there, to the barn. The two of us sat, suffering the silence. Patiently waiting for our prey to emerge. Rodents that seemed the size of cats to me back then. I was a prodigy, a savant, as I learnt from him to be patient, focused, and deadly before I strike.

Daddy preferred the blade to the gun. The knife, he said, was a conduit through which a life can pass. Be drawn from one to another. Like lightning through a rod. I learnt quickly the art of the blade.

We hunted too, for deer in the forest. I experienced the thrill of the night as we stalked. Never the gun, it had to be the bow. Finish them with the knife. It was more personal, always personal for us both; I expect that is why it's so personal for me. It must be personal. As sure as desire breeds intent, only indulgence can fulfil the act. Once I had sipped from the cup, I found my thirst became insatiable. So much blood, and it's all on my hands. Jonas is a bad man. Jonas is like his father. Jonas only takes what he shouldn't have. Bad, bad, Jonas is bad. Hate Jonas. Hate him for what he is, and for what he does.

The writing at the end was scrawled and more childlike. Jack picked up the page below.

I dreamt last night. In my dream I was plunged into the water with my daddy. That one final moment. A sudden goodbye before I swam from the car. A still-frame from my life that haunts me even now. Why? I couldn't have helped him. How could I? I was small and frail, and my lungs were screaming for breath. But before I left him, I remember that Edward wasn't afraid. My daddy reached out, his final wish, to touch his boy one last time.

What a rush. It was too much. The weight of the water, the drag from the car. His face fading as we parted. One singular moment that has driven me ever since. An image that is frozen in my mind; that never changes as some memories do over time.

Jack fingered through the other pages. Was this a later diary? The writing seemed to idolise his father. Best buddies, father and son. Not what the other pages he'd read had suggested. That Edward was a sick mother-fucker who regularly abused his wife and kid. Maybe memories did change. Or was there another personality at work?

I remember cold, and fear. I was so afraid of the many lights gathered on the far bank of the river. Those beams that swept about the water from the bridge above. Though the current had carried me beyond their reach, their powerful glow spread fear throughout the darkness. It would have taken just one to shine on me, and all I have done now may never have been. The fact that there were so many showed the power that my daddy held over them all.

It's a strange thing to write these memories down. Even in these pages, amongst my most sacred words, it is difficult. I've never spoken of how bad it really was after Edward had gone. I put all thought of his work aside and tried to make myself anew. I would be my own man now. I would be Jonas.

Jack reached for another page. With one hand on the paper, the other reached for his phone. He settled down to read. The words were a powerful lure. An insight into the mind of a killer.

They were like ants, the police; so many of them. I did consider turning myself in. Fall to your knees Jonas, cry like a baby, beg them for forgiveness. What harm could a child have done? I could have told them that Edward forced me to watch. That fear had kept my mouth welded shut. The truth was, that was a lie. I knew it, but did they?

Thirty-six dollars and twelve cents, that was all my daddy's estate had bequeathed. I took fresh clothes from his, special place, and I ran. I was al-

most thirteen years of age, with the knowledge that the water had carried me to the bank, just like Moses. And like Moses, Jonas had survived. Jonas, the son of Edward, had struck out to find his place in the world.

Jack read on.

Springfield was where I hitched my first ride, on a train that led to nowhere. But I was content to go anywhere. The destination mattered less than the place I tried to escape. The outside world passed by at the speed of sound.

The loneliness on that train was nothing compared to what I would have to endure. Even so, I loath trains. They take you places. And then they bring you home. They follow a route laid down without chance for deviation. One stop, and then onto the next, followed by another. Wildfowl was my home, the next stop, my destination, it was never to be found. I was always destined to return.

Still, small towns were an opportunity back then. A chance to feed and water before the next stop. I was a ghost who travelled with only a ghost's memories. I saw the world for what it was, and for what Jonas could take from it. I gave nothing back in return. It was inevitable, I suppose, that I found myself in the big city for the very first time.

Union Station was a temple to the Gods, a vast edifice that took my breath away. It was also a frightening place. So many people, so many voices, they came at me like a cursing wind. I was awestruck, excited, and overwhelmed. I was a fish that had leaped from its bowl. Until I saw him. That first time I laid my eyes on him, Damien.

I still remember his face, even now, with so many years between us. Fine freckles in abundance, across the softest white skin that stood him out. The first time his keen candy eyes fell on mine I felt a stirring like never before. I would have done anything for him, and I didn't even know his name.

As I approached I knew he was waiting for me; why else would he be there? How fortuitous that we met in such a wonderful place. As the sun broke through that vast ceiling of glass it shone down upon him, on Damien, and no-one else. I know now that he was watching for foolish run-aways like me. He was Damien, the boy who collected lost souls. The boy who took my hand and led me to a place they called, the Cross.

It was Damien who sold me into a whore's life in a place called Chicago.

It would help Jack if the pages were in order, or had numbers. There were no lines to guide the pen, but despite this the handwriting was

crisp and neat. He couldn't make head nor tail of the symbols hand-drawn on the corner of each entry. He found the next page and read on.

At first they treated me well. But soon enough they treated me badly. Compliance was like an oath forced upon me. They gave me love which turned to violence. They gave me the cellar to call my own; nothing more than a hole in the ground, and my home for as long as they kept me.

They loved me; hated me, over and over until they broke me, until I offered myself to the menu of bad men. Always men, grown men, who should have known better, who forced themselves upon me. It was a treat for them if I resisted. Payment for my service was my food and a smile.

Good boys don't cry. They endure!

Eventually they stopped putting me in the hole. When my mind was theirs I knew no happiness beyond the odd fleeting glimpse of him, of Damien. His image I would hold dear until the next time I saw him, the love in his smile a thing to cherish. And cherish it I did, as I endured, for Jonas is a survivor. Jonas knows how to endure, he found a place where the bad men would never find him.

Ritual, ritual, ritual, the words burned into my mind

Jonas would undress the man, he would caress his body. Use his oral skill to give pleasure. He would perform in whatever way the client desired. And they all desired.

Some were gentle, some were pain. I accepted that one could not exist without the other. All took from Jonas what he wouldn't give freely. But only his body would be present, for he had found a place to hide.

I was a chrysalis, I was a butterfly, I was beautiful beyond measure. Watch me spread my wings and fly. And Jonas had found himself a place to fly off to.

The next page was the wrong one. Where was the right one? Jack moved the pages around. If this psycho was going to send him a book to read he could at least put the pages in the right order.

He checked his cell; still nothing. Chali should be here. It was her efforts that had driven this scumbag to the surface. Where was she? This was all too fucking weird to deal with on his own.

I wasn't sure my mind was whole. Pain from a client could distance my mind. Tear me from being in two places at once. An act I considered impossible, and yet I was there. This mysterious, wonderful place I came to know as Sanctuary. With practice and concentration, total belief in my en-

deavour, I found I could rise and fall at will. Leave the the drooling perversions to another life. In Sanctuary I'd found a place to be free. The end of others and the beginning of Jonas. A new beginning where the sky was always welcome and blue. The sun warm and gentle. A place where Jonas was no longer, bad.

There were others that lived in Sanctuary, but none of them spoke. They wore the robes of monks and lived life as though it were a monastic event. Here, in their beautiful castle, constructed from peace and tranquility, a medieval banquet of pillars and towers, with walls built from flowers, capped by a sky that stretched forever. There is calm here, in body and in soul. There is harmony on which I can fly, where warm sunshine strokes my outstretched limbs.

As time went on I began to understand why I had been chosen to come here. This beautiful, wonderful Sanctuary. Within its cloisters and halls, amongst the soft chanting and the gentle hymns, all of which serve to guide me. To teach me. It was here that I discovered who he was, this man named Jonas Critch. And through him I was able to reveal the deep place below. A humbling sanctum laced with tombs, that served no purpose, where no bodies lay-in-state. Those places of rest that were not yet fulfilled. I counted their number, and they came to Thirty.

‘Thirty?’ Jack sat up. ‘So this *fantasy* has something to do with the kids?’ *Some sort of ritual?* Jonas clearly wanted him to know, or was it to understand. But why? Something else bothered him, it was the narrative. Off somehow, he wasn’t sure how. Jack read on.

I didn't understand much back then. I had little knowledge of any truth, not as I see it now. Not until that first time, when I felt the joy, and I realised the reason that I had come. Down there in that place I love, I first saw her. She beckoned to me, her son. My mother, alive and well. No illness, no pain; perfection had filled her cheeks again. Down there amongst the Thirty I had found what I'd lost, and never thought to see again. She floated there in the Sanctum's centre, hair like silken threads, glazed within ethereal light. Held aloft upon a summer's breeze. She was fed and nourished, no longer pained and broken. If this place, this Sanctuary, could restore my mother in this way, could it restore me? Heal within Jonas that which is twisted and cracked, that which was beat on and crushed by the sinners of this world.

I prayed it could be, as I drifted to feel her welcome. I swear the sky opened above and rained cherry blossom to cover the ground. The soft music of Bach, mother's favourite, played gently on the breeze.

I visited often. I taught her to fly and we chanted with our brothers. My only wish was to stay forever. But life has a habit of breaking men's dreams. Of trashing all hope, to drag us down on courage and strength. I tried to be strong; I swear that I tried. But it wasn't enough to endure and believe. I prayed each and every night for the strength to go on. I prayed to remain free.

But still they came to fuck me, and to spoil my beauty. To piss, and shit, on the body of Jonas Critch. They screwed the childhood from his body and left him set within turmoil and pain. Such harm I feared could never be healed. That no hope could ever dream to recover. No child should ever be treated like that. No child should ever be abused by the grown-ups that are sworn to protect him. I faltered, lost my way, and Sanctuary became a dream.

Jonas was thrown back into the hole because he was weak. The visions became erratic, blurred, more difficult to attain. Sanctuary turned its back. Mother did not have the strength to hold on. I felt her hand slip through my fingers and release me back to this world. Why? Because Jonas was weak. He was unworthy. Jonas was weak, weak, weak.

Jonas was alone again. Left to rot in his Hole. That pit that peels your mind away, layer by layer. The Hole is darkness, the Hole is fear. It is blackness and silence; it is death that kills the spirit. Sucks the life until there is nothing left but hate. Until there is nothing left to do but suffer and endure. Wait for the return of the light.

It was my Damien who brought me back. My Damien, the one who had found me. For whom I prostrated my passion and love. I understood him now; how he had been broken in spirit and mind. He too followed the path that no child should ever be forced to walk. We each understood the other, and how it had come to be. My Damien.

Our lips touched for the first time and we lay together. Our fear bound us, our love. It was my function to pleasure a man and so I employed all my skills to ensure his desires were met. I felt him upon me, his flesh warm to the touch, his passion whispered with broken breath. Our arms and fingers entwined in soft embrace, and he had me. He took me with a whisper and a gentle touch, a climax so wonderful that I was filled with the passions stars. And we whispered sweet words and shared a common longing. A symbiotic curse. He caressed me and kissed me and our bodies helped to heal our pain.

Damien, so sweet. Damien, so warm. Damien . . . so what?

He was my Damien. My sweet collector of souls. He was my first, and he would be my last. As I stroked his neck with my lover's touch, I felt for another. A chord. It lay waiting beneath the pillow. I love you; I whispered in

his ear, his eyes meeting mine. How they shined in the poor light, how they smiled back to me . . . me, Jonas Critch, the boy he had brought here from the station with trains.

As I lay upon him I stretched my chord, I wrapped it around his neck and I pulled with every muscle and sinew. Harder and harder I yanked that thing, that chord which cut deep into his throat. I love you, I whispered. Wheezed protest attempted to leak from his mouth. Damien's face changed. It was beautiful, and macabre. The flesh reddened as if his head might pop, and I heard a faint grunt. I felt the shudder of a body that could no longer resist, and I watched his eyes, those wonderful gems that attracted lost boys. They burned bright like the sun, and then dulled with his death.

When the light no longer reflects the soul no longer resides. There was blood leaking from my fingers the chord had bitten me hard. For just a moment, no longer, I took what was left of his warmth. A memory that I have never spoken of, but I now share with you, my journal. I, Jonas Critch, son of Edward, was strong again. I had seen the future, and I knew what had to be done. The Hole had shown me how.

To attain Sanctuary in another life, would depend solely on my actions in this one. The Thirty would receive and rejoice. I would have to earn my place; collect lost souls. Ensure they are spared the world that Jonas has been forced to endure. Just as my sweet Damien had shown me. It was the only way back. My only way to return. Count my number, for it will be, Thirty.

Jack stared at the page in his hand. Was that it, the whole story. Or just what Jonas wanted him to know. Jonas was damaged goods, and taking the children was a part of some fantasy to leave it all behind.

‘But why take these particular kids?’ There were still a couple of pages to read. ‘Why travel half-way across the country to find them?’ Jack grabbed his phone, and a moment later a photo of the Sheriff's board was on the screen.

It still doesn't make sense. ‘Why these kids in particular? You obviously research your victims in great depth. Unless you think the parents were abusing their children? ‘Oh please, you think you're saving the kids from abuse?’

It ticked a box. But if that was so, then how did Jonas know? And why send these particular pages of a journal to Jack. *An obituary? One more after Alice, and then what?* This had the air of something final, and fatal. Jack didn't like being second in this race. But he didn't really have a choice. He picked up another page.

These children of ours, what will become of them when I am gone? I find them everywhere, lost and helpless, as they kneel at their father's feet, as they endure the fear. But not me, they don't fear Jonas, not Jonas; I will not harm a hair on their head. I would stroke a child's mane not cut it for pleasure. These children are like me, and through me they understand. I grieve for them and share their pain. They are lost with nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. They can only endure or withdraw. Only Jonas can show them the way to survive. I show them the way to Sanctuary.

I have given much thought to the subject, down here, away from all distractions. The human gene has become polluted, it is no longer clean. In some it festers, and harbours, and breeds the worst of what we are. We're infected with a cancer, a mutation that has spread like a virus, seeking to infect others. It is an epidemic that threatens to overwhelm our purity, and suppress the natural evolution of mankind. There is a subhuman that hides in the shadows. Creatures bastardised by the bestial nature of man. There are too many of them, and they are everywhere.

Darwin's theory explains that the female invests so much more than the male. So why then does the male rule supreme? It is his actions, and not hers, that drives the selection. That dilutes the pool with the weak and perverse. Sexual selection has gone wrong. It has warped out of all recognition. Men covet men, and are as common as locusts on corn. They have become accepted, and are even protected. But they are the unclean and filled with demon's lusts. As the rapists and murderers are now more common than shrews.

Somewhere in-between these monsters lurk predators that are worst of all. Pure evil who prey on the vulnerable and weak. They lurk outside and hide in the shadows. Disguise themselves and stand in plain view. They wait for their moment to strike at our young. They even hunt in packs like

dogs. And they are everywhere, believe me. A rabid disease found more common in the genome than you may want to accept. An impurity passed down through the generations. We find them in the street, in our schools. They preach a sickness behind the pulpit. Share our air across the garden fence.

You won't see them coming, the sick and depraved, they are out there and walk freely amongst us. Their sickness is offered for sale. A commodity sold in a digital market; a social media with horns. Don't you see? We are already attracted, all of us. Its dirt, dirt . . . disgusting filth, and we are lured daily. The cancer is present in every one of us, and we all know where it hides. Just below the surface, shifting with the tide. If you listen you can hear it whisper; nipping incessantly at your weakness of will. Humanity is listening to it wholesale, and it has become an epidemic. We are changing, evolving, heading for the point of no return. Bad is everywhere, and it is more prevalent than good.

But Jonas is bad too, and he will not stop until the Thirty is complete. It is the only way. The pain must cease for them and it must end for him. I wonder, do the bells cease to toll as the senses dull themselves into oblivion? Does a tacit scent of desperation descend into a bitter sweet taste as life burns low? I need to know. Tell me, does the sun fade when you close your eyes and the darkness descends? I don't know. I can only suppose that the way ahead is brighter than what we leave behind. It is a self evident act; a simple truism for whatever action or inaction precipitates the act. You cannot have one without the other. We are the beneficiary of all the genes that came before us. Therefore we have little choice in what we do. How can we?

Jack put the pages down on his knee. 'Wow.' If Jonas was faulty when Edward had him, he was full on broken and detached by the time he'd returned to Wildfowl. Jonas was sick. The man was ill, an off the chart delusional psycho. Was he really trying to justify all the crimes he'd committed?

Jack reached for his rucksack and pulled out the other papers from the diary it held inside. These ones were older, more insightful, and more thoughtful in their way. More intimate than the rambling crap he'd just consumed. Jonas was clearly older and more deranged when he'd written these. And something else as he held the papers up to the light. The handwriting was off. The letters 'r' and 't' a little more inverted, the text smaller and not as expressive. Had Jonas suffered an injury to his hand;

to his head? The grammar was wrong too. As if he'd tried to catch up with his thoughts at a later time. Not exactly Jack's area of expertise.

In fact he found it best not to think too much, just let the words rattle around in his head. "Down here," Jonas had said. *Down here?* Was he underground? In a cellar, or maybe a cave? Did the Critches own, or have access to somewhere underground? Was there an abandoned mine, or a storm drain in the area? Something Jack would need to look into.

Ding, ding. Jack resisted the urge to ring the copper bell again. It obviously didn't work because no-one came to attend the desk.

Ding, ding, ding.

Patience. Jack slid both his into his pockets. *Patience.*

Sharp jolts of electricity leapt about his synapses, full of energy, going nowhere. Fingers tapped but still no-one came.

'Ahh, Mr Lottman. It's you again.'

Who else would it be?

'Hi Maddy,' he gave her his best smile.

The woman stood hands clasped to the desk top. She was expressionless, expectant, the pole firmly rammed up her nether region. The woman's hair tied up as usual, a grey skirt and a surprising amount of flesh being exposed through the white blouse she wore. A pearl necklace hung tight about her neck.

Maddy had the *Governess* look moulded into her natural demeanour. Jack suspected she'd been a handsome woman in her youth, and still could be if she'd let her hair down and wipe off the plastic smile. She'd have more chance of getting laid.

'I wonder if I could get some coffee?' Jack asked.

'Of course, but you will have to drink it in the lounge or the rotunda. We do not encourage hot beverages in the rooms.'

Of course you don't.

'The lounge it was then, will you join me,' he asked. 'I'd like to hear more about Wildfowl, and your lovely hotel.' Okay that was a lie 'I understand it was in your husband's family.'

'Mr Lottman, please . . .'

Dear God, she sighs like Jill. Does that mean she loves me too?

‘ . . . if you intend to ask questions about certain unsavoury events that happened in Wildfowl’s past,’ another sigh, ‘then that would be acceptable.’

It would. ‘It would?’ *Is that a proper smile? Shit, pearl necklace, partial cleavage.* No

‘I would also like to apologise for my earlier evasiveness,’ she said. ‘The subject you asked about is, shall I say, sensitive around here. But I have since spoken to the Sheriff, and he assures me that your interest may be of some public service. To that end I will be happy to chat.’

Wow. ‘Coffee, five minutes, in the lounge?’

‘As soon as the beans are ground, Mr Lottman.’

‘Err Maddy, before you go. I don’t suppose you saw anyone loitering near my room earlier?’

‘Loitering? No, why, is there something amiss?’ A look of alarm. ‘Has anything been taken?’

‘No, no, there’s nothing *amiss*. And please, call me Jack.’ He looked about the reception. ‘Are there any cameras in the hotel?’

‘No.’

‘On the exterior walls?’

‘No.’

‘In the parking area?’

‘No.’

‘Thanks, that’s a great help. So, you, me and coffee in five. Which way did you say the lounge was?’

Jack sat opposite Maddy in a deep chair with scrolled arms, made for sitting, not lounging. The fireplace was inglenook and big enough for two children to play happily with a ball. The room itself was cloaked in oak panels, modelled on a gentlemen's club from the turn of the last century. Maddy poured the coffee. Jack wore a velvet smoking jacket, she'd insisted. All he needed now was a pipe and a brandy. He could get used to this. Where was the pouffe for his feet? Call the maid, Jack was feeling hungry.

'Are you sure you'd like me to call you by your Christian name? It's unusual to be so familiar with the guests.'

'Jack, please. I insist.'

'Very well, Jack. Yesterday you said something about my husband.'

'Ahh, I did. Sorry about that.'

'Oh, I see.'

Disappointment on Maddy's face, what had he done now?

He knew exactly what she was talking about as he reached for the fresh, aromatic, black as night coffee.

'He's sorry,' Jack said, and hoped he wouldn't regret it. But a sudden guilt had grabbed him, a result of her sad expression. 'He's sorry about a lot of things. At least, that's how it feels.'

'Feels?'

Out with it Jack. They say confession is good for the soul. And talking to Sheriff Wally didn't hurt, did it? He cleared his throat. 'A few years ago I had an accident.' *Go on Jack, she won't bite.* 'I was in hospital for some time, and part of that time I spent in a coma. Whilst I was asleep I remember speaking to people, only they weren't people.' *Nearly there, feeling uncomfortable. Spit it out, there's good boy.* 'When I asked the nurses about them, I found out they were patients that had died. That's

pretty weird, right? I remember their faces clear as day, and some of their names too.' Jack sat forward. 'The truth is, they unloaded quite a lot of their personal shit on me, like I needed that in my condition. Believe me, it was all very strange, and annoying. I didn't realise I was asleep. Just a constant yap yap going on up here, constant wingeing about passing on. Talk about tales from the unfortunate. Anyway, an old man sat by my bed and told me it wasn't my time. He told me it wasn't my fault. I woke up soon after and thought it had all been a dream. But after I left the hospital I got, well, feelings. I kept hearing whispers.' He sat back. 'You try sleeping at night with that kind of shit going on in your head.' Jack's index finger circled his temple. 'I couldn't shake it off, so I did some research, even took a few messages to loved ones. Anything to make *them* shut up. You can imagine the reception I got from some of the relatives. It wasn't easy I can tell you.' Jack's turn to sigh. 'I was on heavy duty pain killers, I was confused, and I had a habit of saying things that I shouldn't. Not my finest hour.'

'It sounds frightful, what did you do?'

'Derr, I saw a doctor. He recommended a psychiatrist. "Just someone to talk to," he said. What a load of bollocks. Doctor James thought I was two tins short of a six pack, and she was a frosty bitch as well. Difficult to talk to, can you believe? My shrink was difficult to talk to? All I got was more pills.' He tapped his head. 'All quiet on the Western Front now, for the most part.'

Isn't Maddy the one who's supposed to be talking? Fucking pills, they act like Sodium-Pentophal. Interrogate the subject, get what you can. No, wait, have tea and a chat; tell her all about yourself.

'So, you're in touch, Jack?' she asked.

'Huh? Oh, no, no. Christ, I'm not a fruitcake. It's just a feeling now and then. They get stronger when I don't take my pills.'

'Pills?'

'That's it, that's the look. I used to get it a lot. So now I just keep my mouth shut.'

'Jack, you have a gift.'

'No, I had a bang on my head. A good one. I was ill, that's all.'

'Of course. May I ask what kind of accident it was?'

That was the question. That was why he didn't bring the subject up. *Nice one Jack.* All the feelings of guilt, already resurfaced.

'I'm sorry, I'm prying; I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable.'

'Maybe another time.' Coffee had turned bitter. 'But he is sorry Maddy, and for a lot of things.' Jack shrugged as Maddy slumped. It was

the first time he'd seen her do that. Bless her, she still missed him. He knew exactly how that felt. *Move the subject on.* 'I can count now. Couldn't balance my cheque book before.'

'Count?'

'Yeah, I'm a medical marvel. Ask me to add something, go on.'

'Jack?'

'Please.' *It helps shut my head up.* 'Any numbers. Think of it as a game.'

She smiled. '14,734 plus 5,897,435.'

'5,912,169,' he answered. 'I know, it's weird right? Look, Maddy, can we talk about Wildfowl?'

'Yes, of course,' she nodded. 'Would you like more coffee?'

'No, thanks.' *Here goes.* 'There was a family . . .'

'You want to know about the Critches?'

Jack nodded. He'd taken a few sips of Jack-D before leaving the room. It was stirring up a chemical party in his head and encouraging what he commonly thought of as housewife's stare.

Not at her cleavage Jack. Alcohol didn't mix so well with his pills. 'You knew the Critch family?' he asked.

'I was a nurse back then,' her voice had softened. 'I was young, eager. I wanted to help people,' she said. 'I'd barely passed my exams before the Health Board placed me at the local hospital. It's gone now. But back then I was one of the nurses under the supervision of a Doctor named Rolins.'

'Yeah, Doc Rolins. The Sheriff mentioned him.'

'Such a nice man,' she said. 'Helen Critch was a patient of his. I suppose everyone from here to Spokane was his patient. And as such it was my job to make home visits when the patients were too ill to travel. She was a very sick woman. Not so much in body, but here,' Maddy touched her temple, 'in the mind. Which is hardly surprising I suppose, knowing now what we do.'

'Do you think Helen knew about her husband's proclivities?'

'I prefer to think not, but things were very between a husband and wife back then. You knew your place, if you know what I mean.'

'Yeah, a husband could beat his wife and no-one would interfere. Did Edward beat Helen?'

'I think he did more than that. I tried to talk her into going to hospital on several occasions, but she would not leave her home, or her husband. In fact she was very adamant on the subject.'

'So you saw her alone, without Edward being present?'

‘Yes, but never for more than a moment. Edward was a very possessive man. He would linger in the doorway, or by the window. He’d always look out through the glass, I remember that. He was a man with a distant personality. I don’t recollect him ever making eye contact with me. I don’t remember him ever talking more than two words during a visit. I would fill her prescriptions, administer any medical needs, and then I would leave. No tea or conversation. It wasn’t a visit I ever looked forward to. But I did feel for her. That part of her marriage, it was not uncommon. It was not my place to interfere.’

‘You must have been about the same age as Helen.’

‘She was a year older, I think.’

Jack was already doing the calculation in his head. It put Maddy around seventy.

‘Helen came from out West,’ she said. ‘She was the daughter of Jeremiah Parker. His wife had left him and taken her away as a child. I clearly remember the town’s surprise at her return.’

‘Why?’

‘The Parkers had a large extended family. Some of them live north of Springfield, but most reside further south, in Tennessee. She did not *have* to return to Wildfowl. In fact, I believe her mother would have advised her against it.’

‘But Parker was her father. Maybe she had a need to find him. It’s not uncommon.’

‘Perhaps? But he was an abominable man. A man with a short fuse and a propensity for violence. Sheriff Ethan had cause to arrest him on numerous occasions. He was also a hard-drinker which doubtless encouraged his punitive nature. I assure you that Helen’s mother, not that I ever knew her, would have advised her daughter to stay away.’

‘But she didn’t.’

‘Clearly, from what I remember, Helen Critch, despite her illness, was a very affable woman. She was always pleased to see me when I visited. She would take my hand and squeeze it as if we were old friends. She was in her early twenties when I first met her. Within a year she was bed-bound and emaciated. By her end that woman was on a permanent drip. She resembled an end-term cancer patient when she died. I remember Helen Parker when she first arrived in Wildfowl. She was slim, very slim, and pretty in an odd way. More fashionable back then than now, I think. She used to wear long dresses, and hats. She always wore a brim and a scarf, even in summer. My mother knew her mother, that’s how I know that Elizabeth Parker ran away from her husband. It was

just before we entered the war. I'm afraid that Helen Parker married a man just as cruel as her father.'

'Poor cow.'

'Quite.'

'What about the kid, Jonas?'

'A nice boy, most people thought he was a bit backward.'

'Backward?'

'Perhaps *simple* would be a better term. Whereas Edward would be considered an aloof character, his son Jonas was always at home and by his mother's side. She mothered him constantly. He never left her when I was present. Indeed he was often in the way. Perhaps I'm being too harsh when I label him as *simple*. Jonas was quiet, and didn't mix well with other boys his age. He was most certainly afraid of his father. When you put yourself at the heart of a family as I did, you notice things. Edward only had to look at the child and he would exhibit a submissive reaction. I had no doubt in my mind that Edward was violent toward Jonas, and toward Helen as well. Indeed, after they found the bodies in the car I reformed my opinion and diagnosed that Edward had been sexually abusive towards the child. But in those days, Jack, without absolute proof, no-one would dare to intervene in a family's business. In the years after her death I often . . . I often wondered if I could have, if I should have done more. One of life's regrets, I suppose. Would you like more coffee, Jack?'

'Sure, thanks.'

The tiny china cup was filled and the liquid's heat spiralled upward from the rim.

'Excuse my professional curiosity, but may I ask what pills you take?'

'Sure,' he rambled off various brand-names.

'You're in a lot of pain,' she said. 'It must have been a very bad accident. I'm very sorry for your loss.'

Loss? Sheriff Wally's got a big mouth.

'Jack, if you have any more feelings, would you let me know?'

Sure, why not? He nodded.

'Now, what else would you like to know?'

'Anything you can tell me about the family. Did they have any other properties around here that you know of?'

'Not that I'm aware of. They were a poor family, like most families back then. When Julius died, well, I suppose that was when things really changed for them. It sent Helen to her bed full-time; it was undoubtedly why she took a turn for the worse.'

‘Julius? Who’s Julius?’

‘Julius was their son, Jonas’ brother. Edward and Helen had two sons.’

‘Jonas had a brother?’

‘Yes, but he died. Drowned in an accident up at Kealy Lake; it’s just a few miles to the south of here. He was the older brother. Edward also had a daughter by his first wife, did you know that? The poor girl, she went missing aged seven. It was a terrible shock to the community. Edward’s first wife, Maria, I think that was her name. She died of a heart attack, or something similar. It *was* a long time ago.’

‘Was her death suspicious?’

‘Not that I know of. It’s said that Maria died of a broken heart, all very tragic. I only know what my mother told me, Jack. It’s here-say at best. Apparently Edward lost his job, his house; he went to live with his father. He gained employment, and used the money to help pay off his father’s debts.’

‘What employment? What did Edward do?’

‘A salesman, I think. He was often away travelling. It was Edward’s money that kept the family home afloat. Just the two of them, until Herman Critch passed away. That’s when Edward inherited the house. Edward had to sell some of the land, in the late forties. It was the only way to stop foreclosure on his father’s house. If I remember rightly, he sold it to Jeremiah Parker.’

‘The truth is, Jack. My mother was a bit of a nosy parker and knew most things about most people. Wildfowl was a small town, most of the residents of Christian County lived rural lives. When Edward was younger he was away from his home for weeks at a time. Only God knows what he truly got up to whilst he was gone.’

‘Did your mother ever have an opinion on why Helen Critch returned?’

‘She was Helen Parker back then. And it was, oh, maybe four years after Maria died that Helen returned to Wildfowl. Three months later Jeremiah Parker announced that his only daughter, Helen, was betrothed to Edward Critch. That caused quite a stir I can tell you. No-one had seen Parker’s daughter since she was a small child. My mother told me Elizabeth had upped and left him during the War. She went off looking for a better life, and a better man, somewhere out West. There were a lot of factories that a girl could work in during the war. I expect she told everyone that her husband died fighting the Nazi’s. It was a big surprise when Helen came back. Poor woman, she should have stayed out West.’

‘So Edward has a wife that dies, he has a daughter that disappears, and then he has a son that drowns? Is it just me that’s seeing a pattern here? No-one questioned this back then?’

‘Dying in those days was more common than you think, Jack. But I do take your point.’

‘So what can you tell me about, Julius?’

‘Jonas and Julius, they were chalk and cheese. One was an introvert, and the other, well, he was quite obtuse. Julius was a troublemaker, and he was a thief. Everyone in town watched him closely. He was prone to getting into fights for no reason.’ Maddy was deep in her memories, fingering her pearls. ‘No-one liked Julius,’ she made the sign of the cross on her chest. ‘Jonas was a sweet boy. The other boys always teased him. I think he wanted to fight back, but he didn’t know how.’

Well, he sure as shit knows how to fight back now.

‘After the funeral they took Jonas out of school. Home tuition, it was his mother’s idea. We didn’t see much of him around town after that, he spent his days up at the house. Whenever I saw him he was always close to his mother, poor woman. Helen’s health began to fail after she lost her son. She told me on two occasions toward the end that Julius was still alive, still there in the house with her. Her mind had slipped away, you see. The doctor was prescribing stronger drugs and sedatives. I think that all she needed was to get away from that house. Get away from Edward Critch. It was so very sad to see. I wasn’t much more than a child myself, Jack. It was early days for me as a nurse. What did I know?’ Her frame was sagging again. Remembering the past, a past that was proving emotional. ‘Only God knows what that man did to Jonas. What he did to both of his children? They never found the body, did you know that? After Edward died in the car accident they looked for Jonas, but they never found his body.’

Maddy crossed herself again.

‘I’m sorry, but talking about the Critches is unsettling.’

Jack decided not pursue the conversation. He’d change tact. Talk about the town, and the hotel. About the people that lived in Wildfowl during the sixties and seventies.

Maddy told him how the town had suffered in subsequent recessions, but had survived. She lit the fire and Jack relaxed, enjoying the warmth from its flames.

Staring at the fire he realised that since he’d met Chalise he had been more at peace with himself than he had been for years. Maddy had asked him about the woman on the phone. She’d mentioned the smile on his face when she’d said, “*I love you.*” So he told her, well mostly, how Chali had settled his mind. How a few days with her was a better tonic than any doctor could ever prescribe.

It was dark when Jack went back to his room. No surprise waiting on the carpet this time, dropping his bag he checked the bathroom anyway. Not a bad start, he supposed, as his cell-phone went on the night stand. Still no call, no message. Maddy had opened up, and the killer had sent him a welcome package. He opened the fridge and pulled Daniels from within.

Tomorrow he'd check out the local graveyards, go through any church records he could find. Get dates on the Critch's births, deaths and marriages. Try to piece together the past. The devil was always in the detail. Maybe the local priest could shed some divine light on the Critches. The library would be his first stop to check property records. Land titles, town census, check the local Press for the period both before and after Edward crash landed in the river. The more background he gathered the better the feel for the man, the more chance of digging up that one vital piece of information that might expose Edward's secret place. Give him a lead on Jonas. He was going to track that psycho if it was the last thing he did.

Maddy had been helpful, informative, although mostly gossip and loose facts. So Edward had a daughter from his first wife, a girl named Emilia. And there were the two boys, Julius the eldest, and Jonas his younger sibling. Then there was Helen Critch, or Helen Parker, she was an enigma. Something about Helen's tale had perked Jack's interest; he couldn't put his finger on why. Maybe the library could shed some light on her past?

Jack grabbed his rucksack, pulled a pen and notebook from inside and he started to write a list. It was going to be a busy day. At the bottom he added the hospital. Maybe he could get a look at the medical records for the family. Did confidentiality still apply to people who were dead and

buried forty years ago? Would a few bucks loosen a few lips or locked drawers? It was worth a try.

Jack grabbed his cell. *Do something*. His finger tapped open Messages, he selected Chali from the list and began to type.

I miss you? He wrote, and pressed send. A familiar whoop sound as it went, followed by silence.

Beep, beep. *Undelivered*. Not the reply he'd expected.

'For crying out loud.'

Jack reached for Jack-D and unscrewed the lid. He lifted his rucksack onto the bed. *Everyone wants Jack to take his pills. Jack's gonna take his freaking pills*. He did, three of them, and gone in one swallow, swept down his gullet with a stinging slurp of whiskey.

Fuck you Chali. Where are you? Why aren't you here?

Tomorrow was a few hours away. Right now he'd mope for a bit, urge the phone to make a noise; generally feel sorry for himself. He opened the drawer of the nightstand to see a bible and the TV remote. A few seconds later a CNN news reporter was jawing about something on the wall mounted TV. Something was happening in Washington. *Everyone's got problems buddy*. He pressed mute and turned off the light, took another sip from the bottle. *Where are you?* The backlight on the phone's screen went dark. *Chali*.

“Please make a U-turn.”

“It’s about twenty minutes” Maddy had said. “Turn left onto the Sixty-Five and then right a few miles on when you see the fallen trees. You can’t miss them.”

Jack had missed them.

For the next forty minutes the countryside had been lacking a landmark. October in Christian County was delightful. The trees, however repetitive, were wonderful in the autumn light. Vast forests, their dominion ended by rich farmland.

“Please do a U-turn.”

Up on a small hill he found what he was looking for, the church. Its architecture shaped by Colonial days. A familiar rectangular body dressed in timber shiplap. A tall tower at one end that reached toward Heaven with a spire.

As he drove toward the big wooden doors a graveyard passed by on the right. Simple monuments ambled away down a steep incline. Were those apple trees. That was a lot of apple trees. Jack wasn’t sure he liked the idea of eating fruit grown in the soil of the deceased. The Honda’s wheels came to a stop.

Sunny but with a chill, as he walked toward the front of the church. Twin doors already open as Jack entered the House of God.

Nice. The roof was a vaulted ceiling, all the rafters exposed. Good American oak everywhere, nothing new, all hand carved and aged. None of that buy-in-a-box and assemble later rubbish you get from Ikea, this was pure American blood sweat and toil crafted over a century ago.

Rows of pews, a picket rail gallery that circled above. The wow factor were the stain glass windows that filtered through the heavenly light. This place would rock on Sunday mornings, the congregation happy

clapping their faith. The minister preaching his sermon from the rose-wood pulpit.

‘I have the healing hand,’ he shouted out into an empty hall. ‘Give me your forehead, sinner, and I will cast ye evil out. Give me some Amen, and a slice of, Praise be to God.’

‘I’d be happy to.’

‘Oh shit, Vicar? I was just . . .’

‘Checking the acoustics?’

‘Yeah, that’s it.’

‘That’s quite all right,’ he said. ‘I’m glad you can find your voice in the House of God. And I’m a Pastor, not a Vicar.’

‘Is there a difference?’ *Not that it matters.*

‘I administer to the community,’ he said, ‘not to the church.’

What does that mean?

‘I’m looking for a man,’ he said, then thought it best to rephrase the statement. The Vicar was in his sixties, all rosy cheeks and tight ginger curls. He wore brown corduroys, and a multi-coloured tank-top capped his torso. *He’s either colour blind, or gay? Jack, do not say that out loud.* ‘I’m looking for a sinner,’ he said, which sounded just as bad.

‘Only Christians here,’ the Pastor replied. ‘Live ones in the house, dead ones in the courtyard,’ he smiled. ‘Which particular predilection do you seek?’

‘The latter,’ Jack replied. The horror of the man’s wardrobe still being absorbed. ‘I’m told the man I’m looking for is buried in your cemetery.’

‘Oh do tell, but formal introductions first. My name is Granville, and I am the Pastor for this Christian Haven.’

‘Jack,’ he held out his hand, ‘and I am devout Atheist. Not one to be drawn to discussions about God. Not my cup of tea. But you do have a beautiful church here. I like,’ he said.

‘Oh, thank you. It’s always nice to get a compliment from the other side,’ he was staring. ‘So that’s what you lot look like.’

‘What who looks like?’

‘Well, I’ve never actually met an Atheist before. Just differing levels of faith, I suppose. We’re all devotees of the cause in these parts,’ he raised his fist. ‘God rules, okay.’

Seriously?

Granville was an odd little man. Bright eyed and bushy tailed would be the most apt description. Probably what happens when you tend to God’s flock in the Land that Time Forgot.

‘You never know,’ Granville added. ‘I might get you batting for our side before you leave. I’ll apply some Christian perseverance with a but-tering of PCBT, that’s Positive Christian Behavioural Technique. Never fails. Well, sometimes, but even Atheists have to believe in something. So why not in the Lord, that’s what I say. Come, come, I’ll take you outside. Let’s see if we can’t find you a large sapient, bipedal primate, who lies wilting in the horizontal position.’

Find a what? Are you on something?

‘It’s never too late to find Him, you know. He’s up there watching over us, He always listens. There are times when I swear I can hear his voice. Goodness, did you hear that?’

‘No, I didn’t. And with respect, *Pastor*, there’s not much mileage in me worshipping a deity that’s deaf, dumb, and blind. You *do* read the papers? Ever watched Sixty-Minutes? It’s not what you’d call the Garden of Eden out there.’ *Don’t get me going. Do not get me going.* ‘Bipedal horizontals, this way?’

‘Yes, of course. Please, allow me. Is it the Cloth, or the Church that bothers you? I quite understand. Some people suffer loss in their lives. They find it difficult to requite God with Good. I’m here to listen as well as help. Please, we’ll go out through the back. It’s a lovely day for a walk in the garden.’

It’s a cemetery?

‘The Lord’s house is open twenty-four hours a day whether you believe or not. Come to a coffee morning, I promise to keep the Holy propaganda to an absolute minimum. No,’ he smiled, ‘not really.’

‘Reverend, please, the cemetery?’

‘I’m being pushy aren’t I, I do apologise. Do you have a name for this sinner that you’re searching for?’

‘Edward, his name is Edward Critch.’

The Pastor stopped as he opened the back door. ‘Ahhh, yes, Edward Critch. I have to admit, I was expecting you, Jack.’

Really? Have I become a celebrity in Wildfowl?

‘You’ve been talking to Sheriff Wally, how nice.’

‘It was Rosie, actually. She mentioned there was a stranger in town when she flagged me down for speeding. I do get carried away in that little Morris Minor of mine.’

‘I’m impressed that the deputy gave the representative of God a ticket.’

‘Not exactly, apparently the camera doesn’t work when you’re on the Lord’s work. Especially when the spare room back there is available to

host the local book-club. It's just until Cathy Brewster has her kitchen re-fitted. They meet every other Friday, you're most welcome to come. They'd love a new face in the group. I should apply to join myself, I suppose, but busy, busy, busy is the Lord's work.

In anticipation of your visit I've laid out what we have on the Critch's, back here in the office. You'll find the parish records, the marriage register, there's also the Church Diary. My predecessor was keen to keep a day to day journal of Parish life. It covers nearly fifty years, and I'm sure he mentions the events in question. A keen mind might find something of interest. I do try to keep them up to date, but where to find the time? Oh, and there's the family plot of course, at the farthest end of the graveyard. Bit of a walk. Out through those doors, past the sandalwood pots, under the arboretum. Do smell the trellis as you pass. The jasmine is in flower and its scent is just heavenly.'

Get out, Jack. Do it quickly before he decides to . . .

'I'll take you myself, how does that sound? Show you a bit of a Wildfowl welcome. This way. Follow me, follow me.'

They were probably heading to Narnia, as Granville led Jack into an anti-chamber, to a doorway shaped like a portcullis. It was opened and they stepped outside. Out into the sunshine, past the pots, under the trellis, where the Pastor was quite correct, the jasmine stank. But it was one hell of a view as they left the church.

'There's not much left of Edward's headstone. Vandals, I'm afraid. I wasn't in charge back then, obviously, I was still in shorts and going to Sunday school back in the early nineteen seventies.' He was walking backwards. 'Jack, may I ask, what is your interest in the deceased? Are you a journalist? That does sound exciting. He *is* the most infamous man who ever lived in Wildfowl. I've read all the journal pages my predecessor laid down, all about the incident. Such a ghastly thing.' The Minister stopped. 'We're not supposed to be like that you know. God made us in his own image. Even a devotee of the scriptures has to ask, where did we go wrong? I do pray often on the subject. I talk to God every day, and I encourage him to change the world,' he was on the move again, heading down a path that split the cemetery in two.

Is he wearing school shoes? Dear God, he needs to let those trousers hang lower. Some Atheist Jack was. The word *God* seemed to find its way into his vocabulary at every opportunity. *If there really is a God, then why did He take Jenny and Evie from me? Answer that one, Granville. Tell me why?*

'He's listening,' said Granville. 'I saw you looking up. He's always listening.'

‘Look, Vicar . . . with all due respect, you have no idea. I’ve talked with Him at length, and He really doesn’t give a fuck.’

‘Oh, I see.’

Is he blushing? Well, get used to it, that’s how the real world treats you. Try leaving the mountain now and then and you’ll find out how.

‘I’m sorry,’ Jack said. *No he wasn’t.* ‘It’s a medical thing. I have scrap metal in my head, from an accident. It refuses to tune in to the Almighty.’

‘Ahh, I see. Jack, would I be wrong in assuming you lost someone in the accident? Sorry, I shouldn’t intrude, I apologise unreservedly. Stupid me, I do ramble on, always singing His praise. I forget sometimes that people don’t want to listen. Ah, look, there he is. Edward Critch. He’s been here a while now, not going anywhere soon. Shall I leave you to chat?’

Chat? ‘I’m looking for information about him, Edward, and his family.’

‘Of course. And when you come back up to the church, I’ll make you a nice cup of tea. I have chocolate biscuits. I’ll eat them all myself if you don’t help.’

‘Yeah, sure.’ *Is he rubbing his belly?*

‘They’re chocolate chipped with a cookie base that melts in the mouth. Please say you’ll stay.’

‘Tea, nice, thank you.’ *If you shut up.* ‘Chocolate ones, you say?’

‘Oh yes, I’m afraid they are *very* sinful.’

A man like Critch didn't deserve to rest with a view like this. Rolling fields sprinkled with forest trees, and the sun rising each day to bathe the landscape in a golden sunshine. It was a view for the living, not for the dead. Not for evil like Edward Critch.

There were no flowers by the graveside. Too much to hope that someone had left a card. The others were here too, Helen and Julius. They rested with their headstones undisturbed. Edward's stone long since broken, just like the man. There was a small plaque set in the ground by Helen's. The name, Jonas, well faded on the face.

* * *

Coffee and a small plate with biscuits were left by the journals, all of which were opened at the relevant dates. Granville was very helpful. But apart from names, ranks and serial numbers, he found nothing of great interest. The journey was a wash-out.

Granville appeared again. He was a regular Jack in the box; head kept popping through the doorway. "Is everything fine? Can I get you anything else? I'm on crack cocaine, it's great shit!"

He was back again, another biscuit packet in hand. How the hell did he stay so slim?

Oooh, strawberry creams.

'Granville, why does Jonas have a plaque and not a headstone?' Jack asked, his mouth half full.

'Officially he can't have a headstone because there is no body, or evidence to prove he is actually deceased. There was a memorial, of course; you'll find reference to it at the back of the book by your hand. The

former incumbent of my role, Pastor Howard, he insisted that the records were complete and that the boy, Jonas, was remembered.'

'And the child, Samantha, is she buried here?'

'The poor girl they found in Edward's trunk. It's my understanding that the parents came for her body. They took her back home, poor baby.'

'There were two bodies found in the trunk, Pastor. Samantha and a young woman. Do you know anything about her?'

'She was the child's nanny, poor woman. It seems she's all been all but forgotten. You'd have to contact the police, or the mortuary, to find out who claimed the body. It's all before my time, I'm afraid. You're welcome to read what's here. I've never even seen a newspaper from that time. Jack, do you think the rumours about Edward Critch are true? About him being a serial killer, I mean.'

Jack shrugged. 'It appears that what happened in the trunk, stays in the trunk. At least for now.'

'Yes, it's a ghastly affair.'

'What do you know about the son, Jonas?'

'Most people around here think that Edward killed the boy, and buried him somewhere in the Busiek Forest.'

'Do you think he could still be alive?'

'Praise the Lord if that were so. But how, how would a child survive on his own? Did you know that Edward had another son. Yes, he drowned up at Kealy Lake. Edward had taken the boys fishing. Goodness, you think he could have done for Julius as well?'

Done for? Jack shrugged. 'Who knows?'

'It was popular rumour back then. I suppose that's what I get for being at the heart of people's lives round here. They talk to me, tell me most things. As the Pastor of this parish I have to tell you, the tittle-tattle around here is endless.'

Tittle-tattle?

'I sometimes wonder why the Lord allows such suffering to take place. It's a test I suppose. What do you think?'

'I think the Lord works in mysterious ways.'

'Ahhh, touché. And the sarcasm is duly noted.'

'We can live in hope, Pastor.'

'Hope, yes, It's a wonderful feeling. The inspiration that ushers us along. May I ask, what *is* your interest in the Critch family?'

Jack turned another page. All very interesting, but it was telling him nothing.

‘I’m checking out my family tree,’ he said. ‘Got interested about a year ago. Found out I was related to the Critches on my Grandmother’s side. Her mother’s, brother’s cousin. Once removed, I think. I haven’t ironed it down yet. Found two whores and a car salesman from Detroit so far. I never imagined I’d be related to a killer.’

‘Quite, well, I’ll leave you to it. If you need anything? . . .’

‘Sure, I’ll shout.’ *That man has a bee up his ass.*

It was chilly in the office. The furniture was old, Shaker design. This was simple living for sure. He turned his attention to Pastor Howard’s journal, it lay open on the desk. The date on the page was July sixth 1972. One day after Edward had died in the river.

“It is such a sin,” Howard had written. “Why didn’t I see this coming? I’m a blind man who should have listened to his conscience. Read the signs in earnest. I failed her, Lord. I failed Helen Critch, and now I have failed Jonas too. Why do you allow it, Lord? Why do you allow the worst of men to continue in this way? Help us Lord. Help me. If only you would send Him to guide us again.”

Him? Oh, right.

What was it the Pastor saw? He was at the heart of life in this community, he’d have known the town’s secrets. Jack reached for a strawberry cream. There were creepy goings on in sleepy old Wildfowl.

“I have seen and heard things, Lord. I have prayed constantly for your guidance. I need a sign. The matters of men must be judged by men. This town sins, Lord. Edward Critch is the first, I fear he won’t be the last.”

What does that mean? What was going on back then that he’s not putting in the book?

The next few pages were unwritten. Jack flicked on; there wasn’t a page empty of writing before or after the seventh, eighth, and ninth day of July. Was the Pastor away? He flicked indiscriminately through the journal. No other pages were missing text. Why these three days?

Why?

July tenth 1974. The text continued.

“I received a petition from the town today. So many signatures, there is so much hatred. They don’t want the body buried here on hallowed ground. They consider it a sin for someone as evil as Edward to be buried amongst their own family and friends. What do I do? They urge me to refuse his body a Christian burial. They want me to deny his soul entry into the Kingdom of Our Lord. It is not a decision that I can make. I’m a simple Pastor, it’s not my choice to accept or refuse a man’s soul. That decision is for a higher power only. My duty is clear. I cannot, I dare not

refuse to intern his body. But still, I wonder if I do the right thing. I have asked the Church for guidance in the matter.”

July eleventh 1974

“Today some of the flock intimated they would cease to worship in this house of God. Some have threatened me personally. Why Edward, why did you do it? It was not necessary for you to endanger your soul.”

That sounds personal. Was the Minister Edward’s friend? According to the grapevine Edward didn’t have friends.

They broke the church’s window last night. Children with high spirits, I suppose. But I cannot bear the destruction of church property.” Howard had tried to scribble over the next sentence. Jack could just make the words out. “As sin begets sin, let the hand that cast it be cut off.”

What does that mean? Some sort of parable.

“Forgive me Oh Lord, and forgive the sinner, Edward Critch. Please God, let them find the boy, Jonas. I will continue to pray for Edward’s immortal soul. I will pray night and day for Jonas to be found.”

‘Hey, Granville,’ Jack called out. ‘I don’t suppose I could talk to the previous incumbent of your job?’

A moment passed before Granville appeared.

‘Pastor Howard?’ he seemed surprised. ‘I’m afraid he passed twenty years ago; God rest his immortal soul. I took over in his stead. Would you like to see *his* grave?’

‘No, not especially. What can you tell me about him?’

‘Not much, despite him mentoring me once for a year, he was a very private man.’

‘But?’

‘Don’t get me wrong, Howard was a respected and well liked man. But, I always felt he had some unresolved issues with the town. It was early days for me, I was fresh from college. Howard was in his late sixties by then, and somewhat of a poorly man.’

‘Unresolved?’

‘It’s, nothing.’

‘It sounds like it may be something. Come on, Pastor. I just want to understand.’

‘Of course,’ he took a breath. ‘Howard liked a tippie, I’m afraid. As I understand he began to drink after the *incident* with Edward Critch. He never shared whatever troubles he had. But it weighed heavy. And I’m sorry to say that most of his peers; those who knew him best, they’re all

gone now. Pastor Howard served this parish for all of his adult life. He was born in Wildfowl. He took upon himself much of its sin. I was very proud to fill his shoes after he retired.'

'Do you know if he was friends with Edward?'

'Friends?' Granville shook his head. 'You'd have to ask others more rooted here than I. There are a few still living from back then; some of them might talk to you. Talking about Edward Critch is taboo. I'll get in trouble for just whispering about him.'

'I take it you're not from around here?'

'After so many years in this church, I'd like to consider myself a local. But no. I wish you'd reconsider joining us at coffee morning. We could talk about the Almighty, and the wonders of faith. It may help.'

'Help? No, I'll pass. Maybe another time.'

'I'll hold you to that, Jack. Now I really must go. It's the bell ringers, they'll be here soon. Ding-dong, if only they could hold a tune. But sometimes it's the effort that makes us worthy. Now, is there anything else I can help you with?'

'No, thanks. I'll head back into town; check in with the Sheriff.' *Jack, you big mouth.* 'Hmm, he gave me a ticket too . . .' *Look guilty.* 'Gonna try and smooth it over before he takes me to court.'

'The Sheriff in Wildfowl is a man who takes his work very seriously. I do wish you luck, Jack, but I really must be off. Places to go, people to see, and hopefully offer comfort to. Come back before you leave us and let me know how you got on.'

'Sure,' Jack shook the Minister's hand. He took a last look at the church as he headed for the door.

History was all around him, but none of it was making much sense.

Jack put his foot down and the Honda growled along the tarmac. Just as the beast settled to a steady fifty, its dashboard began to ring.

Chali? He accepted the call. 'It's about time?'

'Jack, we have to talk,' a woman's voice.

'Jill? Hey, you okay?' Silence. 'Jill? It's a bad line, is anything wrong?'

No, we just wondered when you were coming home?'

Jack hesitated.

'I'm not sure yet. A few days, maybe longer. I'm on to something here; it's pretty serious. I'll have to see it through.'

'I understand,' her voice paused. *'Jack, David rang. He wanted to know if you were, feeling better. When you'd be coming back to the office?'*

Shit, he'd been busted. He'd told work he was poorly. Wouldn't be in for a few days, maybe a week. Dave didn't even like him, so why was the wanker calling to see how he was?

'I'm undercover,' he said.

'Don't lie to me. Tell me where you are. Jack?'

'Springfield, I'm in Springfield, Missouri,' Jack turned the wheel, eased on the brakes, and pulled to the side of the road. 'Jill, I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but I'm looking for someone.'

'Looking for someone; who? Why have you lied to me?'

Fuck, fuck. Why are you lying to her Jack? 'Someone came to me, unexpectedly. They had information, Jill. I needed to be sure, absolutely positive that it wasn't a hoax.'

'Who, Jack? Who came to you?'

The game was up. He should just tell her. Come clean, and tell Jill everything. But not like this, not on the phone.

'It's a man named Edward Critch,' he said. 'Some people were found in the trunk of his car, back in nineteen seventy two. My informant has

proof that his son is still killing. He's killing children, Jill. He's killed a lot of children.'

'Then why aren't the police looking for him?'

You'd think he'd have a better answer for that particular question by now.

'Edward Critch is dead, and as far as the police are concerned, so is his son. Jill, I think Edward's son is still alive. I think he's kidnapped a little girl, named Alice. I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I didn't want to worry you.'

'Worry me? Jack, you work for the Gazette, not the New York Times. I don't understand, why would someone come to you with a story like this?'

The line went quiet again. It was a bad quiet. A silence from someone who knew more but was afraid to say the words.

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I should have told you.'

'Who came to you, Jack? Who gave you the story?'

Tombola time for his tummy. He should tell her.

'Client confidentiality?' he said. 'I can't . . .'

'Is she pretty, Jack?'

Those were the words, the ones she'd been afraid to say, the ones Jack had dreaded.

'Is she pretty, Jack?' Jill repeated.

'No, it's not like that. I swear, I'm looking for . . .'

'You're a lying bastard. When were you going to tell me? Fuck you.'

Before he could answer her, the line went dead.

Music played softly in the background. The lamp Jonas had put by Alice's bed turned in silence, projecting stars through the red light to the ceiling.

'When I was ten I had a brother,' Jonas whispered. 'I didn't like him much, he stole everything from me. All that I had, that was mine, he took away. I won't let that happen again.'

He was careful not to touch her, just to lay close. There was a strong aura about the child; a delicate mystical hum. It was life, no, innocence. But aren't they the same? No, life gets in the way. It strips the beauty and releases the beast.

'I won't let that happen to you,' he said. 'I won't let you suffer like all the others.' This was nice. Moments like this were so rare. 'She's waiting,' he said. 'You'll meet her when you get there. She'll take of you as she does the others. I promise, we'll all be happy together.'

Candy. She smelt like candy at a fair. Such an adorable, delicious aroma; the smell of innocence from a child. Jonas could feel her energy too. A warmth that enticed him to edge closer. The temptation to snuggle close was intense.

It wouldn't be proper. Jonas didn't deserve this moment. This rare moment, this eye of the storm.

'This was how it used to be,' he wanted so much to stroke her hair. 'Mummy and me, we were the wind and the trees. The waves and the shore. Always together, keeping each other safe . . . inseparable.'

How wonderful if we could stay like this forever. Jonas knew this had to end, it always did. If only he could hold on a little longer. Remain woven like this, in the pure contentment of it all. Just a while longer. *Help me to fly.* He could almost feel himself rise. Lift from his mortal flesh in a spirit form. But one child wasn't enough to satisfy them. His number had been

chosen. That number was Thirty. This little girl, Alice, she was the last but one. An offering and a blessing. A bargain struck, he would see fulfilled.

Jonas pulled closer, he drew in more of her scent. So many children, so heavy a task. 'This is a beautiful thing we do, Alice. We'll both learn to fly. You, me, the others, Mummy; we'll be a family.'

One last soul to save and Jonas would be worthy, the transition would be final and complete. Jonas will fly again.

Hold on tight, it won't last forever. Soon she'll wake and all this will be gone. Jonas drew as close as he dared; it was her hair that held the scent of candy. *Dare I? Just the faintest touch. How could I not? I love you, Alice.*

Jonas let his lips touch Alice's cheek.

Dear sweet girl, you'll always be a rose. A delicate flower who'll never bloom, and never feel the harsh reality of winter. This world is no place for you. Stay with me. Stay forever in spring. Jonas ran his fingers through Alice's hair. She stirred as he did so, and then settled.

'Sleep, Alice,' he whispered. 'You're safe now. Forever young and perfect.'

Alice would feel no pain, not ever again. Jonas' arms wrapped around her, he was a powerful shield. His love would comfort her until the end.

Close now, he could feel Alice's breath letting go. She had purred like a sleeping kitten, but now the rhythm of her tiny heart had begun to slow.

Soon now, very soon. Goodnight sweet Alice, I love you.

Jonas stroked her hair; his body spooned close to hers, their cheeks inseparable. He prayed silently for the moment, for the sound of that final tender breath. *Soon, it will come soon. One last breath, Alice. Jonas will keep it alive forever.* Her tiny heart had slowed, the drug shutting it down. Its rhythm slowly relenting, and then paused. *There, I felt it. Goodbye sweet, Alice.* One final breath and it was over. Life released, she was on her way. Jonas pulled her limp body as tight as he could, he kissed her lips. She was on her way to Sanctuary.

‘You understand,’ Jonas shouted. ‘I had to. It wasn’t my fault.’

Always after the ecstasy, came the pain. *You’re only human, Jonas. What do you expect?* Rapid breathing was always the beginning; a hatred for everything that was Jonas. He began to wheeze, to sweat.

Why does the path to Sanctuary have to hurt so much? A prickly knot stabbed in his stomach. When the deed was done, the children, damn the children; they took something from him. They gave so much, but then took it all away.

‘Retribution, is that it?’ Of course it was. What else? One cannot exist without the other. Jonas doubled over, his arm reaching for the wall. Being shot would hurt less.

Be strong Jonas. It’s not Alice’s fault. You have to take it now, before she fades.

One doorway led to the bedroom, the other to his memories, and the tunnel that led out. Jonas pulled back the curtain. On the table was a camera, an old Polaroid.

Take it Jonas. This won’t end until you do.

He was going to be sick, the bile about to erupt; the juices so loose they rinsed around his mouth. Jonas swallowed, he was strong; he would complete the ritual. He had to. *They deserved to know. They all deserved to understand what a monster Jonas was.*

Be strong, be strong, be strong.

Camera in hand, the support of the wall rejected. Jonas was powerful, Jonas was strong, Jonas loomed above the tiny girl’s empty husk.

So pretty. Pretty little Alice. So, so pretty.

Jonas was sorry, he was, but what could he do now? The flash highlighted everything. So intense it was blinding. A mechanical whir followed as the photo ejected.

She was photogenic; gave a wonderful image. The photo's importance could not be overstated. Indeed, it was essential. *They have to know the truth.*

Jonas placed Alice's image on the board with the other photos. There was room for one more. Below them on the desktop were Jonas' other *memories*, one taken from each of the children. Rings, clothing, even a shoe, all had their own pride of place. Alice's memory would be a lock of her beautiful hair. Like none of the others before her.

Racked below were Jonas' journals. His very private thoughts. A history of what he had done. *The families, they have a right to know.*

Twenty-nine children slept as Jonas turned and walked down the tunnel toward the exit. He sighed aloud, repugnant of the task ahead. Jonas didn't like digging holes, but he had to put the body somewhere.

Sad, Jonas felt sad, always did. He'd shrouded the little girl to keep her clean, but shovelling the dirt across them always made him sad. But she wasn't alone, he could see them all up there, in a grid pattern of holes where their bodies lay buried. He could name them all too, and the date they passed, to the hour of the day. It was always the same.

Jonas flipped the switch on the kettle. The sound of the water boiling, the cup being filled, the spoon as it stirred. Sounded good. He needed to gather himself. Right now he needed to be sociable. Jonas had another child to woo as the laptop's screen burst into light.

He sat in his chair, took a last look at the curtain, closed, across the bedroom doorway. He tracked the cursor toward a familiar icon, Firefox. A double click was all it took and a gateway to an alternative universe was opened.

'Internet, favourites, Facebook,' he said.

Jonas checked over his shoulder, security being everything, then he entered his password. The cursor moved again to 'find a friend'. There was only one friend that he had in mind. One avatar that was worthy of his attention. There she was.

Just as you promised. I'll make it worth your while.

Jonas admired anyone who was reliable and punctual; it inferred that *they* were reliable, and that made his work much easier to do.

Nimble fingers went to work on the keyboard; the privacy setting was raised to the max. He didn't want anyone to eavesdrop on the lovebirds.

Hi Kirsty, how's u? he typed.

Where have you been? I was waiting, the reply

Soz, got delayed. School was shit today, got detained for extra math, YAWN!! Couldn't wait to come share. Hey, like the new piccies, you been shopping?

Nah, just stuff I had lying around. Thought I'd pretty up my profile with #piccies of me, lol. Wat u doing?

Talking to u, lol.

Derr, what u doin later?

Homework, got grounded. Life sucks!!!! Mum's being stress-head cos I didn't walk Frenchy. LMAO he peed on the kitchen floor. Wanna meet tomorrow? Be nice to talk in person.

Got gym class after school. Where and when?

How bout the park, up by the stoopid statue. Meet u after gym?

Totally sick, be there @4.0 :)

Purrrfect

Cool

Better go, mums bent & cracked. No gaming or online for two days. TWO DAYS. #family sucks. :(:(

KK cya then. Don't b L8

She logged off.

Short but sweet, just how Jonas liked it. Of course he wouldn't meet her. She may bring a friend; his presence would be awkward to explain. No, it was best to arrive early, to wait and watch. Let her get angry and stomp off home. He would be sure to see that she got there safely.

Jonas closed the laptop. He needed a drive into town to stock up on supplies; tools of the trade as it were. Make sure the van was filled with petrol; top up the tyres and the oil. Check the stop lamps. He wasn't making that mistake. Jonas was going on a road trip. If things went well he'd be back Thursday morning. Boy, he'd have a nice surprise for Jack.

This is so perfect. Surely it's fate that has brought Jack and Kirsty Lottman into my life. Not only was Kirsty the right age, her birthday was in just over a week. And she's a twin. How perfect. That the number Thirty was a twin, it proved there was a cycle to life. That each journey's beginning was a perfect fit to its end. Someone up there was smiling down on Jonas. Everything is just perfect.

'Let the game begin,' he shouted aloud. 'One more and I'm rid of you, forever.'

Hundreds of smiley faces bounced around the room. They were smiling, laughing, wishing him luck. But Jonas didn't need luck; it was all in the planning.

Main Street was a welcome sight as it stretched before him; a perfect hive of inactivity. The space outside Barbara's was empty. The Honda reversed in and seconds later he was staring at cream donuts, cakes, and buns, all laid out on white linen behind the shop window.

Be strong Jack. Lead yourself not into temptation.

Screw that, when he was done in the library Jack's evil intentions would indulge in Barbara's pastries. And no, that wasn't a euphemism. All he had to do was *find* the library. If the Sheriff's office was in the cinema, the café in the pastry shop, then where would the library be?

"Above the post office, dear," the nice old lady had replied, "where it's always been."

Then she'd got chatting about her dodgy hip, and the disgusting thing that Doctor Rolins had lanced last Tuesday. What sort of person showed that to a stranger? Then the look she'd pulled when Jack asked her if she knew anything about the Critches.

The library was very welcome as he took the last few steps up, into a room much bigger than he'd expected.

The old girl had suggested it wasn't a proper library, and she was right. The repository was more like a bookstore as he walked in. Row upon row of big chronicles and registers, not a paper-back to be seen. Some of the volumes were huge, most bound in leather. Where did they keep the Ladybird books? Daphne de Maurier and Dante passed by on his left. Not a Jacky Collins or a Dan Brown in sight.

Ah, a desk and computer.

'Hello, anyone at home?' He called out.

'Shh,' came the reply.

'Okay, but I'm the only one in here?' he whispered to the man in his sixties, still holding a finger to his lip. *Did I let a firecracker off in the*

aisle? He looked miserable. Probably the bad tan, and the fact he was going bald. He stared Jack down.

‘Shh,’ he insisted again, then added. ‘I’m only joking. We don’t get too many visitors. Hi, my name’s Geoff, welcome to Wildfowl’s Emporium of Knowledge. Please feel free to peruse the shelves. Anything you can’t find, we probably don’t have,’ he wiped his hand on his trousers and extended it. ‘So, you must be, Jack?’

‘No, my name’s Sherman,’ *Hah, not so smug now*, ‘just joking. Yeah, I’m Jack.’ *Has someone put my face in the town’s newspaper?* ‘Anyway, I’m here to look for . . .’

‘Extended family members, I know. Well, you’re in the right place. Isn’t this great? We could be related.’

‘Now there’s a thought.’ Not one he wanted to dwell on. ‘So, anyway, would you point the way. Nothing I like better than a dusty book whilst on vacation.’

‘That’s so cool,’ Geoff did look impressed. ‘Are you one of us?’ he asked.

Us?

‘Am I talking to another worm?’

A what?

He didn’t get the reference, but the book-keeper seemed excited. All his teeth were showing.

‘You’ve found me out.’

‘Wow, that’s great. I mean, to meet another member of America’s Historical Society. I like to think of us as the internet version of the AHA,’ Geoff did something odd with his hand. Some kind of secret sign. ‘Apparently you have to have letters after your name to be a member of the American Historical Association. Teaching under sevens at Patties-Play-Pen every Thursday doesn’t qualify. It’s a bummer.’

‘Yeah, bummer,’ Jack made the sign, sort of. ‘Go AHS,’ he said.

‘You’re only the second member I’ve ever met in person. You must be a founder member.’

Shut the fuck up. I’m not that old.

‘Look, Geoff? I’m here to check out the family tree. Anything I can find about their lives, that wasn’t in the papers. I thought your *Emporium* would be a great place to start.’

‘This is always a good place to start, continue, and finish.’

Did he have to end each sentence with a girly giggle?

‘So you’re related to the Critches? Hmm, bummer. You won’t find much on the shelves.’ His mouth was making abstract shapes as his fin-

gers tapped on the computer's keys. 'This town has a lot of history, not a lot of it has been computerised yet. We could start in there, if you like.'

'We? I don't know, Geoff. It's all kinda personal, you know what I mean?'

'Of course. Still, the Critches. Bummer. This way to Births and Deaths.'

'Already checked them up at the church.'

Geoff, are you having a stroke?

'You've met Granville. Aww, he's a love. And dishy for an older guy, don't you think?'

The Ginger mouthpiece of God? 'Dishy, sure, I see that.'

'I do look forward to Sunday mornings. Clapping and singing, such release. I do look forward to it with the Pastor.'

Of course you do. It's a day out in these parts. 'He seemed like a nice man,' Jack said.

'He's a peach. And he does so much for our community, especially the older members.' Geoff tipped his finger in and out of the spines as he walked. 'He's one of us too, did you know?'

'No way. The Pastor, seriously?' *What the fuck are we talking about?*

'This is what you want. I've got records for school, land registry, planning, lots of official town business. I have railway timetables, ticket sales, and cattle market records.'

'Cattle?'

'Oh yes, we were big on cattle back in the eighteen hundreds; not as big as some, but bigger than others. They came in by trail and then left by rail.' He was giggling again. 'It's a shame that we don't have a train station any more. Or a phone-box, the town misses its phone-box. Times have been really tough these last few years.'

'Bummer,' said Jack.

Coffee and donuts, should have got them first.

An hour was enough for Jack to realise that he'd hit a brick-wall. Deeds, titles, rentals, nothing that shouted serial killer. The only thing the Critches owned was the house, and the plot it stood on, which wasn't much.

The Sheriff had mentioned his predecessor, Sheriff Ethan, had taken dogs up to sniff the property. He'd attempted to establish if there were more bodies. Not exactly high-tech, but a pack of blood hounds could cover a lot of ground and they rarely missed their scent.

So, if the bodies weren't at the Critch's place, then where? The children had to be near Edward's secret place. Somewhere out there the Critches owned, or had access to land that was being used to kill, and maybe even torture, innocent kids.

'Is there anything else you'd like to see?' Geoff asked. 'Anything else you'd like me to find?'

Jack got the feeling Geoff wanted his books back. Talk about possessive. And what happened to computerising the past, the big volumes he had open on the desk were heavy, and a danger to asthmatics.

'I can get you the town council minutes. Or the pay-roll ledgers for the town employees,' suggested Geoff. 'We have eighteen eighty seven through to nineteen eighty, that's when the state took over'

'You said you had a train station?'

'Oh yes, but when Spokane began to grow, they built a much larger terminal. We became a stop en-route. Would you like to see the locomotive records? Amish Lawrence worked at the station *and* the town hall, he was meticulous on both counts. People came and went back then, but Amish kept account of everyone. Of course the station closed in nineteen seventy-six, poor Amish, he died a year later.'

You do spin a happy yarn. Records of cattle probably weren't going to help. 'Geoff, what comes to mind when I say, "The foolish are kept happily at a distance, the wise grows it under his feet."

'I'd say that you've misquoted.'

'Really? Why? How should I have said it?'

'The quote is by James Oppenheim, but you've altered it. The original quote is, "The foolish man seeks happiness in the distance, the wise grows it under his feet."

'Okay, what does it mean?'

'I have no idea. James Oppenheim was a schoolteacher turned writer and poet who lived at the turn of the twentieth century. Did you know that his books were blacklisted because he opposed America's involvement in the First World War?'

I did not, no.

'How do you know that?'

Geoff gestured about the room; it was obvious really. Jack really needed to read more.

'May I?' Jack reached for one of the pens hooked to Geoff's belt, that hung like slimline grenades. 'What about this,' he drew the image he'd seen on the badge from Jonas' envelope. 'What springs to mind now?'

Take your time.

'Have a nice day?'

Very helpful.

'Okay, what about a hypothetical question. If you had a lot of bodies to dispose of, out there in the woods, what would you do with them?'

'Bodies?'

'Yes, let's pretend you're a homicidal serial killer. You go out and hunt your victims, then you bring them home. After doing the unspeakable, what do you do with the bodies?'

'Is that your idea of a joke?' Geoff's tone became serious. More shapes with his lips without saying a word.

'No, just a question.'

'Well, I don't care for it. And you should be careful what you accuse people of.'

'It was just a question.' *In bad taste, obviously.* 'Geoff, where are you going? Hey, all worms together, right?' *Do the hand-thing,* he'd forgotten how.

'Are you even a member? Show me your card.'

'Yeah, I must have left it at the hotel. How about I take some of the books back with me?'

‘No, most certainly not,’ the book-keeper came from behind his desk. ‘You come here telling lies. Under false pretence. What is it you really want?’

Hey, whoah, easy. He’d touched a nerve.

Geoff closed the books Jack still had open. More slammed than closed.

‘What gives you the right to come here and stick your nose into other people’s business? What is it you really want, Jack?’

‘Easy buddy. I’m not sure how I’ve offended.’

‘You came to my town, You opened your mouth . . .

‘Geoffrey, apologise to this gentleman, and I mean now.’

Jack turned toward the voice, eyes still fixed on Geoff, who’d frozen mid-scoop of his volumes.

‘Who’s that?’ Jack whispered.

‘Ma, I wasn’t expecting you this early.’

Mum? She looks old enough to be his Granny.

‘So, can I take the books?’

The last volume snapped shut. ‘Nothing leaves the repository,’ he said.

‘Geoffrey,’ Mother’s tone carried a warning. ‘Why don’t you put the kettle on, dear? Uh-huh, no, go do it now. And when you come back you can apologise to . . .’

‘Oh, Jack,’ he said. ‘I’m very pleased to meet you.’

They both watched as Geoff slunk away. Whatever it was Jack had said, its residue left anger in the man.

‘My boy doesn’t usually resort to a verbal fist-fight. What did you say to him?’

Me? Nothing.

She may have been short on height, but Ma was tall on stature. Jack was pretty sure the old-girl in the flowery frock could throw a mean left hook. Did he have all those wrinkles to look forward to?

‘I asked him what he’d do with the bodies, if he were a serial killer? That’s all, honest.’

‘Then I’m not surprised he tongue-whipped you.’

You’re not?

‘Geoffrey’s been in trouble with the police. But he’s done his time. And I’m not telling you anything the town won’t gossip about behind his back.’

‘You’re shitting me, Geoffrey’s an ex-con?’

‘Try saying it without vinegar in your mouth.’

‘No, yes, I’m sorry, really, just surprised.’

‘Weren’t we all, Sweetie, but shit sticks, if you know what I mean? My boy’s lonely, that’s all, he don’t mean no harm. Doesn’t make it right though.’

‘I guess not,’ he had to ask. ‘What did he do?’

‘Why were you asking my boy if you could take some of his books?’

‘Oh, err, I’m researching a branch of my family tree.’

‘Is that right? And which family would that be?’

‘You don’t know?’ Her look suggested not. ‘Edward and Helen Critch,’ he said.

‘Son, you got some rogue genes hiding in your DNA.’

She said her name was Maise. A sweet old girl, who didn’t mind telling what she knew about the Critches. While Geoffrey kept a close eye from behind his desk, as he sifted through papers.

‘Sweetie, I’m the wrong side of life but hanging on in there,’ said Maise. ‘I don’t have much to look forward to but these old books,’ she smiled at Geoffrey, ‘and my boy, for all his, behaviours. Now what it is we can you do for you?’

‘You can tell me whatever you know about the Critches.’

‘Sweet Jesus, you’ll get a whole bustle of hell and damnation to go with it.’ A lot of wrinkles closed ranks as a kindly face turned Judge-Judy; a death sentence seemed imminent. ‘Why?’ she asked, ‘What’s your interest?’

‘He’s related to them, Ma. Jack’s doing research on his family tree. And he’s been talking to Maddy up at the Last Rites.’

Did Geoff just wink at me?

‘You been talking to that flat nosed bimbo up at the hotel?’ Maise shook her head. ‘All she’s got is a mouthful of piss and primrose. Got it from her mother, I expect. That bitch shoved her nose into everybody’s business. Let me tell you, all Maddy knows is the headlines. Those Critches swam like pond ducks; what you saw in the water, that ain’t what happened beneath the waves. Not if you know my meaning. I know the truth about the Critches.’

Nice one Geoff. He’d pulled the pin, and now Jack was keen to watch Ma explode.

‘I’d love to hear about Wildfowl’s ducks, if you have time?’

‘I worked at the hospital all my adult life, first as a nurse, and then in administration. I often had to juggle the two.’

‘You have hospital records?’

Maise tapped her forehead.

‘Madeline Pierce? That woman is just her mother . . . anyhow, I don’t suppose the patient’s families will be filing any law suits if I break confidentiality. At my age I’d be dead before it got to court.’

‘I remember Edward Critch. And I remember his boys too, Jonas and Julius. Did Maddy tell you about them? I suppose she did. Well, you wouldn’t think they had the same parents those two. Poor Julius, he drowned up at the lake. Fell out of the boat, as I remember. Last time I saw that poor boy he was laid out on a hospital slab.’ She leaned closer. ‘What people don’t know is that boy never felt the knife of an autopsy. Not the boy, nor his mother, Helen. It would have caused a furore if that had gotten out back then. And there were quite a few other *discrepancies* regarding that family’s medical history.’

Oh, do tell.

‘Discrepancies?’ Jack asked.

‘Well, the lack of an autopsy was nothing short of criminal. First thing you saw on the body of that poor boy was the bruising about his shoulders. The father said it was the result of him struggling in the river reeds, and of his brother trying to yank him free. And maybe that was so, poor lad. But the law is the law, and they broke it.’

‘Who broke it? Why wasn’t Julius examined? I thought a coroner *had* to autopsy a body in such circumstances?’

‘Well, there’s the discrepancy. According to hospital records the attending physician, as we didn’t have a coroner back then, had a duty to perform the autopsy. And according to the records that’s what the doctor did. Only he didn’t. Cause if he did, he did it without me. I was the Senior nurse. Hospital policy required *me* to be present.’

‘Why would they do that? Who was the attending physician?’

‘That would be, Orpheus Bailey, MD, he’s dead now, and good riddance. I heard his liver gave out. Hardly a surprise to anyone who knew him. That man was a heavy drinker. More keen on a drink than he ever was for the work. Christ on a cup-cake, I never understood why the hospital kept him on.’

‘So you had a problem with Helen’s death too?’

‘Ahh, now I was there when they brought her body in. That poor woman. I remember the way she was, all bug eyed like that. I couldn’t believe they hadn’t closed her eyes. She looked terrified. And there was something else too. I noted some faint marks on her cheeks, like she’d blushed just before her death.’

‘Blushed, what does that mean? Whoa, are you suggesting that her death wasn’t from natural causes?’

‘I’m not suggesting anything. Just saying what I saw.’

‘But the marks, they could have been from something that smothered her. Could she have been suffocated?’

‘All I know for sure is that Doctor Bailey had been drinking when he came in. They waited to do the autopsy for three days, when I was off shift. None of the nurses I spoke to were called to be present. Body was burned a day later.’

Wow, this is dynamite.

‘Tell me everything you know about Doctor Orpheus Bailey, MD.’

‘What’s to tell? He was a fat balding middle aged git who liked to drink. He was a sexist, a racist, and a leech with long arms. No-one liked the Orpheus shift. The older he got the more obvious he became, to everyone. You see Orpheus liked the nurses on his team to be young, straight out of college. You couldn’t miss it when he made his rounds, the age thing. They all had a look about them, younger than what they were. I remember that Orpheus was keen on giving talks to local schools too, the eight to fourteens in particular. Said it was “his duty to educate children on the issues of health.” Yeah right. I didn’t like him; an I didn’t know anyone that did.’

Maise was like a wind up toy, no intention of taking a pause.

‘The night Edward Critch died in that river, I know for certain that the bodies were redirected to the coroner’s office in Springfield, and by Doctor Rolins, he was adamant about it. He was becoming a very well respected man back then and insisted on being present at all of the post-mortems. He’d heard the rumours same as everyone back then. Rolins didn’t want Orpheus Bailey anywhere near the bodies.’

‘Why would Rolins intervene?’

‘On account of Helen Critch. I think he had a liking for her. Not in a romantic kind of way, you understand. Not anything like that. I’m not sure he ever forgave himself for being away when she passed on. He was on vacation in Europe with his wife. I remember he was angry when he got back and heard what had happened. Of course the powers that be at the hospital kept things hush-hush.’

‘You think that Edward had something to do with his wife’s death?’

‘I ain’t saying that, I’m just saying what I saw. Helen Critch, she was a lovely girl; passive in nature, a real sweetie. I met her, talked with her, when she first returned. I liked her, most people did. But she changed, after her father married her off. I always thought she was a bit odd, the

way that she stood and walked, very upright, hands always cupped in front of herself, like she was in mourning. Sure had a lot of idiosyncrasies that woman. She would never really look at you, her face always looking down. You know, with only her eyes raised whilst she spoke. A kid being told off, that was how I remember her. I guess that most people thought she was shy. But thinking back on it now, I would say she was submissive. Hell, they're all dead, not much we can do about it now. You want a cigarette young man?'

'Err, no, not for me.' Jack watched Maise pull a pack from a pocket in her cardigan, instantly followed by a lighter. 'Isn't it illegal to smoke indoors?' he asked.

'Smoking ain't nobody's business but mine. This here is my home, ain't no-one telling me what I can and can't do.'

The lighter flicked and the cigarette glowed red from the flame. A trail of fumes vented upwards. She almost looked relieved.

'These books belong to me, and to my boy, Geoffrey. We're what they call, Historical Worms. We like to burrow into the past. Car boots, markets, antiquity shops. Anywhere we can find a good book. My father started this wonderful collection, guess I caught the bug too. For Geoff and me, this room is a thing of beauty.'

Jack tended to agree. It was also a great place to start a fire.

'Did Bailey have any friends?' he asked.

'Drinking buddies mostly. I know he knew old man Parker, saw them together in the Starlight bar on many occasions.'

'Starlight?'

'It was a drinking house. You ever seen the cable series, Cheers? Well, you change the faces and the names, then lower the light a few notches, take away the smiles and add a fight or two; that was the Starlight. Christ in Heaven that place was a dump. I remember Bailey was friendly with the Brown boys too. They were the local rebel-rousers. White Trash I called them. They're both dead now so they can't help you. And of course there was Edward Critch, Bailey was friends with Edward Critch. I'll let you draw your own conclusions about that union.'

He was starting to.

'I don't suppose it all matters now, just water under the bridge. A bit like Edward I suppose.' The conversation seemed to be leaving a bad taste in her mouth. 'What else can I tell you?'

'What about the kids? Jonas and Julius?'

'Jonas wasn't a healthy child. I had no doubt, even back then, that he was abused by his father. I never considered it might be sexual, just

physical. But this was Wildfowl, we're a small, tight-knit community. Things like that didn't happen. If it did, well then folk tended to look the other way. You didn't involve yourself in anyone's business but your own. But I did tell Doctor Bailey, that was my duty of care. Probably what marked me out, maybe.'

'What he do?'

'Nothing, not that I know of. And you didn't dare go above his head. Not if you knew what was good for you. You think whistle-blowing is bad for the conscience nowadays? Huh, you should have tried it back then. What happened behind closed doors, stayed behind closed doors. It was family business. Besides, fathers tended to be hard on their kids; it was a different way of life, most especially in the rural areas. Poor child, I suppose he never really stood a chance.'

'Maise, what do you know about Emilia?'

'Critch's daughter? Jumping Jesus on a spring board, you do want to know everything. Truth is, I only saw her from a distance. That girl disappeared before I matured. Another death certificate signed by Orpheus Bailey, I shouldn't wonder.'

'Disappeared?'

Maise shrugged. 'One minute she was out playing, and the next she was missing,' she shook her head. 'They never found her. Like I say, that was before my time.'

'Missing? And none of this aroused suspicions?'

'Sure, I suppose. You'd have to ask Sheriff Ethan about that.'

'I will.' *Donut-man has some questions to answer.* 'So what can you tell me about Helen, about her medical condition?'

'Not much, that was Maddy-Starch-Pants department. She did all the home visits. She was the sixties version of Care in the Community. 'Deals on Wheels' we used to call her, on account of all the drugs she took out of the hospital. She worked more closely with Doctor Rolins than any of us, so I guess on that account she knew Helen Critch better than most. Both she and Doctor Rolins made regular trips out to the Critch household. Mostly when he wasn't there. I do know that Helen was *very* ill, I remember that much. I oversaw the prescriptions before Maddy took them out, mainly sedatives, drugs like Nardil, phenazine, and there was a whole bunch of M.A.O.I.s that you wouldn't prescribe today. She had anxiety problems. Depression, you'd call it these days. And there were definitely some strong bipolar contributors.' Maise covered her mouth with her hand. 'I dread to think what went on up at that

house. They should have burnt it to the ground the day Edward Critch died.'

Jack took a moment to think, and let Maise calm. He could see her fingers tremble as the cigarette slipped in and out of her mouth. Things were getting smoggy.

'Maise, what do you know about the Parkers?'

'The Parkers? I know Elizabeth Parker up and left the old man. There was a man I didn't care for. Vile person: had a temper bad as Satan himself. Died back in the late seventies, best you check the town records if you want the date.'

There was a story here, and it centred on Helen Parker, he was sure of it. The prodigal daughter returned and was married off to Edward Critch. Old man Parker was up to his neck in this, whatever *this* was?

'I hope I've been helpful, Jack. But I'm old, and I have some lady things that I need to attend to. So unless you want to come and hold the cotton wool, I'll say goodbye.' She slowly got up, Jack followed suit offering her his arm.

'It ain't come to that just yet, but thank you kindly. If you want to know about Elizabeth Parker, start with the railway. Amish had a compulsion for keeping records. Every name and time, in and out, was logged for nearly sixty years.' She leaned toward him. 'Ask Geoff nicely. I've scanned most of the train records onto the computer. He's not allowed anywhere near it.' She winked. 'He'll show you where they are. I tell you what, if you're still here when I get back, I'll make you tea.'

'That would be nice, thank you.'

He watched Maise hobble off. Before she disappeared through a doorway she had whispered words with her boy, who kept looking with disdain at Jack, even after his mother was gone.

'You'll be wanting the year nineteen forty-four then?' Geoff asked.

'Forty-four?'

'The year Elizabeth Parker left Wildfowl.'

'Yeah, sure, that's a good place to start.'

Maybe the records would show where Elizabeth went? What she and her daughter were doing before Helen decided to come back. Maybe even *why* she came back.

Edward was married to Helen. But what was Helen doing in the years before she returned? Where did they go? And Maria, what happened to Maria, Edward's first wife. Maybe something in Edward's relationship with these women would dig up some fresh dirt. Somewhere out there was Edward's special place, and Jack was determined to discover where.

Jack found a space at the rear of the library, his laptop open on a desk as he trawled through the town's records. The train station's records were revealing. In the forties there must have been some farms and certainly an abattoir, as most of what left the station was meat goods. Not a lot came back.

Knowing the year helped find the purchase of two tickets, one adult and one child. Both tickets were one-way, to Los Angeles. Elizabeth Parker obviously didn't want to come back. She'd left Wildfowl with her daughter, Helen, in nineteen forty-four. Helen was one year old.

Jack moved onto the County Records Office website. He even visited the state archives searching the local census. Then onto government employment records logged during the war. They revealed that Elizabeth Parker was a surprisingly popular name. But either the mother was the wrong age, or it was the child's age, or she had too many children. It seemed Elizabeth was hiding from Jack, but where? She had to live, earn money. There was no social welfare to claim, but plenty of work in the factories so desperate to increase their output for the war effort against Japan. The woman *had* to be somewhere? Then he had an idea.

'Maise?' he turned to Geoff's mum. She'd returned some time ago, and as promised Jack had two cups of tea by his side. 'Excuse me, Maise? Do you know Elizabeth Parker's maiden name?'

Sometimes the obvious is what handicaps a search. It took another hour but Jack found Elizabeth Scott Daniels, and her daughter, Helen. She'd applied to Los Angeles court for a divorce in nineteen forty-six, claiming that her husband had died overseas. Apparently the court had obliged. Elizabeth had remarried in forty-seven, to a highly decorated soldier named Sergeant Brian Philips. Elizabeth had died several years later of tuberculosis, her death recorded in Lewisville hospital, Cali-

fornia, in nineteen fifty-four. Elizabeth was aged twenty-one. But Jack had found no mention of a child or heir.

Online records from the church were next. Being good Catholics they would have attended regularly. There were too many churches, not enough online records. So Jack tried one last search; local papers. Any that had survived had digitised their old copies; an online database that had frequently served up results. It took a while but he finally found an obituary, and what he read made no sense at all.

“Elizabeth Philips, beloved wife of Brian Philips. Gone. Missed. Loved. Not forgotten. Elizabeth laid to rest besides her beloved daughter, Helen.”

Jack sat upright. ‘Helen was already dead?’ he said aloud. ‘That can’t be right.’ Jack entered the name of the church in the ad, St Michaels Catholic Church, Orange County.

Great, they’re online. He clicked open the parish records, typed in Helen Scott Daniels. To his surprise, only one name was on the screen.

Helen Scott Daniels, aged six years, died 1950 / tuberculosis.
Mother, Elizabeth Scott Daniels

No mention of the father, but the same disease that had claimed mother, had taken the daughter too. Sad, but not what was interesting.

If Helen Scott Daniels / Parker, died in nineteen fifty, then who the hell was the Helen Parker that turned up in Wildfowl in nineteen sixty-one? She’d have been, what, seventeen?

Jack printed off his findings; he needed fresh air. There was a time when he enjoyed this shit. Now it brought on his headaches. Worse than that, he’d uncovered another mystery.

She was cute, full of bounce; such a zest for life. Her entire face smiled when she spoke, I remember that. And I remember the phut phut phut of the Beetle's engine as she pulled up alongside me. I believe now, that she was sent from God to aid my cause.

'Hi, do you need a ride?'

I didn't. The walk in the sunshine, the breeze in my face, the solitude was all that I needed. But her face, that welcome; why not? So I accepted.

'Where you heading?'

'Nowhere . . . anywhere, it doesn't really matter.'

'Wow, that's deep, I like it. Maybe we should go there together?'

She was high on something, the Beetle's top was down. I remember the way her scarf fluttered in the air. She was free with her speech, her affection, and her cigarettes. I liked her a lot. She was a true vision, this princess, dressed in cloth splashed with all the colour of the time; a reflection of the day. She was her own psychedelic version of the seventies; her body rich with the desires of men.

After an hour of driving and talking she pulled over and left the main highway.

'Girls's gotta go,' she said. A few moments behind a rock and she returned. She sat next to me and rolled a joint, sprinkling the weed without care. The way she licked the paper and lit the flame. Drew the strong grey smog between those lush-lips. Followed by lavish laughter and gentle encouragement that I collude. Only then did I understand how free she had become. My own mind, so stuck and fixed, and unable to think, was sent on a journey.

'You can kiss me if you want. I'd like it if you did,' she said.

She was a free spirit in body and soul, and she wanted to share. She didn't even wait for permission, as those divinely moist lips found mine, her

breath as fragrant as her body. Her tongue wet and probing. When done, she sat back. She, a Cheshire cat, whilst I was a child in need of more arousal.

She began to slink to the music on the radio, as her hands slipped that beautiful blouse down slowly to her waist. My head was stuck on pause. My eyes fixed and bulging. I just stared, stared, stared, as her body writhed, its tanned flesh sleek like silk, her shapely breasts as hypnotic as her smile. Her warm fingers took my palm and placed it on her neck. They helped my hand tease downward on her body.

'Help me.' I heard her say. 'Please help me, little boy.'

But I couldn't, I wasn't allowed. He would be angry.

And then her lips touched mine again, and they moved gently across my face, and down to pet my neck. I felt my shirt unbuttoned by practiced hands, and still I stared. Not at her but at the empty desert behind. The wild scorched earth that ran far to the mountains in the distance. Into the darkness, lit only by that old miner's lamp that swung from side to side above us.

My chest now, her tongue was caressing. Down, down she went until my belt barred her path, until its steel pin melted to her dexterous touch, quickly loosened and pulled away.

'Damien,' I whispered, but she didn't hear me. Her lips had found a new delight as the lamp rocked from left to right. And I remembered how her fingers had reached out to me, and how she had begged for my help. How I had touched her, and then touched myself. It was how this beautiful creature touched me now. And still I stared, with spiralling colour in my head. The perfect shade of red. The same shade as the scarf around her neck.

I slipped that scarf from bare shoulders, as her head rocked to and fro in the manner of love. I listened to the sounds her lips made in pleasure as one hand, and then the other, slipped the smooth fabric out to its ends. As every hair on my body began to rise and I finally felt the lust for love. The same rampant charge of emotion that she had given me whilst strapped, so long ago, to my father's chair.

Looking down I realised how little this woman, who gave so freely of her love, no, it it lust. Evil drool between my legs moaned as her lips writhed, as the goat groaned and whinnied, and then began to wheeze, and struggle. Her head trying to rise, her hands no longer gentle but desperate as they gripped at the scarf to force it away. Frantically delicate fingers tearing at mine so desperate to be free.

'Damien,' I whispered, but she didn't hear me. 'Damien,' the last words that stranger heard as the scarf choked the life from her neck.

'Honey, I brought your sandwich and coffee to go,' said the woman looking down. 'Did I catch you taking a nap?'

'No, no, I was just reminiscing,' Jonas replied. 'Hmm, Chrissie, that coffee smells good.'

'Taste's good too, and don't you apologise. Not unless you've kidnapped that Newman girl and kept her from clocking in.'

No, no, that definitely wasn't me.

Maybe he should talk to Mister Newman about his daughter? About her growing unreliability, and the dubious company she was keeping. He'd decide that later, for now he would enjoy lunch. Enjoy the spectacle.

'Anywhere nice?' Chrissie asked.

'Nice?'

'That I dragged you away from just then?'

'I was remembering my first car, a Volkswagen Beetle. I really loved that car. It was sky blue with white wheels. The engine made a funny phutt-phutt sound as I drove my way around the southern states as a youngster. I sold it to an ice-cream salesman in Texas.' The truth was it lay at the bottom of a lake in Florida. 'I brought a truck after that. A much better vehicle to indulge the growing interests of a young man.'

'A passion wagon, oh, I wish.'

Chrissie was miffed. Lunch time at Barbara's was a highlight for the older generation in Wildfowl. A chance to drink coffee, eat cake, and turn into a rabble with a social conscience. Chrissie, thirty-two year old mother of three, liked her job, he knew that, despite the way she insisted she didn't. She'd told him twice already she was keen to end her shift. What she hadn't mentioned was she was meeting up with Bob Ray, mechanic from the garage, and a married man.

'I'm gonna shoot that little cow if she don't turn up in the next five minutes,' she said. 'Shout if you want anything else.' She was off and away to service Doreen. The blue-rinse who owned the craft shop had her hand in the air. Coffee required for everyone at the table.

Barbara's was filling up and he was taking up space. It was midday, he could hear the church bells ringing in the distance. A good few miles away, the sound carried to town on a clear day. The bell ringers would fire up their ropes, twice weekly at noon, and enforce the pleasure of their clappers upon the locals. He wasn't a fan, but what can you do?

'Is there anything else I can get you?' Chrissie asked on her way back to the kitchen.

'No, thank you,' he said, 'I'm content to sit here and admire.'

'Cheeky boy, but you'll get more cream in your coffee talking like that,' she winked, 'honestly.'

Jonas sparred with her but his attention was firmly fixed toward the large plate of glass that separated the café from the street. Something interesting was about to happen. The unexpected was about to intervene. It was time for Jonas to leave.

'Another busy day, Barbara,' Jonas called out, his bag on the table, the Danish being tucked away.

'It's busier than a battery hen's reunion in here,' the overweight, rosy cheeked proprietor replied. 'You leaving early?'

'I've just seen an old friend walk past.'

'I've got too many old friends and not enough new ones,' she smiled, 'if you know what I mean.' Her pen and pad were out. 'Two coffees and a Danish, you want them on your tab?'

'Yes, please.' The local football coach and his wife were already eye-balling the table, coffees in hand; keen to pounce on any seat vacated. He nodded to them, and then to Harry from the timber shop, who watched from the queue at the counter. Both looked ready to fight for his table.

People should learn more patience. Like Jack out there. He was peering in through the window, his face filled with indecision. Was it worth the hassle for a pastry.

Go for the Danish, Jack. The icing on top is to die for.

It was Coach who moved quickest.

'Back to work are you? Mind if we take the table?'

'Not at all, please do.' Harry got the better-luck-next-time smile from Coach.

'Still okay for Friday, Coach?' Jonas asked.

'I'm your man. If it works out with the kids, which I'm sure it will, then maybe we can make it a regular slot.'

'I look forward to that.'

He'd make casual conversation; give Jack a chance to be tempted inside.

Check out the coffee board, everyone does. Try out Ethan's new strawberry sponge. That would be his cue to slip out unnoticed as he continued to small talk, careful to watch Jack. He was tall, well built, a good body, but his spirit was broken. Jack didn't realise how badly of course, but Jonas would show him. The bell above the door did its thing as Jack entered Barbara's.

'Morning,' said Jonas, as Jack passed him in the doorway.

'Hey,' Jack replied. Eyes only for the counter filled with sweet delights.

* * *

What is this? A Viagra convention?

Small wonder that Wildfowl was deserted; all the residents were in Barbara's. He'd have to shout just to hear himself think.

Maybe he'd go somewhere else; somewhere quieter. Too late as he felt his arm grabbed by an unseen assailant.

Whoah. 'Hello, can I help you?'

Strange woman alert, he was being manhandled.

'I want you. In here,' she said.

He was being directed against his will toward a slim doorway with a beaded curtain. 'Hang on to your hat Billy, I'll be back in two shakes,' she shouted to the woman behind the counter, who didn't look too happy.

'You.'

'Me?'

'In there,' she said. 'Ethan would like a word.'

He would? 'Am I being arrested? Is lusting after donuts a crime?'
What's going on?

Jack found himself sat at a small table, with a perfect view back out into the café.

'You need coffee?' The woman asked.

'Err, sure.' *Who are you?* She was tall, overweight, a bit scary. Not the kind of face that launched a thousand ships. Sink a few maybe.

'You like something to eat with your coffee?'

Oh goody, I've been abducted by someone that wants to feed me.

Jack nodded.

‘You tell Barbara what you want. It’s on the house.’

It is? ‘A frosty donut,’ he said. ‘No, wait,’ *Free you say?* ‘one of those chocolate caramel things, with the sprinkles on top and the custard filling.’ They looked really nice in the window.

Barbara made sign language through the curtain. Someone else came up on his six. He was big, brimming with intimidation.

Lurch?

‘Don’t you mind Wayne,’ Barbara said. ‘He’s probably wondering who’s sat in Ethan’s chair. Wayne, go watch the oven for me honey. And tell Ethan his guest has arrived.’

‘So you’re Barbara?’ *Are hostages allowed to speak?* ‘Ethan’s wife?’

‘I am, and that’s Wayne. He works here. Wayne, go see to the oven.’

He was dark and powerful; she was big and feisty. Dispositions more suited to a funeral home than the town café. Outside a crazed flock of aged turkeys gobbled whilst eating pastries.

‘Hi, I’ve brought sugar and cream?’ Another addition entered the already cramped space, tray in hand. She was blonde and in her thirties. ‘Caramel Delight,’ she said, ‘good choice,’ then winked at him. ‘Barbara, I need to go. I have things to do. And why’s Wayne staring at the customer? Wayne, shoo yourself. Barbara,’ she was tapping her watch. ‘I have to go.’

A moment later Jack was alone, in the white painted hallway with chequered floor-tiles. His new space shared by two huge refrigerators. Beyond the curtain was old-age; arthritic vampires sucking on custard and cream.

‘Has she gone?’ Ethan came down the passage. ‘Hey Babs,’ he called out through the beads. ‘How about a hot coffee for the working class?’

‘Get it yourself, do I look like a waitress.’

Ethan shrugged.

‘Do not prevaricate, deliberate, or cogitate, not where that woman is concerned. She will shoot you down.’ He grinned and pulled a coke from the pocket of his white coat and unscrewed the lid. ‘I told her to grab you if you came in. Good job there’s only one stranger in town or this could be an awkward conversation.’

Jack was inclined to agree. And why was Wayne staring at him from the end of the passage? Ethan wiped his hand and offered it to Jack.

‘Pleased to meet you again, Jack.’ He sipped from the bottle and stretched a long day from weary bones. He put twenty dollars on the

tabletop. ‘Babs said I had to give you this back. Don’t see why, you was just trying to feed old Ethan.’

‘Yeah, sorry about that,’ hardly Jack’s fault that Ethan looked like the town drunk.

‘Sheriff Whalen said we had to look after you. He says you’re here on a secret mission, least that’s how I joined the dots. You still checking out your family tree?’

‘Something like that. Hmm, this caramel slice is real good.’

‘Jack, the problem with digging up old bodies, is they tend to stink.’

‘What does that mean?’ Jack didn’t want to do this dance. ‘You know why I’m here. I expect half the town does by now.’

‘Reckon you could be right.’

‘So what’s with the special treatment? Why am I getting a free feed?’

‘No-one said it was free, Jack. Everything comes at a cost, one way or another.’

‘You have something to say, Ethan?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Look, the night Edward Critch died,’ Jack said, ‘one of the officers thought he saw someone else in the car.’

‘There was talk at the time, but nothing concrete. You mind if I join you?’ Ethan pulled another chair. ‘Yeah, Jeb Taylor was pretty sure he saw someone else in the car . . .’

‘And?’

‘And Jack, you’re stirring up things that won’t make you popular round here. What’s your real interest in Edward Critch? You writing a book? You want to make old Ethan famous?’

‘You worried you might have missed something back then? Got something to hide? Everyone does, you of all people should know that.’

‘You got a secret, Jack? May as well tell me, cause I’ll find out.’

Jack licked his fingers. Cake was good. ‘Is there something wrong with him?’ he asked. Wayne’s pretence at floor sweeping was fooling no-one.

‘Wayne, go get the bread out of oven three. When you’re done, wipe down the kitchen, and take the trash out. And no, there’s nothing *wrong* with him.’

‘I’m betting he doesn’t get out much. Part of the bark from your family tree?’ Jack asked, but didn’t see a resemblance.

‘Wayne’s a stray that Barbara and I took in a long time ago, he’s been here ever since. I’ll tell you something in confidence, that boy in there,

he's got miraculous hands when it comes to mixing the dough. Half those cakes out there. Shh, his work, he's my secret ingredient.'

'The way he stares, I don't think he likes me.'

'I do get that impression. Maybe it's cause you ask a lot of questions. Are you a Private Dick, Jack?'

'Tell me about Jeb Taylor. I hear he was a good cop.'

'He was a pain in my ass, but good at his job,' Ethan seemed to consider silence, then relented. 'My boys were chasing Critch at high speed, it was dark out there. Jeb was driving, Lance was on the radio, I was a few miles away up by the dam when I got the call. Lance sounded high on adrenaline, kept saying there was someone in the trunk. I gave them my blessing to chase Edward down. No-one could have predicted Edward would crash off the bridge like that. They both took it bad when the car was fished out, and they found the bodies.'

'Did both the victims drown?'

'The ME reported that both victims drowned, yes. It's a difficult thing to live with, knowing that your actions led directly to an innocent person's death.'

'Ethan, I'm not looking to lay blame at anyone's door. Shit, this happened when I was a kid. Edward Critch would have killed the kid and the nanny, of that there is no doubt. And he would have taken his time about it. Your deputies gave them a chance.'

'That's how I saw it then, and it's how I see it now.'

'Tell me what the deputy saw that night. Everything; anything that wasn't in the report. Did Taylor ever say he thought the figure in the car could have been a child. Could it have been his son, Jonas?'

'Jonas? I guess, we never found the child's body. Once we realised we were dealing with a double homicide it got kicked up to the state police. Better resources. My entire department consisted of myself, and three deputies: Jeb, Lance, and Duke. Duke was only part time, mostly answered the phones. Polished the cars. But we were a good team.'

'I have no doubt. So when state troopers took over the case, what happened?'

'They were there inside the hour. We had the FBI poking around the next day seeing as how Edward had crossed state-lines. My boys and I got relegated to taking notes and making coffee.'

'But you were there, and you were Sheriff. You'd want to know everything, even if they didn't want to tell. Did anything come up; anything trivial that didn't go in the reports?'

Ethan shook his head. 'The child was just ten years old, as I remember. The woman was nineteen. The family that employed her were checked out and found to be squeaky clean. What exactly are you looking for, Jack?'

'Edward,' he replied. 'What did the FBI make of Edward, unofficially?'

He shrugged. 'I know mostly what Doc Rolins told me. Doc was taken on in an advisory capacity, seeing as how he was a psychiatrist, and the family physician. Doc worked with the Feds, he said they suspected Critch had probably done this before. The Doc was positive Critch was a serial killer. Adamant that the kid wasn't Edward's first. But after due investigation the conclusion was, that Critch was a paedophile, and the woman was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Collateral damage, and that's what went into the report. But there wasn't one law enforcement officer involved with that case that didn't suspect there were more bodies to be found. There just wasn't any evidence to point the way. The Feds stamped the case as a homicide, and closed the file. Life went on.'

'But you don't agree?'

'No, I took Alice Austin's dogs up to the Critch property several times after they'd all gone. We worked the area in our spare time. You see, my boys chased him for over thirty miles, yet he kept sticking his nose back towards Wildfowl. He wasn't trying to get away so much, as back to somewhere important. We were all sure of that.'

But the diary pages say that Edward liked women, they don't mention kids. 'You think Edward had somewhere special he wanted to take the child.'

'Without a doubt, but we never found it. The case went from cold, to sub zero. I guess we all just moved on. But I'm telling you, Jack. Edward Critch has more kids buried out there, somewhere. What do you think?'

'I think Edward travelled a lot. He could have left bodies all over the country.'

'Then why was he in such a hurry to get back here? He could have drove in any direction. Even gone off road. Why did he head his car back here?'

'That's the question, isn't it?'

'The Feds checked up on his activities, his customers; they went through his sales records but drew a blank. Doc reckoned he had motive, means, and an abundance of opportunity.'

'So where was he when he left the family home on business? He didn't sleep in his car for weeks at a time.'

‘The Feds tracked him to a few crappy hotels, mostly up country. But we couldn’t find any other missing kids. The world wasn’t computerised like it is now. CSI wasn’t on the TV, if you know what I mean. If Edward Critch had a double life the Feds couldn’t find it, so the case was stamped as a double homicide. The files were put in a box, they were parked on a shelf. No-one ever saw Jonas again, so we just assumed that Edward had killed the boy and hidden the body. Thank God Helen wasn’t alive to see it all happen. Helen was Edward’s wife. She’d already been through the death of one child.’

‘Julius?’

‘Yeah, Julius Critch. He was Jonas’ older brother. Boy died in a fishing accident about eighteen months before it all kicked off. Fell in the lake and drowned.’

‘You believe that?’

‘Didn’t have any reason not to. Not then anyways. We fished the boy out a day later. It was Edward who identified the body. It was Doc Bailey that signed the death certificate. The verdict was death by misadventure, as I recall. From what I understand Jonas took his death real bad. Shut everyone but his mother out. He barely left the family home after that.’

‘Were there any other family members? Anybody Edward was friendly with?’

‘Not that we knew of. Edward wasn’t the sociable type. Sure, some folk would drink with him. I drank with him at times. As for the boys, neither was popular. And they were polar-opposites. Julius was aggressive, moody, what we’d call a dumb-ass. Not well-liked by the other kids. Jonas was quiet, introverted, an oddball. He didn’t mix well either. Neither one was going to grow up making a difference to the world. As for friends, the only friend Edward had that I knew about was Jeremiah Parker.’

Parker? He keeps coming up. ‘Tell me about him, Parker.’

‘Parker was bad news. Part of this town’s darker side. Wildfowl was a bigger town back then. The population only had one thing to entertain them: drink. We had several bars back then, and a club too. That meant a lot of aggravation for me because of the loose women. You wouldn’t believe it looking out there, but we had prostitution and gambling, both of which Parker liked to indulge. Parker was not what you’d call a handsome man. He had to pay for his women, and he liked them young. The local hookers wouldn’t touch him after a while. He had a propensity for being violent after the act. Just a slap at first, some would charge extra and take it on the chin. But then a young girl, Kathy Tyson, God forgive

me for not knowing, but she was barely fourteen years of age. She got beat up real bad. Now Kathy refused to point the finger, but some of the other girls intimated that Parker was involved. I looked into it, but no one would go on the record. I checked with the police in Spokane, now they couldn't prove it, but the word was that Parker regularly solicited under-age prostitutes. He'd go to Springfield mostly. Girls not even thirteen, fourteen. Mostly they had a drug addiction to feed. In my opinion, that man was a paedophile. But we could never prove a damn thing.' Ethan was shaking his head, the memories flowing. 'I knew his wife. She left him because he liked to beat on her. She took the kid because she knew what might happen as she grew up. That was a smart woman. Can I assume that Parker is also a long lost relative?'

'At this point, let's call it historical interest.'

'Tell you what. Let's call it, off the record.'

'Sure, absolutely,' *Is Parker a part of this?*

'When Parker died I took a look around his home. It was unofficial, just for my own curiosity, you understand?' Jack nodded. 'Didn't find nothing in the house, its contents had mostly been cleared. Parker knew he was dying see, from cancer; just what that man deserved. It was quick and painful, but gave him time to clear away anything incriminating. I didn't find much but what I did find was disturbing. There was evidence of something fixed to the concrete floor in the basement. From the marks I deduced it to be a cage, but I couldn't be sure. I took swabs from every corner of that room and they all came back negative for blood. For all I know he had dog down there.'

Jack was remembering what the previous Minister had written in the church journal. Did he know about this? Were there more like Parker . . . like Edward?

'Sorry Jack, times up. I'm getting the look,' Ethan gave a wiggly wave of fingers toward Barbara. 'I got me some baking to do.' He stood and stretched, reached up for something invisible that seemed just beyond his grasp. 'Sometimes it feels like I feed this entire community. It would be a God send if they ever built a Walmart round here. I could retire and die without flour up my ass. Jack, I don't know why you're here, and I guess I don't really care. But this town does not need Edward Critch rearing his ugly head again.' Ethan's gaze lingered. He pointed toward the curtain. 'You take care now,' he said.

Jack slipped out through the curtain. He winked at Barbara, another girl beside her he didn't recognise. Maybe he could get a donut to go. His phone rang as the thought lingered.

For fuck's sake. Sticky fingers and tight pockets were a bad combination as he teased out his phone. Caller's ID was withheld.

'Chali? Chali, is that you?'

It was a male's voice that responded. *'What's it like cheating on your ex, Jack?'*

'Do what? Who is this?'

'Bet you can't sleep at night spooning with all that guilt? Is she worth it, Jack?'

'Who is this?'

'You found Alice yet, Jack?'

Every hair on Jack's body stood rigidly to attention.

'Hi Jack, I just wanted us share a moment. There are so few in our lives these days, don't you think?'

Was it really him? Was this sick bastard really on Jack's phone?

'What's wrong, Jack. Cat got your tongue?'

'You sick-fuck, what do you want?' He pulled the phone tight to his ear. Too much noise.

'Jack, do I hear anger in your voice?'

'Where's Alice, is she still alive? Let her go.'

'Can't do that. Too late for her now.'

Jack's heart sank. 'Did you kill her?' He stepped away from the counter. Had to keep his voice down. 'Answer me you sick prick.'

'There's so much that you don't understand. But it's a buzz, don't you think? Knowing that she isn't telling you fibs.'

'She? What are you talking about?'

'She is her, Jack. Her is she. The woman who's lying to you. Who's telling you half-truths. Facts all bent out of shape to suit her own agenda. She is her, Jack. So ask her, I dare you. Ask that bitch to tell you the truth, and not just the lies she pedals about Old Jonas.'

'What the fuck are you talking about?' *Take a breath. Keep him talking.* 'Why don't we meet? Just you and me. Hey, I can tell your side, put it in print for the world to see. Would you like that?' Jack was staring at his phone. He'd seen Kirsty do it a dozen times. So why couldn't he? Phone the Sheriff, bring Wally into the call. Damn it, he had a Smart-Phone, why hadn't he done this before? 'You're a psychopath who preys on children, that's really all I need to know.'

'I would never harm a child, Jack. It's important that you know that.'

'So abducting kids is what, just a hobby?'

'No, Jack, it's an act of kindness. I'm saving them.'

He didn't want to ask . . .

'Is Alice still alive?' he asked again.

'She is to me, Jack. They all are.'

So she was dead. Just thinking about that poor kid . . . *Think Jack. Get at him, get him to reveal something, anything. Think.*

'You like to touch them, Jonas? Is that it, how you get your kicks? Fiddling with children, is that what turns you on?' *Take a breath.* 'Hi, I'm Jonas, and I'm a fucking paedo.' He felt sick. 'Do they cry, Jonas? Do they beg to go home? Is that how the endorphins flow? Make them beg to be with Mummy, is that what gets you hard?' *I'm gonna be sick.* Jack leant against Ethan's bench, took a deep breath. 'Jonas got it bad, just like his daddy.'

'Are you goading me, Jack? Calling the kettle black. You need to take a pill and chill. I just phoned to ask about the family. Heard you traded the old wife for a brand new model. Better curves, fewer miles; a lot less dents on the bodywork. Don't take her for a drive Jack; your bitches don't come back.'

'Fuck you! I'll rip your . . .' That's when he heard them. He'd thought it was from the café. No, the sound was in the background, on the other end of the call. *Bells?*

'Excuse me, please.' He had to get this bloody queue out of the way. 'Move, out my way. Yeah you too lady.' The pensioner in the motorised scooter was physically helped aside from the window. Jack's nose felt the cold glass as he tried to see outside.

'Hey, asshole, you want to talk about family. Let's you and me get together for coffee. I know, we could start with your mummy; the woman Parker palmed off on your dad? You do remember her, skinny bitch with the pill problem, couldn't get her ass out of bed.' Just the faint sound of bells from his phone. 'What about Daddy, you must remember him. Came home especially for Jonas' birthdays and Christmas. Came back just to bugger you senseless. "Hey Jonas, pull down your pants. Papa got something special for his little boy." Was he a big boy, Jonas? Did it hurt? God, I hope so.'

As he moved along the window seeing nothing outside, a weird feeling stirred in Jack's stomach. He turned to look at the oldies, most of whom were staring at him. His eyes moved slowly from table to table. Only one person he could see was talking on a cell. But unless Jonas was female and knocking ninety, it wasn't her.

'What do you want?' He asked, paranoia dragging his gaze back out into the street; into every doorway and space along either side of the

road. It was busier out there than when he'd entered, people doing their thing, no-one he could see was using a cell-phone.

His vision flicked from one shop frontal to the next. Ripley's grocery, Grace's Boutique, the old cinema where Sheriff Wally kept law and order. One Colonial doorway to the next as he strained for a better view.

A woman steered a pushchair past the café window. A dark Sedan cruised slowly down the road. The bell above the door announced Jack's departure into the street.

'The past is in the past, Jack. Let sleeping dogs lie.'

'Is that right? Then why call? Did you just phone to say hi?'

'I just want you to know, that I know, Jack. I know everything, and you know nothing. I want you to understand, I can't be stopped. You won't see me coming, Jack, and you'll have to live with the guilt when it's done. Every time you close your eyes, you'll think of Jonas.'

'You're delusional if you think I'll lose any sleep over you. But I will find you, you son of a bitch. You do know that?'

'Yes, and I'm going to help you.' His tone darkened. *'Remember this, Jack. No-one asked you to intervene; it was your choice, so you bring the consequences upon yourself.'*

'Screw the consequences.' *What consequences? What the hell does that mean?* 'You have to be stopped. So tell me where you are, I'll come right now. Just you and me; we can have a *proper* chat.'

'Soon, Jack, very soon. It's important to me that you know. That you understand you brought this upon yourself.'

Jack was in the middle of the road. It was a cool day but he was feeling the heat. The breeze had picked up; the sidewalks busier than he'd seen. One by one he picked them out, examined the moving bodies for signs. Closer now as two old men walked silently by; three kids were running, hurling taunts at each other as they weaved between parked cars. Jack counted upward of fifteen people going about their business, all oblivious to his call. Not one seemed aware of the serial killer in their midst. No-one spoke into a phone that he could see.'

'I'm close, Jack. Get rid of the bitch and we'll make it special; have a party, just you and me. You bring the booze, Jack, I'll bring the pills. Oh, and some entertainment, something special just for you. Jack, are you listening? I want to look into your eyes when you realise it was you who made it all possible. She shouldn't have dragged you into this, Jack. She's a bad, bad girl.'

'Up your's asshole, you just name the time and the place. I'll be there and I'll . . . Jonas? Jonas?' The line was dead. 'Fuck, fuck!' Screaming

down the phone wasn't going to bring him back. The phone leaped from Jack's hand and bounced off the café window. Two dozen or more faces turned toward the outside, toward Jack.

'What?' He shouted.

Woman with pushchair again, exiting butchers, staring at him.

'What?'

She turned her baby-wagon away.

You should have kept him talking. Jack picked up his phone as a car began to slow. It was dark blue, old, its brakes whined with age as it stopped beside him. Jack's heart sank even lower as he recognised the man behind the wheel.

'Mister Lottman,' the Minister seemed delighted, his head fully craned out through the window. 'I thought it was you. Out for a stroll? It is a beautiful day.'

The door of the Morris Minor opened and closed. The occupant obviously related to Tigger as he came hand outstretched. Had Jack done something bad in a previous life, was that it? Was he being punished?

'I knew we'd run into each other again.'

Jack ignored him, best to turn away. Now what? Go see Sheriff Wally, maybe he could trace the call? Set up road blocks. Search everyone in town? *Admit it Jack, you blew it. That monster called you and you blew it.*

'Are you feeling okay, Mister Lottman? Your face, it's very red. Do you need to sit down? Goodness, take my arm; I think you're having a stroke.'

The Minister's collar was in his hands; fists clenched as he lifted the man from the sidewalk and shoved him against the wall. The harsh back hander was followed by a palm that slapped hard against that permanent grin. Again and again he struck, determined to wipe that stupid smirk off his face.

Jack took a deep breath and calmed the violent urge. Beating on the Vicar was not only illegal, it wasn't going to help. He sank heavily onto Ethan's bench.

'Mr Lottman, are you all right?'

'Yes, fine. Vicar, did you see anyone *suspicious* as you drove into town?'

'Suspicious? Well, no, I don't think so.'

'Everything all right, Jack?'

Ethan was outside, more questions being thrown his way.

Jack shied away from a bear's hand that reached out to him.

'Keep him away from me,' he said.

‘Wayne’s just trying to help,’ said Ethan. ‘Christ, you were imitating one of those meerkats back there. Half the shop thought you were having a stroke.’

‘I’m not having a stroke. Guys I’m fine, honestly, I’m okay.’

‘Just a bad call.’ *Yeah, that’s what it was.* He held up his phone as if it were proof of his statement.

‘Perhaps the Sheriff can help.’

‘No, Vicar, that’s not necessary.’

And no need as a black and white sedan rolled up beside them. A brief shrill from the siren announced Sheriff Wally, who duly exited the car.

‘Jack, are you having a heart attack?’ he asked.

‘No, I’m not having a . . .’ There was something in Wayne’s hand, being slipped into his pocket. *Fuck, that’s a cell-phone.*

If Jack's journey carried on much longer he'd need spinal adjustment. Trying to think was no easy act either as the Sheriff's car bounced its way down another dirt-road.

'Rosie will call your cell-provider,' said Walter, 'this is now official business. And I have some friends at Springfield PD I'll call. See what they can dig up. But Jack, tracking someone down who's supposed to have been dead for forty odd years, it'll take time. They'll probably consider this a hoax.'

'Some hoax. Sheriff, he knew everything.'

'Word does get around. We've had several calls to the station today asking, about *the stranger* in town. You've managed to drop Edward Critch's name into every conversation you've had. Jack, a lot of tongues are wagging.'

'This isn't a hoax, Sheriff.'

Why did Jonas call me? Why? Shit, should I tell him about the envelope?

'Sheriff . . .'

'Jack, call me Walter.'

'Sure, yeah. Walter, I think he's ready to take another kid. One more to go, that's what he said. He sounded keen.'

'So what about Alice?'

Jack shook his head. *That poor girl.* 'She's dead, he as good as said so. That bastard has already targeted the next kid, I'm sure of it.'

'What happens then?'

'I have no idea. Sheriff . . . Walter, I don't think we have long to find him.'

‘Well, right up here is the place to start.’ A pleasing statement for Jack’s vertebrae. ‘But Jack, the Critch house and grounds have been thoroughly searched on numerous occasions.’

‘You say the house is still vacant? Why didn’t anyone buy the place? Don’t murderer’s homes go for a song?’

‘Maybe, but there’s a covenant on this one. When the land was sold off in the early eighteen hundreds the government dictated that it could only be handed down through the buyer’s family. But if there were no surviving relatives the land must revert back to the care of the state.’ Sheriff took a hard left around a bumpy bend. The cop car’s tyres thumped against the arches. ‘The state doesn’t want to build anything up there; it’s too rural, no access. Way too expensive to build roads round these parts. So the house and everything around it was left to rot. Christian County has a lot of places like Edward’s hiding out in these forests.’

The engine poured on the power as the two ton vehicle defied gravity and loose dirt. At the end of a short and somewhat smoother straight Jack saw the sunlight return. As the tree-line withdrew, a building came into view.

‘This is it,’ said Walter,

Eight cylinders purred contently as the Ford’s tyres found firmer ground. A moment later the car ceased its momentum, and the engine fell silent. Jack sat forward.

There it was, the Critch family home. In that moment Jack felt it all. The house’s history, and its pain.

‘Welcome to Critchville,’ said Walter.

It wasn’t much to look at. A single story dwelling covered in a wood shingled roof. Typical of most houses hidden away out here.

A porch surrounded the base, and sagged; it pulled the roof at the far end toward the ground. Most of the windows were smashed, the openings filled with plant life trying to reclaim the open space. Mother Nature had begun to sublet.

‘Is it safe in there?’ Jack asked.

‘Probably not, but then it wasn’t much to look at when the Critches were here. Most of the cabbage patch you see back here, that was the front yard. The back hasn’t fared any better. Want to see inside?’

‘Sure.’ *Who wouldn’t?*

The front door groaned its displeasure at having to open. Sheriff Wally’s size twelve’s helped encourage the hinges to work. Inside, the Critch family home was being reclaimed.

‘Ethan told me that kids used to come up here. They’d scare themselves shitless, drink and do drugs. He says there’s been the odd tourist and groupie, mostly folk who want a Critch souvenir. I even heard tell of a few séances going on. But as the years passed by the memories faded; the interest waned.’

Jack followed Wally into the house, each step a careful one. One room to the next, none fairing any better than the last. Atrophy was rife inside; creaking floorboards, broken window. What little furniture there was, was smashed he presumed, by kids.

Jack stepped carefully down the hall. Pushed open a door that dropped several inches to his touch. Inside was what looked like a bed. An old dresser, its drawer pulled out and gone. Glass from a mirror across its surface.

‘What’s that smell?’ he asked

‘Contamination of the soil,’ Walter replied.

‘Contamination . . . what does that mean?’

‘Ethan had the dirt up here tested in the seventies. Apparently Edward’s dad used to bury things up here. He’d haul it from anywhere, even out of state. He’d dig a deep hole and dump. Cheaper than legally disposing of toxic waste. Another reason why the state leaves this place alone. It would cost too much for a clean-up. Don’t worry, it’s not the smell of dead bodies.’

Out-back smelt fresher. Behind the house were the remains of brick outbuildings. More broken roofs and vine-covered brickwork. What was inside the buildings, Jack could see, as he stepped out through the kitchen door.

‘They left all of this machinery?’

‘That stuff was old back then. Besides, there was no proof that Jonas was dead. He could have popped back at any time.’

‘Is that what they thought?’

‘No, no-one thought Jonas was alive.’

Jack was counting. ‘There’s two diggers, three tractors, wow, is that a dozer.’ Various rusting buckets no longer attached and a shed that was full of pipes and joints, and God knows what else. ‘Are those generators?’ he asked.

‘Yep, Cummings generators, built in the fifties. Five kilowatt probably. Most places in these parts get their power from a generator.’

‘Someone’s been looting,’ Jack could see that bolt-ons, pieces, and bits of pipe were missing from all of the generators.

‘Probably the locals scavenging for parts?’ said Walter.

‘Maybe, but why not just take the whole thing. Who’d care? And why did he need all of this? It’s not a farm. So he dug a hole or two, he didn’t need all of this. What the fuck was Edward gonna dig out here?’

‘Edward’s father used to hire himself to the locals. He’d plough or dig whatever and wherever. He was a mechanic of sorts too. Like I said, he hauled heavy loads from out of state.’

‘Hence the smell.’ *Most of this stuff is left overs from the First World War.* Jack nosed about the sheds, three of them, their metal sheet roofs rusted, their collapse imminent. ‘What about neighbours?’ he asked.

‘A large farm in that direction, that’s owned by the Millers. They didn’t much like the Critches. The rest for miles is forest. I told you there wasn’t much to see up here. Jack, wherever Edward took those kids, it wasn’t here. Ethan has combed this entire area and come up blank.’

Blank, it was a good word to express how Jack felt. Jonas was right when he'd said that *he* knew everything, and Jack knew nothing.

'I've spoken to Doc Rolins. He'll be back in the morning. He's extended an invitation to join him for breakfast, up at his place.'

'Good; I'm keen to speak to him.'

Jack took one last look around. How many more places like this existed. The rural setting . . . the secrets. America was a big place, and most of it was like this.

'Sheriff, drop me back at the café. I'll get my car and go back to the hotel.'

Jack turned the handle and pushed the door. Something snagged, so he pushed again. *Fuck, doesn't this hotel have any security?* He could see now, beneath the door was another envelope. He wasn't sure he wanted to open it, but a moment later more pages from Jonas' diary fell onto the bed, accompanied by another smiley face. *Is he taking the piss?* The iconic image did not suggest that Jack would 'have a nice day.' Déjà vu was poking him in the ribs.

Most murderers don't send post. Jack grabbed a handful of pills. *Thank you Maddy.* A fresh bottle of Jack-D was stood in the mini-fridge. *No point in skirting around them.* He poured a small glass. Outside the light had passed into dusk, as he let the window's blinds fall.

Reading the rantings of a lunatic wasn't high on Jack's 'to-do' list. But hadn't the man himself said he was willing to help? Was there something in these envelopes that would get him closer to Jonas? Three pillows were plumped against the wall as he settled down.

Go ahead, pick a page. Jack took the one closest.

When I was young I lived in pain. I was lost both within and without. How I envied those who found happiness in faith, because I had none. It seemed the miser was rich with avarice; the pious man belonged to God. Even a vagrant could feel a soft warm tingle of pride to the raising of the Flag. What it was to belong, was a mystery to me. For I was a wretch, and I was a sinner. If pain was the currency of life, well then, I was rich beyond the stars.

Only when the men came to love me did I feel a sense of being. When their flesh cursed mine I found the strength to endure. No matter how harsh the reality, in Sanctuary I found mystery and belonging. I was empowered by my hatred, bewitched by my ability to fly. In the darkness I found the

light, and through this light I found the will to believe. A purpose that sprang fire within me. The need to endure fulfilled me. Somehow I found my own faith in Sanctuary. The day they took my faith away, was the day I resolved to make it mine forever.

I wasn't keen enough. I lacked the will to perform. So they forced me to live devoid of the light. Struck dumb like an animal in perpetual gloom, I had time to think. Time to understand that it is the nature of all beasts to prey upon the weaker and more defenceless. I reasoned that this is the natural order of all things. So I evolved to follow that one simple rule. When you are severed free from all emotion, only then are you free of earthly constraint. I have my dear, sweet Damien, our final kiss, to thank. That was when I finally crossed the line.

Jack held the page up to the light. Nothing hiding in the paper. Just the careful scroll of the handwriting, and those little icons in the corner. What were they? He was sure he'd seen something similar before.

And what was the point? What was Jonas trying to achieve by sending him these pages? Did he want Jack to empathise, to somehow understand? Understand what? If Jonas wanted help he should have checked himself into a Sanitarium. They give out free drugs and have people you can talk to, all day. *Whether you like it or not?*

He picked up another page.

When they caught me stealing I was sent to prison. But it was an easy life for those few short months. Back then I was considered pretty. A pretty young man does well within the harsh walls of a penitentiary. He has a lot to offer those that are more equipped to survive in such a place.

I was a rare commodity and much desired. I was a person of great natural desire. It was survival first, and Jonas knows how to survive.

During this time I offered myself to learning. A prison library is extensive. I found my need to study the work of great men and I began to understand their reason for being. I reasoned the theories that men conceive about their lives and about the universe that surrounds them. I came to understand what Sanctuary really was. What it wanted from me. I began to reason the way for me to return.

Thirty tombs prepared for thirty lives, the weight of innocence that must be paid. Sanctuary comes at a price; such a high price. But it is a price that Jonas is willing to pay.

‘This guy is a total nut-job.’ Jack stared at his glass, now empty. He topped up, took another sip. ‘This delusional bastard believes he can avoid responsibility, because he considers himself to be a victim. Fucking unreal.’

The page descended into Jonas having a bad-hair-day, so Jack picked up another and read on. It was similar stuff, devolving into ranting about sexual selection and the sick minds that prey on the weak. Pot and kettle sprang to mind. It was heavy going but he read on, strangely fascinated by the crazy crap that rattled around in the author’s head, slowly building an insight into the twisted mind of Jonas Critch. This was less a diary, more a biography. The author clearly writing long after the fact.

What was he trying to achieve by sending him these? *So you had a rough childhood? Some have it tougher. You’re not the first person in history to be abused, and you certainly won’t be the last. Most get help and go on to have relatively normal lives. So what are you playing at? Why are you leaking the pages like this?* Another solemn thought occurred. Chali had failed to mention where she’d acquired hers. *Chali?*

Jack dug into his pocket for his cell-phone. Three missed calls, all from Jill. *Not now.* He wasn’t in the mood. *Sorry Jill.* Something else that was wrong struck Jack. *The handwriting?* He leaned down to his rucksack and brought up some of Chali’s pages. *Yeah, the older samples show it nicely. The ‘r’ is different, and so is the ‘t’. Why would that be?* It was a change barely noticeable, but undeniable. *Got a problem with your hand Jonas? Too much jerking off? Shit, is someone else writing this stuff? And there’s something off about the paper?*

‘Is this a hoax after all?’

No, the tone of the text was the same throughout all the pages. Maybe he was seeing things; maybe he just wanted to find something, anything. Jack cast the papers onto the floor.

‘Good riddance, fat lot of help you are anyway,’ he took a swig from the glass, and almost choked it back up as someone knocked on the door.

The quiet kind of knock when the person outside wants to avoid attention. It knocked again, slightly firmer this time. Jack stared at the door, he wasn’t expecting anyone. Jack swung his legs from the bed and moved slowly to the door. *No peep hole. Why’s there no fucking peep hole?* A reluctant hand reached out for the handle, and paused. Jack turned the lock, open. He cautiously opened the door.

‘Chali?’

She was standing outside, and then inside, throwing her arms around Jack’s neck.

Kiss. ‘I missed you.’ *Kiss, kiss.*

Jack’s foot kicked the door shut. Why didn’t you, call, *Kiss, text, Kiss.*’

‘You want to talk, now?’ *Kiss, kiss, kiss.*

‘No, not necessarily.’

A wonderful cocktail of alcohol and endorphins ensued as Chali’s lips threatened to bruise his own. Jack gave way, all the way back to the bed. She fell on top of him.

‘Jack, *kiss*, I’ve missed you, *kiss*, my head, *kiss*, it screams, *kiss kiss*, when I think of you?’

‘I thought,’ *kiss*, ‘you didn’t want to talk?’

‘I don’t.’

Oh Goody. He felt his head pushed back and her fingers fumble for his shirt buttons as her teeth nipped at his chest. Nope, Jack Lottman had nothing more he wanted to say.

It was wild, provocative, suggestive, and down right dirty. Jack felt every lunge and stroke of Chali’s body, each nail and scratch delivered with precision and passion. It was tasteful and lustful. For an hour Jack swapped spit and bodily fluids as if they were an inexhaustible commodity. When it was over he lay pleasantly spent in a pool of his own sweat.

‘Do you mind if I smoke?’ she asked.

‘You can suck blood from kittens for all I care.’

‘Jack, you know I prefer puppies.’

It was blissful the way she smiled. And since when did a cigarette smell that good. He had the strongest urge to reintroduce the habit back

into his own lungs. But as he strained to reach the butt, the advance of his lips was repulsed.

‘Bad habits are for bad boys,’ she whispered, and released the smoke slowly across his face. ‘Are you a bad boy, Shhack?’ Another toke, this time released into the air above the bed. ‘I’m sorry for not calling,’ she said, ‘it was unforgivable.’ Sitting up she pulled the cover across her breasts, well mostly. ‘I have been a naughty girl too. Will you forgive me?’ Her cigarette paused in the air.

Not in the glass. Not in the Jack . . .

It fizzed for a moment before the alcohol extinguished the hot ash.

‘Oops,’ she grinned. ‘I suppose I should be very, very sorry, again.’

Oh well, if you want to apologise some more.

She bit his nipple, then the skin that covered his ribs.

‘Ow, ow, that’s not being sorry.’ Her incisors continued down. ‘Ooh, my mistake.’ He couldn’t see her head anymore; well he *was* staring at the ceiling. Chali giggled, and then apologised some more.

Jack woke with a dry mouth and a gentle pounding between his ears.

‘You’re awake,’ Chali’s voice.

‘Hmm,’ he supposed he was. ‘Hey,’ he said. *Why is she staring at me like that?* Uh-oh, he recognised the, *something’s up*, expression. Jill was an expert in such signs.

‘Jack, we need to talk,’ she said

Both hands pulled the covers above his head.

‘Jack?’

Fine. He knew it was too good to last. Jack was up, his cheek nuzzling hers. The sweet scent of Chali encouraged his man parts to rise again.

‘No, naughty boy. We have to talk.’

‘Aww, can’t we be sorry again. Just for a few minutes?’ He lifted the covers and grinned. Chali pulled them back down.

Aww.

He felt better as she breathed a kiss across his face, then his neck and chest, and then she planted her lips firmly, if briefly, on his.

‘Talk first,’ she said, and slipped from the bed. ‘May I?’ She helped herself to his shirt. ‘I came as soon as I could. Are you still angry with me?’

Jack shook his head; eyes wide open as slowly she covered her torso. Disappointment followed as Chali shook the contents of his rucksack all over the bedcovers. The two envelopes thrown on top.

‘Where did you get these?’ She asked.

‘I found. No, really, I did. Jonas must have poked them under the door.’

‘Why did he do that?’

Jack opened his palms.

‘What’s he playing at?’

‘Jonas? I have no idea.’ Okay he was awake now, and processing things at a higher rate. ‘Chali, he phoned me.’

‘He did what?’

‘Yeah, yesterday.’

‘He phoned you? What did he say? Did he threaten you? Why didn’t you tell me last night?’

‘We were otherwise engaged. No talk, remember.’

‘Tell me everything, Jack.’

‘He knows about us, kinda.’

‘Jack, that’s not possible. He can’t know about us.’

‘Well, he was crabby about someone, I took it to be you.’ Jack propped himself up. Talking about Jonas Critch had softened his ardor. ‘More alarming are those. He slipped those envelopes under my door.’

‘This was not supposed to happen.’ Chali began talking in French, or was it Russian? Jack couldn’t sure she spoke so quickly. She was agitated, angry, he got that much.

‘Hey, easy with the cultural exchange. We’re fine. It’s a good thing that he’s made contact. Maybe he’ll make a mistake that will lead to us finding him.’

‘Jack, you could have been hurt.’

‘If he wanted to hurt me, he wouldn’t be sending me mail.’

‘Oh Jack,’ Chali’s arms were around him, her body was tight to his. And she was talking gibberish again, more concern than anger this time.

This is nice.

‘I won’t let him hurt you.’

‘Shouldn’t that be the other way round?’ He pried her away. ‘The fact that he’s called means he’s worried. And I’ve spoken to the Sheriff too. He’s on board, making official enquiries. Oh, and I went to the library. Get this, Edward Critch married Jeremiah Parkers daughter, only she wasn’t his daughter, she was an imposter. That’s weird, right? And according to the records, Helen Parker, who was Jeremiah’s wife, died of tuberculosis in Los Angeles in nineteen fifty. Did you know Jonas had an older brother, named Julius. He died, and in suspicious circumstances. Chali, I think we’re starting to make progress.’

* * *

Look at him, he’s so excited. So animated and consumed by all of this. Just like me when I began to hunt for Jonas.

‘Jack, stop.’ Chali placed a finger to his lips. She took his face gently in her hands and kissed him.

I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have done this to you. Forgive me.

She remembered *her* first kiss. It wasn’t like this. Her lips had not tingled the way they did now. She couldn’t have imagined how the rhythm of her body would merge with Jack’s. It was symbiotic; two clocks, tick tock. How could she tell him that he was her first.

But it had to stop. *This is wrong, you could get hurt.* ‘I’m sorry, I should not have involved you, I was wrong.’

‘Wrong, why? Chali, are you all right?’

She kissed him again, more gently this time.

‘Jonas has reached out to you. I did not expect this, any of this. I just wanted,’ *needed* ‘someone to believe in me. Hold me, Jack.’ *Take me in your arms.* ‘I don’t want you to get hurt, my love.’

‘Hey, easy, you’re starting to worry me. This sicko only hurts women and children, remember.’

‘Please, Jack.’ *Feel him, Chalise. Feel his heart beat. Feel the blood race through his veins. Feel the warmth of his passion.* She pushed her cheek into his. ‘I did not expect any of this.’

‘Err, what exactly are we talking about here?’

‘Us, Jack.’ *You feel so warm, so tender. How could I have known it would be like this? Yes, my love, hold me tighter.*

He was nervous, she could tell. Or was it her own feelings coming back as she nested in his strong arms. She’d never dreamed that it could feel like this. Never felt that she could feel so alive, so positive about the outcome. If only for now.

‘Chali. What you said to me, yesterday on the phone.’

‘Don’t you feel the same?’

Please, say you do. I beg you.

‘Yes, I think I do. I just . . . God you’re beautiful.’

‘I had to say it, I had to, you understand.’ *Tighter, hold me tighter.* A single tear slid down her cheek.

‘Hey, it’s okay.’

He tried to wipe it away, but she was first to touch it with her fingers. Salty, the tear tasted salty as it touched her lips.

I’m crying? How can this be? She grabbed him tight.

‘Jack, you are the one.’ She felt his breath draw quickly, his chest rise. She didn’t dare to breathe. She was his, he was hers. He *must* be hers. *Please God, let it be so.* Jack’s eyes, she had to look into his eyes. Chali had to know for sure.

‘Tell me I’m not a fool.’ *No, please don’t pull away.* Jack didn’t. He was misty eyed and holding her face with gentle palms. *This is so wonderful, so joyous.* She hadn’t thought it was possible to ever feel like this.

Chali’s breath returned, shallow at first, broken with tiny murmurs that only she could feel. *Jack, say something.*

‘Chali, I do, it’s just . . . Jill.’

Her heart sank. Expectation and anticipation plummeting into her stomach. A free-fall that stung her insides. *He said another woman’s name.* Chali lifted herself away.

‘Jack, I should not have involved you in this. I’m sorry.’

‘Hey, hey, it’s fine.’

‘No, it’s not. I didn’t think for one moment that Jonas would reach out, that he would contact you. Send you all these things. I’ve been selfish, Jack. It’s best I continue this alone.’ She slipped off the bed.

Cold, I must be cold now. Force him away. It’s safer for us both.

‘Hey, no way.’

‘Jack, please.’

‘No! We’re in this together and that’s how it stays. It’s you and me.’

‘No Jack, you must stay away, please.’ Too late, his strong comforting arms wrapped her as if she were a fragile gift.

Please Jack, I’m frightened for you. I was wrong to do this to you. Oh God, he has a family. What have I done?

‘Jack, I have to tell you . . . there’s something you *must* know.’ *Why am I trembling? Just say the words out loud. Would it really make a difference?*

Chalise, tell him the truth!

‘Hey, what’s wrong?’

How could she? How could she tell him that she’d lied, that every word had been a lie? *No, not every word. Not this, not how I feel. That’s real. Tell him, tell Jack the truth.*

No, he would neither believe, nor understand

‘You are my first,’ she said. *Can he feel my hands shake?* ‘I’ve never felt a man’s love before yours.’

The hands that had wrapped her, they loosened. *No, please.* Then she felt Jack’s arms close again, pull her firmly against his body.

‘Chali?’ he said.

‘Shh, Jack, you don’t have to say anything. I understand, I do.’

Just hold me, please.

‘Chali, you don’t understand.’

‘I do.’ *Please don’t say it. I cannot bear to hear it. Just love me Jack. Please, if only for these few moments, I beg you. Love me.*

She hadn’t expected these feelings. From him, of course, that was the way it had to be, but not her. Not her!

But was it really such a surprise? It had been so difficult for so long, she’d been so lonely. Only the search for Jonas Critch had mattered, nothing else. But now there was another reason to live, another reason to refuse. *Jack Lottman, if only I could tell you everything.*

‘We’ll find a way, Chali. We’ll be together when this is done, I promise.’

She pulled away from him. ‘Truly?’ she asked. ‘But Jill?’

‘There is no Jill, not like that. But we’re working it out. You know, as friends. Not just for us, but for the kids too.’

‘Is that true?’

‘Yeah, it’s what we both want. Chali, since we met, I’ve wanted nothing more than to be with you. I don’t ever want us to be apart.’

‘You have no idea how much I want that too. I do, I swear. But I haven’t told you everything. Jack, I . . .’

No, stop. Chali, you cannot. She was forbidden. *It wouldn’t be fair.* How she wanted to tell him everything, right now. She knew that he would understand. He would, he had to.

‘Jack, I think I was wrong.’

‘Wrong?’

‘Yes, when I said there was only one place where we would ever find peace. I was wrong.’

* * *

This wasn’t possible. How could this wonderful creature want *him*, and as much as *he* wanted her? What he said about Jill, it was true. But they’d only just met. Was this infatuation? Or was it love? A sudden gut wrenching feeling as he remembered the accident. His life before it had ended.

This was fucked up.

‘I’m not going anywhere,’ he whispered. ‘It’s just you and me, *kiss*, we’ll work it out.’

‘Chali, you have to get up,’ Jack shouted from the bathroom.

‘Another few minutes. Hmm, I promise, just a few more.’

‘Unless you want Sheriff Wally to see your morning face, you need to get up.’

‘The Sheriff’s coming here?’

‘Didn’t I mention that?’ he popped his head round the door, toothbrush in hand. ‘He said he’d call by at nine to pick me up. It’s half past eight. Chali?’ She was up, sheet wrapped around her, grabbing for her clothes.

‘Jack, I can’t go with you.’

‘Chali, what’s wrong?’

‘You must go on your own.’

‘Don’t be silly, we’ll do this together. Hey, hey, what’s going on? Chali, he won’t mind.’

‘I cannot.’ She was almost dressed.

‘Chali, stop.’ The purring kitten who’d wanted more snooze time, was red faced and ready to leave. ‘What the hell is wrong?’

‘Jack, there’s something else I haven’t told you.’

Here we go. What now? ‘You have a pathological fear of Sheriffs?’

‘No, yes, Jack, I have a warrant out for my arrest.’

‘You have a warrant . . . what for?’

‘I tried to get information from the Sheriff’s office.’ She shrugged and slumped on the bed, her jacket in her arms. ‘When it was closed for business.’

‘Whoah, wait; you’ve been to Wildfowl before? And you broke into the Sheriff’s office?’

‘Oui, yes.’

That was the craziest thing he'd heard this morning. 'You want to wind this back a reel. You broke into his office. Why didn't you tell me?' *No, don't you give me that little-girl-lost face.* 'Go on, there's more isn't there.'

'I might have borrowed Deputy Rosie's badge, just for a while,' she grinned. 'I pretended to be the new deputy in town.'

'You have got to be kidding.' She didn't look like she was. 'And they caught you?'

'Oui. Sheriff Whalen was very unhappy.'

'No shit.'

'Oui. He put my face underneath the street-lights for a week.'

That's a no to the puppy-dog eyes. Jack knew full well there was more she wasn't telling him. *Damn it, I want to know everything.* He just couldn't bring himself to ask.

'Sorry,' she said.

'Is that why you were so keen I should come here first? Is grandmother really at death's door? Do you even have a grandmother?'

Look at her, she seems sorry.

'No, don't answer that. Okay, fine, you stay here then.' *Way to go Jack. That told her.* 'Take a look at the shit Jonas posted under my door. My laptop's in the rucksack, this place has decent Wi-fi,' he put the rucksack on the bed. 'All the sites I've been to are saved. Find something that can help us catch this bastard. I'll wait outside for Wally.' *Arrested for impersonating the deputy?* He was still shaking his head as he looked into the bathroom mirror. 'Chali?' he looked back in the room. 'You will be here when I get back, right?'

'Jack, I will always be close.'

'That's not what I asked.' *Kirsty does this. You have to ask the right questions, pin them down.* 'I mean here, in this room, when I return. I don't want to come back and have to go looking for you.'

'I promise you will always know where to find me.' She was up, palms gripping his cheeks, her lips planted on his. 'Now you promise me something. If this goes bad for us, if anything happens to me.'

'Happens, like what? Nothing's going to happen.'

'But if it does?'

'It won't.'

'We all have to face the end, Jack. We all have to find a place of peace. A pretty place, somewhere our loved ones can always come to find us. You will come to find me, yes? Promise you will come and find me. Do you understand?'

‘No, not really’ *What are you talking about.*

‘We’re dealing with a madman, Jack. Remember what we say, here and now. If anything happens, if things go wrong, promise me. My place of peace, you will come to find me.’

I have no idea what you’re talking about, he nodded anyway.

‘I promise.’ *Kiss. But nothing’s going to, kiss, go wrong.’*

‘Good, now get dressed before the Sheriff arrives.’

That’s what I was trying to do.

Shoes followed jeans, not so easy a task with eyes fixed on Chali, naked, shirt removed. He loved the way she slinked. How she fluffed her hair and teased it into a tail, and how she slid back between the sheets with his laptop.

‘I didn’t know that Jonas had a brother,’ she said. ‘He’s never mentioned him in the diary.’

‘Huh?’ he dropped the tooth-brush into the glass he’d been using for the Jack-D. ‘Yeah, his name was Julius, poor kid drowned. And get this,’ he poked his head around the door again. ‘He died one week before his eleventh birthday. So that’s one question answered. We know *why* Jonas takes the kids when he does. Julius’ death must have been some kind of stressor. Maybe even *why* he’s continued the family business. Maybe he’s trying to bring his brother back, or trying to atone for something,’ he was staring into the mirror again. ‘Who knows? And there’s something else. Apparently Edward had a friend.’

But I get the feeling you already know that.

‘Who was his friend?’ she asked.

‘A man named Jeremiah Parker. A sleazy individual who had a bad temper. Though I’m not sure what his connection is to Edward beyond being best drinking buddies. But I did find something weird about Parker’s wife.’ He hopped from the bathroom one leg still out of his jeans. ‘It seems his wife, Elizabeth, did a runner from him back in nineteen forty-four. She got on a train and headed to Los Angeles, took the only child, Helen, with her. And here’s the odd bit. Helen came back to Wildfowl in nineteen sixty. What’s interesting about that I hear you say? Not a lot until I found out that Helen Parker died of small pox in nineteen fifty.’

Didn’t know that did you?

‘She died? But she was Jonas’ mother? She came back to Wildfowl in nineteen sixty, didn’t she?’

‘Well, that’s the question? There’s something very odd going on with the family trees around here. Maybe Wally can get a look at the Critch

medical records. The Parker records as well. And there was one more thing, this,' Jack held up the two badges he'd been sent. 'Chali? Chali, what's wrong?'

She'd backed away, grabbed at the bedcovers for comfort. The way she stared at them, as if it were a threat. 'Take them away,' she insisted. 'Please.'

'Hey, it's okay. I've got you,' he wasn't letting go. 'They're just badges.' 'Have you seen these before?'

'No, of course not. It's just, I think that Jonas has a sick sense of humour.'

No shit. Your pulse is racing, and your face when I showed them to you. Is Smiley something else you don't want to tell me about? She was smiling again. Rubbing his arm as if it were he who needed comforting.

'Chali, they're just a badges,' she was shaking poor thing. 'Is this how you found out about Jonas; does he send you things? Chali?'

She looked fearful. Was it of Jonas, or telling the truth?

'Oui,' she said, and nodded. 'I have things.'

'When? When did he start sending things to you? And why to you?'

She shrugged, tried to pull away. She seemed angry now.

'Chali, this is important. We need to understand why is Jonas is looking for attention after being invisible for so long? This guy has been anonymous for nearly four decades. Why come to the surface now?' she was up and walking away. 'Hey, Chali, talk to me.'

'I'm sorry. It's just, that face. I don't like it. It's sick.'

'Okay, I get it.' *He wasn't buying that for a minute.* 'Look, Jonas has a reason for everything he does, no matter how sick it might be.'

'Maybe the sick-man wants some recognition?'

'You think he wants his fifteen minutes of fame.'

'Oui, why not? Perhaps he wants to be famous. He wants someone to write a book about him.'

'If that's the case, then why not send the diaries to a newspaper? They could serialise the serial killer.' *That's not funny Jack.* 'And why call me? That's a pretty personal act.'

'Maybe he wants *you* to write his book.'

'No, that's not it. I'm a hack. Why not call Anne Rule, she'd give her right arm for a story like this. Her name would guarantee it's a best seller too. No, if this is all about fame, then why not walk into Quantico holding up a map? X-marks the location of the bodies. Think of the attention he'd get, and the satisfaction from all those suits who'd had no

idea of what he'd been doing. No, if fame was Jonas' end-game, then why are we still playing?'

The door knocking loudly ended the conversation.

‘Jack?’

‘Shit, Wally’s here. Get in the bathroom, and stay quiet. Jack ushered Chali into the shower. She hopped in, clothes in hand, her bra hanging from the heel of her shoe. It would have been funny if the law hadn’t been banging at the door. He drew the curtain. Then pulled it back, gave her a lingering kiss.’

‘Jack, take your pills,’ she placed her hands either side of his temple. ‘I want you to be well.’

‘Shh,’ he whispered. ‘Don’t make a sound.’

He’d been casual and welcoming; relaxed even, as he’d dressed. Despite being desperate to leave in case the law required to pee.

He’d left the room and then gone back inside. Sheriff Wally had given him raised eyebrows as he took several pills, then washed them down with a swig of Jack-D. Water was in the bathroom. Fugitive, in the bathroom. Wally already thought he was weird. So why was the Sheriff smiling as his cop car pulled out onto the Sixty-Five.

‘You have a woman hiding in your room, Jack?’

Shit, you know?

‘Maybe,’ Jack replied. ‘What gave me away?’ he asked.

‘I’m law enforcement, Jack. That’s all you need to know. So who was she, a local? Jack, are you banging Maddy?’

Maddy? That depended. *No, not Maddy.* Would it be worse than a fleeing felon returning to the scene? The truth was, he was busting to tell. But Jack took the gentleman’s-fifth. Refusing to kiss and tell.

‘So, breakfast with a psychiatrist. I hope he has a healthy appetite, I’m starving,’ Jack put his boots on the dash. ‘Do you think he knows any-

thing about Jonas? Did they even know Edward had a secret place back then?

‘I guess we’ll find out. Jack, get your feet off my car.’

Nice house, the shingled roof swept up and over, a big black stack protruding. Two narrow windows in an eyebrow design added something intimidating to its design. Half a dozen wide steps led up to a long, wood decked veranda. As the Sheriff pulled up to park Jack couldn't help but wonder, why anyone would live in the middle of a forest.

'Nice place,' said Jack. It really was.

'Built by a Senator you've never heard of,' Walter replied as both men left the car. 'Had a hankering for a country retreat at the turn of the twentieth century, Doc's owned it for about forty years.'

'He's certainly added a modern twist.' The front paneling had been ripped away and replaced with smoked glass, all the way along the front, like a department store. The tall trees of the forest swept around the house but were encouraged to keep their distance with the threat of a chainsaw. 'Poking around in people's heads still pays well.' *Ninety bucks an hour if I remember?*

'Jack, the doc stopped his practice twenty years ago. He writes books, and they sell well. But he still runs a clinic in town for the over seventies. And Jack, before you condemn him. He does it for free.'

Ninety bucks an hour, my ass it's free. He really needed to let that go as one foot followed the other up the steps. He smiled at the camera above the door; gave it a little wave.

'Door's unlocked,' said Wally, 'always is. Damned if I see the point of all this security if he's gonna leave the front door wide open. Jack, please remember the doc's no spring chicken.'

'Noted.'

'Jack, he's old.'

'Got it, old.'

'I feel obliged to impress upon you the need to be patient.'

‘I get it, re-election. Don’t upset anyone.’

‘Be nice to the doctor, Jack. He’s very well respected, and *I* like him.’

‘Duly noted. Now can we get in there, I’m hungry.’

Inside was impressive. A vast open space, lots of large stones mortared into walls. At its centre a huge copper funnel suspended above an open fire. Jack followed the split levels, three of them, each one led down. At the rear the house sparkled with more glass and half a forest welded into its architecture.

‘He’ll be out back, usually is.’

Jack hadn’t got that far, he was still checking out the house. *No oversized TV? A lot of books.* The doc had a library along the far wall. *Nice Hi-fi.* Black and shiny, lots of stainless steel. A collection of Star Trek Borg nodes that grew out of a tree sized plinth lodged in the wall. And the doc had a serious collection of music CD’s; classical mostly, with a lot of Jazz. *Eurgh, Jazz.* Everything was so big, even the furniture, all handcrafted and bound in leather. *What would Freud make of all this?*

‘Jack?’

‘Coming.’

Wally was right; Doc sat outside on what could only be described as an eternal patio. It was huge, and laid with chunky flagstones. From the house it extended to a drop, and then continued. The view was not what he’d expected. There was a huge bowl in the earth, at its bottom was a river. The unknown Senator had built himself a waterfall, and a pond to swim in.

This guy must charge nine hundred bucks an hour?

‘Jack, meet Doc.’ Sheriff Walter coughed. ‘Jack . . .’

‘Hi, sorry. Nice place,’ he added and extended his hand in greeting.

Doc half raised himself from his chair. Below a wide awning that extended from the rear of the house, there was a table, with food. Jack’s stomach groaned when he saw the breakfast on offer. Bread sticks, and pastries. Jack hated pastries. Several small glass bowls filled with jam and butter.

‘Is that cake?’ he asked.

‘It is, my housekeeper bakes it for me.’ Doc extended a welcoming hand. ‘You must be, Jack?’ Firm grip for an old man.

You have a housekeeper? Jack wanted cake. And coffee, from the large cafetières that took pride of place on the wooden table. *Let go of my hand, I want cake.*

‘Sheriff, it’s good to see you again. Please, both of you. Take a seat.’

Doc Rolins had taken some time to read the diary pages, whilst Jack enjoyed the view. The hour they'd spent here had allowed the sun to rise and warm the garden. It allowed Jack to kick-back, refuel, and chill just a little. He'd realised that his constant looks toward Wally weren't going to speed things up.

The doctor kept making noises which didn't help. 'Hmm,' and 'I see'. Doc's resemblance to the Simpson's Mr Burns was uncanny, his antiquity a constant reminder that Jack was heralding the golden fifty next birthday. All he could hope for was more hair, and that he could read a bit quicker.

Three coffees and multiple slices of cake, and the old man was still studying the pages. How many time was he going to read them, put them down, read them again? Jack wondered if a fourth slice of the yellow sponge cake would be impolite? One more scowl from Wally and, *ahh, the old man speaks.*

'Fascinating,' Rolins remarked. 'Are these for real, Walter?'

'I'm afraid so. It's why we're here. We need your help.'

'Fascinating.'

Jack wasn't sure what was more annoying, the word, or the silence that followed every time Doc said it.

'Jack, are you at liberty to tell me where you got these from?'

'They arrived in the post, piecemeal,' Jack replied.

'I could only hope to get mail like this.'

'Seriously?'

'Oh yes, this man would be a rare case-study for a younger version of myself.'

'There's more,' he said. 'I got a call from him on my cell.'

‘You did? Well, that’s wonderful, but most unlikely.’ Doc dropped the papers onto the table top. ‘Jonas Critch is most certainly dead. Edward Critch was a psychopath who I was, and am, very familiar with. Did Walter mention that I wrote a book about him, back in the day?’

Jack shook his head. ‘No, he didn’t mention that.’

‘Fascinating.’

If he says that once more?

‘Doc Rolins, as *fascinating* as this obviously is. We need information; absolutely anything you can tell us. This man is literally stealing children.’

‘Of course. Where do I start, it was a long time ago,’ he consider his words carefully, ‘I suppose I knew Edward better than most. His wife, Helen, she was a patient of mine. That was why the FBI asked me to consult on the case. Edward Critch was a truly fascinating character.’

‘So was Adolf Hitler.’

‘Jack, what did we agree?’

‘No, no, Doc corrected Walter. Say what you mean, and do what you say. I suppose it keeps things simple. But you must understand, Jack, I haven’t practiced psychiatry for nearly two decades. It’s a profession that moves on as quickly as computing and social media. Walter, did you tell Jack that I treat octogenarians now? And that I haven’t got a clue what a *Twitter* account is.’

A glance passed between Wally and Jack, and it didn’t go unnoticed by Doc Rolins.

‘More coffee before we continue?’ Doc offered.

‘Sure. Look Doc, anything you can tell us,’ Jack invited, ‘this fucked up psycho has to be stopped.’

The same look now passed between Rolins and Wally.

‘Doc, Jack’s right. We need your help.’

‘Well, take your best guess,’ Jack added. ‘Anything you can tell us; any insights, anything at all.’

‘Hmm,’ Doc removed his glasses. ‘The highlights are, Edward liked to kill. It was, and still is, my firm belief that Edward had multiple personalities, and most of them enjoyed to torture and kill. The FBI established that Edward had *at least* two other identities. They found snapshots of his life, in Washington in nineteen sixty-six, and another Edward living in San Francisco between sixty-eight and seventy. The people that knew him described him very differently. Its even possible that Edward had other families. I suppose we’ll never know for sure,’ he mused.

‘My own personal acquaintance with Edward began as a youth, way back in the forties. I was several years his senior, and as I remember he was a pleasant enough boy. Of course I wasn’t supposed to fraternise with the local rednecks, but I did. We all did. You took your fun where and when you could in those days. We didn’t have PlayStation or Nintendo back then. Besides, the rednecks had guns, and a forest where we could shoot them. You have to remember that Wildfowl wasn’t the cosmopolitan hive of activity that you see today. In fact it was quite dull. You certainly wouldn’t have put Edward down as psychotic, not then.’

‘You were friends with Critch?’

‘No, Jack, never friends, just friendly. I went off to college to take my medical exams, he stayed on the farm with his father. It was a few years later the next time I saw Edward. I was helping out at the hospital, on the psychiatric wing. Very exciting back then. I wanted to pay my respects at the service for Maria, his first wife; she’d died in childbirth. When I was reacquainted with Edward he wasn’t the person I remembered.’

‘Really? So what happened? What turned Critch toward the dark-side?’

‘As far as I remember, Jack, Edward’s personality had already taken a turn for the worse, around the age of ten or eleven, I think. He became more sullen and moody, angry even. And he adopted a strong predilection toward knives. It wasn’t that he pointed them at people; he just liked to play with them.’

‘Why doesn’t that surprise me?’

‘Well, I wasn’t surprised when the FBI asked me to consult. I was a psychiatrist, and I knew the family. They suspected, and after I had seen the evidence, I concurred, that Edward Critch murdered more people than we know. I believe that man was sexually perverse and morally unencumbered. He was a danger to anyone who came into contact with him. Only God knows what that man got up to when he was away on the road. He would be gone for months on end. Walter, I have lots of supposition, but very few facts to back them up. I made a study of Edward Critch after his death, and as I said, he was a *fascinating* character. A very clever man, good with his hands. As a child he would carve things, ornamental mostly, he’d try to sell them. Not so much a hobby as a compulsion. Some people play the guitar, Edward whittled with a knife.’

‘Do you know if Edward’s father owned any land around here? Any place he had access to that Edward would know about?’ Jack asked.

‘No, just the house. His father wanted help with the family business, he freelanced his services to the farmers back then. Edward went off on

his own. He was fifteen when he found employment working for Saxons. They were a local company that worked the Mill End quarry, it's about an hour's drive from here. By the time Edward was eighteen he could drive all manner of heavy machinery and had become completely independent from his father. It must have been hell for him when Saxon's closed down and he was forced to return home, back to work for his father.'

'Why? Why didn't he want to return?'

'Saul Critch was a ruthless man; a hard drinker and a wife beater. Not much liked by the community. He was suffered out of necessity. Saul hired himself and his diggers to the local farms and small holdings. But by the end of the forties business wasn't good. You see the War had just ended; the army was selling huge amounts of surplus. Trucks and machinery were going cheap, and the public was keen to purchase. Times were changing; it was the late forties and the world was moving on at a frightening pace. No different then to how it is now. It was leaving a lot of folk around here in its wake. The Critches included.'

He sipped on his coffee. The memories had returned in spades.

'Edward was forced to find employment, away from Saul. That's how he landed his first job as a salesman. Local sales at first, but the hard times took him further afield. He began to spend more and more time away from home. It surprised us all when he married Maria, she was a local girl, very popular as I remember. She was pregnant with their first child in a matter of months. She gave birth to a daughter, Emilia.'

'The child that went missing.'

'Yes. It was hard on everyone when that little girl went missing. I've often wondered if her abduction was Edward's stressor. They never found the child. One minute she was playing in the yard, and the next, poor kid. Of course later events held the disappearance of the child in a completely different light. I can promise you that it came as a complete surprise to everyone when the police found those bodies in Edward's trunk. No-one saw that coming.'

'So how does any of this help us to find Jonas?'

'Well, it doesn't. But if you build a profile of the man you're searching for, dig deep into his past and find out what makes him tick, then you have the ability to highlight him from the crowd in which he hides. You can even begin to predict what he will do next.'

Doc poured himself another coffee.

'I take it from the looks on your faces that I need to talk some more. Hmm. Look, *if* it was Jonas that wrote these diary pages, and *if* he saw

his father die in that car, then that was probably the stressor that accelerated his slip into psychotic instability. Edward Critch was most likely the negative and positive polars of Jonas' world. He would have seen his father, his mentor, his entire life sink into an abyss inside that car. Jonas' world would have been shattered like glass. So he would have tried to survive the only way he knew how. Like his father. I find it interesting that in the pages of your diary, Jonas tells how his father liked to torture and abuse women. There's no mention of children.'

'Yeah, I noticed that too,' Jack said. 'So why was there a child in Edward's car?'

'Well, if you take the pages at face value, they would suggest that the child wasn't a part of Edward's predilection toward murder. They suggest the woman in the car was his target, and not the child.'

'So the police looked at this from the wrong angle?'

'Yes, I fear we got it wrong. How interesting.'

Please stop saying that.

'What you have here throws an entirely different light on the case. One that we didn't have back then. And it can help you now.'

'How?'

'A place to begin. Start by looking for evidence of a child with no fixed abode. He would have a crime-sheet that includes petty theft, violence, and he would have hung around the seedier parts of a big-city. His natural instinct would be to run, and to hide. You couldn't do that in rural areas, not in those days. A child of that age, on his own, he'd stand out to law enforcement. No, he'd have little choice but to head for a larger population and attempt to blend in. Lots of kids on the streets in the big-city. He would have changed his name, presumably, and tried to be someone else. But unless he was *very lucky*, Jonas Critch would have grown up to be just like his father. If a twelve year old boy, as maladjusted as these pages suggest, having just witnessed his father and mentor die, knowing that he couldn't go home, well, then that child would struggle to fit in anywhere. It's obvious really.'

No, it really isn't.

'Most *normal* screwed up kids gravitate toward the city. If Jonas followed that rule then he'd have been at risk from every dysfunctional individual and group he crossed paths with. He'd experiment; he'd try to fit in. He'd be a target for every social parasite that lived within the darker side of society. In short, Jonas would either die out there, or be re-born. He would learn from everything he was exposed too. And I quote you here, Jack. Your fucked up kid would become an even more, fucked up

adult. Please understand that's not a label that most professionals would attach to a patient. Jonas Critch would indeed be a very sick individual.'

'How sick, in what way? Could we track him through his doctors, or prescription drugs? From what's going on in his head? The letter said he hated himself. Does he have a split personality like Edward?'

'Possibly, Jonas does seem to hate himself for what he does, at least some of the time.' Doc leant forward, his voice lowered, hands rested on his lap. Not all of the profession had retired from the man. 'Most of us have secrets, Jack. Things that we don't want others to know. An episode, an event; something that has affected our life. Maybe it's a dark desire to do something illegal, or immoral. Perhaps we've been unfaithful to a wife, or to a partner.'

Why are you looking at me?

'Perhaps it's the realisation of gay tendencies but don't have the courage to come out. In short, it could be anything that we are ashamed of, or constantly troubled by. Whatever the reason, it can make us feel unhappy, anxious, or hurt. Cause us to lose sleep, our objectivity, and even lead to a change in personality. What would someone with a healthy mind do in these circumstances? They'd see their doctor, talk to a friend, they may even seek counselling. They would look for a solution within socially acceptable boundaries. Now, let's multiply these feelings by, ten. Now you can't sleep at all. A fleeting thought becomes an all consuming burden. The fear of sharing your secret entraps your conscious mind, it paralyses you, and there's worse to come; now you want to act upon the forbidden thoughts, or repeat the unspeakable act. What if the pleasure you derive from this act is impossible to achieve without its repetition? What if that act is say, murder? It's the same overwhelming desire and disgust that an alcoholic or drug addict may feel. During the act you are euphoric, invincible, nothing else concerns you. That feeling can last, the memories can sustain you, but eventually you will spiral downward and possibly crash. You may feel guilt or self loathing; you may need to enact the process again. Only now you have a different problem. Each time the act is committed it is never the same, not as powerful as that first wonderful experience. Now mix into our cocktail of anti-social behaviour, the beginnings of psychosis. The perpetrator has all the feelings but *none* of the guilt. What if the act that he or she perpetrates is judged to be perfectly normal behaviour, and in their view, it is *you* and *I* who are wrong. What then?'

'What? Sorry, was that a question?'

‘According to these pages the author has been betrayed by every person he has ever loved. He has been systematically abused his entire life. Hardly surprising that he has withdrawn into a fantasy world. He is undoubtedly confused sexually, it represses him immensely. He doesn’t appear to accept that he is homosexual. According to his textual indulgences the author appears to use his homosexuality as a weapon, and also as a shield. It’s a way to attack others and to protect himself, nothing more. I think he tries to mask the fact that he is gay, and he believes that the act is some kind of leverage, that he has used since childhood to aid in his survival. He’ll probably hate himself for any positive feelings derived from what he perceives to be a wanton and depraved act.’

I have no idea what you’re talking about. ‘Doc, dumb it down, please.’

Doc sat back and crossed his arms.

‘This monastery, for example, it’s all part of the fantasy that he’s constructed to help himself come to terms with, to understand even, who and what he is. And more importantly how he can escape. He’s far more complex than just a plain old serial killer. But, and here’s where it gets really interesting for someone like me. The one thing he never loses sight of is whatever he perceives the *Thirty* to be. Everything else in his world can be changed, adapted, and improvised. All very fluid. But not this. Not the *Thirty*. This appears to apply the most positive influence on all of this person’s acts. It’s a scary thing really that every one of us is just a head bump, or a few faulty synapses from joining the increasing ranks of the mentally ill. And your author, according to these pages, has been mentally ill since he was a small child. And from what I can tell he’s spent his entire life undiagnosed. This is a very dangerous man.’

‘Thanks for the warning, Doc. But I think we got that.’

‘No, I’m not sure that you do, Jack. To catch a man like this you have to understand what drives him to kill.’

‘How about a lifetime of practice and abuse.’

‘A good start, I grant you.’

‘So help us out, Doc. We need to find this guy.’

What? The Sheriff was pulling faces at Jack. *What?*

‘Jack, you have to understand *what* your serial killer is before you can find him. What predisposes him toward his crimes? Is it a genetic predisposition toward mental illness? A head injury or infection? The result of physical and or sexual abuse? For my money, the author of these began with an abnormal neurological landscape. He was a ticking time bomb. And for patients like this, it’s usually the social environment that trig-

gers their fuse. There's a formula for discerning the appetites of a serial killer, and from what you've told me, I'd say that Jonas Critch would rank very highly.'

'A formula?' Jack wasn't sure he'd heard that right. 'You have a formula for this sort of thing?'

'Well, it's not mine, and it is more of a scale really. A way to quantify the degree of murderous depravity. Weigh up the acts of evil if you prefer. The crimes committed and the criminal mind behind the acts. They can be ranked in categories from one to twenty-two. When you're hunting a compulsive killer, especially clever ones, you take every weapon at your disposal.'

'Are you saying there's a league table for serial-killers?'

'If you'd prefer, yes. Now, Jack, please eat some of the raisin cake and not all of the lemon drizzle. Friends of the Forest are coming to see me at noon.'

‘Despite popular myth, no two serial-killers are the same. You’ve heard of Arthur Shawcross, I presume?’

Jack shook his head. From the frown it seemed obvious the Sheriff was none the wiser.

‘Arthur Shawcross was a murderer who claimed he would break from reality each time he murdered. He would leave his body before each brutal kill, and then return to eat the remains. What about Gary Heidnick, heard of him?’

‘The who’s who of psychopaths wasn’t compulsive reading when I was at school,’ Jack replied.

‘Gary Heidnick held sex-slaves captive in his basement. For months he’d torture and abuse them before finally ending their lives. Ed Gein claimed he could hear his mother’s voice. So he robbed graves and used body parts in an attempt to bring her back to life. His house was a mortuary explosion; he had limbs, organs, and body parts stored all over the house. And this was before he began murdering women and wearing their skin. So, Jack, are these people mad, or just bad?’

‘This where you use the formula?’

‘Exactly. Personally, I believe that evil has only two categories. Those who understand what they are doing, and those that do not. We should only offer sympathy for the latter. Psychotic behaviour doesn’t always manifest into violent or malevolent tendencies. It’s more about the personality, its characteristics and predispositions. A generous sprinkling of schizophrenia tends to move things along. My point is that these people are very complex; I can’t just sit here and diagnose your author without more relevant information. My hypothesising has bounds. Any more and I’ll need to take an early nap.’

‘Look, Doc. What you’ve just read is all we have. The diaries, the photos of the evidence board; the abduction sites. It’s all we have.’

‘All very compelling, I agree. But Jack, there are just too many people in the world these days. Too many copies will mean too many errors, it’s inevitable. That’s why we psychiatrists get away with charging what we do?’

No shit. Jack could still see his own bank statement. *Ninety bucks an hour to drink coffee and stare at the ceiling. It’s about time I got my money’s worth.* He sat forward. Wally was watching him like a hawk.

‘Take a leap of faith, Doc. Please, anything else you can tell us. Anything at all? Age, height, hair colour, an address would help. Give it your best shot.’

‘Very well. Let’s assume that Jonas is still alive. I would suggest that amongst his many skills he has the ability to blend in, to become a part of the crowd, or indeed the community. After all, he’s been doing bad things for a very long time and remained unnoticed. It sounds as if your phantom killer has been living amongst us for many years, and will be someone that we are *all* very familiar with. He has an employment, or a trade, that keeps him at the centre of town life but will also offer him plenty of anonymity.’

Both men glanced toward the Sheriff.

‘Well, it’s not me,’ he said.

‘Isn’t that what a killer would say?’ Jack gave the Sheriff a hard stare, and then a wink. ‘Walter’s not old enough,’ he said.

‘Yes, well what I can tell you is a large part of this man’s process is his patience and his attention to detail. He has an outgoing personality. This man is quiet and methodical and yet outrageously brazen. To take a sleeping child from their bed whilst their parents are asleep in the room adjacent, that’s supremely confident. Then to transport them across the country and bring them here? That takes planning, as well as balls. And I assure you this man has been in the child’s home prior to his abducting them. Judging by the distances between the children he has a job that allows for, or includes travel. Because of this, I suggest he is familiar with all forms of social-media, and is undoubtedly a predator online. I’d guess the internet serves him well. Is anyone sounding familiar?’

‘Half the country,’ Jack was eyeing up the lemon drizzle again. ‘So you think he’s grooming these kids on the internet?’

‘Undoubtedly. Wouldn’t you if you were that way inclined? Imagine the feeling of power and anonymity, the satisfaction you’d feel whilst enjoying the comforts of your own home. A keyboard is your weapon of

choice, the internet your field of fire. You have a crime scene that knows no boundaries. Evil doesn't have to wander the streets in darkness anymore; it can do its business from an armchair whilst sipping a warm latte. A thousand disguises, a melee of personalities, it's a brave new world in which a predator can hunt its prey. My goodness, the internet has handed our younger generation to the paedophile on a plate.'

'So Jonas is a paedophile? You think he abuses these kids?'

'Strangely enough, no, I think it's unlikely. Jonas has a higher calling, a greater purpose. These children are dead, that's beyond doubt. But if what he writes in these pages is honest and true, I'm pretty sure that he doesn't abuse them first. I'd even go as far as to say that the thought would disgust him. No, in his warped version of reality he's trying to protect them.'

'Come again?'

'He's overlapping his delusions. His own pain and abuse is being projected toward his victims. I have to wonder, are the children he chooses being abused themselves? And there's one other point I feel professionally bound to point out. This man you're looking for has been living at least two *very* separate lives here in Wildfowl. And from what I've just read, and heard, he has just made you, Jack, a very important piece of furniture within them. So although you don't seem to be in any imminent danger, I do suggest that you proceed with caution. Do not underestimate this man. He sees things on a far wider plane than you and I.'

'So Jonas has gone from somebody, to just about anybody. Wally, we need to arrest every male over the age of sixty living in the area. No, wait, that is every male in the area.' That was harsh and uncalled for. Doc had been helpful. He'd given Jonas substance. More than just words on a page and a voice over a cell-phone. 'Sorry. Thanks Doc, you've been really helpful.'

'I don't suppose you have any ideas about the symbols on the diary pages?'

He shook his head. 'Some sort of mystical meaning I suppose. We've already established from his monastery fantasies that he has a schizotypal personality. That's what we call a personality when magical processes become a part of the delusion. Usually it's the occult, numerology, or apocalyptic revelations. The fact that these children are taken a week before their eleventh birthday suggests that Jonas *is* re-enacting something terrible from his past. You do know that his brother died a week before his eleventh birthday?'

Jack nodded.

‘And that he was Jonas’ twin.’

‘His twin?’

‘Oh yes, they were identical; the boys were born ten minutes apart.’

By the look on Walter’s face this was news to him too.

‘Gentlemen, you’ll have to excuse me,’ Doc stood. ‘I need to tinkle; every two hours, regular as clockwork. Walter, if he goes for the lemon drizzle you have my permission to shoot him. I’ll swear you did it in self-defence.’

Charming. Jack watched the old boy trot off, then glanced back at the table. Wally was watching him too.

‘Go ahead punk. Make my day,’ he said.

‘Seriously? That is like, so old.’ Jack reached for some sort of muesli bar that had been neglected. *Yeah, keep watching Sheriff. The muesli is about to get it.* He was bluffing of course as his hand retracted. Then a feeling of horror sprang through Jack’s stomach. He could only watch as Wally picked up, and then stuffed the penultimate piece of lemon cake into his mouth. What was he saying? Sounded like, “And I get to hoot you poo,” followed by laughter. ‘Hey, where are you going?’

From the jovial sound he was making Wally was about to piss himself quicker than Doc. Jack responded the only way he knew how, his hand quicker than a bouncing yoyo, to leave the plate empty of lemon drizzle. He followed Wally into the house; two grown men trying to chew away the evidence.

Jack had no idea what half the items in the lounge were, but they looked valuable. Which probably meant they were. Apart from the books and the priceless artefacts, there were a half dozen paintings strung around the walls. Local rock, he assumed, cemented in wonky lines. They had a naturally soothing effect on the abstract shapes and colours painted over the canvas. He wondered why people paid so much for something the kids could do in five minutes.

‘Please don’t touch that,’ Rolin’s barked.

‘Sorry.’ *I wasn’t going to break it.* Jack replaced the ornament. Potty time had taken shorter than expected. *Keep looking at the painting Wally, you’ve got cake stuck in your teeth.* Jack pointed at the table outside, then at Wally. He smiled. ‘You were saying about Julius?’

‘Hmm, yes, the boy’s body was found a day after the incident. They dredged the river. The story was that Julius fell from the boat; he got himself caught up in the flora on the riverbed. I think Julius’ death sent Helen Critch on a downward spiral she couldn’t recover from. That poor

woman; such a timid and nervous creature, and totally submissive to her husband.'

'So why didn't she just leave him?'

'Fear, and not just of Edward, but of losing her children. A man like Edward has a narcissistic ego. He married Helen to make her his caretaker, a homemaker; she gave him the air of normality and respectability. Having children provided an extension of his manhood, and possibly even the opportunity to groom them for, who knows what. Edward had a domineering personality. I never once saw him smile. Helen was his complete opposite; at least she was when I first met her. A nervous woman who was frightened by the world, but brave enough to walk out into it every day. She was a delicate soul, with a very kind heart. Toward her end she would pace her bedroom like a woman possessed, her fingers bled from incessant biting of her nails and skin. I don't think there was any doubt that Edward was abusing her mentally, physically too I should think. For a woman as fragile as Helen, the loss of her child was devastating. I think it broke her. Edward of course took control. He kept her isolated after the death. After the funeral I wasn't allowed to visit for almost three weeks. And when I did Edward was always present. Jonas would always be by her side, sat on the bed, or in the chair by the window. Helen was what we'd call a manic depressive these days. Either resigned to her bed, or shifting and fidgeting about her room. God knows how she must have felt living in that house. I urged Helen several times to admit herself to hospital. But she refused every time. Insisted that her place was at the house with her family. It's only just struck me, that in all the times that I visited I never once saw Edward sit by her bed-side. I don't recollect that man ever holding her hand. Not one sign of tenderness or affection was ever shown toward her, not whilst I was in the house. Perhaps Maddy saw differently. She was there more often than I. The truth is, Jack. I was blind. The complexities of the Critch household became so bloody obvious after the bodies were found. I cursed myself for not having the balls to section her. I could have got Helen away from that man, from that house.' Doc took a breath. He sat himself down. 'So there you have it,' he said. 'Helen, gentlemen, is *my* guilty secret. As I said, we all have them. Only God knows, but perhaps I could even have saved Jonas?'

'That's a lot of shit going round your head, Doc. I'm sure you did what you could, but it doesn't help us find Jonas.'

'Jack, what did I say before we came out here?' Wally glared from the sofa.

‘It’s all right, Walter. I’m self-indulging, not helpful to anyone. Jack, after Julius’ death Helen never left the house again, not that I was ever aware of. Helen Critch became a recluse. Her symptoms strengthened and her health declined. I was forced to prescribe stronger medication but nothing seemed to help. Helen became delusional toward the end. She told me on several occasions that she could still see him, Julius. That she could hear his voice, and that she would speak to him regularly. It was very disturbing to watch her decline. It was especially hard for Jonas. You see Helen doted on that boy. She smothered him; today we’d see it as unhealthy. When Helen passed on, all that Jonas had left was Edward. Poor child, he didn’t stand a chance. Look, Sheriff, as much as I want to help you. This was all a very long time ago. And I do have the Friends of the Forest in about, ooh, half an hour.’ He stood and walked closer to Walter. ‘Sometimes we can find ourselves sucked into other people’s delusions, you do recognise that?’

Why is he looking at me?

‘You don’t believe Jonas is still alive?’ Walter asked.

‘I think it unlikely. But I suppose being Sheriff means you have to be certain. Just, be careful out there.’

Again, why look at me? ‘I have one last question?’ He’d take the man’s silence as an okay to ask. ‘Did the Critches own any property, other than the house I mean? Held in someone else’s name maybe? Did Edward’s father or grandfather have land for storage, or any other use? Did they have the loan of any land, anything that you know of? Did Edward have a favourite place, somewhere he liked to visit. Anywhere you can think of?’

‘If I assume you’re referring to Edward’s, special place. No, I don’t know. I do know that Sheriff Ethan believes it exists. I have to accept that Edward had somewhere that he took his victims. Perhaps that’s why I never wrote the book, Walter? The story never had an ending. Sorry, Jack, I have no idea where it could be. Now, all this thinking is very tiring. Please, show yourselves out.’

Jonas watched his breath cloud in the cool air, then dissipate into oblivion. It was a cold night in the park.

The girl is patient, or perhaps she is stubborn? One thing is for sure, she's a very pretty child.

Jonas wanted to go over and talk to the girl sat on the park bench, sat below the statue as they'd agreed. She looked cold in her green uniform, the thin leggings proving inadequate protection below the knee length skirt. It was important that children wear uniform at school, at least he thought so. The pink hat with matching gloves was a sensible precaution.

Jack, you should be very proud.

Kirsty was prompt, he liked that. Her being here meant that unfortunately more lies had been spun. Her mother, Jill, should pay more attention to her child.

I suppose it's hard to bring up children these days. There are so many distractions. The lives of the younger generation are far more complex than they have ever been; than a parent knows, or wants to know.

Jonas believed it was their inattention to the finer points that left their young vulnerable. The majority of parents were too frightened to look closely at their children's lives. It was a self-indulgent en-masse. A generation that was lazy, inattentive, and wholly unprepared to service the needs of their children. They were incompetent, they were negligent.

Look at her, young Kirsty, out on her own.

Kirsty Lottman was supposed to walk home with best friend Jackie, not wait in parks for strange boys. But she'd kept her promise and come alone. Bitterly disappointed, she was about to leave. His phone buzzed. Kirsty was updating. He watched her text, his phone discreetly cupped within gloved hands.

Oh dear, that is very uncomplimentary language.

Apparently, among other things, Stevie was a douchebag!

Kirsty was up and moving. It made sense for her to walk through the park now, it was quicker. He delayed his pursuit; careful to remain unnoticed. Several minutes later they left the park and turned right down Douglas Avenue. A long road lined with odd sculptures, modern art free-standing along the path. An awkward moment arose as a bus came down the road, Kirsty's hand waving it down. If there was one thing that Jonas objected to, it was running.

No choice, he had to get a move on, his hand waving for the driver to see him in the big rear view mirror. A moment of relief as the bus idled and waited. Best smile on as he followed Kirsty onto the bus. 'Thank you,' he said, and removed his hat and coat, draping them over his arm. A five dollar bill passed hands and change was given.

Jonas was careful to seat himself behind Kirsty, who only had eyes for her phone. Six minutes later they exited the bus, Jonas delaying, pretending he'd dropped something to make the driver wait. It made no difference now if he was remembered. Kirsty would be the final one. He thanked the driver and followed on from a safe distance.

Such a nice neighbourhood, the houses on either side clearly affluent and middle classed, very pleasant. He blended nicely with his surroundings, the grey NorthFace coat he wore, its collar pulled up to his cheeks. He liked to be grey and boring; no-one noticed you in gloomy colours. No-one cared if you're in the margins. Just a local man enjoying the evening air. He didn't look up from the sidewalk; he never lost sight of Kirsty.

In another era he would have made a fine spy, back in the Cold War days; he always got a rush from the cloak and dagger, so to speak. Despite their common age all of his children were different, no two were alike... no mission ever the same.

Kirsty turned left down Main Street and Jonas followed. One eye on the girl the other reading the text on his phone. Kirsty was pissed off and she was telling her friends on Twitter all about it.

Walking

Walking

#boys suck.

More walking.

Nearly home.

Two more streets went by. A polite nod to a passing dog walker. A host of gaily coloured SUV's passed on by.

Still walking . . .

It was Twitter relief when Kirsty finally reached home. That girl could bitch with the best. Jonas paused to admire a neighbour's roses, he wanted to be sure she entered the house. Jack and Jill had done well for themselves. A safe neighbourhood, plenty of trees. A garage and a front yard. Neighbours that smiled and said, "hi."

Jonas walked on. Kirsty continued to rant, more so when she got to her bedroom.

#crying.

There were multiple selfies to prove her claim. Though he doubted they were sincere.

Never mind, you can rely on Jonas. I'll be back tonight when the street has emptied. Jonas will come when the darkness returns.

#Jonas loves Kirsty.

How he would have loved to send that.

‘Oh my God,’ Jack eased the door closed behind him. ‘Chali, what have you done?’

‘You’re back?’ Chali pounced into his arms. ‘I missed you.’ *Kiss.*

‘I can see that.’ *Kiss, kiss.* Every scrap of paper he’d collected, and more, were pinned taped and tacked to the walls. ‘Maddy will go crazy. Crap, she’ll explode.’

‘Who’s Maddy?’

Before he could answer his lips were in full use fending off Chali’s. Not that he tried too hard.

‘Chali, *kiss*, there isn’t a piece of wall left. Maddy will go, *kiss*, thermal about this.’

‘You think it’s too much?’

That was priceless, and brought a smile.

‘No, it’s, you. Loveable you.’

‘Then shh, and take a look. Here, I found this in the fridge.’ She was already pouring a glass of Jack-D for him. ‘And your pills, you left without them. Jack, you must take your pills.’ They we’re lined up on the surface of the nightstand.

‘Aren’t I missing one?’ he asked

‘Not those, they make you drowsy. I want your full attention tonight.’ She helped him remove his coat. ‘Tell me what happened, tell me every little detail. Don’t leave anything out.’

He recanted the day. His visit to the Critch house with Sheriff Whalen. The chat they’d had with Doc Rolins. All very interesting, but whether it had been helpful, only time would tell.

Then he listened to Chali as she told him about her attempt to search online for Critch’s family and friends. She’d tried to access hospital records by lying to several employees, unsuccessfully. She’d emailed re-

tired staff members and was waiting for replies. Nothing new had been exposed, she was sorry.

Look at her, trawling through all this shit dragged up from the web. Nothing dampens her enthusiasm, not even failure.

They were no closer to finding Jonas now than when he'd first driven into Wildfowl. Chali's voice trailed off as the Jack-D wet his lips.

All of this information, but we're missing the piece that brings it all together. Damn you, Jonas. If you want me to find you, just send me your address.

'Jack, what's wrong?'

He forced a smile.

'Nothing. A bit frustrated maybe, that's all.' *Look at it all. Walls plastered with dates, places, faces.* He understood why Rolins hadn't written his book. Everything was up there, the entire story. Rolins was right. It was lacking an ending.

The light went out and the room went black. *Was the power down?* For a moment Jack was unsure, nervous even. As his eyes adjusted he began to make out Chali's shape in the gloom. The shirt she was wearing, his shirt, it was gone. *So not a power cut.* The shapely shadow was moving towards him, her arms outstretched, hands taking hold of his jacket. He felt her unclip one button and then another. Her slender fingers pulled on the fabric to help it slip away, as sharp nails trailed upon his shoulders.

'I want you Shhaack.' He loved the way she said his name. 'I want to hold you, touch you, feel you upon me. I want to wrap my legs about you and whisper my love in your ear.' She giggled as they flopped down. Her legs wrapped tight about his waist. She began to whisper, and Jack's blood pumped wildly toward his vital organs. Nothing in the room mattered now except the woman, the darkness, and the passion.

Jonas turned the key to end the gentle purr of the engine. He'd spent a lot of money ensuring the engine was as silent as an evening breeze. The van's door opened without a sound as he stepped out into the darkness.

This was a perfect night. Not one light shone down the entire length of the street. No sound to be heard. These were good people. Folk who worked hard; who needed their sleep. Even the moon had hidden itself behind invisible clouds.

A large tree, one of many along the road, hid the van from view as he strode a brief confident walk up Jack's driveway, to the prettily glazed front door. A standard Yale lock. Easy pickings as he encouraged the tumblers to turn. The front door clicked open. Hardly a sound that the family would hear, but noise enough to cause Jonas' heart to flutter. His adrenaline to surge. It triggered a wave of excitement as Jonas slipped Smiley down over his face and stepped inside. One last look at the street before the door closed it out.

He'd not been in the Lottman's house before. This was new, and unnerving. No plan, no layout to work from. The house was dark and silent.

Where are you, Kirsty? She was close. Jack's baby-girl, I can smell you. The final piece of the puzzle. *You are the Thirty.* So why wouldn't his legs move? Why did he feel like, this? *This is exhilarating.*

The lounge was large, the furniture generous in size. Such a big television; he'd wager the kids had one each in their rooms. Down the hallway was the kitchen, a way out through the back. Jonas hoped it wouldn't be necessary as he took his first step upwards.

Stairs were always a difficult proposition, the wood still alive and waiting to groan. Any sound, no matter how small, would fill the dark void like a scream. Could they hear his heart beating, no, thumping in

his chest? Jonas took a deep breath and began the ascension. One carpeted step after the next, being careful to walk only on the outer edge. He couldn't remember being in a house so warm as this. It was too hot, too hot, as a bead of sweat rolled down his chest, followed by another from his brow. The house wasn't hot, Jonas eased Smiley up and wiped his face, he realised he was frightened.

Their were four doors on the landing. At the far end another set of stairs, he presumed went up to an attic room that faced the rear. Why was it so quiet? He reached out for the closest door and took the handle in his hand. As he eased the door inward the board below his foot groaned below his weight. Someone inside stirred. Jonas froze.

Why do I feel like this? My heart, it's beating too fast. It's too fucking hot. He unzipped his jacket, peered around the door. Pulled the blade from a hidden sheaf. *Anyone wakes, and I'll kill them.* The first of the bedrooms presented itself. He had to blink to keep focus. The walls, they were a shade of red. *Mummy?* A woman lying snugly below the covers. *No, not now.* He was leaning against the wall, his hand gripped to the door's handle unwilling to let go. Adrenaline surged through Jonas' veins as the body moved. It threw back the covers and turned toward him. Jonas took two steps toward the bed, the blade raised in a stabbing position. He watched as Jill turned over, kicked the covers away, and went about her slumber as she lay in the ex-marital bed, alone.

The chemical party being thrown in Jonas' head, relented. What a come down! *I suppose the prize has to be earned.* He found the wall supportive. And Jill was attractive. *Why would you stray?* Jack had done well for himself. The way Jill lay above the covers, her body elongated, the nightdress she wore somewhat revealing. Jonas wagered that Jill had brought the garment especially for Jack. It was sexy, suggestive, something special for her man. The silky fabric perfectly traced her ample bosom. The undergarment skimpy, her body firm from physical exercise. *Naughty, Jack. So typical, Jack. Like most men, you can't say no.* She was nicely contoured; the garment's threshold low and encouraging the need to see more. He'd wager that night dress had given Jack's blood a fair-ground ride or two.

There are times, Father. That I almost understand your needs.

Some women attracted him. Not in that way; not the manner in which men usually lusted for women. It was different. He'd admired the way that Edward had posed his women in that awful chair. Before, during, and after he had loved them. There was art to be found in the female form. Jill had the talent that his father desired. The way her breasts

swelled the garment as they rose, the nightdress creasing as each breath was released. The motion was suggestive with its simple rhythm.

How stimulating it would be if you were to open your eyes right now. Jonas knelt beside the bed and raised the knife. Open your eyes Jill. I want to feel what my father felt. The power those women gave him when they looked up and saw him standing over them. Open your eyes, Jill. I want to see what my father saw as you open your eyes.

Jonas slipped the smiley back down to cover his face. One hand lifted, prepared to cover her lips; silence the mouth in mid-scream. *Open your eyes.* Jonas traced the knife along her cheek, as close as he dare without touching the skin. *Open your eyes, Jill.* Is this how it was for Father? Yes, it must have been. What a buzz to see the woman's terror, to feel her scream as he stole it into his palm. *The eyes tell everything, they never lie. I'll see it all Jill, everything, the moment you open your eyes.* For a single moment Jill Lottman would burn brighter than a star.

One final draw of Jill's scent to remember her by, and the knife was retracted. *Not tonight, you're not for me.* Jonas eased himself up from his knees. *This is not, me.* He stepped backward fro the room. *Sweet dreams, Jill. This will be last night you'll ever sleep without nightmares.*

He pulled the door closed.

Next door Ben was fast asleep; the boy snored like a grown-man. Like the Batman that adorned his walls and quilt. Jonas wasn't a fan. Thor, the God of thunder, he was a real Superhero. You were only allowed to like one or the other; Marvel or DC, you couldn't like both. *Not allowed.* He did understand a child's need for a hero, the larger-than-life characters, they were important. They assured a child that all would be well with the world. *And then we grow up.*

Sweet Ben, what would it have been like to have had a son of my own? Edward had me, and I didn't turn out too bad. I wonder. Was Smiley actually smiling? Enjoy your sleep, Ben. And have a great school holiday. The Grand Canyon is a beautiful place, or so I hear.

Jonas had always wanted to visit the Grand Canyon, but what with one thing or another he'd never managed to fulfil that particular dream.

Too late now, he supposed. No more dreams . . . no more nightmares. The die is cast. Bad Jonas has only one place to go now, and that's straight to Hell. Jack Lottman will be the one to send him there.

These were the moments that Jonas craved. He didn't like fear, or the unknown. It was this, the empathy that he'd struggled to find in his own life, that he always portrayed so well toward others. When Jonas put on

the mask, when he entered the homes; for a short time at least, he understood what it was like to be a part of the family.

Jonas eased Ben's door closed. He had one more room to find, a mere five steps to feel his fingers about the handle on the door. This was it, the moment he had aspired to for so long.

Take a pause, Jonas. Savour the next few moments. Open this portal slowly and rejoice at the moment. In a few moment the real work begins.

Jonas was wired, he was alive, his veins sizzled like power-lines on a stormy night. The years of planning were about to find fruition. Jonas twisted the knob clockwise. He pushed the door ajar.

‘JACK . . .’

One scream came after another, the voice’s owner hidden somewhere out there in the rain.

‘I can’t see you?’ The window was steaming up. The more he rubbed at the glass, the worse his visibility.

‘JAACK . . .’

Christ, is that a kid out there? So difficult to make out. ‘Hey, come toward the light.’ He banged on the window. ‘Over here!’ How could they hear him? *Shit.* Jack’s nose began to bleed.

‘JAACK . . .’

‘Over here!’ He couldn’t even see the rain outside; fog all over the pane. ‘Come towards the light.’ He should go outside. Try to find whoever it was.

‘JAAACK . . .’

‘Fuck!’ A face, he saw a face; suddenly there and now gone. Jack backed away from the window. ‘Who’s there?’ he shouted, as the light in his room began to dim. The bulb’s glow diminished, shedding gloom and shade across the walls. As he turned from the window a young girl’s face came close to the glass.

Rain clung to her nightdress, water streamed down her pretty face. *Help us*, she shouted, but no sound came from her lips. *Help us.* She lifted the bear she clutched in her arms and pressed him against the window. *Please, Jack, help us.*

Jack reached for the bulb. ‘Aargh. Fuck, idiot, of course it’s hot.’ Again the light dimmed inside as lightning flashed and lit the world outside. The bulb’s glow became a blaze and left a smudge in his eyes that forced his gaze away.

‘JAAACK . . .’

Lightning flashed away outside and for a moment the rain could be seen. Heavy sheets of rainwater being driven across the ground outside. As the sky blacked the air resonated to an unhappy growl of thunder.

‘Whoah.’ Another flash. A wild fork of light that streamed across the sky, and as it faded he saw a figure standing outside in the rain, then gone in a cloak of darkness.

Jack ran for the door. He yanked on the handle, pulled at the lock. Neither would turn. ‘Open the door,’ he shouted. Then beat on it with his fist. He ran back to the window. ‘Hey, kid? Come toward the light.’ Just the rumble of clouds outside, singing angry hymns in the heavens.

‘JAAAACK.’

‘Fuck, fuck,’ he stumbled backward, the move so sudden he tripped, only the bed stopped a fall. ‘Oh God, no, no, no.’ Jack was back at the window, beating on the glass. ‘Hey, hey?!’ There she was, walking away in the distance, exposed by another fork of light across the sky. She turned and gazed at Jack as the rain lashed down. *Help us*, she mouthed, and was gone again.

‘No, no,’ Jack beat on the glass. ‘Don’t go, don’t go . . .’

Kirsty?!

Jack threw himself upright, eyes wide open, his heart beating so fast his chest hurt. He fumbled for the light-switch and the room was illuminated. Everything was as he’d left it last night. The curtains still drawn across the window. Jack took what felt like his first-ever-breath. Expanding his lungs to highlight how badly he trembled. It was just a dream.

What the fuck was that all about? He threw his feet from the bed to the floor and placed his face into his palms. On the nightstand he saw Jack-D, and an empty glass. A small bottle half-filled with little blue pills. *Fuck, fuck, my head hurts.*

‘Shaack, are you all right?’ Chali placed her hand on his chest. ‘Your heart, it’s beating so fast. What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing,’ he lied. ‘No, maybe, there’s something.’

‘What, what is it?’

Something Doc had said to him earlier. What was it? A phrase or a sentence, it had nipped at him all day. Words that now demanded to be heard.

Think Jack, what is it? Something in that stupid grey head of yours. He stared at the curtain, the urge to throw it back almost too much. *Twins?*

‘Chali, Doc Rolins said Jonas was a twin.’ *They were twins?* ‘Twins,’ he said aloud.

‘Jack, are you all right?’

‘No, the Doc said that the Critch boys were twins.’

‘That’s what you said, yes. Why, does that mean something?’

‘Oh my God, why didn’t I see it?’

Jack was up and grabbing for his cell. The time read 03:20. It didn’t matter; he had to make the call.

‘Jack?’ Chali was sat upright, her voice driven with concern. ‘Who are you phoning at this hour?’

‘Answer damn you, answer.’ The recipient’s cell-phone switched to voice mail.

‘No, no, no, answer the phone.’ *Please answer. Please, please, please, answer the fucking phone.*

He hit redial, waited; the sound of the other phone ringing, and then a recorded message. Jack dialled again, and again.

‘Answer the fucking phone.’

‘Jack, what’s going on. What’s wrong?’

‘Shh, she’s answered.’

Hello . . . Jack, is that you? The woman’s voice sounded half-asleep. *Do you know what time it is?*

‘Jill,’ he had to calm his voice. ‘Listen to me, please. I want you to go and check on the kids. Go check on the kids.’

‘What?’

‘Kirsty and Ben, please, go make sure they’re in their rooms.’

Jack, its three, Oh Jack, its three twenty-three. For crying out loud what’s . . . have you been drinking?

He didn’t have time for this. Deep breath Jack, stay calm, remain focused.

‘No, I haven’t been drinking,’ he lied. ‘Jill, for me, please. Go make sure the kids are in their rooms.’

Why? Why wouldn’t they be in their rooms? Jack, what’s going on?

‘Will you just, for once, do as I ask? Please Jill. Jill? Jill, are you still there?’

I’m going upstairs, Jack. I left my phone in the kitchen last night.

‘Thank you. It’s just a precaution, nothing to worry about, its fine.’

You’ve got me up at three in the morning. Jack, there’s plenty to be worried about. Do you have a headache? Jack, please tell me you’re taking the pills.

‘Sure, I’m fine.’ *What’s taking you so long?* Why didn’t she walk more quickly. Get up the stairs with more urgency. *Move yourself Jill.*

‘Ben’s sleeping, he’s fine. Okay, he’s fast asleep.’

‘And Kirsty?’

‘Hold on, Jack,’ She was whispering. *I’m just putting Ben’s covers back on the bed. Focusing at three in the morning isn’t so easy. What’s all this about?’*

‘Kirsty, check on Kirsty.’

Silence again. Tick-tock, seconds, hours, time seemed to scramble.

‘Jack?’

‘What is it? What?’

‘Oh my God, Kirsty’s not in her room.’

The words were a stab in his heart. He could hear Jill call for her daughter. Confused at first, and then annoyance. Emotions that twisted into something far more potent. *Kirsty? . . . Kirsty!*

She’d become borderline frantic. *‘She’s not in her bedroom, Jack. I can’t find her anywhere up here. Kirsty?’* He could hear Ben now, asking what was wrong. Tears, Jill had begun to cry. Jack could hear doors being forced open, a mother calling out for her child.

‘Jack, she’s gone. Oh my God, where is she? Where’s Kirsty, Jack? Where’s my baby?’

‘Go back to her room.’

‘What?’

‘Jill, please. I know this sounds crazy, but you have to go back into Kirsty’s room.’ He had to swallow. Force down the urge to panic. ‘Tell me what you see?’

Jill’s voice was close to breaking. Her breathing erratic, the tears tore at Jack’s heart.

‘What do you see?’ he repeated.

The tears were in full flow. Panic had broken down the gates, a sea of confusion filled the Jack’s cell.

‘It’s empty. Kirsty’s gone.’

‘Look at her bed, Jill. The table, look for anything out of place.’

‘Why, what am I looking for? She’s gone, Jack, there’s noth . . .’

‘What, what is it?’ He’d begun to whisper. His hand on Chali’s. Her body spooned close behind his. ‘What is it? What do you see?’

‘On her pillow? There’s a, badge. Jack, it’s a badge.’

Jack pushed the cell into his forehead. He wanted to scream. Why hadn’t he seen this coming? Jonas had told him, he’d spelled it out. Jack

would bring Jonas the Thirty. Kirsty was a twin; she was eleven in a week's time.

'What's on the badge, Jill?' he didn't have to ask.

'I don't understand. Jack, where's my baby?'

'The badge, what's on the badge?'

'I don't understand this, why is this here? What have you got us involved in Jack? Where's my baby?'

'The badge, Jill?' anger spilling over his desire to stay calm.

'Jack, it's a smiley face.'

The life drained from Jack as he slumped forward. His eyes welled with water that broke free and ran.

'Jill, he's taken Kirsty'

'Who? Who's taken Kirsty, Jack? Who's taken my baby?'

'I'm so sorry.' Chali's arms were around him. 'We'll get her back.'

'I need to think,' he pulled away from Chali, her voice was soothing, not that he heard the words, but he did hear Jill's. He heard the anger and the damnation in her voice.

'Are you with someone? Who's that with you Jack? Is she a part of this? Is your slut the reason my little girl is gone? Fuck you, Jack. You bastard. Where's my baby? Where's my Kirsty?'

Focus. He had to focus, on everything that Jonas had shared. Jack pulled away from Chali. Hateful words spitting out on the other end of the line.

'Jill, call the police. Give them the number that I'm going to text you. It's the local Sheriff here, he can advise them of everything that's going on. I'm so sorry Jill, but I have to hang up now. I swear to you, I swear. I will find Kirsty, and I will bring her home. I'll make this right. No matter what the cost, Jill. I'll bring Kirsty home.' Jack ended the call.

‘Jack, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know this would happen. Jack, please . . .’

‘Julius was Jonas’ twin,’ Jack said. He’d never felt so pale, so empty. ‘Jonas told me. He spelled it out for crying out loud. I didn’t listen.’

‘I don’t understand?’

‘Don’t you? You come into my life, all Christmas cards and candles. You drag me into this, this bloody nightmare.’

‘Non, I, didn’t know. Tell me what’s going on.’

‘Kirsty’s eleven on Saturday. That bastard’s taken her.’

Chali shook her head. ‘I’m sorry, please, I’m so sorry.’

‘Don’t touch me.’ Another tearful woman was not what Jack needed right now. And this bloody smart phone, why wouldn’t it send the frigging text. He swore on all that was holy, that when this was over it would be smashed into a thousand pieces. It beeped. Text sent.

Calm down, Jack. He had to get a grip. Had to think this through. Kirsty needed the investigative reporter, not a freaked out step-dad. Jill would be on the phone to the police, probably freaking out. Chali sat on the mattress, bedcover wrapped around her body. She stared at him, she looked frightened. *Stay Calm.*

‘Doc Rolins said the Critch boys were twins,’ he said. ‘Twins, Chali. Kirsty and Ben are twins. Jonas told me, he said that *I* would be responsible for the Thirty. That the consequences were mine. I didn’t think . . .’ Even now he wanted to hold the frightened little mouse on his bed. It wasn’t her fault. He didn’t have to come. It was his choice to get mixed up in this. ‘She’s got nothing to do with this,’ his voice laced with anxiety. ‘She’s just a kid.’ A moment later he felt Chali’s arms around him.

‘I’m so sorry. So sorry,’ she kept saying it.

Jack pulled her tight. The truth was blindingly simple. Before the pills and the booze he would have seen this, suspected it at least. Taken pre-

cautions to make sure his family was safe. Too late for that. Only one choice left now, and that was to find Jonas Critch before he could hurt his little girl.

Find him Jack.

‘Jack, where are you going? Jack, I’m coming with you.’

Too close, she was too close. He needed space. Jack backed off, his hand raised between them.

‘No, you’ve done enough.’

‘Non, Jack, no, let me help. Please, this is my fault. Please, let me help.’

‘You want to help? Sure, okay, tell me why? Why me? Why did you come to me for help?’ Yeah, that face says it all. Secrets. ‘What do you know that you’re not telling me?’ he asked her.

‘Jack . . .’

‘I didn’t think so.’

‘No, please, Jack. I swear I didn’t know, how could I? I should have, I should have known. I learn so much, but know so little.’ Tears now. Eyes filled with sorrow, that pleaded to him. ‘He’s right, he’s always right.’

‘He? Who’s he? What aren’t you telling me?’

‘Jack, please, stop. You’re hurting my arm.’

He pushed Chali back to the bed, released her before he did something far worse. She’d been so beautiful last night, so wonderful in his arms. Now she cowered at the foot of his bed; frail, frightened, her body barely covered by the blanket as she wept.

‘I swear to you, Jack. I swear I didn’t know. I just want to stop him. Jack, no, where are you going. Please, listen to me, let me help.’

‘Then start talking,’ his jeans were in his hands. Jack need to find Wally. ‘Hey, I won’t tell you again. Keep your hands away from me, unless you have something to say.’

‘I cannot. I want to, I do, but they won’t let me. You wouldn’t believe me anyway. Ugh, Jack, stop. You’re hurting me.’

He had her by the throat. *Stop it, Jack. Let her go.* ‘If anything happens to Kirsty.’ Chali was down on her knees, both hands gripped to his as he pushed her back against the bed. Jack down at her side staring into her eyes.

‘I love you,’ she whispered, and let go of his hand. What little make-up she wore smudged by tears, she seemed resigned to whatever fate Jack intended.

He let go. *I’m sorry.* The way she sucked in breath. *Forgive me.*

‘Jack,’ her voice barely audible. ‘Don’t leave, I beg you. I’d never hurt you, I swear.’

I know. ‘Chali, I . . .?’ Jack’s cell-phone rang. *Fuck, fuck!* Jack answered the phone. ‘Wally, you have to help me. He’s got Kirsty. He’s got my little girl.’

I know Jack. I just got off the phone with Wichita PD. I’ve sent over everything I have. How you holding up?’

‘Not good.’ Nothing was good as he vented suspicion and distrust toward the woman below him. ‘But I seem to be seeing things a lot clearer now. Can you meet me at your office, in twenty?’

‘Already on my way.’

‘And Wally. . .’

‘Yes Jack?’

‘Thank you,’ he ended the call.

Jack hadn’t taken his eyes from Chali. They held him. Snared him. *Who the fuck are you?* He stepped back, picked up his keys and coat. ‘Don’t be here when I get back,’ he said.

‘No, Jack, please.’

It was the only way he could look away, as the door clicked shut.

* * *

‘I love you.’ Chali stared at the white door. She began to cry.

You don’t understand. How could he? She’d lied to him from the beginning. Not that there was ever a choice. But she was the cause. All this was on her.

You stupid girl. Stupid, stupid, girl. Chali screamed and shook her head. A pathetic and frenzied act. *I shouldn’t have lied to you. I shouldn’t have done this to you.* ‘I’m sorry,’ she shouted at the door. *‘Jack, please, I . . .’*

She stared at the door. There was a finality about the white barrier. Its brass lever and chain that hung limp. It helped cement the realisation that Jack was gone. All that she’d tried to do, it was over. Too late she realised that what she’d done was wrong; encouraging and manipulating his feelings. She knew that now. But what other choice had there been? After so many years on her own. Finding Jack; somehow it had made her more desperate than she could ever have imagined.

What have I done?

She dragged her knees to her chin and began to cry. Full on sob because it was all she could do as she wrapped herself tight in the bedding. She’d never dreamt she could feel like this.

Chali screamed again. A shrill sound that left her stomach empty and in pain. *Jack?* So many years and she was still acting like a child. Like a

victim. Had she learnt nothing. *Jack?* Chali's world had never felt so empty. Jack was gone, and he wouldn't be coming back. Chali slumped against the bed and stared at the ceiling.

I didn't mean for this; for any of this. You hear me? I just wanted to feel again. Just one last time. On the side she saw Jack's pills. A half emptied bottle of booze. If only she could?

'You were right,' she said. 'He, was right.'

I should have moved on. Now Jack's little girl will be hurt because of me.

'It's so cold,' she pulled another blanket from the bed. 'It's so fucking cold.' All the warmth that Jack had shared, it was gone. No heartbeat to feel, no breath on her lips to share. No kind words from the man she'd fallen in love with. Only silence. A reminder of the years spent struggling alone; searching for *him*.

She could talk, taunt, and despise the man, but she could never find where Jonas hid. Clever Jonas, he was always too clever. But she'd found another way. She'd found, Jack. Chali couldn't find Jonas, but Jack could. She'd do everything, and anything, to get him to help. Feeling like this, it was never part of the plan. *Jack . . .* She had to put it right. She would put it right. She owed Jack that much, and more.

She pressed the blanket hard to wipe away the tears. Jack had gone now, that wouldn't change, but no-one else was going to be hurt.

Jack would find Kirsty, he had to. And he would find Jonas too. When he did, she would be there. She'd give it all up. Everything she'd worked so hard and so long for. She'd forsake all that was promised to save Kirsty, and to save Jack.

'He'll find him,' she shouted. 'And when Jack finds Jonas, I'm going to be there.'

She'd look that bastard in the eyes one last time and then she'd do what had to be done, and send him straight to Hell.

‘Wichita PD have put out an amber alert, they’ve set up road blocks, and in twenty minutes they’ll be stopping every car in a twenty-five mile radius.’

‘Wally, they’re too late.’ He checked his watch, 05:15. ‘Jonas has two, three hours head start. He’ll be long gone and on his way back. He’s probably left Kansas by now. That son of a bitch will be on a back road somewhere and heading straight back here. He’ll take Kirsty to Edward’s secret place.’

‘Jack, sit down. I can wake up a few people at state headquarters. We can get road blocks on every bit of tarmac between here and Springfield.’

‘And have a repeat of what happened with Edward?’ *Is that what Jonas wants?* ‘No, no, let him come. I want that bastard to feel safe when he calls.’

‘Calls? You think he’s going to call you?’

‘Yes.’

No, I can’t be certain.

Jack was hedging a bet and praying that he was right. What else could he do as he pulled the evidence board out into the middle of the room. All those kids?

‘He’ll call me. I came looking for Jonas, remember. But he found *me*. I brought him, Kirsty.’

‘Jack, this isn’t your fault.’

‘Yes, yes it is.’ Jack put his phone out onto the desk. ‘He’ll call. That bastard wants me to find him, Wally. He’s got this all planned out, so when he calls, we need to be ready. What was it Doc said? “If we understand his past we can predict what he’ll do in the future.” I know what the future is, Wally. What we have to work out is where he hides it in

Edward's past. We have to work out where he's going to take her, so we can be there when he calls.'

Jack was staring at the evidence board. All those children, gone now, Kirsty wasn't going to join them.

'It's a puzzle, Wally. Jonas has sent me everything I need to work it out.' *Think, Jack, think.* What was it that Jonas had sent him? *The diary pages, the badge, why send any of it, if it isn't to find him?* 'We know he's heading for Wildfowl, somewhere close. Can you put a map up on the wall?'

'Coming right up,' the Sheriff pulled an ordinance map of the county from a drawer. A roll of tape in his hand.

'Jonas wants me to find him, there's no reason to reach out to me like this. He's survived off the grid for decades. Taken kids without anyone suspecting him. Why now? What's his end-game? Wally, there's an air of finality about all of this,' he was back at the board. 'Twenty-nine kids.' *Fuck.* 'Kirsty makes Thirty. What happens when he gets to thirty?'

'Maybe he flies away. Remember the fantasy?'

'Maybe? But why bother with me? Why doesn't he just kill Kirsty and fly off? No, it's about a legacy of some sort.'

'He wants to be famous?'

'No, Jonas is leading me by the nose. It's all there, in those diary pages; has to be. Jonas wants me to see something, and it's real important to him. Wally, what do we know that's important to Jonas?'

'Could be about his father?' said Walter.

'Maybe?' *What was it the page said?* 'Jonas is bad, bad, bad.'

'Jack?'

'Something he says on one of the pages. It's like he hates himself,' he emptied his rucksack on the table. *Come on, Jack* He moved all the pages into lines, in the order he received them. 'He doesn't want me to stop him, that's obvious. So he must want me to bear witness? But to what?' *Think Jack.* 'It's here in the diary, why else send it? Did Doc get back to you about the pages I photoed for him?'

'Not yet, no, I sent them to the crime lab in Spokane as well. They need time, Jack.'

'We don't have time . . .' he picked up the closest page.

'What is it? You see something?'

'Time,' said Jack picking up two different pages. 'Look at the handwriting, it's not consistent. See here, the letters change. The 'r' is different, and so is the 't'. Where it changes the pages are older. Look,' he

was shuffling them about on the table's top. 'The paper is different. It's just not, right?'

'I've asked the crime lab to have the writing and paper examined, but . . .'

'I know, they need time.' *What's he trying to tell me?*

'It could be the result of an injury. Maybe Jonas had a stroke. Old age?'

'Yeah, I'd assumed Jonas had injured his hand; why else would the handwriting be off? Shit . . .'

'What if we're looking at this from completely the wrong angle?'

'Jack?'

'Wally, what if these pages are forgeries?'

'Forgeries? But we know Jonas is real. He's got Kirsty.'

'Yeah, I know. But that fucker's got us staring at something we can't see. Have you got some paper, a pencil?'

Walter put a large pad and a pen on the table. 'You got something?' he asked.

'I got plenty; I just don't know what it means.' He started to write things down. Edward had two wives, three kids. It was a plot from a bad movie. 'We need to think outside the box. You remember what Doc Rolins said. To catch this guy we need to *think* like him.' He wrote down the name of Edward's friends. Only two names, Parker and Bailey. But what was it that linked them? They were obviously more than just drinking buddies. 'You got a more local map? Just the area around here, something detailed.'

'Try this.' Another map was placed on top of the first.

'Edward's place is flat, farmland right?'

'The Critch place is farmland, covers this area, about here.' Walter ringed the land. 'Not that it was ever farmed, least not by the Critches.'

'Fine, so let's assume that Edward's secret place isn't there. Ergo, it has to be somewhere else. Wally, Edward was a salesman, right? What the fuck did he sell?'

'Can't say as I ever heard mention. But I know a man that can find out.' He was off to one of the other desks, phone in hand and dialling. 'Let's get Henry out of bed. He works at the courthouse in Spokane. If there's a record of Edward's employment, that's where it will be.'

What was Jack missing? Jonas obviously had a plan. Jack had become a part of that plan. What wasn't he seeing? What hadn't he considered?

'What's so important about a quote by James Oppenheim?' he said aloud.

‘Who?’ Asked Wally. Jonas sent me a quote, or rather, a misquote. “The foolish man seeks happiness in the distance, the wise grows it under his feet.”

‘What does that mean? Oh, hey Henry, sorry about the time. I need some information . . .’

Jack was staring at the names he’d written down. Edward’s friends.

What is it that links these people to each other? Edward was a loner, what did he share with these people? There was a more complex relationship at work here. Edward, the doctor, and old man Parker. What did they all have in common? ‘Girls?’ he said aloud.

‘Jack?’

‘It’s girls. What did Henry have to say?’

‘That he wasn’t happy about the time. But he’s phoning back in a few minutes, after he’s logged into his workstation up at County. Girls?’ Walter asked.

‘Girls, it has to be the girls. From what I’ve been told all of these names are associated with girls. Young girls, underage girls to be specific. Wally, Ethan suspected Parker of being a paedophile, right? And the doctor, he liked his nurses young. More specifically, he liked the nurses who looked young. Younger than they really were. And he liked to do school talks. Wally, what was it they found in Edward’s trunk?’

‘Samantha Grear,’ Walter looked on edge. ‘Jack, you think we have a paedophile ring here?’

‘Yeah, but that’s not it, it doesn’t fit Edward. Not if this diary is telling us the truth. Wally, it’s the nanny. She doesn’t fit.’

‘The nanny was collateral damage, at least that’s how the Feds saw it.’

‘Then why not dump her body? Or leave it behind? That woman was still alive when the car went into the lake. The autopsy reported she had water in her lungs. The nanny drowned.’

‘Where are you going with this?’

‘Why keep that woman alive? Why take the risk of bringing her back here if all you wanted was Samantha?’

The phone rang and broke the spell. Walter answered. Jack waited for the brief conversation to end.

‘That was Henry up at the County. He just checked the census recordings for Edward Critch throughout the fifties and sixties. I figured he might have put a more exact occupation down on the forms. Now according to Henry, Edward puts his profession down as Salesman, same word every year until he finds an anomaly on the sixty-six census. He noted something odd in that year, Edward had added the word *fallout*,

and put a smiley face beneath it. Henry doesn't know what that means, but he said he'd check back with me if he finds anything else.'

There it is, that smiley face again. A symbol bequeathed by a father to his son. And the Oppenheim quote, "The foolish are kept happily at a distance, the wise grows it under his feet."

'Jack, spit it out. What are you thinking?'

'Edward would have started work in the fifties, right? What was it he sold that he couldn't sell enough of locally? That he had to travel the country? Wally, what was the one thing on everybody's mind back in the fifties? Even more so in the sixties?'

'We're not talking bad hair and music, are we?'

'No, it was the end of the world, Wally. Or the beginning of the Cold War to be more precise. The Russians exploded their first nuke on the twenty-ninth of August nineteen forty-nine. From that moment on it was a race between us and them to build bigger and badder ballistic missiles. MAD remember? Mutually Assured Destruction. It was a paranoid time. The fear of nuclear war, and the fear of nuclear *fallout*. Fifty bucks says Edward was selling shelters?'

'Shelters?'

'Think about the quote that I got from Jonas. "The foolish are kept happily at a distance." He's teasing us. He's kept the world at a distance, until now? And then there's the ending, "the wise grows it under his feet"'

'What are you thinking, Jack?'

'Out of the box. Wally, do you have Ethan's phone number?'

Walter's phone was ringing, on the other end. 'This won't make us popular,' he said.

'Ethan's a baker, they get up early.'

'It's Sunday Jack, and I wasn't thinking about Ethan. Barbara can be real mean if she doesn't get her eight hours, oh hey, Ethan, how you doing?'

'Sheriff Whalen?'

'Ethan, I'm real sorry about the hour, but we need some information.'

There was a pause.

'I have buns rising Walter, what can I do for you?'

'You ever heard of a company around here that sold, bomb-shelters?'

'Bomb-shelters? What's this about Walter?'

'Sorry Ethan, but I need to press you on this. We're short on time.'

Jack could hear Barbara asking questions in the background. Ethan telling her, "It's Walter." Asking her to go back to sleep.

'Ethan, please, we're on the clock.'

'Bomb-shelters. You mean from the war?'

'Later, Ethan. In the fifties and sixties.'

'Oh, you mean nuclear. Christ, Walter, that's a long time ago. Wait a minute, yeah, there was a company. In Springfield, years back, what was its name. Walter, I think the company's name was Sanctuary.'

Wally and Jack shared a moment.

'What do you know about them, Ethan?'

'Part of a big construction company called Saxon, I think. They owned the old quarry until they closed it down. Put a lot of folk out of work round here. As I remember they diversified, revamped an old carpet factory somewhere up in Marshfield. A year or so later they were up and running.'

'And they sold bomb-shelters?'

‘That’s right Walter, they sold bomb-shelters. If I remember correctly they sold all shapes and sizes of those concrete monstrosities. They had salesmen travelling all around the country selling the stupid things. Some of the guys from Saxon joined up. I guess back then, all things considered, having a bomb-shelter in your garden sounded like a good idea.’

‘Thank you Ethan, you’ve been a big help.’ Walter hung up.

‘Sanctuary?’ Jack had to take it in. ‘Who do we know that worked for Saxon? Edward must have been feeling real brazen to boast like that. It’s a census, right? So when he jots down his profession as, salesman. Then he adds an embellishment, a cryptic two fingers he sticks up to everyone. He puts the word *fallout* and a smiley face below. Christ, Jonas sent me a badge. It had a smiley face on it. Edward was laughing at everyone, and now Jonas is too. Edward put his profession, and his hobby, in plain view. He couldn’t help himself. The smiley face is Edward’s. Sick fucker!’

No wonder Chali freaked out when she saw it. But how did she know? What is it she’s not told me?

‘The joke must have tickled him pink. Imagine the *fallout* if anyone had found out what he was up to. The irony if they’d discovered he’d built his own shelter. That’s what Edward’s secret place is, it’s a fallout shelter. Jonas is underground.’

‘So we’re working on the assumption that Edward built his own bomb-shelter?’

‘Yeah, without a doubt. He had access to heavy machinery, its still rusting away up at the house. And those generators, the bits missing, they were taken for spares.’

‘Okay, I’ll go with this. But it still doesn’t help us find where Edward built the damn thing. The Feds were all over that place with hounds and shovels; they turned the ground upside down and found nothing.’

‘Remember, we’re assuming that it’s not at the Critch residence. So where would a man with only two friends build his shelter? Orpheus Bailey lived north of Springfield. Edward was driving south when he was caught. Wally, there is only one place that shelter can be. Up at old man Parker’s. It has to be. It makes perfect sense. Edward built his secret place in his only real friend’s backyard.’

‘Jack, Parker was bad news, but to let Critch build something like that on his land. Why? Why would he?’

‘It’s been staring at us from the beginning. Parker is where this all begins to make sense. Wally, Samantha Grear wasn’t for Edward. The young woman in the trunk, she was Edward’s victim, not the child. He took Samantha for someone else. For his friend, don’t you see? Ethan

suspected Parker of being a paedophile for years, but could never prove anything. He was so right about Parker, but got it wrong with Edward. Edward Critch took the child for his friend, Parker. The young woman, the nanny, he took her for himself. What a sweet arrangement for two sick fucks. Neither man can tell on his friend because they're as evil as each other. Oh my God, the dates in the diaries, that's why they were penned over. That's why the writing doesn't match.'

'Jack, you keep thinking out of the box and your head's going to explode.'

'It's all here if you can read it. Jonas didn't write the diary, at least not all of it. Don't you see?'

'Not really. Jonas wrote those diaries. You brought them to me, remember.'

'Yes, I did. And Jonas wrote those pages, until he died.'

'Jonas is dead? Jack, you need to slow down, I'm not keeping up here.'

'Oh you clever, clever bastard. I get it, Wally; it's all about the dates. It's about the day that Julius Critch drowned. He's been trying to recreate it. Doc said that a traumatic moment would be the stressor, the reason that Jonas started to kill. There's nothing more stressful than murdering your own brother.'

'Wait a minute, you think Julius was murdered?'

'No, not Julius. It was Jonas that was murdered out on the lake, by his elder brother, Julius. It's the only thing that makes sense of all this.'

'To you maybe. Jack, buddy, have you taken your pills this morning? Hey, I'm just checking.'

'Think about it, Wally. The diary page states that, "Jonas is bad. Bad, bad, bad. Everyone must know." What do you do if someone has taken everything that you've ever desired; kept you from all that you believe is rightfully yours? You take it back. And I bet Edward watched it happen. Why else would he suddenly let the boy in on his big secret? Edward watched Julius kill his younger brother, Jonas, and he did nothing to stop him. No wonder Helen told everyone that Julius was still in the house. He couldn't fool her, not even with all the medication she was on. It's the dates, Wally, it's the dates. Helen Parker died in nineteen fifty.'

'Easy Jack. Helen Parker, *Helen Critch*, died in seventy-one.'

'No, you have to think like a delusional psychopath. I know who Helen really was. Her real name was Emilia.'

Wally shook his head. The train had left and Sheriff Whalen wasn't on board. 'Emilia died,' he said.

‘No,’ Jack replied, ‘she disappeared. Her body was never found. Remember, Orpheus Bailey was more than just friends with Parker. He wrote out all the death certificates so nobody would be the wiser. The fucking Priest knew what was going on. He wrote about the town’s sins in his journal. That son of a bitch knew, but did nothing? Either someone let slip in confessional . . . or he was a part of the ring?’

‘Whoa there son, where do Priests come into this? What are you talking about? Jack, Emilia Critch disappeared years before Helen came back to town.’

‘No, she didn’t. Elizabeth Parker took her daughter Helen away because she knew what would happen when she grew up. Helen Parker died in nineteen fifty; I’ve seen her death certificate online. It was Emilia Critch who turned up in nineteen sixty, claiming to be Helen. That kid had never left Springfield. That son of a bitch! Wally, I have to go. I know where Edward’s secret place is.’

‘Hey, hey! Jack, just wait, I’m coming with you.’

‘No, you need to get reinforcements up to the Parker house.’

‘From where? Jack, there’s no SWAT team in Spokane. I’ll have to call state police. They’ll have to call the FBI in. Jack, it could take a few of hours to get them here.’

‘Good.’

‘What?’

‘Wally, I have to do this alone. He’s giving me a chance to stop this.’

‘You’re not serious? Jack, he’s a psycho.’

‘He has Kirsty. He’ll kill her the moment the cops turn up.’

‘I’m not letting you go anywhere on your . . .’

‘I know what Jonas wants, Wally. I know what this is all about.’

‘You gonna share with me?’

‘Sure, it’s about Jonas; Bad Jonas. “Jonas is bad, bad, bad,” remember. That’s not true, this is about Julius. About his hatred, and about his guilt. Wally, Jonas isn’t Jonas. His mother, Helen, she wasn’t Helen. Christ, Edward Critch did a real number on his family.’

‘Jack, you’re doing one on me.’

‘Wally, the two bodies they found in Edward’s car. Edward didn’t want the child, Samantha. It was the nanny. Edward liked to torture and kill women, not children. Read between the lines and it’s all there. We’ve been looking at the bodies the wrong way round. Samantha was taken for someone else.’

‘Who? You mean Parker?’

Jack nodded. 'It's the only explanation that makes sense. It was that little girl who started all of this. Julius saw something in her that night. He saw something in himself that came back to haunt him. He truly believes he's saving these kids, and that they are saving him. Samantha Greer, his father's death, what happened to him as a child. It all got distilled down into one fucked up delusion; Thirty. Think about it, Wally.'

'I'm trying not to. Jack, you're not going out there on your own. We wait for the troops.'

'Can't do that. Wally, let go of my arm. Let, go . . . there isn't time,' he squared up to the Sheriff. 'Jonas has laid this out beautifully for me to follow. I have to go, alone. At least give me the time it takes to get there.'

'To do what? What's the plan, Jack? You think you can talk him down?'

'I have to try. Why else did he reach out to me? Wally, give me the time it takes the cavalry to get here, please.'

Come on, Wally.

'I must be crazier than he is.' Wally pulled open Rosie's desk. 'You take this with you.'

'That's a gun?'

'It's not a choice.' Walter put a small automatic hand-gun into Jack's hand. 'Rosie likes to wear it on her ankle.'

'I've never even held a gun before.'

'Two things you need to know, Jack.' He thumbed the safety. 'Green is mean,' he clicked the tiny lever up. 'Red, is dead. You understand?'

'And the second thing?'

'If you point it, you use it. Don't think, just do.'

It felt lighter than it looked. Strange, how powerful it made him feel.

'Wally, Jill?'

'I'll call her. I'll explain everything while I sit on my ass waiting for the cavalry,' he took his keys off his belt. 'Type 'Parker' into the SatNav, it'll take you right to the front door. And Jack . . . make sure you come back alive, and bring Kirsty with you.'

'Sure, good plan,' he turned for the door. A moment later Jack had paused. The Sheriff had phone in hand. 'Thanks Wally,' he said, 'for believing, you didn't have to.'

'Please stop, before I get all tearful. Jack, you get the opportunity, you pull the trigger. You end that bastard.'

Easy Jack, drive easy.

The SatNav's clock read 06:30, time to destination, three minutes. Jack had never felt so alone as he did now. The car easing forward on what was now a dirt-track feeding its way through a forest of ominous looking trees. Nothing but darkness and shadows beyond them.

Jack jerked the wheels left as his phone rang. A hallelujah that blasted out from the car speakers as his finger searched the screen for a way to stop the sound. To answer the call. He hadn't realised his phone had bonded with the car.

'Wally, is that you?'

'You sound on edge, Jack? Everything okay? You lost something?'

It was him. But how? It didn't matter.

'Kirsty, let me speak to her. If you've hurt her . . .'

'She's fine, Jack. Kirsty's having a ball. I was beginning to think you wouldn't work it out. Find old Jonas from his clever trail of breadcrumbs? Truth is, I thought you'd get here sooner.'

The truth was, Jack had hoped he'd get there before Jonas.

'Please, let me talk to Kirsty. I want to hear her voice.'

'She's sleeping, Jack. Can't wake her, not yet. But you'd better hurry, I haven't got all day.'

'I'm a minute out from your daddy's fallout shelter. It's just me. You touch a hair on her head and I'll kill you, you son of a bitch!'

'Bravo Jack; get in touch with your dark-side. I'm so proud. Ha, ha, ha, I thought I was going to have to draw a map to find me. Tell me, how does it feel? Like the good old days, back when you were a real reporter. The juices flowing, Jack?'

'Don't flatter yourself, you weren't that hard to find.'

'Aww, you're being modest.'

‘Let her talk to me her, please.’

‘Sorry Jack, she’s a little drowsy. It’s not fair to wake her; abduction can be a harrowing affair.’

‘Oh God, if you hurt her . . .’

‘First things first, Jack. Tell me how it feels? I want to hear the words.’

‘Fuck you.’

‘Not nice, Jack. Say the words or I’ll cut her. What a shame to scar this pretty little face.’

‘No! Don’t. Whatever you want?’

‘That’s better, Jack. And no more profanity, it’s below you.’

‘You want to hear that I’m scared? I’m scared. I’m terrified right now,’

‘Better, Jack. Much better. But there’s more, tell me more, Jack.’

There was a lot more. A bottle-load being shaken in his head, its lid ready to flip. Jack was ready to go fizz-pop. Just the thought of Kirsty being with him, it squeezed at his lungs. Pulled at his stomach like an anchor. How had it come to this? How had he let this psychopath into their lives?

A cocktail of rampant emotion was collected, directed, and focused into a bitch-hard-stare that fell on the Parker house. Tears filed in an orderly queue but were denied permission to flow.

‘Helpless,’ he said. ‘I feel helpless. There’s a pounding in my head that needs a hole to get out.’

‘How very Neanderthal.’

‘That’s not all, you douchebag. I have a hole where my stomach used to be. It’s screwing with my lungs and twisting its way up my neck. I want to puke.’

‘Much better, Jack. You let it all out. Just like you did in the hospital. Tell Jonas how it feels to lose another kid?’

‘Please, don’t hurt her. She’s innocent in all of this. I’m sorry.’

‘Sorry? For what, Jack? Why are you sorry?’

‘For thinking I could mess with you, I was wrong.’

Jack turned the car into a clearing. A dark hole lit up by his headlamps; a house came into view. Above him, sunlight broke through the trees to herald a new day-dawned in Missouri. The Sat Nav pinged, it spoke.

“You have arrived at your destination.”

‘Don’t hang up, don’t . . . Jonas?’ The phone had gone dead. ‘Bastard!’ Jonas was here, somewhere. But where? *Careful Jack, it’s a trap. Don’t go rushing in.* Jack opened the car door and took a hard stare at the tree-line.

He’d hoped, prayed, for a chance to find the shelter before Jonas had returned. Too late now as his thumb rubbed back and forth against the hard metal of the handgun now laid on his lap. *Red, green. Red, green.* The tiny lever was in the green position. “Green is mean.” Wally had said that. Yeah, Jack was feeling mean. Tungsten tipped as he slipped the gun behind his back, his free hand reaching for the glovebox and the torch he’d seen Wally use at the Critch household. Jack exited the vehicle.

Houses in these parts weren’t built to look welcoming, this one was positively intimidating, and loomed two storeys above him. The roof’s pitch had tumbled; it was old, twisting vines rampant across wooden shingles being eaten away by time. Nature had moved back in.

Jack peered through the holes that had once been windows, no sign of movement. Just a dark interior hiding itself from the light of a rising dawn. This was it, he could feel it now, the eye of the storm was right here in this house. He’d never felt the presence of *others* as strongly as he did right now, in this circle in the forest. This hole in the Earth. No doubt about it, Edward’s secret place was close.

‘Kirsty?’ He knew it was hopeless to call out. ‘Kirsty?’ But maybe she could hear him and it would give her hope.

Look about you Jack, he’ll leave signs. He wants you here. That bastard has Kirsty somewhere close. He was sure of it. This was Jonas’ Endgame; well thought out and leading Jack to find him. Somewhere out here Edward had dug his bunker. Created his world away from prying eyes. The

way Jack saw it, there were two choices. Under the house, or out there, in the trees?

Edward was a loner, despite collaborating with Parker. Whatever deal these men had struck, neither of them would want to share. Jack looked back to the trees; he'd build away from the Parker house. But Ethan had been out here, or so he'd told Wally. Or was that a lie? A ruse to stop anyone from looking too hard?

Shit, could Ethan be involved? What was it that Doc Rolins had said? "Jonas will be someone that we are all very familiar with." No way, Ethan was too old. Unless he was a member of the original ring? And there was, Wayne; the outsider he took in? He's the right age? He could think of several other people that would fit the bill. Not that it mattered, not now. Jack's mind had to be here, focused, looking for clues to find Edward's hole-in-the-ground.

Eerie was the best way to describe the dark passage he walked into. The creaking front door that led to the stairs, that led upwards into darkness. The torch sent a plume of light upward. No point in going up as you couldn't build a bunker upstairs. So down then.

Why does evil always have to be down and in the dark?

Jack flooded the downstairs rooms with light. The torch's beam powerful and intense as it cut through the lingering night to highlight furniture, soiled walls; drapes that hung at half-mast. From the ceiling hung masses of cobwebs. Every step caused an anxious groan from the floorboards. More fuel sprinkled on Jack's paranoia.

There was nothing he wanted to see on the ground floor, so it was down. Down to wherever the basement door would lead. He shouldered the door open and shone torch-light down into the dark; how quickly the dark closed in around the beam. If Jonas was going to spring a trap, it was going to be down there. It was going to be in the dark.

Highly charged, that was how Jack felt as he stepped slowly down. He was plugged into the mains and sporting a permanent fizzle below his skin. Each hair and bump on alert as his legs moved him cautiously down.

Which way will the bastard come from? Which way?

His right hand hooked the trigger of the Colt tucked into his belt; his left moved the torch-light from one corner to the next. Jerking toward every perceived sound, twitching at the silence. And then touchdown, as Jack's boot found the floor. Rubber sole on dusty concrete, the gravelly sound was ominous.

Old man Parker had left most of his tools; they hung from hooks and looked as sharp as the day he'd left them. A series of shelves still occupied by tins and boxes. The powerful torch-light settled on the floor; on a dark pattern, just as Ethan had described.

Fuck. They were the dark outlines of bars. *Oh my God.* Had Parker really kept kids in a cage down here? He couldn't stop looking; stop wondering. No, he didn't want to think about it. He didn't want to hear the growing sounds in his head that bayed like crying children. *Fuck, fuck. This is too much.* Jack pulled the Colt from behind his back and raised the barrel below the torch for courage. His body jacked higher than he'd thought possible as his body pumped drugs. There was nothing down here, the basement was empty. Just dark corners and hollow sounds, his imagination starting to run riot. And his head was starting to hurt. Not now. *Fuck, not now.* Jack backed away to the wall. He dropped the rucksack from his back and tried to unzip the front pocket, gun held aloft. His hand trembling as he held the zip, torch in hand. The gun in the other suddenly felt heavy.

Calm, Jack. Calm! No way he was putting the gun down. Heart racing, breathing short and sharp, Jack placed the torch onto the ground. Then worked quickly at the zip, only to fumble his pain-killers out onto the concrete. A sound somewhere in the dark caused his adrenaline to spike. The torch swept the room as his finger pulled on the trigger. The gunshot was like thunder striking under his hat. The bullet ricocheted twice and left him stunned.

Fuck, fuck. Jack couldn't stop shaking. *Fuck.* He plucked two of the pills from the ground and grabbed his water. *Fuck you, Jack!* He took another pot and tipped. Two blue pills emptied into his palm. He wanted to get out, leave, run. But he couldn't. *Kirsty.* There was one more thing to do. The sound of pills crunching under his boot, as Jack followed the walls, the torch's light constantly on the move, as he tapped the gun against the plaster. Jack listened for signs of an opening behind.

It was disappointment, and pure relief, that sloshed around his innards, as Jack went quickly upstairs. The torch's light illuminating the hall again. Jack left the building for the gathering sunlight outside.

Out here then, it has to be out here?

'Kirsty?' He shouted. 'Kirsty!' Nothing but silence.

Too long, it would take too long. The trees that circled the house were too numerous.

For each one he checked, another two took its place.

'Kirsty?' *Oh God, please. Just keep her safe.* 'Kirsty!'

Another tree checked, more time wasted. The ground covering made it impossible to spot if there was an entrance in the soil.

'Kirsty?'

Jack turned back toward the house, and that's when he saw it. Bold as brass and twice as inviting. A brazen emblem painted on the bark of a tree. No doubt about it, Jonas had beckoned.

Painted in yellow on the carcass of an ancient tree, was a smiling face. The paint had run down the petrified bark to enhance the gory image.

Does it mark an entrance? He couldn't see anything out of place. *Does smiley mark the spot?* Nothing but forest, and ground-hugging undergrowth that filled up space between the trees.

Instinct encouraged his hands to reach out and touch the bark. It was coarse as his fingers traced around the dead trunk. *Something, there has to be something?* There was. Hidden in a groove he found a piece of rounded metal. Tight, but enough space to close his hand around. Jack pulled it and the lever came down. *Son of a bitch.* He backed off as a hidden door cracked open in front of him. *Very clever.* And very dark inside as Jack peered inside the opening.

This was it then. Edward's secret place, it had to be. No choice but to ignore the ice in his veins, the crippling cramp in his stomach. If his breath got any shallower he'd diagnose himself as dead.

The torch clicked and a strong beam of light pierced the dark. A metal staircase led down. Somewhere below was Edward's secret place. He must have dug it out and lined it with the shelter he sold. No knowing how deep the staircase went as he trod on the first of the flat-iron-rungs. One careful step at a time. Enough space for a large man to fit with ease. One hand gripped hard to the railing as the other kept the torch pointing down.

Kirsty, baby, I'm coming. A dozen steps down and the sound of humming drifting up from below. *A generator?* He stopped, cut the light. The colour of glowing coals from below. *Kirsty's down there.*

'Jack, stop.'

He wheeled around, torch pointed upward, the voice's owner in full glare. His heart-beat shunted onto pause.

‘Chali? What the fuck? . . .’

‘Don’t go any further, please.’

‘What are you doing here?’ he whispered. ‘How . . . you followed me?’ he lowered the torch. Switched off the beam. ‘You shouldn’t be here.’

‘Yes, I should. This is my fate, not yours. I know that now. I’m so sorry, I truly am.’

‘You have to go, this is hardly the time.’

‘This is exactly the time, Jack.’ She was smiling, positively beaming. Jack felt his spirit lift. Company was good, right? But could he trust her? *No, no, not this again. Whatever charms you’re working, it’s not working now.*

‘You followed me? Why, why would you do that? And how? I didn’t hear a car.’ Jack pulled the Colt from behind his back. He wanted to point it up at her, but couldn’t. ‘How do you know about this place?’

‘You showed me. You found him for me.’

‘Whoah, stay there,’ he hadn’t meant his voice to raise. ‘Don’t you come any further,’ he insisted in a harsh whisper, the gun raised, and then lowered. *What the fuck is going on?* ‘You’ve lied to me,’ he said, ‘since we met in the cinema. And now you turn up, here, now?’

‘I never lied to you, not about this. And not about us.’

‘Us?’ *Is there an, us?* He wasn’t convinced.

‘You found it, I knew you would,’ she took a step down.

‘Easy, just stay there.’

‘Jack, I was wrong to involve you,’ another step down. ‘He has Kirsty, and that’s my fault. I have to go down and find her.’

‘I said, stay.’ She wasn’t listening. ‘Chali?’ She slipped past him, touched his face.

‘Don’t follow me down my love. I’ll get Kirsty out. Jonas wants one more for his Thirty. I’ll give him what he wants.’

‘What does that mean? Hey, wait up. What does that mean?’

He was going down, following.

‘I will be his Thirty, Jack. It will be me, not Kirsty.’

‘Hey, wait, Chali, stop! For fuck’s sake, you can’t go down there,’ he was following, reaching out to stop her. ‘Chali?’

‘Jonas,’ Chali’s voice carried into the ruby gloom. ‘Jonas Critch? Show yourself.’

‘Shh, what the hell are you doing?’

‘Jonas? I’m here, can you see me?’

The Colt was aimed out in front, the steps ascended behind. Jack took Chali’s arm, but she resisted.

‘I know you can hear me,’ she shouted. ‘Show yourself.’

‘Hey, I don’t know what you’re doing, but you need to stop. Now,’ the Colt’s safety was well and truly off as Jack held it gangster style out in front.

‘He knows we are here, Jack. He’s considering his options. My being here wasn’t planned for.’

‘How do you know what he’s got planned?’

‘Jonas, I’m here.’

‘Stop this, now.’

‘Jack, please, I beg you. I can do this. I know what he wants. I couldn’t bear it if he hurt you or Kirsty because of me.’

Jack wasn’t listening. His attention was tuned elsewhere. To a drape that hung across a doorway. *Kirsty?* He stepped forward, snapped the curtain back. The Colt searched the room for a target. His eyes pleading for Kirsty to be in there. Nothing, just a small bed, and a chain bolted to the floor.

‘That’s horrible,’ Chali said.

Focus Jack. Attention back on the big room, the Colt lower now; both hands gripped about the handle, his finger over the trigger. His eyes searching to gather information.

Jonas obviously liked to read, he had enough books. *So what does a psychopath like to read at bedtime?* The books were non-fiction, highbrow

titles, a lot of shit about cryptology and codes. *Hieroglyphics?* There was a whole shelf dedicated to the occult, and to black magic.

‘He’s a fucking nut job, and he’s got Kirsty.’ The Colt raised toward another hole in the wall, a wooden door at the farthest end of the room.

‘Jack, please don’t go in there.’

‘Why, what’s in there?’ the gun altered its trajectory toward Chali. ‘Are you a part of this? Are you working with this psycho?’

‘No, I swear to you. I’ve never set foot in this place before. You have to believe me; you have to trust me.’

‘Trust you? I don’t even know you. I never did,’ he levied the gun back toward the door and moved quickly toward it. She was slowing him down. Why? Could she really be a part of all this? Jack pushed the door inward.

‘Oh God!’ he couldn’t believe what he saw inside.

Da Vinci's 'Vitruvian Man' was charcoaled onto the wall in front of him. The naked figure prostrated with pride, amidst a host of ancient symbols scrawled within the circle that enclosed him. Someone had taken notes in the margins.

Jack's gaze was drawn up to the ceiling. *What the fuck?* An impressive sight to see the galaxy hand-painted above him. The artist's brush delivered with clinical precision. The image colourful and majestic; hardly a gas cloud or star out of place as they extended to the wall tops. And there was a smell, something burning. Jack turned to his left for another surprise. *Some kind of altar?* Three shelves lined with candles above, their bright yellow flames erect, and enclosed in prisms of glass.

'Jack, is this a shrine?'

'It's seriously fucked up, that's what it is.'

Chali gasped. 'Look.'

Now what? She pulled at his arm trying to turn him. 'It's the children,' she said. 'Non, I can't look.'

Jack did. He didn't want to, but his hand eased the door closed to see what had shocked her. The truth of 'Thirty' was there to see on the wall.

Photos of all Jonas' victims were pinned to the rough plaster. Each child posed as if they were asleep. *Fuck.* Top row, third from the right, he recognised Samantha Grear. *So she wasn't the first?* The sweet smile of Angelina Trepri, her photo was second from the left, middle row. The final image on the bottom row. 'Oh God, is that Alice?'

It was hard to take his eyes away from the wall. Even more difficult to shut out the noise that was building in his head.

Jack backed off, he grabbed at his temples. 'Fuck, what is that?' *Sounds like kids in the playground?* 'Can't you hear it?' Too loud, it was too loud. Not playful children. They were screaming. 'What the . . .' he

fell hard against the wall, tears welling, he couldn't shut it out. 'Aaargh, stop it!'

'Jack, it's all right.' Chali's hands on his.

'Can't you hear it? Chali, my head?'

'Leave him alone,' she shouted. 'You're hurting him.'

Fuck, make it stop. 'Make it stop.'

'Shh, it's okay. There, you hear? They've stopped. They don't understand, but they will. Shh, it's all right.'

'Christ,' Jack was down on his knees, 'what the hell was that?'

'Shh, it's all right.'

'No, it's not all right. None of this is all right.' He felt pillow soft hands touch his cheeks; Chali's face pushed against his. Jack smelt lemon-grass and honey from her hair.

'They won't hurt you, I promise,' her voice a whisper of peace and harmony. The words a wall of silence that finally shut it out.

'Chali?' she was sunlight and mildew. Warm grass on a summer's day. There were ponies prancing in a field, and daisy chains falling from the sky.

No, no. It wasn't going to be that easy. 'Don't touch me,' his voice fuelled with anger.

'Jack, please, don't push me away.'

'What the fuck was that noise?'

'The children, Jack, it was the children. They need to find peace. We have to help them.'

'The children? I don't know what you're talking about. I need to find, Kirsty. *You* need to stop messing with my head.' Jack pried her hands from his and insisted on distance between them. He had to get unplugged from the tear fuelled eyes that pleaded for him to hold her.

Jack grazed the wall as he pushed himself up. 'Who the fuck are you?' his tone demanding. 'No, you stay away from me,' he had to take it all in.

The kids were dead, no-one was screaming in his head. He was sure of that much. It was strain and anxiety pressing at his buttons. "Fucking with his mental capacity to focus on any given stressful task." That was how the psychiatrist had dumbled-it-down, way back then.

Take a moment. Think this through. 'Chali?' *Look at her.* Whatever her agenda, Chali wasn't a threat. Not to him, and certainly not to Kirsty. That much he was sure of. But she was a liar as well. 'Kirsty?'

'Non, Jack, please. You're not well.'

She was trying to touch him again. He backed away.

'Jack, there's so much more . . . Please, I have to tell you.'

‘I don’t care.’ *I’m not a fucking looney-tune.* ‘I don’t hear voices. I can’t hear kids scream, okay? It’s all up here, not for real.’ *She’s nodding. Why is she nodding?*

‘Jack, there are things you don’t understand.’

‘No shit. And guess what, sweetie. I don’t give a fuck.’ Jack needed the wall’s help to get to his feet. ‘This is about Kirsty,’ he said. ‘Nothing else. It’s about me getting my little girl back, alive!’ Jack was up and standing, his arm outstretched, his hand warning her away. He had to focus, take a breath. He couldn’t help one more glance toward the photos. Those kids were gone, dead, but he could still save Kirsty.

Jack stumbled into the doorway, and then stopped. *Music?* Being played through hidden speakers. *Classical Music?* ‘Please tell me this is you?’ he asked.

‘No, not me,’ she seemed more surprised than Jack.

Do you see now, Jack? Can you see that woman for what she really is?’

The voice was calm; laden by a scratchy texture from old equipment; hardly Dolby Surround. ‘Is that him?’ he asked.

‘Oui, yes. It must be.’

Jack tuned in, but the sound was poor, the voice unfamiliar.

I told you to come alone, Jack. You shouldn’t have brought that bitch here with you. How dare you bring her here, Jack. Not now, not when the Thirty is so nearly complete.’ Jack was still looking for the speakers. ‘This was supposed to be our moment, Jack, your’s and mine. I said, alone. You were supposed to come alone. Alone, alone, alone . . . There will be consequences, Jack!’

Jack did a fine impression of a Navy Seal. One side of the door to the other, gun raised as it checked in both directions. 'Can he hear me?' he asked.

Chali shrugged. 'I don't know.'

'Newsflash asshole,' Jack shouted through the doorway. 'I'm not playing this game. Just tell me where Kirsty is, and we'll leave. Give you a chance to get away.'

'She's somewhere safe, Jack, somewhere very private.'

Chali stepped closer, her eyes alert and searching; falling on his.

'Tell me what you want?' Jack shouted. *Please God, let Kirsty be safe.* 'Anything you want, Jonas. Please, let her go.' Chali tugged on his arm. 'What?' She was pointing. *What?* His eyes followed her finger. *Are they wheel marks?* Barely visible in the fine dust.

'Trolley wheels?' she whispered.

The wheel marks went down the passage, back into the other room.

'Jack, he said that Kirsty was sleeping. They could be from a gurney.'

Jack felt a wave of hope, and then confusion as Chali walked out beyond the doorway.

'A trade,' she shouted. 'Let's finish this the way it started.'

'Chali?' Jack tried to pull her back, but she resisted. 'Hey, what are you doing?'

The blood red glow seemed more intense as he followed her back into the main-room. From this angle the curtain and the bed were in full view. The chain on the ground a solemn reminder of what they faced.

'I'm here,' Chali shouted. 'Isn't that what you want?'

'No, it's not that simple anymore.'

‘It can be,’ she replied. ‘It’s what you wanted back then, isn’t it. I saw the way you looked at me. The need in your eyes. This way it would be forever . . . Jonas?’

‘*Why did you bring her, Jack? You shouldn’t have brought that bitch down here. Not cool. Big mistake.*’

‘No! Jack was right to bring me. He wants to trade with you.’

‘*Trade? Jack has nothing to trade.*’

‘Chali, what are you doing?’ *Where the hell is he? ‘Chali?!’*

She wasn’t listening as she raised her hands; a clear sign he should stay back, and then she tilted her head, and smiled. ‘I saw the way you looked at me, Jonas.’ Was it the way she looked at Jack now? ‘I felt it; everything you wanted. That you’d never had. Jack offers me, in exchange for Kirsty.’

‘What are talking about? Stop it.’

‘This time it would be forever,’ she said, as her hand reached out to Jack.

He watched her fingers close, her arm retract. Both hands clenched to her breast.

‘*Liar!*’ The first sign of frustration in Jonas’ voice. ‘*He hasn’t got the balls.*’

‘That’s why he brought me here, to trade.’ Her smile suggested it was okay.

But it wasn’t okay. Jack had no intention of trading. He wasn’t going to lose either of them.

‘*No deal. Not going to happen. Jack has to understand; he has to feel the pain. How else can he tell the world how bad Jonas is.*’

Jack pulled Chali back. ‘What the fuck are you doing? Have you met this guy before?’ his tone more than insistent she answer.

‘Trust me,’ she said, and pulled hard on his hand to follow. ‘We’ll get her back, I promise.’

What’s she doing? ‘Hey, are you part of this?’ he asked. *No, you can’t be.* Her finger pressed against his lips and she pointed to the bookshelves behind the chair, and then down to the floor.

If he wasn’t looking he wouldn’t have seen it. Someone had moved the bookcase, and recently.

A secret door? Is Kirsty behind it? Jack tried to push the wooden casing. He pulled at, but felt movement. He watched as Chali fingered the individual volumes, one book after another. He followed Chali’s lead. Somewhere on this bookcase was a mechanism. There had to be a lever

to make the thing move. The voice through the speakers remained as calm as the music.

‘Bottom left,’ he said, ‘third volume along.’ *“The Stranger Beside Me.” It’s the obvious choice, Jack. You really should read more.*

‘He can see us?’ Jack scanned the room. There had to be camera, somewhere. His gaze settled on a round bubble of smoked glass set in the corner of the ceiling.

‘Smile, Jack.’

‘Fuck.’

‘I’ve found it,’ Chali was on her knees, a book in her hand. As she pulled at its spine, a hidden mechanism reacted with a metallic clunk, and the bookcase sprung ajar.

Jack took a final glaring look toward the camera. Was he here, or somewhere near? A smart guy like him, he could be in another state.

‘You should go,’ he said to Chali. ‘Leave now, before . . . Chali?’

Jack thrust the Colt through the opening and followed taking brisk steps.

‘Chali?’ he called out. *What the hell is this place?* Another hallway to be traversed in the rosy half-light. Jack was going down; the concrete path leading closer towards Hell.

As bomb-shelters go, this one sucked. It wore a grey suit and held a musky odour. There was an open doorway at its end.

‘Chali?!’ *where are you?* ‘Chali?’ her name called in a hushed holler. Jack bobbed his head around the opening. Both sides. He didn’t understand what he saw as one careful step after the first led him inside. ‘Chali?’ he called again. *What the fuck is this place?* It looked like a hospital ER revived from the fifties.

Medical instruments covered the walls. Expensive looking, made of copper and stainless-steel. Surgical implements, utensils, knives hung with obvious pride. *Dear God, these must have belonged to Edward.* A slender work surface lined one wall, cupboards and drawers the other. What caught his eye more keenly than the knives, the hooks, and only God knew what else these things were for, were the jars on the shelves. He’d seen pickles and eggs stored in similar receptacles. Jack didn’t want to know what was in these. *Please God, not from the kids.* An overwhelming feeling of nausea was fought back down. *What the hell did Edward do down here?*

‘Chali?!’ Anger in his voice.

‘Jack, over here.’

The room opened up to the right at its far end. Jack lowered the gun. ‘Oh God, Kirsty?’ she lay on a medical gurney, an IV line attached to a bottle on a shaft. Chali had her hand in hers. ‘Kirsty?’ he could barely speak her name as he hurried toward them.

‘Jack, be careful,’ she pointed upward.

Another of the dark bulbous eyes set in the corner of the room. Jonas was watching. Not that it mattered, not now, he’d found his little girl. Jack took her wrist, desperate to feel for a pulse.

‘It’s okay, she’s alive,’ Chali whispered. ‘You found her.’

‘Thank God,’ as he kissed her hand. Kirsty dressed in a hospital gown. Her eyes closed, she was sleeping. ‘What is this?’ he lifted the plastic tube, one end inserted into Kirsty’s arm. ‘What’s he done? What have you done, you bastard?’

‘It’s just a sedative, Jack. Didn’t want her waking up halfway through. Tends to get messy.’

‘Messy? Halfway through what, you fuck?’ he didn’t really want to know. ‘Chali, get it out of her arm. We need to leave, now.’ *What? Why are you shaking your head?* Didn’t she understand. Leave, now.

‘Jack, look,’ Chali raised Kirsty’s other arm.

‘Handcuffs?’ *Shit.* A slim chain ran from her wrist to the bed-side rail. ‘We need to find something that will cut it.’ There had to be something. ‘Kirsty, I’m so sorry. This is all my fault,’ he kissed her forehead. ‘I’ll get you out of here, I promise.’ But how? There had to be something he could use.

Jack fingered his way between the bowls and jars. Then began to clear the shelves with seeping movements of his hands. Cupboard doors were flung open, most of the contents still packaged and boxed. He opened up drawers, spilling their contents across the floor.

What did that asshole do down here? What did Edward do to the women he brought down here? Several boxes flew from a cupboard and clattered against the opposing wall.

‘We’re not going to get her out of here cuffed to that,’ he backed into the middle of the room. Opened his arms wide; stared up at the camera. ‘What are you waiting for? It’s you and me, remember?’ No response. ‘Bring it on you, mother-fucker.’

‘Jack, stop it. That won’t help.’

‘Don’t you touch me,’ he pushed her away. ‘You want to help? Then tell me what’s going on between you and him; what you’ve dragged us into?’ he threw a box of bandages at the camera’s protective glass. ‘Hey, douchebag, why don’t you come down here and help me understand.’

‘Jack, stop it. That’s not the way.’

He wasn’t listening. Jack’s attention was up and focused on the camera.

‘Jack?’

‘I’m gonna kill you, you son of a . . .’

‘Jack, please?’

Jack lingering a stare upward. *Fuck you*, he mouthed on quickening breaths.

Okay, she wanted to talk. Fine, he was ready to engage. Turn his anger on the woman who’d dragged him into all this. The woman he wanted, no, needed to hate, to shout at, and revile . . . only he couldn’t. Somehow she’d stabbed him, right here, in the centre of his heart. Left a flare that burnt too brightly. An overwhelming response that melted his anger and left a feeling of helplessness.

She was right, they had to talk, but not now.

Get Kirsty out first. Call the cavalry. Fuck, where’s Wally? He should have been here by now.

Jack turned, frustration oozing from every pore. What he saw left him dumb-struck. Jack’s fuse fizzled when he saw her, Chali, stood in the doorway. There was a dark figure stood behind her, and it held a gun to Chali’s head.

'Hi, Jack, told you we'd meet again.'

That voice, I know you. The face he turned to see was one he recognised instantly. 'Granville?'

'The Lord works in mysterious ways, Jack. You said so yourself.'

'Why?' Stupid question, but all his mind could muster. *The Minister is the monster? Granville is Jonas?* 'You ginger-twat, let her go.'

'Can't do that Jack. All that's present gets paid for by the past. It's how we weigh up our future, don't you think? Someone else always pays for the ride,' he pulled his arm tighter around Chali's neck and pointed the gun at Kirsty.

'No, not Kirsty.'

'Someone else's child then? Jack, you'd offer up someone else's child to save your own? That's not nice.'

Yes, no; that's not what I meant. Jonas was a head-taller than Chali, his arm tight about her throat. The muzzle of an old revolver pushed back into her cheek. She looked so scared. 'Granville . . . Jonas, please, let's talk.'

'You want to appeal to my better nature,' he shook his head. 'Jack, I don't have one, I'm a sinner. I wish I did, and that's the truth. But there's only ever been one way forward. And Kirsty's going to help me get there.'

'So what now, you plan on killing us all down here?' Jonas was no more than twenty feet away. His face close to Chali's. If he could draw the Colt? *Fuck.* He'd never fired a gun before. He was more likely to hit Chali than Reverend Tank-Top.

'I wanted us to meet down here, Jack. Down here where it happens; where it all started.'

'You're sick, Jonas. Let me help you.' *What? Did I say something funny?* 'I won't let you hurt them,' Jack's panic level spiked wildly as the gun was pointed at him. *Fuck, fuck.* He wouldn't shoot, would he? Jack shied his face away, teeth fully ground and gritted. He only realised how fast his breaths came when the gun was turned away, and released an overwhelming feeling of relief. Then guilt as the gun was jammed up below Chali's jaw.

'Don't, please. What is it you want? Anything, Jonas. I'll do anything you want, just let her go.'

'You like this one, don't you?' he stroked Chali's cheek with the muzzle, his lips close to her ear. 'And you like him too. Now I didn't see that coming. You think he'd feel the same if he knew the truth about you?'

What truth? The way she looked at him, those beautiful tear filled eyes suddenly pleading. She turned away as if in disgust. She was mouthing something to Jack. He couldn't make the words out. "Sh, shoo . . . shoot us both." Did his expression say what he wanted to shout out loud? *No! I won't . . . I can't.*

'I've thought this through, Jack. This is the way it has to be. I think the parents have the right to know. And the rest of the world needs to bear witness.'

'Witness?' He shook his head. *No.* 'Witness to what?'

'The badness of Jonas Critch, what else? I can't help myself. I suppose I never could. He's a bad, bad, man.'

'Granville, Jonas? Let Chali go. If you want to kill someone.' Jack opened his arms. *You think that's funny?*

'It's too late for heroes, Jack. They don't exist anymore. Just be grateful that I'm almost done; it's been a long time coming.' Chali winced, more through fear than pain, as the muzzle jerked into her throat. 'I was lost, Jack. But then I saw the light, and it was wonderful. One more, Jack. One more makes Thirty. One more and I can fly. And I have you to thank for bringing me Kirsty. It's poetic, don't you think? I mean, that she's a twin. You have worked it, haven't you. I don't have to spell it out for the thickies in the class?'

Jack nodded, he'd got most of it at least. Chali's hand, still on Jonas' arm. She was pointing at her face; she was smiling. Telling him that it was okay. It fucking wasn't. Jack felt for the rail of the gurney. He wanted to be sure it was still there. Kirsty still asleep, it was best. Chali was offering him a way to save her. If he unloaded the clip in Rosie's gun he'd be sure not to miss, either of them.

Green is mean. Be mean Jack. Be fucking mean!

‘Do you think there will be Angels, Jack? Will they herald me into Sanctuary; will God be there to meet me on the other side? What do you think?’

Chali kicked down on Jonas’ shin, she tried to break free.

Shit, shit. Grab the gun; grab the gun. He backed into the gurney, got his hand caught in the bars. He had Chali by the hair and was dragging her back. Jack found the Colt’s grip, but too late the moment had passed. Jonas had Chali by the neck again, gun jammed up against her chin. He was choking her. Jack had blown any chance of helping.

‘No, stop, stop!’ he shouted. ‘All right, I’ll do it.’ *Time, I need time to work this out.* ‘I’ll give you what you want.’

‘Too late Jack, times up and I have to go. I just needed you to bring me the girl. This one is a bonus.’ Chali was gasping, fighting for air. ‘Funny how fate plays out, don’t you think? It’s so fitting that it should end like this.’ Chali was dragged back, his arm cutting off her air, the revolver in his hand waving Jack away as he’d stepped forward to follow.

‘Time’s up Jack, I just needed a witness. A voice to tell them how bad Jonas was. How bad, bad, bad, Jonas has been.’

Stop him Jack. But how? *I won’t get there.* Chali was fading, her lungs screaming for air. *No, no.* The gun, it was lifting, aimed straight toward Kirsty. *Jack, make him stop.*

The weapon was aimed. Jonas’ finger squeezed down on the trigger.

'JULIUS!' Jack shouted, as he moved between Kirsty and the gun's aim. 'Julius,' he said again, with both arms raised as if they would deflect an oncoming bullet. 'You're not Jonas, you were never Jonas. Julius walked away from that lake, it was Jonas that died.'

'No . . . don't you say that. Julius died, only Jonas survived,' his arm lowered a few inches, and Chali gasped for air.

'Your name's Julius, it's not Jonas. Jonas died in the lake. Or are you that far gone you don't remember holding your brother's head under the water until he drowned?' *That's it, lower the gun. Aim it away from Kirsty.* 'How did it feel, Julius? Your first kill; he was your brother.'

Jack's blood pressure sank in response to Jonas' arm, letting Chali breathe. *You have his attention, say something.*

'She knew, didn't she?' *That's it, engage with me. Just you and me in the room.* 'Helen Critch, your mother, she knew didn't she. She told people that Julius was still there, in the house. Despite the drugs and the depression, she knew which son came had come back from the lake that day. Christ, losing her son, even the wrong one, was that what tipped her over the edge?'

'No, you're wrong,' the Minister looked indecisive, then raised the gun again. 'Maybe I'll only kill one of them. You choose which one, Jack, no? Then you can watch them both die, and I'll start with this bitch.'

'No, wait. Don't you want to know if I worked it out? Isn't that the point of me being here?'

'I want you to tell them, how bad he was, is.'

'No, no, that's what Julius wants. You've been Jonas for so long now, some of him is rubbing off. You want the truth to be told, and I can do that.' *Keep at him, you have his attention. Time, I need to buy time.* 'Did she know, Mummy dearest? Did she guess how one son had held the

other's head beneath the water? I admit, it did take me a while.' Come on Jack, work it out. 'It's all in there; in the diary pages you sent me,' *His face? Oh, he doesn't realise he gave them to me.* 'I just had to spin the words on their head.' *Get him away from Chali. Give Wally time to bring the cavalry. Where is Wally?* Not a game he wanted to play right now.

'It's all a bunch of lies, the diary I mean. I'm guessing you found a little boy's memories and decided to bring them up to date. It would explain the inconsistencies.'

'Jonas is bad,' said Julius.

He's looking dazed, that's good. That's dangerous? Keep talking Jack. The one thing you're good at, pissing people off.

'No, that's not true. Jonas was the good twin. The one both Mother and Father had love for. You were the spare-twin, right? Shit, did Edward watch you murder your brother. His son. He did didn't he? He didn't lift a finger to stop you. That's why he took you under his wing, right? Like father like son. Oh, that must have been a very special day for you both.'

'He loved me.'

'Who? Edward? No, I don't think so. It wasn't the same, was it? You didn't get what you expected, did you. All of this, Edward's secret place, it was a complete surprise. This wasn't the love that he shared with Jonas. Not the physical affection that Jonas endured. He didn't abuse you, did he? He only shared his love with Jonas.' *Shit, his face . . . I'm right.* 'I can't believe you actually wanted Edward to bugger you senseless. Oh, he didn't did he. Even after you killed Jonas, he still didn't love Julius in the same way. That was his special love, and just for the other twin. Why was that?'

Hit him again. Hit him hard.

This isn't about Jonas. This was never about Jonas. It's about you, poor little Julius; the terrible-twin. He didn't get the love he craved from his parents, so he drowned his little brother to get their attention. So he could pretend to be Mummy's precious boy, and Edward's play-thing.

History is always written by the victor, isn't that right? Not quite how you explain things in the diary. Oh crap, it all makes perfect now. Edward didn't love his son like that, did he? No, Edward liked women, not kids. That evil fucker, he let Parker have the child, didn't he. He'd take Jonas to gratify Parker, and he'd leave you behind. Fuck, this is even sicker than I thought.'

The revolver's hammer startled Jack as it was cocked back. The muzzle forced Chali's head back. Tears were streaming again. She was making words with her lips. *I love you*, she said.

No, no, stop him. Focus him. Bring his attention this way. Jack clicked his fingers, all eyes back on him.

‘It didn’t get any better when Edward was gone, did it?’ he said. ‘When he died you were left alone; forced to fend for yourself. Wow, that must have been scary. Poor Julius, left alone in the world. Nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. Did you think about handing yourself in? Pretend you had no choice. Who’d even believe that a child could be a part of such a thing. But then *he* found you, didn’t he? Damien. The one true love of Julius’ life. That much is true, wasn’t it? You really thought you’d found him, the Special-One. Only he wasn’t as *special* as you thought, was he? *That’s more like it, got your attention now. Keep talking.*

‘He showed you the reality of your world, didn’t he?’ *Look at him. Not a twitch when I mention his brother. But Damien?* ‘Damien was your stressor, wasn’t he. It wasn’t killing Jonas. You hated your brother that much?’ *Wow.* ‘You thought you’d found true love, but it wasn’t what you thought, was it? You discovered the truth about Edward’s love for Jonas. Letting Parker abuse him like that. You realised just how wrong you’d been. How it felt to be preyed on by the sick fucks who abuse children. It wasn’t love, it was just plain old exploitation and perversion. Your father used Jonas to cement a deal with his paedophile friend, Parker. And it wasn’t just Jonas, was it? You know that now, don’t you. He offered his own kids as payment on this place. This *special-place* where he could bring his women, his victims.’

Jack didn’t like the way Jonas was staring at him. Had he gone too far?

‘Let them go,’ Chali pleaded. His arm loosened enough now for her to smile at him; trying to use her charm. It wasn’t going to work, not on Julius. ‘We can finish this,’ she said. ‘You and me, *we* are the Thirty. We always were. Let them go. I’m the one that you want, not Kirsty. My life will bring everything full-circle. I can deliver you to Sanctuary.’

He wouldn’t stop staring at Jack. Pure evil dressed in a tank top and purple corduroys.

‘You hear that, Jack? The sound of a woman begging. Reminds me of the others, back then. Back there in that room. Daddy sharing his love beneath that bloody awful lamp. They all begged. They pleaded with Jonas to help them survive.’

‘That’s a lie, and you’re a fucking liar,’ angry words from Jack. ‘Let’s start by using the right name shall we? Julius! Your name’s Julius. And you didn’t want to help anyone, not ever. Edward brought you down here and it gave you a fucking hard-on. Watching what he did to those

women, it was a rush. The fourth of frigging July. You enjoyed watching Edward torture those women.'

'No, no, Daddy loved them; he loved them like he loved Jonas.' The gun was directed back at Jack. 'He loved them all, that's not a lie. He had a lot of love to share. Oh what the fuck do you know anyway? You're not even real. I deny you. All of you.'

Who's he talking to? Jonas wasn't listening, at least not to Jack. *Oh-no. Shit.* Jack could hear them too. The screaming, he could hear it again. Children, too many to distinguish any single one. *No, no, I'm not like him.* He had to concentrate, shut them out. *Chali, she can hear them too?*

'Do you hear them, Jack? Ha, ha, ha, you do, don't you. Is that why this bitch chose you? She's used you, Jack. I bet she's told you all sorts of sweet things. It's what they do; lies, every word. Hurts, doesn't it? I can't shut them up. They're always here, always bitching. Yap-yap-yap; they never leave me alone.'

Julius fired the gun. A single shot that slammed against the wall and burst concrete in all directions. The sound sent a shock-wave through Jack.

'You can only kill them once,' he said. 'Look, bitch, he's beginning to understand. One more, Jack. One more and I can fly; I can leave all of this behind. I'm going back to Sanctuary, Jack. And you're going to tell the world about Jonas.'

'Julius, your name's Julius.'

'Listen to Jack,' Chali pleaded. 'He can help you. He can stop the children's voices. That's why we came.'

'Stupid girl, I don't want them to stop,' Julius snapped. 'I want them to stay. I want them to speak to Jack. I want them to haunt him just as they've haunted me. They'll be a constant reminder of how bad *Jonas* really was.' Julius had regained his composure, he seemed more assured. His moment of weakness had passed. 'Look at him. Jack Lottman, man of the world. Tell me, *Jack*, do the memories still hurt?' The gun pressed hard to Chali's head. He was laughing. Whispering to Chali just loud enough for Jack to hear. 'He thinks he can stop the Thirty. He thinks he can stop me from getting to Sanctuary,' he pulled hard on Chali's throat. 'And you, *bitch*, have the audacity to offer yourself when you've already been taken.' Chali groaned as his grip tightened. Her face red, her lungs fighting for air as she clawed at Jonas' arm. 'I want you to see this, Jack. I want you to watch, up close and personal.'

'Fuck you, let them go. I'll end it all with a bullet in your head. What, did I say something funny? I'll tell you something funny, you're a fake.'

The diary, it's a fabrication. All that effort to mimic your brother, it's been a waste of time. I get it now, all of it. You're out, Julius, you've been exposed. How did it feel when you realised you were homosexual? When you discovered you couldn't be like your father? He knew it, didn't he. That's why he brought you down here. Christ, he was trying to cure you. You wanted to be his bitch, but he saw right through you. Daddy's boy, no, just damaged goods.'

Another deafening gunshot ejected more concrete from the wall. This time much closer to Jack. He felt the dust fly in his face.

'It's over,' he shouted. 'You may as well let us go.'

'Ten minutes, Jack. That's all that separated me from a different life. From the life that should have been mine.'

'You're sick, you don't have to do this. *Please*, stop this. Julius, *Jonas*, let the girls go.'

'Jonas, please, listen,' she was about to pass out.

'I don't think so. You're not leaving here, ever. You bitch, it's your fault they're here, bitching and sniping in my ear. Always in my ear, you fucking bitch.'

'You, had, to pay.'

'Well, guess what. Who's paying now?'

'Easy, we need to stay calm here,' Jack was done with cowering. He was feeling mean. First chance he got, he'd take the shot.

'I, can, stop them.'

'The voices, too late,' he was whispering now, his face touching Chali's, his lips grazing her skin. 'You've *lost* the only thing you had to bargain with. You've given it to him, haven't you? I can small Jack all over you. How was she, Jack? All soft and wet? I mean, come on, you're old enough to be her dad.'

What? What's he talking about? What did I take? Jack's hand on the gurney, as close to the Colt as he dare.

'It's time, bitch. I want to fly one last time; leave the voices with Jack. Let's see how they react when your man fails. I wish I could hang around and watch.'

No, he's going to do it. Stop him? He's too far away; I won't make it in time.

Jack panicked. He saw Kirsty lying helpless, his own efforts to save her pathetic. *Why is she smiling?*

'Jack,' her breath laboured, 'they said, I could stay.'

‘Hear that, Jack. That’s touching. It really is. But this bitch messes with your head. Once she’s in, you can’t get her out. Aww, she’s crying. I do believe she likes you.’

Chali’s lips, were mouthing something, “*Others*”. Words she didn’t want Julius to hear? “*Scream*.”

No, don’t, stay with me. Her eyes closed, she could no longer breathe. Nothing Jack could do. He didn’t get the chance. He grabbed at his ears, dropped to one knee; the screams had returned. Too loud, too intense, like a nail being forced into his head through his ears. Julius could hear them too, his arm had dropped. Chali gasped for air. How could he stand there and endure the pain?

Jack saw lights, dozens of them, circling around Julius. The terrible screams being sucked towards him and Chali. *My God . . .* being drawn in through her eyes.

‘*Chali?*’ Jack tried to stand. What happened next he barely believed. Like a scene from a horrible movie Chali jerked backward. Her arms jerked out in spasm, then grabbed at her captor. She threw herself across the floor against the far wall. The collision was bone breaking, but Julius refused to let go. They hung there, suspended.

‘*Jack?* Chali’s voice in his head. ‘*Forgive me.*’

‘What’s happening?’ he asked, without speaking words. Why weren’t they moving? Their struggle had ceased, as if frozen in time.

‘*When they realised,*’ she said, ‘*when I told them how I felt. They promised me I could stay.*’

‘Who? I don’t understand. What’s happening?’

‘*I have to go now, my love. It’s the only way.*’

‘No, don’t go. We can stop him. Chali, stay with me,’ a sudden warmth embraced him.

‘*I can only give what they gave me,*’ she said. ‘*I choose to give it to you. Save Kirsty,*’ she said.

‘What does that mean? Chali, what are you going to do?’

‘*I love you,*’ those words again. ‘*Come find me, my love.*’

Jack’s reply caught in his throat as the colour in her eyes darkened from an Autumn Grey into a winter storm. Nothing but black left to see. Chali turned in Julius’ arms. They fell from the wall. A gunshot sent lightning throughout Jack’s body. The room hit fast-forward and slammed at his senses.

‘Chali!’

Blood soaked outward around her blouse. Julius tugging at the gun, trying to push her away.

‘End this,’ she said.

Julius struck her and she fell away. The revolver grappled from her hand, but too late, Jack was pointing the Colt. He felt he was sleep-walking toward his enemy, his finger snug around the trigger. Even Jack could hit the target at this short a range. He shifted the safety to red; now he wanted Jonas dead. Jack pulled the trigger, the bullet missed, another stride taken. His hand jerked with each shot. One, two, and then a third bullet fired. Each shot a cause to flinch, for his eyes to close and re-open. A wide pattern of fire that sent ricochets bouncing off the wall.

Julius held a gaze that resembled surprise, it was probably shock. His revolver discharged at the floor, and then the wall, as he reeled and stumbled. The killer fell back through the doorway.

It seemed an angry silence; the stench of gunpowder overwhelming. Jack’s hand shook uncontrollably, the gun levied at Julius. His body lay awkward and still. Both eyes open and staring at the ground. The flesh starved of life, the anger in his eyes faded.

Chali?

Jack fell to his knees.

‘Chali!’

Jack ripped at her shirt, he had to stop the bleeding. ‘Don’t die,’ he whispered as he fingered through the sticky fluid. *Fuck, fuck.* He dragged his jumper over his head and wiped at her stomach. There, the flesh blackened and defined. She’d pulled the gun tight before making it fire. Jack wiped again, the blood refusing to stay. A strange weeping motion, as if pushed out from within. *I have to stop the bleeding?* Towels, he remembered seeing them by the sink. A moment later two grey cotton towels were by her side, one pressed hard up against the wound.

Chali? He couldn’t say her name. More pressure on the towel. *Pressure, Jack, it needs pressure.* He wanted to shout-out for help, but knew there was none. Not buried down here; not in Edward’s secret-place.

Phone? Jack fumbled it from from his pocket. Pressed at buttons that were too small, his fingers covered in blood. *Call Wally. Get an ambulance. Chali, hang on.* Text already on the screen, “Unable to find server.” *No!* He dialled again. “Unable to find server.”

Both hands pressed back on the towel. He had to stop the bleeding. Why wouldn’t she stop bleeding?

‘Jack,’ Chali groaned.

‘Shh, shh, it’s okay. I’m here.’

‘Julius?’

‘Gone, he’s gone. You’re gonna be okay,’ another lie.

‘Kirsty?’ her voice so frail.

‘She’s okay; you’re both going to be okay.’ *Why won’t the bleeding stop?* ‘We’re all gonna be okay.’

‘Julius?’ she said again.

‘That fucker’s dead,’ three words that brought a smile to her lips. Jack did his best to reciprocate. Desperate to hide how helpless he felt. *I can’t stop the bleeding.* She was so pale, so gaunt, as her life continued to bleed away.

‘You saved her,’ she said, her hand lifted and pressed to his cheek. ‘You saved us, both of us,’ she whispered. Her beautiful accent stretched and torn.

‘Hey, hey, keep them open. Look at me,’ she could barely stay awake. *I’m gonna save you.* Jack wanted so much to say the words aloud, but could only watch helpless as she slipped further away. He forced the second towel against the wound, it’s cotton-soft fabric quick to soak up more blood; changing colour too fast. ‘I don’t know what to do?’ he said, no warmth left in her hand.

Chali pulled him close. ‘Remember,’ she whispered, as if it might be the last thing she ever said.

‘Remember?’

‘One, *cough*, place,’ Jack wiped the blood from her lips. ‘Only one, place. Remember?’

What place? He nodded his head. ‘I remember.’ *Please don’t leave.*

‘One place,’ she lifted her head and Jack cradled her, ‘One place, *cough* One place, *cough, cough*, that we ever, truly, find peace,’ her hand slipped from his cheek.

Whoah, no.

‘I’ve got you,’ Jack lifted her head. ‘Come on, Wally’s coming,’ her eyes were closed. ‘Don’t you dare.’

‘Promise,’ her will to speak fading. ‘Come, find me . . .’

‘I promise,’ he said. What good was his word if he didn’t understand.

Jack’s arms tightened around her, nothing he could do, helpless to keep her safe.

Don’t you do this. ‘Chali?’ *Hold on. Hold on.* ‘Chali!’

A chill enveloped Jack as he felt for a pulse. *Chali?* The rhythm of life had left her body.

‘She’s flying, Jack.’

‘What?’ Jack’s chill hardened into frozen repression as he turned toward the doorway. Julius’ body, it was gone. A blood-trail smeared along the wall for Jack’s gaze to follow.

‘We’re not finished yet,’ words that were angry, and from a man now stooped over Kirsty. The murderer of children half-hunched, his pain obvious. A hunter’s knife grasped in his hand; Jack watched as the crisp serrations in the blade glinted in the half-light.

‘It’s time for the Thirty,’ Julius said.

No. Jack sat with Chali in his arms. *Don’t*. The knife raised up above Kirsty’s slumbering body.

Please God, help me.

Jack had lost. It was over.

There was nothing more he could do, but watch the inevitable.

‘Hey, hey!’ Jack’s aggression drew Julius’ attention. ‘Don’t you fucking touch her, not until we’re done. And we are far from done,’ he had to stall for time. But how long? It seemed an eternity since he’d found this place, and still the Sheriff hadn’t come. It was all his fault, he shouldn’t have come alone.

‘Done? We’re all over and done, Jack. Nothing more to say.’

‘I’ve got plenty, scumbag.’ *That’s it, focus on me.* ‘This isn’t over until you own this. That means coming clean and square on your brother’s account.’ *Keep talking, Wally’s coming.*

‘Jack, the wound’s not that bad. I won’t bleed out. Not like someone I can see.’

Fuck you. ‘I’m here to tell a story, remember.’ *You bastard.* ‘Isn’t that why you left me the diary pages? I’m a journalist, that’s why I’m still alive, right? But how do I tell the story if I don’t understand all the facts?’ *That’s it, you think about it asshole.* ‘Tell me, honestly, how did it feel when Damien betrayed you?’ *Really? Well, that face says it all.* He laid Chali’s head gently to the ground. ‘Wasn’t what you expected was it, the love of another man? Not the fantasy you’d created around Jonas when your daddy gave him to Parker. You actually thought he’d offered him up out of reverence; because Jonas was special. But Damien showed you the truth, didn’t he. It was just lust and perversion. Another body bargained for cash, to dirty-old-men who craved sex with minors. I’m guessing you weren’t the only kid that Damien brought home?’ *Didn’t think so.*

‘Damien was, a disappointment,’ Julius replied.

‘A disappointment? You killed him because he offered you up as a piece of meat, just like your father did with Jonas. How did it feel, huh, when you realised that Edward cared less about Jonas than he did about

you? Jonas, the good-twin. Jonas, the pure-twin. Jonas, the *murdered* twin.'

'No, I didn't do that.'

'Sticking with the accidental death, is that it?'

'He fell in,' said Julius. 'He reached too far out to grab the net.'

'And then what, you pushed him under?'

'No,' he looked shocked that Jack could suggest such a thing. 'My brother was a fine swimmer,' now he was smiling. 'We were laughing, me in the boat, him in the water.'

'So why kill him?'

Julius seemed consumed with guilt. An odd look for a serial-killer.

'Edward pushed me in,' he said. 'He knew I couldn't swim. My brother tried to save me.'

'So you're saying it really was an accident?'

'I panicked. I, freaked out. Thrashing and kicking in the water, I hit him. I didn't mean to, I didn't even realise, and as he rolled over I used him to get back to the boat.'

'Edward didn't help you?'

'No. He sat eating his lunch as I hauled myself into the boat. When I realised, I tried to reach my brother with the oar. All I did was push him further under. My brother stared at me all the way down. So it seems we both know a little about accidents.'

'You can't say his name can you? Go on, I want to hear it. Say your brother's name. Give Jonas his name back.'

'He was weak.' Sadness turned to anger that the memory had resurfaced. 'It was *me* that Daddy took to his special-place, not him.'

'Great, happy for you. No, really. It must have been a bonding experience. Tell me about it. What was it like down here watching your father at work? Which reminds me, where did Edward bury the bodies? Up there? Is there a graveyard of women above us? How fucking romantic. All of this just to impress a father who didn't give a shit about you or your brother.'

'You're wrong, Jack. My father had power. And he passed that power on to me.'

'Then where are the women? I mean, come on, did you even try? How do you get a hard-on from a woman when you're a hundred percent gay?' *Wow, you're still in denial, aren't you.* 'How long did it take for Edward to work it out, huh? All that time waiting for the twins to grow up, just to discover that one was, what, too nice. And the other, even worse, was preparing to bat for the other side.'

‘That’s a lie! My father loved me.’

‘No, he saw you as a mistake. Putting you right was just a test of his manhood.’

‘So what’s all this then? You putting your life on the line for a kid who’s not even yours. Kirsty won’t bring the other one back. You do remember the other child? The one you pile-drove into a truck.’ Julius moved the knife away from the gurney. ‘Find all of her did they?’

‘Fuck you.’

‘Temper, temper, Jack. We all have shit to own,’ his lips curled about the words and threw them like spears. He seemed to lack any concern for the bloodstain that spread about his shoulder. The sleeveless wool of his jumper dyed red by the wound.

Fuck you, fuck you. ‘She’d have grown up loved by her father. Not sold into slavery for a plot of land. All that bollocks in the diary? Aww, sad-face.’

‘How will *your* diary read, Jack? How will Jill take it when the past comes out? Maybe she’ll understand that you forgot to tell her what the pills are really for. The secrets you’ve kept, and why. Is it because you don’t trust her? And let’s not forget the exotic piece of pussy you’ve been fucking behind her back. Oops, can’t do that any more. And let’s not forget Kirsty. You think Jill will forgive and forget that you got her baby killed?’ the knife raised to his eyes, he peeked over. ‘Who’s hiding what, Jack?’

It was hard to swallow, difficult to breathe. Looking at the floor added pounds to the guilty scales. It also gave him hope. *The revolver?* Half-hidden below the first towel, it must have slid there when he fell. All Jack had to do was reach for it. He knew he’d never reach it quickly enough.

‘Did you really think you could take Jonas’ place? Jack asked. ‘Helen knew, didn’t she. Despite her frail state of mind and all that medication, she still refused you. “It was such an effort for her to smile,” you said so yourself in the diary.’ *Get him closer. Draw him in.* It was almost impossible not to stare at the gun. ‘Helen knew you weren’t Jonas. Is that why you killed her? Did you overhear Helen telling Maddy that Julius was still there, in the house? Did your own mother become a threat? Is that why you killed her?’

‘I didn’t . . .’

‘I killed my baby, you motherfucker! I’m responsible for that. That’s what you want to hear, right? “I have to understand”, those were your words. Well, you’re not blaming all of this on Jonas, not any more.’

That's it, take a step toward me. Jack took a half-step towards the gun. *One more, just one.*

'Clever, clever Jack. You think you know, but you don't. What it's like to be the sum of all that is wrong and bad.'

'Is that how Mummy felt about you?'

'She pushed me away. Even when I was *him*, she wanted no part of me. I think I reminded her of everything my father had done to her. I think she despised me more than Parker.'

'Why, because *you* were their first born? Julius came out first and absorbed everything that was guilty and sinful about his parents. And you know what that sin was, don't you? The worst sin imaginable between a father and his daughter: Helen wasn't just Edward's wife, she was his daughter too?'

'That's not true . . .'

'Helen's real name was Emilia Critch. She was Edward's daughter from his first marriage, the child who went missing. Only she never did. Emilia was abducted by her own father. He gave her to old man Parker for the land. Both men bound by their perverted delusions.'

'That's a lie.'

'Uh-huh, Parker kept her prisoner in his house. I've seen the marks from the cage he kept her in, down in the cellar. Edward exchanged her for a piece of land. An unwanted child bartered away with a handshake so Edward could build this, his dream.' *You didn't know, did you?* 'He did the same to your brother, Jonas. Hah, a serial killer and a paedophile, neither one could ever rat on the other for fear of exposing himself. Joined at the hip with their dirty little secrets.'

He's wondering if I'm lying. Jack had no idea what was going on in his head. Had the delusion imploded, or was he trying to figure another way out? One thought was prominent. Not much point in keeping Jack alive if he was going to write down the truth. It wasn't the truth Julius wanted told. It was never Jonas, but Julius. The impure brother who was bad, bad, bad.

The silence was far from golden as the Minister sized Jack up. He looked at the gun, and then wished he hadn't. *Get him over here. Make him want to use that knife.*

'Parker got what he'd always wanted.' *Keep at him.* 'He got a child; a pretty young girl by all accounts, for the paedophile to play with. As for Edward, he got rid of the unwanted child; no use for a girl. And he got to play with his mechanical toys, and build this, his underground den of iniquity. It was the opportunity of a lifetime for him. The chance to explore

his cravings in total privacy. What happened, did Parker lose interest in Emilia? Did he want to return her like a broken toy? I mean, this is seriously fucked up shit. Surely it would have been easier to kill Emilia? Oh, but Parker wasn't a killer, was he. He didn't have the stomach for that kind of thing, so he forced Edward to take her back. Emilia Parker, poor-broken, submissive wretch. How do you deal with that? But Edward had the perfect solution. Bring her home as someone else, and turn her into the perfect housewife. Once she'd had the twins, she'd never run. Fuck, you make the Adams Family look normal. But that's what he wanted, of course it was. A wife and kids lend a careful touch of normality to a truly sick arrangement.' *Come on, make him angry.* Jack took a half step more toward the towel. It was so hard not to look at the weapon below.

'Can you see the problem brewing,' he asked. 'Parker needs a new plaything. So what does Edward do? Could he get rid of him? But if he does, what would happen to the land? No, he's in for the ride with Parker. So he goes into the business of abducting children. He's got away abducting women for years. What's a few kids?'

That is why Edward took Samantha Grear? Samantha wasn't Edward's taste, she was Parker's. It's the only reason that makes any sense of why Edward would have a child in his trunk that night. It was to keep Jeremiah Parker happy, wasn't it?' *Move damn you. Get away from Kirsty.* 'How many, Julius? Do you even know. It's important I get this straight in my head. Fuck, I can see the headlines now. Sick, psycho, incest, and matricide. *Julius* Critch, fucked up serial-killer. It's a best seller. I'll make you famous!'

'Edward got unlucky that night,' Julius' reply was reserved. 'The cops pulled him over for a stop-light offence. The woman in the trunk was awake, she tried to attract their attention.'

'You were there, weren't you. One of the officers saw someone in the back seat. What went through your mind as the cops pursued with their sirens blaring?'

'I was a child. I'd never seen Daddy panic like that.'

'Were you scared?'

'Of course I was. The car was being driven too fast, it was sliding around, tossing me about in the back. Edward kept shouting for Parker. I didn't know what to do so I slid down into the foot-well. That car seemed so big back then,' he was laughing. 'Daddy, Mummy; they were both broken. How else could I have turned out?'

'Let's not get all tearful about it.' *That's the look I want. Come on you bastard, you've got the knife.*

‘They should have loved us both, as equals. As brothers.’

‘Life’s a bitch.’

‘It can also be very short, Jack. I was, am, damaged goods. The first of a pair who came out only to be basted with guilt. My father loved *him*. My mother loved *him*; there was nothing left for me.’

‘So you’re blaming Helen for not snuggling up and singing lullabies. Are you fucking listening to yourself? Julius, your brother was abused; he was sodomised by a man who wasn’t capable of love.’ *Golden moments, keep sharing*. Jack tried not to be obvious as he edged closer to Julius’ revolver. Close enough now, maybe. Dare he? He’d only get one chance.

Jack was a mess. His heart a singularity, dense and hard; filled with hatred. Chali was gone, murdered by the ginger-fuck with a knife. He couldn't take his eyes from the man; this Minister of death who'd murdered her. He felt sick at the thought. The gunshot still stuck on repeat in his head. *Chali*. She was beautiful, vulnerable, so courageous. She'd said the words, "I love you." He'd been afraid to say them back.

Wally wasn't going to come in time. And that time was here, and now, and about to happen. It was time to end this, one way or the other. He just needed Julius to take one more step away from Kirsty.

'You can't let me live, you do know that,' Jack said. Solemn purpose in his words. Venom on his lips. 'I'll tell everyone what a loving son *Jonas* was. I'll write a book,' he said with a smile. 'I'll paint a picture of Jonas that will break hearts. I'll write a requiem and sing it with the choir. There'll be tears and poems, and odes about the good twin.'

That's it, you're getting the message. Julius' hand clenched around the hilt of his knife. Tiny movements of intent, as he lifted his chin, narrowed his gaze. Recognition of the problem now at hand.

'I'll commission a statue in Jonas' memory. I'll see to it that Jonas is remembered as a broken and loving child, whose father and brother deceived, defiled, and crushed his spirit and life. He'll never be the monster you've tried so hard to create,' Jack felt his breath stop. The moment was at hand. 'I'll tell them everything. I'll tell them what a pussy you are. What a fag you're frightened to be. I'll tell, I'll tell, I'll tell.'

'No, you won't.' Julius' knife lifted and levelled toward Jack. 'You're going to die, Jack. They'll find all the bodies, and they'll work it out.

I win, Jonas loses. Jack ends up dead.'

Julius came fast, knife wielded above his head, a bloodthirsty cry on his lips. Jack's senses erupted in response. A sudden overdose of chemicals urging fight or flight. *Now* was the time.

Jack rushed forward, hand reaching down for the towel. But Julius was too quick and knocked him away, the weapon teased from his grasp, as the knife stabbed hard into the concrete besides his face. Its second thrust he caught, both hands around Julius' wrist. The two men fell against the work top and sent glass crashing to the floor.

Skinny, ginger . . . he was strong. *Fuck you. Hold him.* Terrible pain in his abdomen. Had he been stabbed? How, the knife was between them, still being forced too close. *Can't, hold, him.* Tank-top was too strong.

He let go and tried to move; felt the blade's energy scythe by his head and stab into the worktop. Jack grabbed the closest thing to hand. He smacked Julius with a microscope. A solid impact that forced the killer away, both his hands outstretched as if he'd been blinded.

Jack dropped the instrument. He had a sudden, unnerving feeling he was leaking around the belt-line. Instinctive fingers felt at his waist, and came back covered in blood. A terrible numbness followed; nausea close on its heels as Jack pulled the knife free, then let it fall to the ground.

Anger burned in his stomach, the need to strike back. Jack sent himself head first into the fight. He was a boxer, a cage fighter, a bitch-crazed-assassin. He hit Julius hard, picking his punches, making sure they hurt. Until he fell, the effort too much, allowing Jonas to stagger away.

Tank-top and corduroys snarled through the blood and bruising. Psychotic hatred that glared like a wolf. He still had power, and no intention of leaving the fight.

Where is it? Jack backed away from the oncoming killer. He stumbled and fell toward one of two towels on the floor. It was a fifty-fifty as Julius picked up his knife. *Fuck you.* Jack didn't see anything to smile about as he fumbled below the cotton.

He'd fallen for the wrong towel.

Rolling like a child across the floor hurt Jack worse than he could have imagined. Each spin of his body gave a snapshot of evil another step closer. A smug grin content to take its time.

Jack reached out for the farthest towel, still wet with Chali's blood, his hand sliding below in desperation to grasp metal. What he felt was Jonas' hand about his ankle, and then the floor sliding below him as he was pulled away, and turned over.

Jack levelled the gun at Julius, but not quick enough as the weapon was turned back towards him, the taller man using his weight to turn it around. A moment later the gun fired. The muffled discharge followed instantly by searing pain boring at Jack's stomach. Their struggle ceased.

Is this how it ends? The pain was unbearable. Kirsty?

Julius rose above him, a black shadow that blocked out the light. Jack's head was yanked back, the eyes of a killer came close, keen to command, the killer's warm breath foul against his face.

'Ten minutes,' Julius growled. 'Ten minutes and my life would have been so different.'

'No . . . you're a douchebag in any life,' it was strange how the whites of Julius' eyes had filled with a scarlet haze. Was he really the Devil? *I'm so sorry Kirsty.* A sense of failure tore at him. Worse still was Rosie's gun in the bastard's hand, being pressed up under his chin.

'Goodbye Jack.'

Jack turned away. He flinched as the hammer snapped down; but no bang. No lights out, or bright light to which he could ascend. Just click, click, click, the Colt's magazine empty.

'I don't understand,' Julius seemed bemused. 'It was my destiny.'

The gun clicked again and something wet dropped onto Jack's cheek. He opened his eyes to see blood dripping from the man's mouth, as the Colt swiped down and struck him on the temple. A bruising thump that preceded the bright lights he'd expected. That began a dance around his head-space that coaxed him toward sleep. But Jack wasn't going anywhere. Hazy or not, he'd been given another chance. He grabbed at Julius' leg as the Minister tried to stand, his legs barely able to hold him. Jack not strong enough to hold on.

'You dumb son of a bitch,' Jack snarled, 'another few seconds and I would have run out of things to say,' he tried to get up. To be the first off the canvas. Like two punch drunk fighters with Kirsty as the prize. 'What, did I say something funny?' *Shit, he's still laughing at me.* Julius laughed despite being on his knees, hands held to his stomach, blood trailing the ground as he tried to crawl away. 'Just die, you fucker,' Jack was on his feet, heading to Kirsty. 'Bleed out and die,' he said, and meant each word.

'This, isn't over, Jack,' *cough, cough.* 'In this world, or in the next, I still win.'

'You don't get a medal where you're going.' *Move, this isn't over. Get Kirsty out of here.* The wound in his side felt bad, the wall acting as a crutch. 'Kirsty?' He grabbed at the broken gurney and pulled it toward the door, careful to keep Julius in sight. 'Kirsty.' Two fingers on her neck, feeling, praying. *Thank you.* She had a pulse. Jack had an overwhelming urge to cry.

‘You think, you’re the only one, she comes to?’

Jack wasn’t listening. He was trying to take the brake off, the gurneys wheels had jammed.

‘It’s not just you.’

Fuck this thing! ‘What the fuck are you talking about? Just shut up and die,’ he said. Jack shook Kirsty. ‘Hey, sleepy head, Kirsty, I need you to wake up.’ No way he could carry her out of here.

‘I knew, she was special,’ it was getting harder to breathe. ‘She pleaded, Jack. Lying there, in the trunk, Begging with her eyes. When you’ve seen, her eyes.’

‘You’re losing it, asshole.’ *Get Kirsty up, wake up.* ‘If I didn’t need an ambulance, I’d happily sit here and chat. Watch you bleed-out,’ he said.

‘The nanny, Jack.’

The what? ‘Come on Kirsty, you have to wake up.’

‘Go, see, the nanny, Jack.’

Jack had to look. He had to be sure he was still dying; so much blood around his body. He was struggling to breathe, but offered no less defiance.

‘She, didn’t tell you, about the nanny?’

‘What? Didn’t tell me what?’

‘My father, he would have loved her, *cough, cough*, if only . . . It was the river, took them both.’

‘Go fu . . . Kirsty?’ she was stirring. ‘Hey, it’s okay, I’m here.’

‘Dad? Dad, is that you?’ Weary arm cast out to find him.

‘Shh, it’s okay. I’m here.’ Jack lifted her head and pulled her close.

‘Daddy,’ she burst into tears. ‘The bad man took me, *sob*, he brought me here. I want to go home.’

‘I know, I know. I’m taking you home.’ *Did she just call me Dad? Not Jack, Jacko, or mum’s boyfriend?* Every time she squeezed it hurt, but he didn’t care. *Dad, she called me Dad? Get her out of here, now.*

‘Kirsty, can you walk?’

‘Yes,’ she nodded, ‘I think so. Dad, you’re hurt?’

‘No, I’m fine. It’s his blood,’ he lied. ‘Come on, we have to get a signal on the phone. We have to get out of here,’ he lifted her off the trolley.

‘The nanny, *cough*, what was her name, *cough, cough, cough*. Jack, tell me her name. I never knew, her name.’

Fuck off. ‘Have an unhappy death.’ *Just die.*

‘Oh my God, Dad, that’s him,’ Kirsty grabbed Jack and moved behind him. She was crying again. ‘That’s him,’ all tears and spit, and needing Jack.

‘Shh, he can’t hurt you, not any more.’ *He’ll be dead soon. Real soon!*
‘Don’t look, we’ll walk right by and not notice.’

‘Her name, Jack? Her, name . . .’

Neither of them could look away as Julius’ head slumped.

‘Is he dead?’ Kirsty asked. ‘Is that a dead man?’

I fucking hope so. ‘Don’t look, just walk. Shit, Kirsty, do you hear that?’

‘Hear what?’ coming from a distance. ‘Yes, yes, I can hear.’

The sound of sirens, faint, but getting louder. The cavalry was coming. Wally had finally arrived.

Four hours in surgery, numerous stitches; several days of rest. Jack felt like a new man. He'd even eased up on the medication prescribed at the hospital. The only pills he ever wanted to take now, the little blue ones. And he'd been thinking that maybe he'd try that woman again. The officious looking one who charged ninety-bucks an hour. He'd seen what the past could do to a man if left unchecked.

'I'm getting a rise from the town council for this,' Wally said as he sat on the edge of the Jack's bed. 'You are writing a book about this?'

Jack shrugged.

'Take a few pounds off me when you do.' He patted his stomach. 'Oh, and some years too. You could liken me to, I don't know, Tom Selleck? Rosie would love that.'

'I was thinking more along the lines of, Rutger Hauer?' said Jack.

'Sounds rugged, who is that?'

Jack laughed, it still hurt. 'How's Wildfowl handling all the attention?' he asked.

'We've got reporters from outta state taking over the town. They keep coming in their space-wagons. Maddy's been full for a week now. You know Rosie's thinking of framing that little Colt. Damnedest thing, it had never been shot before that day,' he sighed. 'Jack, they found more bodies. If the count is right, there's another eight to find. Poor kids.'

'Wally, I want to say thanks.'

'For what? It was you who got sliced up.'

'Another Sheriff might have locked me up. Come on, I must have seemed, well, a bit crazy.'

'I wish you had been. But that's not the way things happen.'

The door opened, both men put on a smile.

‘Hey Kirsty, you okay?’ she looked full of colour and life. That moment hit him again. Feeling for her pulse; not knowing. He couldn’t help the grin. The sigh of relief.

‘Yeah, well,’ Wally picked something from the floor. ‘I do believe it’s someone’s birthday today. Rosie and I brought you this.’

‘Yay, pressie,’ she took the box, already ripping the paper away. The lid dropped onto the chair. ‘Is this Mace?’ she asked.

‘Wally, you put a can of Mace in her birthday box?’

‘There’s a whistle too. And look, there’s a book on how to damage limbs when receiving unwanted advances. Rosie wanted me to put a gun in the box.’

‘A gun?’

‘Oh my God, dad. Dad, look,’ she’d sprung onto the bed, the shock wave pulled his stitches. ‘I can’t believe it,’ she was up again, jumping around.

‘Wally, you didn’t put a gun in there, did you?’

He shook his head. ‘It’s way worse than that.’

‘Dad, look, oh my God, I can’t believe it. Thank you so much,’ she hugged Walter. ‘They’re tickets, dad. We’re going to see One Direction.’

‘We are?’

‘Not you, me and Jackie. Oh my God, oh my God . . . tickets,’ she was shrieking.

‘One Direction Reunion,’ Wally was nodding. ‘Very important, apparently. The boys read about what happened in the Press. There are four tickets and back stage passes. The guy’s want to say hello.’

‘You’re joking?’ now she was screaming.

‘See, very important. Err, Kirsty. Rosie says she’s happy to go shotgun if you can’t find a fourth.’

‘Dad, tell me he’s joking?’

‘He’s joking.’ *I think he’s joking?*

Kirsty was up and shrieking, phone out and dialling. Best friend Jackie on the other end. ‘We’re going to the reunion. I know, I can’t believe it either.’

Jack could hear Jackie screaming down the line. Even as Kirsty left the room and stepped out into the hall. ‘Thanks Wally. I wasn’t sure I’d ever see her smile like that again.’

‘She’s a great kid. She’ll be fine. I’d better go. Got a hat-full of parking tickets to process. Did I tell you? Rosie wants a month off to write a book. Yeah, I know.’

‘Wally,’ Jack’s voice lowered, he was looking at the window in the door. ‘I want you to do something for me.’

‘Well, that sounds unofficial.’

‘A want to see the file. Everything you have about that night on the bridge.’

‘Jack?’

‘It’s important.’

‘You mind if I ask why?’

‘Something that Julius said before he died. It’s probably nothing.’

‘Jack, you need to let this go.’

‘She was there, Wally. And I know what you’re thinking, but she *was* there.’

‘Jack,’ he took a breath. ‘State troopers shut that place down for a half mile. Springfield CSI’s went over the scene, and they missed *nothing*. So let me make this clear for you, as a friend. We didn’t find a body.’

‘She *was* there, Wally. Chali was there . . . if it hadn’t been for her?’

‘Well, we didn’t find her, Jack.’

‘Don’t look at me like that . . . !’

‘You’ve been under a lot of pressure; you been taking a shit load of pills, what with the adrenaline, all the stress.’

Jack recognised the sigh. He knew what was coming next.

‘Are you really sure you’re not . . . ?’

‘Imagining her?’

‘Well, I was going to say *mistaken*. But that’s as fine a word as any, under the circumstances.’

‘I’m not fucking crazy, Wally.’

‘We didn’t find her body, okay? And not one person has substantiated this woman’s involvement, or existence. You’re the only one who’s seen her, spoken to her . . . I don’t know what else to say to you.’

Jack recalled the faces of the FBI men who’d interviewed him. They way they kept looking at each other. ‘You think I made her up?’

‘Not deliberately, no, but the mind does, well, funny things when drugs and stress are involved. Jack, You’re the only one who’s ever seen this woman,’ he let out that same sigh. ‘Take the time to get better. Forget about, this woman. Go home to, Jill.’

‘You mean the woman that’s real.’

‘The woman that loves you.’

It didn’t make sense. Nothing made sense since he’d woken up in the hospital.

‘The file, Wally. Can you at least do that for me? *Please*.’

‘Fine, I’ll have Rosie scan the damn thing and send it to your phone. But Jack, you burn it when you’re done. And I mean to a cinder.’

‘Sure, I promise. Don’t look at me like that, Wally. I need to work this out.’

‘You need to stay here a few more days. Why don’t you check yourself back in, don’t leave later today. It takes time after what you’ve been through. Have you, you know, talked to anyone yet?’

Jack wan’t listening. He was trying to make sense of it all. Why didn’t they find her? How was it possible that no trace of Chali was found? They’d been through so much together. She’d sacrificed herself to save Kirsty. No, they were wrong, Chali was real. And there was something else that made him certain he wasn’t going crazy.

Julius knew she was real too.

It had been a tough few days, not least the house being stalked by the press. Jill had cried a lot. They'd talked things through. Life gets put into perspective when the Grim Reaper does a fly-by. Jack was glad, no, grateful to be home. Jill wanted him to make it permanent, and he knew now that was what he wanted too.

But there was something he had to do. No way he could move on without finding out for sure.

Jack turned the ignition off and the music stopped, the purr of the idling engine ceased. Jack exited the car. This was the obvious place to start.

Two dozen cops don't lie. If they reported there was no body, then Chali wasn't there. But she was. She had to be. Jack's sanity was in question otherwise. No way he could start again with Jill, not knowing he was crazy.

Nothing had changed as he strode toward the door; as he knocked. He knocked again, louder this time. Curtains were drawn, no way to see inside, he pulled at the door. It was locked.

Jack took the short walk to reception. The sign above read, 'Eagle Star Hotel'. A short fat man sat reading a newspaper sat behind the desk. He didn't bother to look up as Jack entered.

'Hi,' Jack said, 'I'm looking for the woman in number twelve. Don't suppose you've seen her?'

'Twelve?'

'Hmm, she's dark haired, slim, attractive.' *Not someone you forget.* 'I'm a friend. This is the right address?'

'There's no-one in number twelve.'

'Five nine, long dark hair. Speaks with an accent.'

Why was he shaking his balding head?

‘We got a hot blonde in number four? Is that who you’re looking for?’

‘No, she’s slim with tanned skin. Pretty as a picture. Her name’s Chali.’

‘Charlie? You sure you got the right hotel?’

‘Number twelve, yes.’

‘Number twelve’s been vacant for several weeks. Problem with the previous occupant. And he wasn’t slim, tanned, or pretty. I think you’re looking for Linda in number four. Far end of the carpark, green door. She has a lot of boyfriends.’

‘I’m not looking for a blonde, okay. Her name’s Chali, and she’s in number twelve. Maybe you could let me in, I could wait.’

The paper closed and was folded onto the desk. He was bigger than he looked, and obviously didn’t like Jack’s attitude. ‘There’s no-one in number twelve, hasn’t been for over a month. Not since the old man died, okay. We’re not allowed to rent it until next week.’

‘Old man? What old man?’

‘He had the room for three years; we’re still waiting for relatives to clear it out. They pay the rent, so they own it, okay. Like I said, there’s a blonde in number four, I think it’s her you’re looking for. I’m not judging you, man. She was probably wearing a wig when you met last time. Drunk too, she normally is. I’m sure she got the room number wrong, and she’ll wear any colour hair you like.’

‘I’m sorry, what’s your name?’

‘Why? Shit, are you a cop? This is a law-abiding-establishment. If there’s anything going on in number four, I don’t know shit about it.’

‘I’m not here to arrest you,’ Jack said. ‘I’m just looking for someone.’

‘Well, she’s not here.’ He turned, took a key from the board; placed it on the desk. ‘Number twelve, go see for yourself. But don’t touch anything, okay?’

Jack clicked the light switch up and down, the power was off. He left the door open and went inside.

This wasn't how he remembered the cabin. It hadn't smelt like this, old, damp, like a shack left rotting in the woods. There was nothing left of the fresh evocative scent that Chali always wore.

Her scent? He could smell it from memory, so why didn't he know its name?

There was a pipe on the side. Slippers and a waistcoat folded on a chair. Wide brimmed hats hung behind the door. All the signs were that the occupier had been male, and aged.

'Chali?' calling her name wasn't going to help. *What's going on? She was here, we were here. Together.* He pushed the bedroom open. No Batman duvet on the bed. There were no boutique hangers, and no women's clothing. The closet was hung with suits, leather shoes lined up on the floor. Patterned shirts hanging from the rails. *I'm not crazy, she was here. She was here.* The wall, it was bare. Just an old drawing in a frame, no pictures or strings. No photos pinned to the plaster. No pin holes to suggest they were ever there.

The sign above the door read, 'Welcome to Starbucks'. No queue, not like last time. Two young girls behind the counter, one serving, the other ready to make his drink, 'Hi'.

'Hi,' Jack squinted at her name plate. 'Jessie?'

'Hey, what can I get you?' she replied.

'A skinny latte, and make it decaf, please.'

Hot air blasted from the steam wand to warm the milk. The aroma of coffee beans as it dribbled down through the filter.

'Is that everything?' Jessie asked.

'Err, I don't suppose you remember me do you. I was here a couple of weeks ago?'

She paused before pushing the lid onto the cardboard cup.

'Oh, right. It's you. You shouted at me, twice. I remember.'

I'd hardly call it shouting.

'Yeah, I wanted to apologise for that. Sorry,' he said and took the coffee she offered. He handed over a twenty. 'Jessie, I was wondering if you remembered the woman I came in with. She had dark hair, very pretty. Have you seen her lately? I'm trying to find her.'

What? It's a simple enough question. Do you know her?

'Look, I know some people have problems. I get it, I do. But, I don't want to be your friend, okay.'

'My what?'

'Should you be taking pills or something?'

'What? . . . No. I'm asking if you know the woman I came in with.'

'You came in on your own.'

'I what?' He had to stop saying that. 'Jessie, that's not right. I sat with her by the window, remember? She'd brought two lattes before I joined her,' he pointed, 'we sat over by the window.'

‘Mister, please. I need to serve the gentleman behind you.’

‘Yeah sorry, look, just answer the question and I’m gone.’ *Why was she leaning forward? Why was she whispering?*

‘You came in on your own. You sat down by the window. Then you got up and ordered for two. You were rude to me. Then you told me to take the change to the woman,’ she was shaking her head. ‘There was no woman. I’m really sorry, but can I phone someone to come and get you?’

‘No, thank you.’ *This is wrong. You, I. . .*

‘Mister, are you all right? You’ve gone kinda quiet.’

‘What?’ He’d said it again.

‘Hey buddy, if you’re done?’

‘What? Oh yeah, sorry.’

‘I’ll have a cappuccino, lots of foam and sprinkles.’ Big man, mean looking, obviously needed his coffee. Jack took his latte and retired a few paces.

No, this can’t be right. There has to be an explanation. Chali was here. She was!

‘Mister, are you all right? You don’t look all right. Can I make a call; get someone here to collect you?’

‘What?’ *Go away. No, maybe she should make a call. Phone Jill. No, not Jill. Who then, Chali?* ‘No, I’m fine, thank you. And I really am sorry if I upset you.’

‘That’s cool. Do you want to sit down?’

He nodded. ‘Thanks. Err, yeah, by the window.’ Jack pulled out his phone and placed it on the table. *Make the call.* Maybe this time it would work? Jack pressed the green phone symbol on the screen, and waited.

“You have dialled an incorrect number.”

The same words as before. So many times before. Maybe he should phone Jill? He opened the text memory, scrolled through looking again for the conversations he’d shared with Chali. He found none. Just the texts *he’d* written. Numerous, and unanswered. *Maybe this time it will work?*

Where are you? He typed. His thumb hesitated, and then pressed. A moment later familiar text flashed up on the screen. “*Undelivered*”

It wasn’t possible to sink any deeper than Jack was right now. His stomach ached, his head barely an inch from the table’s surface. Had he made it all up? Had Chali been a figment of his imagination. Part of a delusion that caught a serial-killer.

How is that possible?

Jack's phone buzzed. He barely lifted his head to see the message was from Wally, and it had a file attached. Jack scooped the phone up and worked the screen with his thumbs.

'She's real, I touched her,' his hand slammed against the table venting the anger. 'She's real, she's real, she's real!'

Shit, now you've done it. The coffee shop wasn't full, but all the customers were staring at Jack. *Fuck, here comes Jessie.*

'Mister, are you sure you're all right? Can I phone someone to come get you? The other customers, I'm sorry.'

It seemed that Jessie agreed with everyone else. That he needed to be sectioned. Who could blame her, he was coming to the same conclusion.

'I'm sorry, I'll be fine. I will, just give me a moment.'

'Okay, but the manager,' she looked back to the counter. 'he'll ask you to leave if you persist.'

Jack smiled as he put coffee to lips. 'Hmm, good,' he said aloud. 'Message from Wally,' he told everyone, holding his phone held aloft. *Look at them stare. All those faces asking the same question I'm asking myself.* 'I'll be fine,' Jack assured Jessie.

He didn't really see the point, but Jack opened Wally's file.

It was all there. Jack read through the entire night's proceedings and subsequent investigation. They'd got lucky, the cops. Stopping the car for a defective stop lamp. The ensuing chase. How the fugitives took a high-dive over the bridge.

Pictures of the car and its driver; the covered bodies in the trunk. Jack wasn't sure he could feel any worse. Not until he saw Samantha's autopsy results. That poor little girl, she'd drowned. Such a fragile face posed in the photo. So drained of life. Jack felt a sudden urge. A wish that he'd put the gun to Julius' head and pulled the trigger. Done it for her, and all the others; the children who didn't grow up because their lives had intersected with his.

Jack scrolled through the highlights remembering why he'd asked Wally to send him the file. Julius had said something odd.

Why refer to the nanny, why? Odd thing to focus on before you die. He'd asked Jack to tell him her name? *Why did Julius want to know the nanny's name?*

He found the page, opened it, began to read. What he found was unbelievable. That couldn't be right. If Jack didn't think he was crazy before, he was borderline certain that he was now.

That's not possible.

Written in black and white. The official Police investigation revealed the nanny's name as . . .

Chalise Thierry
 DOB 25/08/1954
 Nationality – French
 age, 19

A photo of the woman scrolled down onto his screen. Jack's coffee lowered to the table's top.

Chalise, it's you? He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. 'You're not in my head,' he said. 'Hey, you see? I'm not going crazy,' he called aloud. 'It's her, it's Chali.' Hardly surprising that no-one took up his offer to examine the photo on his phone. 'But how?' *That's not possible.* 'I don't understand. How can this be?' He caught sight of his reflection in the glass. *But she's real.*

"She messes with your head," that's what Julius had said. He could see her. Why couldn't anyone else?

'What? What are you looking at?!' The coffee shop customers were still focused on Jack, and then at each other. Fearful now to make eye-contact. 'She's real,' he added. 'I spoke to her,' his turn to look away. 'I held her in my arms and . . .' *They won't stop staring.* 'It was Chali that caught Jonas,' aggression in his voice. 'No, Julius. It was bad Julius.'

A woman in a blue jumper stood up. She made eye contact whilst slugging down her coffee. She sniffed with disdain, then gave a lingering glare as she left the shop. Two men at the far end dressed for manual labour, sipping at their caffeine kickstart, postured as if daring Jack to

continue. So he showed them his phone screen. 'That's her,' he said. Then turned it so all could see. The mortician's photo caused a stir. He saw Jessie walking towards him, a tall man with greying hair, his name tab read 'Simon / Manager'.

'We don't want any trouble with you sir,' the manager said. 'I'll have to ask you to leave.'

'Why?' *What have I done?*

'Because you're disturbing the other customers,' Simon offered direction toward the door with his hand.

'Are you sure there isn't anyone I can call?' asked Jessie.

'We sat here, you remember? Chali and I, at this table.' *Don't you shake your head.* 'We sat here together.'

'I'm sorry, but you *were* alone,' Jessie replied.

Jack's breath sent a chilled stream of ice into the air; a reflection of how cold his heart was feeling. Winter, it seemed, had arrived this morning.

He'd found a wooden bench to sit on in the park, as far away from people as he could find. A few minutes later some school-kids had turned out to play baseball. Numerous dog-walkers were out exercising their canine friends.

He'd been through the file twice now; read every word as if there might be an explanation.

Chalise Thierry, aged nineteen, dead from drowning. The same Chalise who had come to him for help to find a serial-killer. The beautiful creature he'd made love to at the Eagle Star Hotel. It all felt like a dream.

She'd said she loved him, why would he make that up? Was he that needy, or self absorbed? Jack began laughing as a tall half-naked jogger skipped by. Nothing but shorts and a vest. *Fuck that, it must be close to freezing out here. And I think I'm going mad.* Jack watched him quicken his pace. A quick sprint past the crazy dude sat on the bench.

None of what had happened made any sense, not any more. Unless he accepted that his mind had dreamt Chali back to life. That he had somehow spent the last few years accumulating evidence of a killer. He'd have to acknowledge some sort of split personality disorder to explain that. But it was the only explanation that made any sense.

Maybe I should phone Jill? Get her to come and get me. Have me looked at. Yeah, that's what he should do. But he didn't. He just sat there as the cold crept into his bones. *I'm not crazy!* Jack was up, head down and striding down the path the jogger had taken. *Think Jack. Think this through.* He was two-parts ready to sign himself back into hospital. The one portion that remained still sought clarity; it was unwilling to fold

and take the easy way out. *Julius was real. He saw Chali.* ‘And that bastard heard those kids when they screamed.’

A dog gave Jack a hungry glare as its owner took to the grass, and away from the path. He barely noticed, his phone in hand being checked again. Maybe something had changed. Guess not as he scrolled down a list of calls made to a number not in service. He read and re-read a host of texts, sent from himself, to a number that had not replied. *Where are Chali’s texts? Not one reply. Where, where, where?*

‘They’re nowhere, that’s where,’ the other parts of his mind were speaking out again. ‘She’s dead. Been dead for forty odd years. She’s dead!’ he shouted, and didn’t care who heard. ‘You’re fucked, crazy, face it.’ he wanted to throw his phone, but couldn’t. He knew it would break whatever link remained with a woman who was deceased.

‘Call Jill. Tell her everything.’ *She’ll know what to do.* ‘Find someone to talk to,’ he scrolled through his address book, stopped at Jill’s name. *Call her, she’ll have the answers.*

For the first time since the accident . . . before he’d killed them. Jack felt ready to talk. *Yeah, spill the beans. Open up my gut.* He had to tell someone, anyone, what it was like to be inside Jack Lottman’s head. *She’ll come and get me. Take me home. It’s the only place you’ll find some peace.*

‘Peace? That’s what Chali said,’ he felt the need to sit, quickly. He was back there, holding her, watching Chali die. “*The only place that we can ever truly find peace,*” she’d said those same words.

‘The only place that we can ever truly find peace,’ it sounded the same out loud. ‘What else did she say? Fuck, Jack, remember,’ he’d made her a promise. Thought she was just rambling, influenced by the shock. ‘I remember . . .’ he said.

“We all have to face the end. Find a place to rest. A pretty place, where our loved ones can always come to find us.”

‘She made me promise.’ *Oh God, she died in my arms. I promised I’d come find her.* ‘In the only place we can ever truly find peace.’ *You dumb shit, now I understand.*

Jack sat in the middle of the path. Phone open, he sifted through the pages of documents. He needed to find out where Chali’s body had been sent after the post-mortem.

Chalise Thierry, French National, parents deceased. Last living relative was her grandmother, Claudette Thierry.

She lived in the US. Body was requested, but no forwarding address. It had to be in the file somewhere. For the first time in days Jack had reason for hope.

He'd found it. Chalise's body was shipped to . . . *No way. I've been there . . .* The Maple Grove Cemetery, North Hillside, Wichita, Kansas.

The former editor of his Paper, Paul Reidler, was buried there. His service had been at the 'Maple Grove'. No way that this was a coincidence. It proved, without a doubt, that he wasn't going crazy.

It does, doesn't it?

Easy Jack, get a grip. His heart rate was up, skin warming, caffeine buzz well and truly engaged. *No, she's dead, gone. Never was.* It was too late to be rational. The one portion of his mind that still believed had taken control. *What if she's there, waiting?* Jack was up and heading for his car. One way or the other this would prove beyond any doubt if he was truly losing his mind.

There it was, Maple Grove Cemetery, in big bold lettering along the wall. Tall brick pillars either side of its entrance. He vaguely remembered the taxi driving through the gates as he nursed a hangover; still half-loaded from the previous night's free-bar. A liquid celebration for Paul Reidler's life. A man he barely knew, but respected.

He remembered now, the argument with Jill. He'd stomped off without his plus-one, drank too much, then slept most of the way here, being roused by the taxi-driver as they'd arrived.

It looked so different this time around, as he left the road and entered the cemetery. He remembered shying away from the dappled sunlight and shadows that sparkled through the windows. An illuminating effect as he drove up a pretty avenue of ancient trees. As the car reached its peak the cemetery revealed itself. A sprawling garden of undulating grassland and trees. A bounty of marble and stone to commemorate the dead. Maple Grove Cemetery was huge.

Jack parked on a verge below an old maple tree that had begun to shed its leaves. He exited the Honda in awe of the view, but that wasn't what he'd come here for.

"It is all we can hope for," that's what Chali had said. She'd made him promise that he'd come and find her. Jack had no doubt now that this was where he was meant to be.

Chali's buried here? It can't be a coincidence.

But where to start? How to find a single grave in such a vast mausoleum? He walked away from the road, not sure why, just a feeling. Ahead was a field of headstones, the grass on the hill trimmed and lush. It was a walk back through time, his gaze flitting from one grave-marker to the next. The distant dates, the fading names; the tears shed as these forgotten bodies were lowered into the ground. He felt sadness that no-

one remembered. How could they? The burials had been such a long time ago.

He saw an old picket-fence ahead, its whitewashed timber now a greyish brown. It stood out amongst the headstones, and pillow-stones. The much grander monument-markers made of marble and stone. It reminded Jack of Pilgrims, their families laid together on a hill. It was stirring memories of his childhood, of the Little House on the Prairie. Strange feelings and emotions bubbling to the surface. He had no doubt at all now, that this was where he was meant to be.

Several headstones were gathered within the fence. A looming willow stood tall and graceful overhead. It's branches bowed in perpetual mourning for those below. He stepped over the fence to check the names; the markers not as old as the others.

Henrietta Doubois was the first name, beside her, her husband Frederick. There were two others stones that he could barely read without scraping away the moss. The fifth was a child named Natalie. Born in nineteen forty-four, died in nineteen forty-seven. This wasn't hers, not Chali's. Jack headed for newer markers. Several stones outside of the trees shadow, caught now in the chilled sunlight. There were six headstone in all, laid in a small group, all with the same surname. One in particular brought Jack to his knees.

Chalise Thierry
25.03.53 / 05.07.72
Taken from this world but
welcomed into the next.
God bless her soul.

Chali? He'd found her.

It was true then, she *was* dead. And the dead can't rise to love the living. That wasn't possible. In some way he thought . . . by finding her? The sight of her gravestone drained every emotion from his body.

So what had happened that day mourning Paul? Had he been that hungover? Maybe taken a walk and found her grave. Had another personality fantasised somehow about the girl in the grave?

Jack thought he might puke. This was way too much. Why the fuck couldn't he remember?

A split personality, is that it? He began to find it funny. What other explanation could there be? *I found a big story. A hunt for a serial-killer in*

my spare time. I took this woman's name and built it into my delusion. Is that even possible?

Jill had said he was acting odd. She'd accused him of being, distant. She kept asking if he'd stopped taking his pills again. But that wasn't true, was it? Jack slumped against the willow's trunk.

'So that's it then, I've lost my mind.' *At least a part of it.* 'I've gone mad,' he said aloud. 'I've gone crazy,' his voice carrying out across the vast and empty graveyard.

'No, I can't be. I'd know, wouldn't I?' Jack stared at the gravestone. *So where is she, if I've not gone mad? She should be here?* 'You made me promise,' he shouted. 'Chali?' he called out. 'Chali?!'

No surprise that she didn't answer. No choice now but to accept. The girl of his dreams had been dead for over forty years.

‘Shaack . . .’

‘Chali?’ *Shit, it’s happening again.* ‘Is that you?’ he couldn’t see her.

‘Shaack, I knew you would come.’

‘Chali?’ *No, she’s not real.* He was staring at her headstone. ‘Chali, is that you?’ *Stop it. Don’t do this.* He sheepishly looked around. ‘Is it, you?’ *Oh God, you’re here.*

‘Yes, I knew you would come,’ she reached out for him.

‘I don’t understand?’ He said, and felt the willow’s bark at his back. He pointed at the gravestone and closed his eyes. Jack sank to his knees. When he opened them again, Chali was knelt beside him. She took his hand and kissed it.

That was no delusion. He felt her lips. A moment later they touched his. Her hand cupped to his face. ‘I knew you’d come.’

‘Chali, I thought I’d lost you?’

‘No, I’m here. Where I said I would be,’ she kissed him again, ‘and you found me, just as you promised.’

‘They couldn’t find you, at the bunker,’ he eased her hand away, holding it as gently as he could. ‘How can this be?’ he turned her face to follow his gaze. ‘That’s your grave?’ he whispered.

Chali’s smile faded. Sadness filled her eyes.

What, what’s wrong?

‘Chali?’ he grabbed her; pulled her tight. A sudden, terrible feeling that he was about to lose her again.

‘I’m so sorry, Jack,’ her voice fallen to a hush. ‘They won’t let me stay.’

‘Who won’t? Who won’t let you stay?’ *This is ridiculous. She’s long gone.* He wrapped his arms around her. ‘You’re back. I won’t . . . I can’t let you go.’ *No, don’t cry.*

'They gave me a choice, you remember? I chose Kirsty. She deserves to be a child. To grow up and have a life. Edward took mine. C'est la vie. I'm so sorry,' she held onto Jack as if the end was coming.

He didn't know what to say. 'Thank you,' he said, and ran his fingertips down her cheeks. 'Am I crazy?' He asked. 'Did we do, what we did?' *Please tell me it was real.* 'Did we do it together?'

'Yes, you and I, together,' she broke away; wiped her face. 'Jack, look. I've brought friends to meet you. They wanted to thank you for what you did.'

'What friends?' *Christ, where did they come from?* Children, standing behind the gravestones. A lot of them. 'Chali, are they the . . .'

'Oui, yes, all of them. They wanted you to know, Jack. They want you to know, before they pass on.'

'Pass on? Chali, what's going on?' he was getting a headache. 'No, I don't want to look at them. Hey, hey, look at me.' *Fuck.* 'You're leaving with them, aren't you?'

'We have to go, yes.'

'No, you don't.' *They're not real. They can't be.*

'They're as real as you and I,' she said, her lips didn't move. She took his hands and kissing them.

The kids, they were waving; smiling at Jack.

'Is that Samantha?' her Elfish face, grinning. All smiles with her eyes. She blew Jack a kiss. *Thank you,* she said, without uttering a word. The others too, all gave a smile of thanks. He recognised them from their photos.

Angelina Trepri, the kid with the ponytails, she had a mischievous grin. Jack's eyes began to water. 'Alice,' he said. She looked just like her photo. She raised a hand, her fingers waggled to say goodbye. Tears were streaming down his face. Jack recognised them all, as one by one they faded.

'We waited for you,' said Chali. 'I, waited for you.'

'Please don't go.'

'They gave us this time.'

'Who? Who's they?'

'Time to say goodbye,' she kissed him on the lips

'Goodbye?' not a word he wanted to hear. 'I don't understand any of this. Is any of this real? Am I . . . ?' he touched at his temple. Her finger touched at his lips.

‘Shhhh, who’s to say what is or isn’t real? This is real, you and I. Julius was real. The children, they wanted you to see; you saved them. They . . . we, could not have done this without you.’

‘Please don’t go. Stay . . .’

‘I cannot. My time ended in that place. I’m so sorry; I wanted so badly to stay, with you.’

Touch her again. Prove that she’s real.

He didn’t care what the rules were, Jack needed to touch Chali. To kiss her and hold the Girl from the Grave. He refused to let her go anywhere.

‘You’re not mad,’ she said. ‘Perhaps a little crazy in love, who knows? I hope so.’

‘Don’t leave. I’m broken without you.’

‘You’re the only one,’ she said.

Jack held on for as long as he could. He hadn’t meant to, but he did the thing he feared the most. He closed his eyes and wished with desperation she would stay. When he opened them, Chali was gone. They were all gone.

‘Chali?’ *Don’t leave me.* He felt his heart may stop at any moment. Jack got to his feet. *She has to be here, somewhere. She has to be.*

Nothing but grass, and memories of the forgotten.

‘Chali?!’

It was real. You’re real.

‘I love you,’ he shouted. ‘I love you!’ As if the words alone would bring her back. *I can’t be without you.*

A funeral procession walked amongst the stones in the distance, it’s followers dressed in black. A Clergyman in his dark regalia, Bible in hand, looked primed to deliver the dead. The march of his Patron’s coffin now on pause.

The congregation stared at the strange man who was shouting to himself in the graveyard.