

AND NEXT,

DARKNESS



DAVID DWAN

And Next, Darkness

David Dwan

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Prologue

Fear. That was the word Dodds had been searching for. That Woman he had just seen was scared to death of something. He'd caught that look in her eyes the moment he had looked into them and even at that distance it had been tangible. It had only been a fleeting glimpse, but it was undeniable, it was a raw almost primal fear. And if there was one thing Barry Dodds knew about, it was the look of fear in a person's eyes.

During his twenty five years in the police he had seen it more times than he cared to remember, a gallery of nameless faces he had encountered with numbing regularity down through the years he'd spent on the force. Victims of violence and hate, loss and cruelty of every imaginable type which he had always viewed with a professional detachment, you had to or you would go insane. But now that he was entrenched in semi-retirement as a caretaker slash security guard here at Old Mill Studios, a film and TV post production house on the outskirts of Leeds city center. This had been the last place he'd expected to see that look again. And it had shaken him.

Dodds had taken the job because the studio was literally a stone's throw from the flat he shared with his Wife, Debbie. He could see the building from his front window and so didn't actually have to be on site the whole night. The alarms were all hooked up to a monitor in the flat, all the employees had swipe cards so they didn't need to bother him if they were working late and he would just give the place a cursory patrol every couple of hours if it was empty. It was an arrangement that suited everyone. The studio's owners got a nice reduction on their insurance premium without having to employ a full time security guard and Dodds got a nice supplement to his police pension.

It had been just after midnight then Dodds had looked out of his window to see the building lit up like a Christmas tree, it seemed every light in the place had been switched on. None of the alarms had been tripped, so whomever it was had to be an employee, but a quick glance

at his schedule told Dodds that no late night production work had been planned in. Which wasn't that unusual, these film and TV types kept irregular hours at the best of times, so maybe a deadline hadn't been met which meant some poor soul was burning the midnight oil to finish editing the latest ASDA commercial or whatever masterpiece they were working on at the moment.

Still, just to be sure, Dodds had dragged his bones over to the studios expecting to find half a dozen headless chickens running around the place, but despite the lights on everywhere it seemed deserted. He had then made a cursory sweep of the lower floor which yielded nothing but empty rooms and so he made his way upstairs to the second floor where the sound department was located. Again, to coin a phrase, all the lights were on, but no one was home. Dodds was smiling to himself at the old joke when he passed a large sound recording studio, he glanced through a door left ajar which he saw led to the mixing desk/control room and beyond that the recording studio itself visible through a large observation window.

And there she was, standing in the middle of the studio, staring blankly ahead with her arms wrapped around herself as if for warm. It took Dodds a few moments to recognize the woman, who was in her mid-forties and although she was inside and it was the height of summer she still had on her long black coat. What was her name? Dodds racked his sleep deprived brain, something Welsh. Bromlyn, that was it, she was the head of the sound department if memory served. He came into the control room and was about to go through into the recording studio itself and announce himself when something about the look on her face made him stop. Now that he was in the room he could see she wasn't actually staring off into space but was looking at a small old fashioned reel-to-reel tape recorder sitting on the table in front of her. She seemed transfixed by the spinning reels, her brow knitted in deep concentration.

He must have moved because she suddenly caught sight of him through the window out of the corner of her eye and she screamed out loud, or so it looked to Dodds who suddenly found himself glad the booth was sound proof. Judging by her face it was a full bodied scream of terror. Dodds tried to laugh as casually as he could muster at having startled her, he held up a hand in greeting and shrugged apologetically at nearly causing the poor Woman a heart attack, but the smile fell right off his face when he looked into her eyes, he gave an involuntary shudder. Yes, there is was, fear. This woman was terrified of something. It was as if she had been listening to the devil Himself on that antiquated tape recorder. And Dodds knew in that brief instant why she had turned all the lights on, for comfort. That childish need to banish the dark and what monsters may lurk within.

The spell broken, Bromlyn frantically looked around her surroundings as if re-orientating herself, then remembering where she was she quickly grabbed the tape from the reel-to-reel player, stuffed it into a large canvas bag and left through the back door at the other end of the studio without a word.

Dodds stood there for a full half minute staring thought the partition at the empty studio. He refocused his eyes and looked at his reflection in the glass. "Weird," he said to it. That seemed to sum things up perfectly.

Of course, if he'd known then that he was to be the last person to see her before she vanished off the face of the earth, he would have thought of something more profound to say.

ONE

To the casual observer Bloomfield Manor was the epitome of an elegant English stately home. On the surface it ticked all the relevant boxes. Built in the late eighteenth century as a country retreat for his beloved

wife Laura by Lord William Bloomfield (the second). It was located in the heart of the Yorkshire dales, nestled in a modest twenty acres of rolling green countryside and had in its time played host to Kings and Queens, and generations of the great and the good of British aristocracy alike. Up until relatively recently its history had been as sedate as its surroundings, and had Lord Bloomfield chosen a spot closer to civilization, it would have undoubtedly been a magnet for tourists.

The outward appearance of the great house had changed little over the years since the Bloomfield line died out towards the end of the nineteenth century, but its occupants most certainly had. After laying empty for nearly twenty years Bloomfield manor was purchased by the Government in Nineteen Seventeen and turned into one of the country's first psychiatric hospitals devoted entirely to the study and treatment of soldiers returning from the Great War suffering from the then little known condition, shell shock.

In the years since, the once crude treatment techniques born out of ignorance of the newly discovered condition had become more sophisticated, more humane if you like. And with that the influx of mentally damaged soldiers dwindled to nothing, housed now in more modern and suitable surroundings. Shell shock gave way to post traumatic stress disorder and a greater more compassionate understanding of its effects. And in nineteen eighty two, with no real pomp or ceremony. Bloomfield Manor became a NHS funded Psychiatric Hospital. The patients were no less numerous (thirty at the last head count) and no less damaged, than their uniformed counterparts. But now they were just civilian casualties of that war to end all wars. Life.

To the outside world it was Bloomfield Manor Psychiatric hospital and treatment center. To those who lived and worked there, it was known by a different name. The Monkey Farm.

The Monkey Farm hadn't changed much since Jenny Drayton had been released from it some twelve months ago now. She had been a 'guest' here for eight sometimes harrowing months, and there had been times during her stay when she felt sure that she would die here. And others, during her more lucid moments, when she swore, if by some miracle she did get out she would never return. But yet here she was again.

Jenny superstitiously tapped the visitor badge clipped to her blouse which identified her as an outpatient. Even though it had been a year since she was released back into the community she still half expected one of the orderlies to grab her and throw her back into a padded cell, every time she can back for her quarterly evaluation.

She looked out of the large window of Doctor Kapoor's second floor office and down into the grounds below. Several patients were in the gardens, enjoying the change in the weather. Two were sitting on a park bench their faces upturned to the cloudless blue sky, another was strolling around barefoot on the lush grass. In the mid-summer sun it could have been a scene played out in any park across the country, people just out for the day enjoying the sunshine and pleasant surroundings. Were it not for the fact they were all dressed in identical light blue shirts and trousers, and the lack of children playing ball games, flying kites and the like. And of course for those white uniformed orderlies lurking around like ghosts amongst the greenery. Keeping their distance but always never far away.

There was a minor commotion over by one of the flower beds, a Patient was arguing with one of the Gardeners, she was gesticulating wildly at the flowers he was in the process of planting. Jenny tensed, seeing two orderlies come jogging over to them and she was hit with a sickening wave of déjà vu as the scene played out like some silent movie below her. The Gardener was backing away from the mad Woman with his hands out in front of him, shaking his head. *'Don't stab me, crazy Lady'* he could almost have been saying. It would have been comical

under any other circumstance as he was nearly twice her size, but not here.

In Bloomfield this little interchange screamed potential flash point in twenty foot high flashing neon letters. The Gardener glanced around to see the orderlies approaching and began talking to them animatedly. Jenny felt her heart race, and without realizing it she had begun mouthing to the Woman, '*Calm down, calm down,*' under her breath. Silently pleading with her not to lose it, as she knew only too well what could follow. She thought she recognized one of the Orderlies, a man named Myers. She wracked her brains trying to remember what he was like and came back with hard but fair, which was a good sign if she remembered correctly. Then she recalled with a flash of recognition, that she had once punched Myers square in the nose and although it had shocked the Man, and broken two of Jenny's fingers, he had remained calm and hadn't reacted with a punch of his own. She just hoped he hadn't hardened with time served here at the Monkey Farm.

The Woman bent down and pulled out one of the flowers, this made Jenny wince and for a moment she thought the Woman was going to throw it at Myers and the other Orderly. But she just knelt down and replanted it in another place. Evidently she didn't think much of the Gardener's planting skills. Jenny could almost feel the tension down there dissipate, the Gardener nodded and said something to Myers then joined his new best friend on his knees and together they went about replanting the entire flower bed. The two Orderlies exchanged a smile and backed away to a more discrete distance to observe. Crisis over.

The incident, however harmless in the end had brought too many bad memories flooding back, Jenny touched her top lip with the tip of her finger and it came away wet with sweat, she wiped her face with her hands and exhaled waiting for her heart to stop racing. She closed her eyes and let the sun warm her face through the window.

She could hear a faint tap-tap tapping behind her and realized that the commotion outside had made her forget that Doctor Kapoor was still in the room. The tap-tap tapping she could hear was him tapping his pen on his notepad the way he always did when he was thinking. Jenny knew he was studying her even without turning around.

“Doctor,” she said still facing the window. “I can feel your eyes burning a hole in the back of my head?”

“I was looking at your arse actually,” came the reply.

Jenny finally turned around to look at him. There he was, dressed in his trademark smart tweed suit, in direct contrast to his perpetually stubbly chin and unruly salt and pepper hair. Sitting in his massive office, behind his massive desk, massive ego to match. And thank Christ, all of that dwarfed by his massive heart. She didn’t try to hide her grin.

“No, really,” he said with a school boy smirk.

“You know, I could have you struck off for that?”

He rolled his eyes. “Tut, again!”

Her grin turned mischievous. “I’m sure Doctor Freud would have something to say about the size of this office. Not to mention that desk!”

“Who’s the psychologist here, anyway?”

“That’s a matter of opinion.” Jenny said and walked across and casually perched herself on the edge of the desk, it was massive indeed, she was still some three feet away from the Doctor. She looked down into his eyes, he was sixty one at the last count and you could see every day of it written on his face, but he still had the eyes of a twenty year old, always full of mischief and the Devil’s twinkle. That was one of the first things he noticed about him, that and the irreverent sense of inappropriate humor.

“I’m supposed to look down at *you* during these things,” he told her. “It’s a power thing.” He threw his notepad down on the desk and

picked up his coffee cup.

“So, how did I do on the whacko test? You going to re-admit me to the Monkey Farm or what?” It was joke, but still some irrational part of her still waited for him to click his fingers, say ‘yes’ and two Orderlies to come bursting through the door with a straight jacket. She watched him as he took a gulp of coffee and wince theatrically at the taste.

“Well,” he replied and carefully replaced the cup back on a coaster on the desk. “It has been a little dull around here since we let you out. Which I still think was a clerical error by the way.” He smiled warmly at her, just in case she didn’t get the joke.

Jenny stood back up and paced a little. “What about Mad Maggie? She was always good for a shit fit or two.”

“She’s just fine, she was asking after you.”

“Ha! I bet.” Mad Maggie had taken an instant dislike to Jenny the moment she’d arrived. Once she had actually called her the Anti-Christ. It made her sick to think about it now, but during those first few dark weeks here, the sport of Mad Maggie baiting had been all that had kept Jenny going. She physically cringed at the thought, even all these months later. And when she was finally slated for release Jenny had tried to reconcile with the Woman, she could finally see just how deeply ill Maggie was, but all she had got was the regulation verbal abuse in return. Still, Jenny mused, at least she was alive and in good hands here. Even if chances were she would never get out.

She must have been frowning because Kapoor coughed, bringing her back to reality. Jenny smiled, old ghosts she thought, Bloomfield certainly had it’s fair share of those.

“You okay? Kapoor asked.

“Sure,” Jenny shrugged it off. “Just the old place, y’know?” He nodded, he knew only too well. “So,” she changed the subject. “You were saying about the whacky test?”

He threw her a stern look. “You did fine, and it’s not a test, just an evaluation. I’m going to write you a new prescription.”

“God bless the happy pills. You know I actually rattle when I walk?”

Kapoor took a prescription pad out of a locked draw and started scribbling on it. “It’s a much lower dose,” he said with his face buried in the pad. “Practically nothing in them in truth.” Then he looked up to make sure Jenny was paying attention. “But you still have to take them, okay?”

She saluted him. “Anything to get away from your ugly mug, Doc.”

He grunted in response and tore off the prescription slip. A sharp rapping on the door made them both start. “She does that on purpose,” Kapoor said to Jenny, then gave a brisk, “In!” To the door.

Mrs. Hargrove, Kapoor's secretary came into the room. A stern looking woman in her mid-fifties wearing a very formal grey suit. Jenny had never seen the Woman before today. Kapoor seemed to go through secretaries at an alarming rate, there always seemed to be a new one whenever she came back to Bloomfield. Which if she was honest wasn't in the least bit surprising. Kapoor being Kapoor.

“Sorry to bother you, Doctor,” Hargrove said in a clipped tone. “But you wanted me to let you know when Doctor Taylor was out of his meeting?”

“I did?” Kapoor looked puzzled, then the light when on above his head. “I did, yes. Thank you Sarah.” He looked at his watch. “We’ve run over by twenty minutes.” He said to Jenny as Hargrove began clearing the coffee cups from his desk.

“Tempus fugit, Doc,” Jenny replied.

Kapoor nodded. “Indeed, shame I'm not charging by the hour,” then he turned to Hargrove who was already half way to the door with the coffee cups. “Tell Richard I'll be through to see him in a sec’”

Kapoor got to his feet with a grunt of effort. Signaling the end of the evaluation. And Jenny couldn't help thinking that she had escape the Monkey Farm's clutches once again. She tapped the visitors badge again for luck. Kapoor caught the action and gave her a sideway glance.

“Nutter,” he said and Jenny shrugged apologetically as Kapoor shoved the new prescription in her hand.

Although when she had these evaluations, Jenny was never actually in the secure part of Bloomfield, she was always glad to see the great entrance hall which housed the hospital's reception area and beyond that the inviting sunlight flooding through the two massive front doors as she and Kapoor came down the stone steps from his office. Kapoor always insisted on walking her out, she was in no doubt that he did this for all the out patients he saw, but still it was just one of those little touches he had of making you feel like you were the only patient he had.

“How are things with Reece?” Kapoor asked as they reached the bottom of the long stone steps that lead down from the office area of the hospital. “You two kids married yet? And if so, why wasn't I invited?”

“Good, he's good. And no we aren't married; don't hold your breath on that one, Doc.” Jenny had been with her Boyfriend Reece for coming up to two years now, he had been everything to her through the darker days, but lately she had a niggling doubt about where things were going. And she voiced it to Kapoor now. “He still feels like he has to look after me.”

“Don't knock it. He's a good fella,”

“I know. But...” Her voice trailed off, and she examined her shoes as they walked, and listened to the click of them on the highly polished stone floor of the reception area.

“But?” Kapoor prompted.

She looked up at him and tried a smile. “Oh, I'm sure it's just me.” She was surprised how hard she found it articulating what was worrying her, especially to Kapoor, the one man in the whole world who really knew her, more than Reece, more even than her own Father.

Jenny shrugged. "Dunno, relationships, eh?" She said lamely suddenly feeling awkward.

"Things not going so well?" Kapoor inquired.

"Oh, no, things are fine." She said lightly. "It's just. Lately..." She fought to find the right words. "I know it's probably me, but lately I've been wondering. What if Reece is one of those types who needs to be needed, y'know? Part of me can't help but think that once I'm well maybe he'll just sod off." It was strange but once she'd got the thought out of her head and into the open, she could see it for the folly it was. Reece was a good man, better than her petty paranoia was giving him credit for. Weight lifted somewhat, she shook her head. "Of course I could just be talking bollocks."

"Firstly. You are well, Jen." Kapoor said with his serious face on. And she knew him well enough to know he meant it, which felt good. "And secondly, yes, you are talking bollocks. I've seen you two together, it's sickening, really, all that lovey dovey stuff, it's quite unhealthy, y'know? He's a good guy. God knows what he sees in you, but whatever it is, I think he's in it for the long haul." He thought for a moment and Jenny saw that familiar twinkle in his eye. "Y'know. Maybe I should give *him* the evaluation next time. After all there's obviously something deeply wrong with the guy. Dating a nutter like you."

"I told him I was rich," Jenny said with a chuckle.

As they approached the reception desk, Jenny unclipped her visitors badge and gave it to the receptionist. Now that her lucky talisman was gone, Jenny couldn't help but study the receptionist face as she scanned through her paperwork for any sign of alarm. That clerical error Kapoor always joked about suddenly becoming a heart stopping reality.

But the receptionist didn't hit the panic button, summoning a dozen Ninja Orderlies who would appear out of nowhere to drag her kicking and screaming back to the Monkey farm, and no doubt the

loving arms of Mad Maggie. She simply smiled, ticked her sheet and slid the visitors signing in sheet across the counter to Jenny.

“That’s all fine Miss Drayton,” she said offering Jenny a pen. “Please sign here, and we’ll drop you a line confirming when you’re next evaluation will be.”

“Thank you,” Jenny said, her voice seemed paper thin. *Pull yourself together!* She thought and taking the pen signed where indicated and slipped the sheet back.

“Besides,” Kapoor picked up the conversation as they exited the building and walked across the gravel car park towards Jenny’s car. “I’m the last one to give advice on relationships. I’ve been divorced three times already.” He dug his hands deep into the pockets of his jacket.

It took Jenny a second to pick up the thread of what they had been talking about. She wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans.

“Huh?” she said absently, then; “Relationships, oh. Hang on, you’ve only been divorced twice.”

“Well, two and a half. Laura and I separated again. Think it’s permanent this time.” He frowned ever so slightly.

“Shit, I’m sorry to hear that.”

Kapoor gave a shrug of the shoulders and smiled ruefully. “You know she’s a psychotherapist? She’d always say to me; you know what your problem is don’t you? And she’d be right. Used to annoy the hell out of me.” He looked around the car park. “So, which jalopy is yours then?”

“The Fiat,” Jenny nodded across to her white Punto parked under a large oak tree to keep the sun off. “About Reece,” she said as they approached the car. “He’s going away for a week, filming, he’s a cameraman. That’s how we first met, on a film shoot, I used to be a sound recordists, before...” Before, before. Her life was now divided into before her breakdown and after. During it was just a distant memory, a blur of pain and half remembered nightmares.

“Tomorrow, right?” he answered.

Jenny looked at him with surprise. “What are you a mind reader now?”

“He rang me last week. He was worried him going away might affect your evaluation.” He caught her look of surprise. “He was worried about you. I told him it was okay.” He explained.

She exhaled and shook her head. That was just like Reece, she had had to practically beg him to go and she wasn’t surprised his first thought was to ring Kapoor. They reached the car and Jenny lent her back against it, despite the shade it felt hot. “He needs to stop worrying so much and get on with his own stuff, y’know?” She said.

“Like I said, Jen, don’t knock it, Reece is a good man.” He folded his arms and studied her as she spoke.

“I know,” Jenny admitted. “But he needs a life of his own, I don’t want him to feel like he has to babysit me all the time. Besides we can do with the cash.” Jenny looked around the grounds that surrounded the car park. It was such an idyllic place, sometimes it was hard to imagine that it was a nut house. She saw the Gardener and his new helper still planting in the flower bed, she smiled and looked back to see Kapoor was still studying her. “What?” she said defensively.

“Nothing. Don’t add paranoia to your list of mental issues.” He smiled broadly. “So, you’re okay with being on your own for a week?”

She nodded. “Yeah, it’ll be nice.” Jenny had been so caught up in convincing Reece she would be fine without him for a week that she now only just realized that this would be the first time she would be alone for any length of time since her release. Suddenly the car at her back didn’t feel quite so warm. Shake it off Girl she thought, a bit of me time will do you the world of good. “I’ll be fine,” she added and almost believed it.

“Course you will, but you call me if you need to.” Kapoor said.

“Thanks,” she replied. They both knew she wouldn’t although neither would say it. There was an awkward pause, and Jenny had the

feeling Kapoor didn't want to let her go. Hang on, she chided herself; don't add megalomania to your list of mental issues.

"You should get back into it," Kapoor finally said obliquely.

"Huh?"

"Sound recording."

She sucked in a breath and gave him a quizzical look. It was such a loaded issue. Her breakdown had first manifested itself as half heard spectral voices through her headphones whilst sound recording. Then before long they migrated to the radio, TV, anything electronic. It was all in her head she now knew, but the thought of tempting fate didn't appeal. "Maybe," she finally said in a less than convincing tone.

This won a smile from Kapoor. He studied her again, and then after a moment said, "You know we're all really proud of you Jenny. You've come so far in twelve months."

"God as it been that long? You know I can even be trusted with sharp objects again?" Her stomach knotted seeing a flash of pain in Kapoor's eyes. She absently ran her hand over her left forearm; she could feel the network of deep scars even through the material. Bad joke. "Why is it," she said with an attempt at gallows humor. "If you get a tattoo you're considered cool. But slice yourself up with a carving knife, and they lock you up?"

She could see Kapoor's eyes soften at this, obviously as glad as she was to be back on familiar sick ground.

"That's because," he said. "As everyone knows, tattoos are cool, so is smoking. These are socially acceptable forms of self-mutilation."

"Years of medical school taught you that?"

"Huh," he snorted. "Got my medical degree over the internet. Six months and they let you dispense hard drugs."

"Nice one."

"Keeps me in Jags and ex-wives."

Before she even knew it, Jenny was hugging the old quack. He had saved her life in so many ways. And she loved him so much it hurt. She

eventually let go but was surprised to feel him still holding her, tears came to her eyes and he let her go just in time to stop them becoming a flood. Jenny looked into those youthful eyes of his. "I'm still not sure you weren't just one of the patients who nicked a white coat." She told him

"Ssh," he said and gave her a mischievous wink.

Jenny fished in her pocket for the car keys. "Thanks for everything, Doc."

"Always a pleasure, never a chore," he replied. "And remember, call me if you need anything. Anytime." She was about to thank him again when he added. "Except Thursdays, that's poker night."

She laughed and kissed his stubbly cheek, then gently pushed him away. "Will you get out of here you quack!"

"See you soon," he said.

"Not if I see you first." she replied. Kapoor winked again and started back towards the building.

Jenny opened the door and let the heat pour out for a moment before she got in. She watched Kapoor, hands buried deep in his pockets disappear back inside the impressive looking stately home. Then out of nowhere the tears came. For the old wounds reopened every time she came back, but mostly it was in relief, because she finally knew that after all those dark, dark days and nights spent at Bloomfield. She knew that now, thankfully, she no longer belonged there.

TWO

A visit to the Monkey Farm, although now thankfully a rare event these days. Never failed to leave Jenny Drayton with two very conflicting emotions. Firstly there was the fear, however irrational it seemed once she was away from the place. Fear of what might come. During the

days leading up to her latest evaluation she would be a mass of nervous energy, usually driving her long suffering Boyfriend Reece mad with her constant pacing and fretting, she wouldn't be able to settle, and sleep would be impossible the night before.

It was like the worst kind of exam, and although she knew deep down it was ludicrous, she couldn't help but think that it was one exam that if she failed, she would be trapped there forever. Locked away in her very own straightjacket left to bounce off the walls and count the hours until her next session with Kapoor.

Kapoor. Kapoor was the flip side, after her evaluation the second emotion would kick in and it felt a lot like loss. Like visiting a sick relative and wondering if that would be the last time you saw them. Like finally realizing that someone you loved might leave your life forever.

What would happen to her once it was all over? Once the evaluations with the good Doctor came to an end and she was deemed by the great and the good at Bloomfield to be completely sane again and thus allowed to inhabit the civilized world unchecked by those quarterly visits to the monkey farm and her beloved Doctor? It had been hard enough leaving the structured familiarity of the hospital when she was released, but she had been comforted by the knowledge that she could always call Kapoor in a time of emotional crisis, calls she had made with lessening regularity as the months had passed, but just knowing he was only a phone call away made life the outside world seem that much more bearable. Kapoor was her safety net, her crutch more so than even Reece, who with the best will in the world, and no matter how much he wanted to, could never be that to her.

She loved the old quack like a Father and still got a flash of panic at the thought he would never be there for her again. Of course he had sworn he would always be just a phone call away (excluding Thursdays, that was poker night) even when he was no longer professionally obliged to do so. He had made a promise to her during those dark days,

that he would lead her through the dark shadows of madness and out to the light at the other side. Jenny knew now that, that was just what she needed to hear at the time, and that eventually she would, like her real Father, one day no longer need him to function from one day to the next.

But that day still seemed so far away. Jenny shuddered at the thought and splashed cold water onto her face to wash it away. She looked at her reflection in the bathroom mirror and shook her head. "Nutter," she scolded her reflection and managed a wry smile. She felt like she had been standing there in the bathroom, staring into space running things through her head for hours, she glanced at her wrist watch, which was laid on the small dresser by the sink, it was nearly eleven and she had to get up early in the morning to see Reece off. Jenny could hear him in the bedroom next door cursing under his breath, he had been packing and repacking his suitcase for half an hour now.

Jenny flicked through the much thumbed note book which was next to her watch, it contained the medicine schedule Kapoor had drawn up for her and she ticked the last empty square of the day and put it back into the medicine cabinet above the sink.

She padded barefoot across the hall towards the bedroom and rested her shoulder against the door frame before going in. And sure enough, Reece had emptied the contents of his suitcase all over the bed and was checking for the umpteenth time that he had everything he would need for the week long shoot he was going on. He was dressed for bed in his lucky moth eaten Daffy Duck t-shirt and stripy boxer shorts and was still wearing his grey socks all of which made him look like a kid getting ready for a school trip rather than the thirty three year old so called responsible adult he allegedly was.

"That's the third time you've packed that," Jenny pointed out. "Would you like me to call your Mummy to come over and check it for you?"

He looked across at her and grinned. "You take all your meds?" He asked, stuffing a pair of jeans into the bottom of the suitcase.

"Only the pretty ones." She replied and came into the room. Reece grabbed a pair of socks and playfully threw them at her. Jenny easily dodged the black cotton missile and pushed him back onto the bed. She straddled him and pinned his arms to the bed. He grunted in protest.

"So, Kapoor seemed pleased?" Reece said.

"Uhuh, and why not? I'm his star pupil." Jenny leaned forwards and kissed the tip of his nose. Reece looked up into her eyes, he frowned ever so slightly. Jenny knew what he was thinking. "Hey, I'll be fine.

"I know you will," Reece replied. But still he didn't look totally convinced, he was an open book to her and always had been.

"I don't want you worrying about me when you're supposed to be working. You'll mess up all your shots, and then they'll fire your sorry arse." She told him and ruffled his hair, he squirmed under her and made a face, he always hated that.

"Oi," he protested. Then added, "And what do you mean mess up my shots? Reece 'steady cam' Parker does not mess up his shots."

Jenny raised an eye brow. "Really?" She let out a shriek as Reece flipped her onto her back and knelt on top of her. She gasped theatrically. "Can't breathe!" she said but couldn't keep a straight face.

Reece lent forward and they kissed. His face lingered over hers. "I love you," he said tenderly. Jenny pushed him off and rolled off the bed and onto her feet.

"Why, Mister Parker," she said in mock exasperation. "And we're not even having sex!"

He frowned. "Tut, I mean it." Jenny held out her hands to him, Reece took them and she pulled him to his feet. She kissed him. "I do," he said and kissed her back.

“I know you do,” Jenny said. She looked deep into his doe eyes. He was half waiting to hear it, but they both knew she wouldn’t say it back. Not yet, after everything that had happened, she just wasn’t ready for the ‘L’ word. It would have to remain unspoken between them for now, but she hoped he knew she did love him, but just couldn’t verbalize it. It made her feel too vulnerable, just one of the many lingering foibles from her breakdown. It was a joke they shared from time to time. But lately, although Reece would never openly admit it himself, she felt it was a souring one.

As Jenny turned off the bedroom light, the Woman standing in the street below stepped out of the shadows opposite and looked up at the house. Such a normal suburban environment, she thought, although it seemed a lifetime ago now, she had lived in one just like it with her Husband and two children and that was just two week ago, or so she thought. She wondered as she stared up at the house if she could ever return to that life, now that she knew what lay just beneath the surface of normality.

She shifted the package she was holding in her sweaty hands to under her left arm and wiped her hands dry on her sleeves. The contents of the package would seem harmless looking enough to the casual observer, but may as well have been stuffed with Semtex for all the damage they had done to her and potentially could do to Jenny Drayton.

Clutching the package close to her chest now, Bromlyn started across the street towards the house, but with every step she took, the crushing doubt that this was the right thing to do grew. But she didn’t know who else to turn to. Jenny Drayton was surly the only one who could help her understand what was happening to her, to help her solve this mystery that was threatening to unravel her already dwindling sanity completely. Without her Bromlyn didn’t know how she was going to survive another day. Twice already the sheer weight of it all

had driven her to the very edge of suicide, she couldn't think straight and needed an ally against the growing darkness that was threatening to engulf her. And although she knew Jenny wouldn't thank for it, she had no choice.

Bromlyn snuck around the side of the house and quietly laid the package on the door step. "Sorry," she said softly and slipped back into the night and away. As she went she couldn't help but wonder if in doing so, she might have just killed them both.

THREE

The sound of music coming from down stairs dragged Jenny unceremoniously out of a much needed deep sleep. She groaned and rolled over to look at the alarm clock sat on the bedside table, but it took several seconds for her eyes to focus on the green florescent numbers. Eight thirty. "Shit!" Jenny threw off the covers and dragged herself out of bed. Thanks to the music, no doubt coming from the kitchen, she knew she hadn't missed Reece's departure but she was sure he had booked a taxi for around eight thirty. Her head swam as she swung her legs out and got to her feet and still groggy from sleep she made her way down stairs.

She followed the music and the welcome smell of freshly brewed coffee through into the kitchen where Reece was sitting at the kitchen table sipping orange juice. His suitcase was sitting by the door with his jacket draped over it ready for the off. He looked up at her as she entered and gave a sharp laugh. "It lives!" he said seeing her disheveled state.

"Why didn't you wake me?" Jenny asked still half asleep.

"I did," Reece nodded to the CD player on the kitchen counter.

"Good hair by the way." Jenny made a vain attempt to smooth down her

riotous bed head and turned the CD player down. "Coffee?" Reece added.

"Oh dear God yes," she sat herself down at the kitchen table and pinched a piece of toast from Reece's plate. She watched him as he got up to pour her a cup. "I meant, why didn't you wake me earlier?"

"Thought you needed the sleep. Don't worry I was going to come up and say goodbye before I went." Reece set her cup onto the table in front of her.

Before he could sit back down again Jenny wrapped her arms around his waist. "Ooh, I'm going to miss you." She said and squeezed him tight. Reece leant down and kissed the top of her head. As he sat back down next to her Jenny noticed an A4 padded envelope amidst the breakfast clutter on the table. "What's this?"

"Came this morning, it's for you," Reece said and pushed the envelope over to her. "No stamp, must have been hand delivered. I found it on the door step." With this he drained the last dregs of his orange juice.

Jenny frowned and picked up the envelope, she span it in her hands and felt its contents shift as she did so. There was no address just her name scrawled on the front in black marker pen in a hand she didn't recognize. "Bizarre, wonder who it's from?" She said as much to herself as to Reece.

"How the hell should I know? Open it." Reece got to his feet and began clearing the table. He laughed as Jenny held the envelope to her ear. "It's ok I don't think its ticking." He added.

"Bizarre," Jenny said again and put the envelope down. She didn't know why but she was in no hurry to open it. Maybe it was because an unexpected letter was like a phone call out of the blue, an intrusion into your life that had the potential to throw your equilibrium out of whack. Of course both could bring good news as well as bad, but Jenny was a pessimist through and through.

“Well are you gonna open it or not?” Reece asked. He checked the clock on his mobile.

“Maybe later,” Jenny shrugged. “What time you off?”

“Taxi should be here any sec’” Reece suddenly darted forward and snatched up the envelope off the table. “Ha!” He said in triumph.

“Hey!” Jenny made a half-hearted grab for his hand but he was too quick.

“Well if you aren’t gonna open it I am. You might want to get under the table just in case it blows up.” Reece said squeezing the envelope. “I’m sure a girl like you must have lots of enemies.”

“Millions,” Jenny said. Reece tore open the envelope and looked inside. “Well?” Jenny asked as he looked puzzled.

“Well, it didn’t go boom.” Reece said and tipped the envelope up, two old fashioned audio tape reels spilled out onto the table. Jenny frowned and picked up one of the tapes. She hadn’t seen one of these in years.

“Aren’t those Nagra tapes?” Reece asked, picking up the other. “Talk about old school.”

“Yeah,” said Jenny. She examined the tape but it had no label.

“Hmm, weird.” Reece put the tape back onto the table. “I didn’t think sound recordists used those anymore.”

“They don’t, everything’s digital these days.”

“Yeah, like cameras,” Reece lamented. “Bring back film, I say.”

“I trained on a Nagra way back in the day.” Jenny spotted a piece of paper wedged inside the envelope. She reached in, pulled it out and opened it. *‘Couldn’t think of anyone else, sorry. Brom.’* It said cryptically, written in the same shaky scrawl as Jenny’s name on the envelope.

“They’re from Bromlyn,” Jenny realized with a flash of nostalgia. “God I haven’t heard from her since...” She shrugged. “Y’know, before.”

“Bromlyn?” Reece asked.

“You remember, my old sound recording tutor. Bromlyn Richards. Did some work with her, before, y’know, again.” She smiled. She knew

she didn't need to scoot around the 'breakdown' word but she always did.

She passed the note to Reece. "Hmm," he said as he read it. "You know your old Nagra's in the loft somewhere, you should dig it out." He tossed the note back onto the table with the tapes. "You never know, maybe she's offering you a job." He picked up his jacket and began rummaging through the pockets for something.

"Yeah," Jenny frowned. "But why say, sorry?"

This won a shrug in response from Reece. He looked up at the sound of a car horn from outside. "Shit, that's my taxi." He said and pulled on his jacket. Jenny got to her feet and moved over to him. They stood there for a moment just looking at each other, after an age Reece exhaled. "You sure you're..." She lifted her hand to his lips to silence him. He smiled and nodded. "Ok, give us a kiss."

"Gladly." Jenny stood on her tip toes and they kissed, she pulled him close. "Have fun." She said hugging him tightly.

"I'll call you when I get settled. You need anything, ring me." Reece pulled her off him and held her at arm's length. "Okay?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes dear," she said playfully and they kissed again. She pushed him away and he picked up his suitcase as the taxi outside sounded its horn again.

"Okay, okay," Reece said suddenly flustered, quickly checking he had everything. He opened the front door, but paused to look back at Jenny. "I do love you, you know?"

"I know, I know. And I love me too," Jenny said a little too quickly, leaving an awkward pause. She smiled weakly and blushed. "Now go!" She said trying to lighten the mood. "Go, earn money." But she knew she had failed.

"See ya," He said as lightly as he could but Jenny caught a frown play across his face ever so slightly, it was more in his eyes than anything.

Then he was gone. Jenny suddenly took a step towards the door, desperately wanting to go after him, but she caught herself. "Shite," she said sharply under her breath and kicked the table leg in frustration. What the hell was wrong with her? She scolded herself. Was she trying to sabotage things with Reece? The one good thing in her life? She kicked the table again and ran her hand through her hair messy. One of the Nagra tapes rolled across the table at the jolt catching her eye, it stopped next to the note. *'Couldn't think of anyone else... Sorry.'*

"Sorry." Jenny said it out loud. "Aren't we all?"

FOUR

Selling houses was Mary Keller's business, and business was good. But then again business was always good for Mary, she was born to sell, it was in her very DNA. Back at the office they called her the shark. Partly because she was always on the move, constantly prowling her patch for the next potential sale, but also because she could smell that sale a mile away, and when she had her sights locked onto it, she wouldn't stop until her 'victims' as she liked to think of them, were shaking their house keys helplessly in front of her face, practically begging her to sell their homes.

Some of Mary's more jealous (IE. Less successful) colleagues would no doubt put much of her success down to her looks. Even though she was rapidly approaching fifty, she could still turn heads in the street, especially, like today when she made that little extra effort. She was wearing what she liked to call her killer suit. Sure, perhaps it was just a little too tight in all the right places for a work day. And she had taken a little longer with her make up this morning, but it was all in a noble cause. Today's 'victim' was also her most elusive.

Arthur Willard was a hard nut to crack. It didn't help the cause that he was, if not flat out rich, certainly not short of a hundred grand or

so. Arthur had been left a string of butcher's shops when both his parents had died, quite suddenly within six months of each other. That was five years ago now, when Arthur was only in his early twenties.

The sensitive soul that he was, Arthur didn't have a head for business, much less for carving meat. Mary had sensed that in him from their first meeting when Arthur was still reeling from his devastating loss. That had made him a prime target, a wounded fish for the shark, if you like. Cynical? Sure, if you want to look at it like that, but Mary was only doing what she did best, and Arthur had no use for the shops, but the money would come in very handy for a young man with no family left in the world.

Mary over saw the sale of the shops with an almost indecent haste, and then even before the ink was dry on the contracts she helped Willard purchase a nice two bedroom flat in his home town of Wetherby, modest in its way but with a much coveted view of the river Wharfe. It had cost Two hundred thousand pounds. And thanks to the sale of the five shops, Arthur Willard had been able to pay cash and still had a tidy sum left over to live quite comfortably off ever since.

It still made Mary's head swim when she thought about the commission she had earned off the Willard sale, which had been to put it mildly obscene, not to mention bordering on the unethical if not quite down right illegal. And that should have satisfied even the most avaricious professional seller, but not Mary Keller. She could only focus, obsess, some might say, on the sale in the whole affair that got away.

For some reason only known to himself, Arthur had steadfastly refused to sell the farmhouse that his parents had also left him. It was situated out of town in the middle of nowhere set in two acres of its own land. Prime real estate, worth an absolute fortune. But he just wouldn't be swayed. As far as Mary could ascertain, the Willard family hadn't lived there for a good ten years before Arthur's parents had died.

Apparently it had been a long held dream of his parents that they would do up the old place once they retired, but Arthur himself had

shown no desire to realize that dream for himself. He was quite happy in his little flat in town, wiling away the hours doing God only knew what. But still, he wouldn't entertain selling the farm house. It was a waste that left a bitter taste in Mary's mouth and it was rapidly becoming more about the principal of the thing than merely the money (well nearly).

So the place just sat there depreciating by the day, it was now so dilapidated that it was only good for one thing. Demolition and then the whole site could be regenerated, perhaps an out of town retail park, cinema, maybe an Ikea (just what the world needed, Keller mused, another addition to the Swedish franchise.) The possibilities were endless. It seemed almost criminal to let it go to waste so.

Maybe this time, Mary thought as she checked her watch. She had managed to persuade Willard to meet her once more, in what had almost become a bi-annual event. She would weave her magic, and he would playfully refuse, offering her tea and polite conversation, but the end result, so far, had always been the same. Thanks but no thanks. Still it was a game Mary was happy to play, because deep down she knew Willard would crumble. The Man was only human after all and with no other visible source of income it was only a matter of time when his inheritance would run out.

She looked up at the three story riverside luxury flats Willard called home. There were twelve in total and Mary had sold at least eight of them down the years. Even without a mortgage she knew the council tax and insurance on them was astronomical. She quickly flicked through her portfolio, which contained the latest valuation on Willard's land along with some expertly drawn artist impressions of what the place could look like if only Arthur would give up his stubborn hold on the farmhouse. She made sure the highest evaluation report was on top. Four hundred thousand pounds. She smoothed the page with the palm of her hand.

"Time to shine," she told herself and pressed the buzzer.

After a short while, Arthur's tinny voice came through the entrance doors security speaker. "Hello?"

Mary leant forwards. "Arthur? Arthur it's me Mary Keller?"

"Oh, Mary, of course. Please come on in. Flat twelve, right at the top, you remember?"

Of course I remember dickhead, who do you think sold it to you? Mary thought but did not articulate out loud. Still it made her smile to herself all the same. "Flat twelve," she replied sweetly. "See you in a sec'." The outside door lock release buzzer sounded and Mary pushed the large glass door open and slipped inside. She could almost taste the commission already.

The lift that carried her up to the third floor was mirrored down one side, Mary took in her reflection and gave a satisfied nod. She smoothed down her shirt and checked her hair which had taken so long this morning, but it had all been worth it, she looked good.

Arthur answered the door with that winning smile of his, it seemed all the brighter as he was wearing a crisp white shirt and neatly pressed light brown linen trousers. His blond hair was longer than before, pushed back casually behind his ears, the new look suited him and coupled with his attire gave him the air of a playboy. Mary had almost forgotten how handsome he was and was sure she blushed as he shook her hand. She half expected him to bend forwards and kiss the back of it. "Mary!" He gushed, "You look even lovelier than I remember, please come on in." He stepped away from the door to let her enter with a sweep of the arm.

She followed him through the hall and into the flat's spacious living room, which boasted a large patio style glass sliding door that led out onto a balcony and beyond that you got an impressive view of the river. Mary could have sold the flat ten times over just on that feature alone.

Arthur Willard wasn't much for clutter, the living room was minimalist to the point of Spartan. A cream colored double seated couch situated in front of a modest entertainment cabinet was the only place to sit, save two bar stools pulled up next to the adjacent breakfast bar which took up a large proportion of the living room/kitchen combo. The room was so bright, thanks to the sunlight streaming through the open patio doors, which hit the white tiled floor, that Mary had to squint as she entered from the relative gloom of the hallway. A quick glance around confirmed that the place was spotless. If Arthur cooked in that kitchen at all this morning then he must have fastidiously tidied up after himself.

"Come on in," Arthur said brightly. "I've just brewed a nice fresh pot of coffee. I thought we could sit out on the balcony since it's such a nice day."

"Sounds great," Mary replied and followed him out through the open patio doors and onto the balcony which looked down onto the tree lined river below. Once outside, Arthur gestured for her to sit at one of the two expensive looking white wooden chairs sat either side of an equally white wooden patio table.

"Phew," Mary exclaimed taking in the vista. "I'd forgotten about that view." She sat down and put her black leather document case on the table which clashed alarmingly with the pristine white.

Arthur smiled contentedly as he followed her gaze. "I know, perfect, isn't it? Back in a moment." And with this he disappeared back inside.

Although Mary had only been in the flat a minute she had already estimated its price had risen at least five percent since she had last been here. She glanced back inside, Arthur was busy arranging a cafeteria and cups onto a tray at the breakfast bar. The place was clean to the point of antiseptic. If he was such a clean freak, then why in God's name was he so attached to that dingy falling down farmhouse? She couldn't imagine him, dressed like he was today, for a Spanish

summer, wandering around the old place, she doubted if he had even been back there in months if not years. The last time she had sneaked a look up there it had clearly been abandoned for some time. Arthur had installed hefty new doors and dead bolts to the front and back, and all the down stairs windows had metal sheets on them. What was he afraid of, squatters? A crying shame to let the potential of the place go to waste.

“I must say Arthur,” Mary called back through the open doors. “I was surprised you agreed to see me again.”

“Nonsense,” Arthur came back outside carrying the tray and set it gently down on the table. He took the seat next to Mary and began to pour the coffee. “It’s become something of a ritual, you and I meeting like this.”

“Me trying to pursued you to sell the farm house.” She said.

“And me steadfastly refusing, despite all common sense. Milk? Sugar? I’m afraid I can’t remember how you take it. He asked.

“Black,” she replied. “Thank you.” Mary studied him as he placed the cup in front of her, so gently it barely made a sound, then he took a sip from his own, he closed his eyes and sighed savoring the taste. Is that all this is to him, she wondered, some game? Or was he simply lonely? Mary, despite her better nature, suddenly felt sorry for him. She knew all too well that Arthur didn’t have any living relatives. And as far as she could tell he had no girlfriend, she looked at his expertly pressed shirt and spotless flat. Or Boyfriend for that matter. Was this the only company he could look forwards to? A mercenary estate agent who, surly he knew, was only after the sale and nothing more.

“What’s wrong?” Arthur asked and Mary started slightly, had she been staring at him? She felt her cheeks flush. “You were frowning just now.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “Oh it’s nothing,” she said. “Just lamenting that falling down farmhouse of yours.”

“Arh! Enough of the small talk, eh? Down to the sell.”

“What can I say?” She shrugged and took a sip of coffee and felt an instant rush of caffeine, it was strong and very expensive. “Oh, nice coffee, Arthur.”

“Thanks, and it’s Arty, remember? Everyone calls me Arty.”

“Of course, Arty.” She couldn’t imagine a more ill-fitting name for the Man. He was an Arthur from head to toe.

He nodded to the portfolio case on the table. “So, what have we here?”

Mary opened the case and took out a high quality sketch showing an artist’s impression of a proposed exclusive out of town outward bounds activity centre, a potential buyer had given her. It was so right for the area, not to mention the amount the developer was willing to pay. If Willard refused this one then she might as well give up and become a shop assistant. Mary slid the picture over to Arty who leant forward to study it.

“I have to say, Arty, this is an amazing opportunity for you. I really can’t imagine getting a better offer for the land.” Mary reached into the case and took out a sheet with the financial figures on, she had made doubly sure the final figure, the actual cash offer at the bottom of the page was twice the type face size and bold. She placed it over the top of the sketch, knowing that if Arthur did go for this then he wouldn’t really give a damn about the aesthetics, just the bottom line.

“Well.” Willard seemed genuinely surprised by the amount, although he tried not to let it show on his face. He nodded approvingly as he scanned the figures. Mary noticed that he was absently smoothing his left sleeve with his right hand as he thought. He gently rubbed the material as if running his fingers over something underneath, a tattoo perhaps? No Mary dismissed the notion, people like Arthur Willard don’t get tattoos, too messy. Still she found herself trying to see through the material all the same. “That’s a lot of zeros,” he finally said. Then Arthur moved the sheet to one side and looked at the sketch once more.

“Some areas, like yours are recession proof, the developer wanted to offer less, but I managed to get him to up the price. No one needs to get ripped off here. Besides I told him how reluctant you are...” She corrected herself mid-sentence. “*Were*, about selling the old place.”

“It’s hard to believe it’s the same building,” Arthur said squinting at the picture. “It’s amazing what these architects can do nowadays.”

“Sorry?” Mary said and looked at the sketch as if he was seeing something she couldn’t.

“I was just saying,” Arthur said picking up his cup taking a sip of coffee before continuing. “The farm house looks so different, I know most of the new place will have to go up around it, but you can’t make out any of the old place in these. How are they going to do that without compromising the building?”

Mary felt a flash of panic. “But, but,” she stumbled. “The old building would have to go.”

“Go?” Arthur replied not comprehending, he pushed the papers away as if protecting himself from what they represented.

“Arthur,” Mary said as calmly as she could. Could anyone really be that naïve? “It would be impossible to build a new building around the old farmhouse.” She was sweating now, despite the cool breeze coming off the river below them. “The place is a mess, its half falling down as it is. I mean, have you seen it lately? The first thing the building contractors would have to do would be to tear the old place down.” She couldn’t believe it, but Willard actually winced when she said it.

“Oh, no.” He shook his head vigorously. “You can’t do that. That building has been in my family for years... I, I grew up there. If you keep the old place intact, maybe make it a feature or something, then I’d be more than willing to sell. But tearing it down?” Willard stood, pushing the chair back with his legs, wood on wood scrapped harshly together setting Mary’s teeth on edge. He dramatically wrapped his arms around himself.

Mary fought the urge to get up herself and slap some reality into the twerp. He was acting like the run down glorified shack was a National Trust historical heritage site or something. "Arthur, for Christ's sake!" It came out before Mary had time to censor herself. And for a second she thought she had actually slapped him by the look on his face. She took a breath and slowly got to her feet. He was staring at her now like an idiot. "Arthur," she said softly. "You can't go on burying your head in the sand about this. The farmhouse is falling down. Even if you wanted to, you couldn't renovate it. Give it a few more years and it will fall down by itself anyway."

"No," Arthur snapped. He gestured towards the patio door. "Mary, I will have to ask you to leave."

"Arthur, please, listen to reason. They are offering four hundred thousand pounds for the land. Land you can't use. Not without leveling the farmhouse. Four hundred grand!" He seemed to pause, was that doubt in his eyes? Mary felt a faint spark of hope. "Four hundred thousand pounds," she added with gravitas.

"Keep the farmhouse standing, and I'll sell." Arthur said firmly. "Do that for me, and I'll sign the contracts today."

Mary's shoulders sagged visibly, she scooped up her portfolio case but deliberately left the sketch and more importantly the valuation on the table. "You know that's impossible," she said. The words fell from her lips like stones. She fished her business card out of a side pocket in the case and placed it on the table. Willard made his way back inside and she reluctantly followed. She walked behind him as he led the way back through the living room and into the hall by the front door. And she couldn't help herself saying. "You're living in a dream world Arthur." She gestured around the flat. "You can't live like this forever."

"I'm fine," he said and opened the front door. He finally turned to her. "You don't know anything about me."

"What is it about that place? You could be rich."

"There's more to life than money, Mary." He replied.

Bullshit! She almost said. She looked at him now and he didn't seem quite so debonair as he had when she first arrived. In fact he just looked pathetic to her now. Living a wasted life he would one day have to wake up from. And then he would come begging on his knees for her to sell the old rundown dump. Either that or he would have to move in there himself and rot along with the rest of his former life.

She was feeling mean spirited, so as she walked past him to leave she stopped, her face was a foot from his. "One day you'll end up living there yourself." She said bitterly and to her surprise she thought she caught a look of absolute terror cross his face for an instant. If she had been in a better mood she would have taken that as an opening to try again with the sale, fear was a powerful weapon to someone like Mary. But she decided just to take the satisfaction she had caused him a little pain and to hell with the commission. She left without another word.

Arthur Willard closed the door gently behind her, to slam it would have been a little too dramatic. He had almost crossed the line as it was, from Oscar winning actor to Soap Opera ham with the whole 'Don't demolish the old place,' line he had given her. True it was little over the top for the character he liked to portray himself to the outside world as, but he just couldn't think of yet another way of turning her down again. And he only hoped this time she would take the hint and leave him the fuck alone. He turned and rested his back against the door. Agreeing to meet her had been a mistake, he knew that now. But he felt he had gotten away with it again. The ghost of a smile played across Arty's face at the thought of it all. He rubbed the scars on his arms absently through his shirt sleeves.

Sell the farmhouse? Let them pull the whole place down? He half wished he could, at least that would put an end to it all. But of course if they did that, then they would find all the bodies he had hidden there down through the years. What was it now? Eight? Maybe Nine? Sometimes Arty Willard lost count.

FIVE

With Reece gone, Jenny was left to rattle around the house alone for the morning. She planned to take a walk into town that afternoon, to browse the shops and more importantly pick up the new prescription Kapoor had arranged for her. The fact that this was the first time she could actually pick it up from a normal Chemist and not the dispensary at Bloomfield where they kept all the hardcore drugs, confirmed Kapoor's assurance that it was a very weak dose. And as such, Jenny felt she could finally begin to entertain thoughts of a life without the happy pills which had been such an important part of her treatment so far. What was that at the end of the tunnel she mused? Why if I'm not too much mistaken, I think it might be light. This much improved Jenny mood after the dark cloud left my Reece's departure and another missed chance of using the 'L' word. She shrugged it off, baby steps Jen, she told herself, baby steps.

It must have been this new sense of hope and an extra cup of coffee that led Jenny up into the loft to brave the dust and spiders, in search of her old Nagra reel-to-reel tape recorder. Something that would have been unthinkable just a few months ago. Jenny climbed up the metal fold away ladder and pushed open the trap door leading up into the loft, she fumbled around in the dark, half in half out for the light switch and finally finding it switched the bare bulb on which cast the loft in a sickly yellow glow. Jenny cursed to herself, she had forgotten how cluttered the loft was, due to the fact the last place they had rented had been much bigger and so when they moved here all the crap they couldn't fit downstairs had been dumped up here.

As she scanned the clutter she had to admit most of it was hers, she'd always been a hoarder. And right then and there she decided that as the clutter and junk in her head as gradually being metaphorically

cleared out, she would do the same up here. Just not today, baby steps again. She was up here on a mission to find the Nagra, so she pulled herself the rest of the way in, but as the roof sloped down she could only straighten about three quarters of the way up, so she decided to conduct the search on her knees which was marginally more comfortable.

Jenny soon realized just how easy it would be to get distracted up here, so many blasts from the past fought for her attention as she looked around. One of the first boxes she opened contained dozens of her old CDs from way back during her student days when she was going through her punk period. Classics like the Clash stacked side by side with obscure American hardcore bands like the Crumbsuckers and D.R.I. And a particular favorite from her youth, Plasmatics. Good times, she thought, as she sorted through the CDs. Gooooood times.

Excited by the find and the memories they invoked, Jenny selected several old favorites and tossed them over to the trap door, she just hoped they were as good as she remembered. Then went back to the task at hand. If memory served, she would find the Nagra with her old University files, so she directed her search over to the far end of the loft where a large number of files were sticking out from under a pile of dust covered clothes. Again the clothes were from the Uni' days but she would be damned if she'd give them an airing again. She picked up a crumpled black t-shirt and opened it out. The punk band Plasmatics all reclining in a swimming pool along with a half-submerged Cadillac stared back and Jenny laughed out loud.

"Hmm," she said to herself and pressed the musty t-shirt to her chest to see if it still fit. "I'm I too old for this?" Of course she was, she would have to make do with the music, she would never grow too old for that. Jenny tossed the t-shirt to one side and wondered at what point she got too old to wear punk band t-shirts. She shook her head. "Focus Drayton," she scolded herself. She pushed the rest of the clothes aside and opened the top box they were stacked on. Inside she found a

couple of sound recording text books, which looked promising, she took them out and underneath she saw the perplex cover of the Nagra reel to reel tape recorder. She felt a slight chill, seeing the old machine, just like the CD's that box of tricks had a ton of memories attached to it, mostly good, until the voices had started of course. Jenny almost put the files back on top and left it to rot, but something made her stop herself. She realized this was just another of those baby steps she needed to take. Her psychosis had pretty much started with the Nagra, so it seemed only fitting that it should be part of the end of it. She tapped the lid. "Hello old friend."

Jenny placed the Nagra down on the table in the spare room they occasionally used as an office. It was a small room at the back of the house lined on three sides by bookcases each stacked high with books and boxes, DVDs and her and Reece's CDs which had not yet been relegated to the loft. She plugged in the mains adapter and turned the power on, half expected it to explode with a puff of smoke, but the needle on the sound meter spiked for a moment then dropped back to zero as it always did when the power was turned on. Jenny wiped the dust off the Perspex lid which had a large crack down the middle held together by a strip of camera tape, from where she had dropped the damn thing on a night shoot years ago. She smiled remembering, and then lifted the lid to give her access to the reels.

She clicked the stop/play switch to the play position and watched the empty reels turn, the soft whirring sound brought back a flood of memories. Of hours spent hunched over the Nagra on countless student film shoots, carefully monitoring the sound levels as some bad actor or other destroyed a perfectly good monologue much to the growing despair of the bleary eyed crew, followed by the enviable cry of 'Cut!' from the director. 'What's that, take eleven or twelve? Let's go again people.' Jenny chuckled out loud and switched the Nagra off. She realized she'd missed it more than she had thought.

Her attention was drawn to the two tapes on the table next to the Nagra and her mood instantly darkened. She knew they weren't going to play themselves, but was she ready for this just yet? It had taken her many months just to listen to music through headphones again since voices had stopped, the thought of them starting again the moment she laced up the Nagra was of course ludicrous, but still she was afraid.

“Stupid,” she said out loud but still closed the damaged lid and gently patted it with the palm of both hands. Baby steps, that was the mantra of the day. She pushed the tapes to one side and pulled the eight high stack of CD's she had salvaged from the loft over to her. A musical blast from the past would lighten her mood, a good old fashioned mosh around the living room with the volume up high while no one was home was what was needed, then maybe she would come back in here to face the Nagra once more. Sounded like a plan and a stalling tactic all in one, but what the hell. She picked up the first CD. 'Life of Dreams' by the Crumbsuckers. Great band, hard and fast. Just what the Doctor ordered for a faint heart. Mad Maggie would have loved them.

SIX

Memory lane is such an easy place to get lost. You set off down it only intending on a short trip, but when you finally look up at your rose tinted surroundings you have been walking for hours, lost down some side street called nostalgia.

Jenny was pretty sure she put on the first CD at Nine Thirty. She remembered checking that her neighbors, Bill and Karen Kenwright were safely off to work so she could crank up the volume without any fear of disturbing them. They had both left for work as they always did, just after Nine, and once she had had another cup of coffee it was almost half past.

So how it had come to be nearly two in the afternoon when she had finally glanced at the clock on the DVD player mid-slam dance to Wendy O Williams sandpaper edged vocals as she belted out another classic by Plasmatics was beyond her.

Of course, now that she thought of it, it had been the internet searches after each bands rediscovery that had eaten up the day. No sooner had she played an old CD and without fail marveled at how well her taste in music had stood the test of time, then she was on the computer to Google the various band members to see what they were up to now. She must have spent a good couple of hours on You Tube watching old concert footage. It appeared there was still great demand for this type of Music, even amongst the younger generation. But I was there first she said to the screen. I was there in person. That made her feel really old.

But in truth she had been avoiding the real issue, the tapes. Time and time again during the day she had found herself wandering upstairs to the study and just standing there in the door way staring at the old Nagra and the tapes. Once or twice she had got as far as sitting at the desk spinning one of the tapes like a coin on the table, she would then think about threading the tape onto the Nagra and having a listen but each time her nerve and the lure of more long lost music had driven her back down stairs again for a fresh dance around the living room. Anything but facing the tapes and what they might hold.

It was stupid, she knew. She was like a teenager doing anything to avoid getting down to her homework. For Christ Sake she had even vacuumed the whole house, done most of the washing and dusted on top of the book case in the hall, which she couldn't remember ever having done in all the time she and Reece had lived here. That was testament enough to how little she really wanted to listen to those tapes.

She was at the study door again now with a pair of head phones hanging around her neck. She leant against the frame wanting to, but unable to step inside, like a Vampire waiting to be invited in across some virgin's threshold. The Nagra just sat on the table mocking her cowardice. "This is stupid," she said to it. And it was. She was better now, Doctor Kapoor had said so himself, he had even suggested she get back into sound recording again, and considering it was the only real skill she had, this was the perfect time to test herself. Where was the harm?

But still she couldn't go inside, maybe later, after she had done the washing up, and she was sure there must be a few more CD's up in the loft waiting to be rediscovered. Then it hit her, how ridiculous she was being and she laughed out loud at herself. And with that revelation the spell was suddenly broken. Jenny stepped into the study and sat herself down at the table. "Now, let's see." Before she could change her mind, Jenny picked up one of the tapes and threaded it into the Nagra without thinking. Just like riding a bike she managed to thread the quarter inch tape up to the machine first time. "Still got it," she smiled and patted the reel to reel machine.

Jenny put on the headphones and flicked on the power switch, the sound meter jumped into life and after a moment settled back to zero. She could hear the hum through her head phones and turned the volume up slightly then moved to turn the play/pause/stop switch on the front of the Nagra to play. She stopped, her findex tips an inch away as they began to shake ever so slightly. Jenny bit her lip gently and concentrated until the shakes stopped. A small victory, she thought and now for another. She hit play.

The reels spun instantly into life, spinning slowly, almost hypnotically and Jenny watched the leader cord at the beginning of the tape feed through the pickups and the brown sound tape itself followed through. She listened intently, if there was the sound of a pin drop on the tape she would surely have heard it she was concentrating so hard.

Beads of sweat broke on her brow and she wiped them away with her sleeve and closed her eyes, listening.

After thirty seconds of silence, Jenny opened her eyes and tapped the sound meter reading which was still firmly on Zero. She let out a frustrated breath through her teeth and forward wound the tape for a good ten seconds then let it play again. She turned up the volume and held her breath, not that it did any good, she was still treated to nothing but the electronic buzz through the head phones and under that the deafening sound of silence.

“Jesus,” she slipped the head phones off her head and let them hang around her neck, rewind the tape all the way to the beginning then took it out. She flicked the on off switch a couple of time just to make sure. Each time she did the sound meter reading jumped before settling back to zero once more. Jenny knew damn well she had threaded the machine correctly, she had done it a thousand times before. So why wasn't she getting anything? “Antique piece of crap,” she snapped and wondered who in their right mind still used these machines anymore. It had been years since she herself had trained using one and even then they had been ten years out of date. Everything was digital now. So why had Bromlyn used a Nagra?

Jenny took the second tape, threaded it carefully and hit fast forward. “Right, come on, let's hear what you've got.” She smiled to herself, if Kapoor could see her now, talking to a machine... “First sign of madness, talking to yourself.” Jenny stopped the tape, slipped the head phones back on and hit play again.

Nothing.

“Bollocks!”

Fast forward. Hit play. Nothing but more nothing.

“Bugger.”

Fast forward. Hit play, smack the Nagra hard. Listen intently with bated breath.

Nothing.

She turned up the volume two more notches and was about to fast forward one final time when she heard a telephone begin to ring. Jenny held her breath and listened. Yes there was definitely the sound of a telephone ringing in the distance. Jenny held her breath and pressed the head phones closer to her ears. Strange, the ring sounded almost just like...

“My own phone! Oh, you stupid cow!” Jenny tore off the head phones and tossed them onto the table next to the Nagra. Even though she was on her own she could feel her cheeks going super nova with embarrassment. The phone was ringing in the bedroom. She slapped her palm on her forehead and dashed through into the bedroom.

She must have been laughing when she picked up the cordless phone off the bed because the first thing Reece said was, “What's so funny?”

“Oh, nothing. Your girlfriend is an idiot, that's all.”

“Which one?”

“Ha, Ha.” Reece was on a mobile, she could hear clattering and banging in the background, a typical film set. “You get there ok?” Jenny almost swore out loud when she caught sight of the alarm clock on the cabinet by the bed. It was Nine PM.

“Yeah,” Reece replied raising his voice over the background noise. “We're just getting ready for the first shot, so I thought I'd give you a quick call before it goes mental. Speaking of which. Did you pick up your new Meds ok?”

Jenny winced. Her prescription! She had completely forgotten about picking up the new medication. “Yeah, fine. I got them this afternoon,” she lied. “They're strawberry flavored.” Jenny kicked the bedroom door in frustration, which hurt like hell. She hobbled out onto the landing fighting back a curse.

“You ok?” Reece asked. “You sound a little tired.”

“Oh, yeah I'm fine. It's just those damn tapes.” She limped over to the study doorway, where she saw the reels still spinning slowly, she

had left the tape playing.

“You listened to them? Jen that's great!” He sounded really enthusiastic. “So you found the Nagra ok?”

“Yeah. But they're blank,” she said.

“Blank? You sure you set it up alright?”

“It hasn't been that long.” Jenny stepped into the study.

Something about the Nagra was different, but with the pain in her foot and the distraction of talking to Reese, she couldn't put her finger on it straight away.

“Maybe you could contact that Woman who sent them. She might have sent you the wrong ones.”

“Hmm,” she said distracted by the Nagra. Then she saw it. The sound meter was going crazy. “Reese, can I call you back?” She said absently.

“It's a night shoot, remember?” He said but she only half heard him. The meter's needle was fluctuating from Zero right up into the red.

“Hmm,” she said again approaching the desk.

“I'll ring you first thing tomorrow, ok?”

“Sure,” Jenny pushed the end call button without really realizing it. The sound meter's needle was going berserk. “Finally.”

She sat back down at the desk just as the meters needle died and fell back to zero. “Oh no you don't, I saw you.” She rewound the tape a few seconds and slipped the head phones back on. She was about to hit play when she remembered the volume, she turned it back down to three, whatever had sent the needle racing was going to be loud. She slowly reached out to the play switch with a trembling hand, her heart was pounding fit to burst out of her chest. She let out a couple of calming breaths. What was she getting so worked up about? It was probably some bad actors stumbling soliloquy. If it was though, then it was a damn loud one.

Jenny hit play and waited. The sound meter needle peaked straight away making her jump slightly and as before began registering from Zero to Ten back and forth like a manic windscreen wiper, but still whatever was making it dance was inaudible. "Shit." Then she heard a split second burst of static and the meter needle fluttered momentary at ten then died. Jenny snapped the tape back into re-wind and played the section again with the same results. She turned the volume up to eight, making the head phones hiss in her ear, rewound the tape and hit play a third time. And once again the sound meter danced manically to a song she couldn't hear, then the burst of static followed by the needle plummeting to zero once more.

"Fuck it!" There was something there, she knew it but could still only hear that sharp burst of static which passed by so quickly at the end, she just couldn't make anything out. Jenny was frustrated and exhilarated at the same time. Was this what Bromlyn had wanted her to hear? Maybe the woman couldn't see the wood for the trees and needed a second pair of ears and a fresh perspective on the problem?

It's going past too fast, Jenny thought. Clearly she had no chance of making out what was making the sound meter throw a fit, that was beyond human hearing and he didn't have a dog handy right now. But she could slow the tape down when it hit that point of static. Run the tape through the machine manually using her fingers like a DJ with a turn table and max out the volume. So Jenny turned the volume up to ten and manually round the tape back to just before the static, then ever so slowly she fed the tape through.

A voice. Jenny almost cried out loud at the shock of it. She definitely heard what sounded like a human voice through the rumble of static, no not through it, the voice was the static, a few words she couldn't make out, recorded at such a speed that it can across as a second of inaudible sound. She gently rewound the reels and this time literally played it through a millimeter at a time, she leaned so close to the machine she could make out infinitesimal scratches on the tape, she

used these to guide her speed through the Nagra's pick-ups. Jenny held her breath as she concentrated.

"Buuuuuusshhh..."

She exhaled and rewound once more. Bush? But no doubt now it was a word, or words.

Again, much slower.

"Buuuuutttcccchhhheeeerr." Again, even slower, concentrate girl she told herself. Then the word came through clearer, in a deep, distorted, rasping voice. *"Bbuuttchheerr... Buttchherrr."*

"Butcher?" she asked the machine. Was it butcher? At this speed and playing the tape through manually she couldn't be sure if it was a male or female voice it was so distorted and drawn out, then it came again, much clearer as she gradually got the knack of keeping the tape feeding through at a steady pace.

"Butcher..." Yes it was definitely butcher. More words now, over what sounded to Jenny like scraping metal. *"Ccchhoopp... Chhopp... Chop... Chop... The... Butcher's... Back..."* Jenny couldn't be sure, but she thought it sounded like several voices now, each overlapping the next. *"Chop, chop, the, butcher's, back..."* Followed by a series of heavy thumps, or hammer blows? They sounded like booming cannon fire at this speed but she could still catch a slight metallic edge to the sound. She moved the tape as slowly as she could through the pickups. She played it again and again, each time slower than the last until there was no doubt. Chop, chop, the Butcher's back.

"Jesus," she breathed suddenly afraid. Although it was a mild summer night, she felt a chill run through her and the hairs literally stood up on her arms. If all this hidden in a second or two of static, she wondered. What would she find on the rest of the tape she couldn't hear? What else was there hidden on this thing that made the sound meter go so nuts, but was beyond her meager human hearing?

Then her heart stopped. At the end of the section came what sounded for all the world like a low, drawn out, pitiful scream which

was cut short and the needle fell back to zero again. "Oh God." The sound twisted her stomach into knots it was so heart wrenching. Jenny jumped up and the head phones were pulled off her head. "Jesus, Jesus, God." She panted. Her head swam for a moment and her heart was hammering ten to the dozen. She staggered away from the Nagra as if it might jump up and bite her and half stepped, half stumbled out onto the landing. She quickly snapped the light on and had to wrap her arms around herself and concentrate on regulating her breathing to stop herself from throwing up right then and there. That low horrible noise was still rattling around her head. It felt like eaves dropping on an execution.

A feeling of absolute dread washed over her and she began to shake uncontrollably, tears came soon after.

"Damn you Bromlyn," she sobbed. "Why me... Why me?"

It was a good question and one she would have answered by the Woman herself tomorrow if Jenny had anything to do with it. She would track the bitch down and ram the damn tapes down her throat. But only after what would be a much needed but no doubt fitful sleep. She shuddered at the thought of sleep, she could only imagine the nightmares it would bring.

Jenny dragged herself into the bedroom and collapsed onto the bed. She glanced at the clock and wasn't at all surprised to see it was now well after midnight. She had been listening to the tape for over three hours, three hours for it to seep into her subconscious. Her head was pounding from the sheer concentration of it all, her eyes stung like she had been using battery acid as eye drops. Jenny grabbed the duvet and curled up into a ball shaking like a child.

Now she knew why Bromlyn had said *Sorry*.

When Jenny awoke the next morning it was from a haunted fitful sleep. Haunted but thankfully she couldn't remember by what phantoms. She had that left over feeling of dread you get when you know you have dreamt something bad, but couldn't quite grasp the contents of the nightmare. The feeling lingered long after she had showered, had a token breakfast (half a slice of toast and two strong black coffees, which helped) and left the house. She was a woman on a mission this morning. Jenny had made up her mind to confront Bromlyn, to find out just what the hell was on those tapes, and why she had picked her of all people to send them to. So she had grabbed the tapes and feeling like she was leaving the scene of a crime went out.

Once she set off on foot, Jenny had hoped the new day would burn away the blues that followed her like a guilty secret as she walked. Even when she was out in the warm summer sunshine she felt a chill around her, another residue of some forgotten nightmare she assumed and pressed on feeling like a ghost drifting through people's lives as she walked.

The last time Jenny had seen Bromlyn Richards, she was still working at Old Mill Studios, as the head of the sound department if memory served. So she decided to start there, if she had moved on since, then they would surely know where she was, film and TV production, especially in the North was an incestuous affair, everybody knew everyone else and had worked with them at least once.

Her walk from Leeds town centre took Jenny along the Leeds-Liverpool canal, a stroll she had taken many times over the years. Old Mill was situated close to the canal, just past the famous Royal Armories. The Armories was a place she had never really appreciated the way you don't when something is right on your door step. Reece practically lived there and had managed to drag her around a couple of times but Jenny had always preferred the understated energy of the West Yorkshire Playhouse herself.

The Armories and Playhouse were two testaments to the changing face of Leeds Jenny had witness growing up here. She still marveled at how the city had changed from her childhood, thanks to the influx of money to fund Leeds rebirth as a financial centre. All the rundown fabric industry mills and factories which had lain empty and desolate for so many years as she grew up, were now expensive apartments or like Old Mill as its name suggested, home to a growing media and arts scene.

Normally the walk would lift her spirits, even during those dark days when she would often contemplate stepping off the edge of the pathway running along the canal and taking a header into the water. She would return home feeling at least for a little while, better.

But not today. Not with those pitiful voices slam dancing around her head. Not with '*Chop, chop the butcher's back*' as the soundtrack to her stroll. Jenny chewed her lip as she walked. Her emotions shifting between self-pity and a smoldering resentment for Bromlyn. She knew when she saw the Woman again it would be a battle between these two sides of her, to stop either bursting into tears at the sight of the Woman or throwing the damn tapes right into her face and leaving without a word. Just give the tapes back she told herself, you don't need this. You don't need to know what those voice were, that God awful scream.

But she did. She did need to know. She felt as if she was infected somehow by what she had heard, by a burning need to know what they were and how they were so hidden on that tape. Yes she *had* to know. And she hated Bromlyn all the more for it.

Old Mill Studios had been just that in a former life, and old Textile mill that had stood empty for twenty odd years waiting for the inner city regeneration wave to wash over it in the late nineties, thanks to the arts council and a hefty top up from the lottery commission years later. It was surrounded by glass fronted offices and opposite an overpriced restaurant. Jenny felt her half empty stomach growl as she caught a

whiff of something delicious when she crossed the stone courtyard which led to the Studios main reception area.

There was a smooth stone sculpture right outside which, whilst doing its best to be a Henry Moore statue (and failing) announced to the world that you were now entering Old Mill Studios, that was new, Jenny thought, she ran a hand over the cool surface of the sculpture as she past and the automatic doors hissed Star Trek style as she entered the building.

Business must be good Jenny noted as she entered the plush reception area. In her day old Mill had been a sort of workers collective, all the furniture was second hand as was most of the equipment. Had she been away so long? The reception resembled one of those big corporate advertising companies you get down in London, expensive art work on the walls looked down on leather couches and several coffee tables that were more Harrods than Ikea. She had to ask herself two things, almost out loud. Was she still in Leeds? And if so, just how long had she been away?

At the far end was the reception desk which she imagined wouldn't have looked out of place in the entrance area of Disney Pixar or any one of the Hollywood studios. Behind the desk was a large photograph of the film Director Ridley Scott shaking hands with a Man Jenny didn't know, maybe the new owner. She nodded appreciatively. They say first impressions count, and this was a good one. It was almost enough to distract her from the fact she was on the war path.

There were too young receptionists behind the desk, one stunning looking Woman in her early twenties, the other an equally handsome, but stick thin man who looked even younger. Jenny inadvertently glanced around for a camera crew. Surly they were shooting a commercial for the place, with these two up and coming models playing the receptionists. But there was no cry of 'cut!!' as she approached the desk, and neither of the beautiful people behind it shouted for their agents. They were both busy talking animatedly on headsets while

directing calls here and there. The Woman transferred a call then gave Jenny a warm smile exposing perfect white teeth.

“Hi, welcome to Old Mill Studios,” she said in a well-practiced, but genuine greeting and Jenny was surprised to hear a strong Yorkshire accent. Books and covers, Jenny, she told herself, books and covers. “How can I help?”

“Oh, yes, hi,” Jenny stumbled, suddenly feeling like she was here for a job interview. “I was wondering if you could help me. I'm looking for Bromlyn Richards? Does she still...” Before she could finish the sentence the Receptionist's face froze at the mention of Bromlyn's name, her smile remained frozen for a moment then melted.

“Brom..?” The Woman said weakly. Her handsome co-worker over heard this and went amazingly pale for one so tanned. The Phones continued ringing but neither of them answered, they were both now staring at Jenny awkwardly.

Jenny suddenly felt fear and guilt grip her, something was wrong here, something with Bromlyn.

“I, erm,” the Man stumbled this time. “Just a moment.” He fumbled with a laminated sheet on the desk in front of him, Jenny could see it was a phone list. He punched an extension number into his phones high tech key pad and waited. Jenny looked back at the Woman who tried a smile but it resembled more of a grimace this time.

Maybe it's just that Bromlyn has been fired, Jenny reasoned, they're just embarrassed that I don't know, that's all. But the butterflies in her stomach didn't buy that and continued their aerial acrobatics.

There was an awkward silence as the receptionist waited for whomever he was calling to pick up, then his face flooded with relieve. “Oh, hi, Tom? It's Greg in reception.... Tom, there's someone here to see Bromlyn...” His voice nearly cracked on her name. And Jenny felt sick, this wasn't embarrassment, it was almost grief.

“Look,” Jenny said contemplating a swift exit. All thoughts she might have had of a righteous confrontation with Bromlyn fast

dissipating. "I don't have an appointment or anything, if it's a problem I can come back later.."

The receptionist shook his head no, listened for a moment then nodded. "Will, do, thanks Tom." He ended the call and said to Jenny, "It's ok, erm, someone's going to nip down and see you."

"Are you, sure, like I said If she's not here I can come back later." Jenny replied hopefully, she even took a step backwards.

"Its fine," he said and motioned to one of the plush leather couches close by. "Please, take a seat. Tom will be down in a sec' to speak to you. Please." The second 'please' was almost a plea.

"Ok," Jenny said and drifted over to the visitors waiting area and sat down on the couch. She put her shoulder bag on her knee like a shield and clutching it so tightly she could feel the two tapes inside press against her chest.

Any feeling she had of righteous anger had long since gone, replaced by doubt and a feeling of impending doom. Bromlyn wasn't here and something wasn't right. The reaction of the two receptionists at the mere mention of Bromlyn's name was testament to that. She glanced across the reception area, which now looked somehow more dark and ominous than it has when she had first entered, and over to the glass doors. A dozen or so steps and she could be away from here and back to some semblance of normality. It was a tempting thought as she was beginning to get a nagging feeling that if she stayed here things could only get worse.

"Hello?" A man said from a million miles away.

Jenny started in shock and her cheeks flushed. She must have been concentrating so intently on her potential escape that she hadn't see him approach. She was about to get to her feet when he motioned for her to stay seated. She knew him from somewhere, but couldn't quite place him.

"Please," he said and sat down in a plush chair opposite her. "I'm Tom Brannigan, I'm the Managing Director here."

Jenny looked over her shoulder to the large photograph she had seen when first entering. Brannigan was the man shaking Ridley Scott's hand.

Brannigan caught the gesture and smiled modestly, if anything he looked a little ill at ease with the picture. He leaned forwards and extended his hand. "Pleased to meet you." It wasn't until she moved to shake it that Jenny realized her hands were still clasped tightly around her bag, knuckles showing white.

"Oh, hello," she just about managed to unclench one hand and shook Brannigan's hand. "I'm erm, My name's Jenny..." For some reason she stopped short of given him her second name. If anyone would have asked her why she didn't, Jenny couldn't have readily articulated it. Paranoid much? Doctor Kapoor would have had a field day with this little scenario.

Brannigan shook her hand firmly but not too hard. He looked in his late forties, perhaps older, dressed in a casual tie less white shirt and khaki chinos. His shoulder length greying hair betraying his lofty position, he was clearly at ease with the power of his position and didn't feel the need to advertise the fact he was the boss. Jenny could imagine that he had protested long and hard about that photo, but the rest of the board must have loved it. She also recalled the receptionist had called him Tom, no 'Mister' or 'Sir'. Under different circumstances, she would have felt at ease around him, he had that kind of air about him.

"Hi," she said lamely stopping short of 'Tom.'

Brannigan rested his arms causally on his knees and studied Jenny, the smile slipped to a slight frown. "Greg said you are here to see Brom?"

"That's right, but if it's not convenient..."

"It's not that. Is Brom a friend of yours?" He asked gravely.

Jenny nodded, she felt her stomach flip at his expression. Her throat was dry, so she had to clear it before answering. "Kind of, well I

haven't actually seen her for ages, we sort of lost touch.”

Brannigan brought his hands together and tapped his lips with the index fingers like he was praying and trying to silencing himself all in one gesture. Jenny thought of Kapoor again, this was the classic body language of someone not wanting to say what they have to say. Her heart was hammering now. The room didn't feel quite so air conditioned anymore.

“I'm sorry to tell you, but Bromlyn is missing,” his eyes went to the floor for a moment than back to hers. “She's not been seen for nearly two weeks now.”

“Missing?” Jenny gasped. “God that's awful.” Two weeks? Bromlyn had sent her the tapes, no, hand delivered her the tapes just over twenty four hours ago.

“Yes, her husband's frantic with worry,” Brannigan continued. “As you can imagine. We've had the police in here and everything. We're all worried sick.” The pain was clear on his face.

Jenny stood up sharply, taking Brannigan by surprise, she had to get out of here, now. “I, erm,” she stumbled over the words. “That's, that's terrible...” She began to move over to the exit. Brannigan stood, he was frowning, but in her confused state, Jenny didn't know with worry or suspicion.

“Are you Ok?” He asked.

“Yes, yes, it's just a shock that's all.” Jenny said taking two more steps towards the automatic doors. “So sorry to have bothered you.”

“No bother,” Brannigan replied in a tone bordering on suspicious. “You haven't seen here lately, have you?”

“No, not for years,” Jenny said a little more defensively than she had intended. It was true enough thought and Brannigan seemed to take her reaction as shock rather than guilt. The poor fellow even looked a little guilty himself at having caused her to flee. The door hissed open and the afternoon heat hit her now sweaty back. Before turning to leave she said, “I hope they find her.”

“Thanks,” Brannigan hung his head for a second, thinking then looked up at her once more. “You know she had...” He screwed his face up, wrong choice of word. “*Has two kids?*”

“No,” Jenny croaked, she shook her head dumbly but now she thought of it, she did seem to remember Bromlyn taking about her children what seemed like a life time ago now. And with that the doors closed and Jenny walked briskly passed the Henry More rip off and away.

How Jenny wasn't sick then and there she would never know, her stomach was tied up in knots and she had broken out in a cold sweat. Bromlyn had left a husband and two children behind for what she had in her bag, Jenny was sure of it. She knew she should just throw them into the canal on the way home and be done with it, but she couldn't, could she? For better or worse she felt that she was part of this now. She suddenly thought of Reece as those pitiful voices from the tape rang clear as day in her ears again. They were so vivid she actually spun around to see if the whisperers were behind her. What in the world could make someone walk away from their family like that?

“What did I ever do to you?” Jenny said bitterly out loud to Bromlyn and stumbled away shell-shocked. The two tapes in her shoulder bag weighing heavy as she walked, they banged rhythmically against her side. *Don't forget about us*, they seemed to say. As if she could.

EIGHT

The meeting with Mary the Estate Agent had been a mistake. He knew that now. It had dredged up all the old familiar feelings of dread in Arty Willard. He had known it would, it always did, but prior to this particular meeting he had felt stronger than he had in a long time, and with that supposed strength he had foolishly felt like he would be able

to suppress the guilt and anguish which always followed hot on the heels of even the merest mention of the farm house. The place was like a temple to his hidden self. That monster he could become then *that* feeling over took him. The sickness he called it.

He had promised himself that this time it would be different, but things had inevitably followed the old familiar path. A sleepless night, the silhouette of the farmhouse looming large over his every thought as he lay in bed trying desperately to think of anything but the run down building and the dark rotting secret it kept deep at its heart.

Then once he had survived the sweat soaked night, he took an early morning walk to the car hire place on the high street, they had been surprised to see him, he hadn't felt the need to hire a vehicle in a long time. The destination was always the same, just the vehicle would change. A car, for the paranoid guilt trip out to the farm house, like today. Or a transit van, when events had spiraled out of control to the inevitable bloody conclusion and there was evidence that need concealing.

The two hour long drive out here had at least help clear Arty's head somewhat, he had traveled the whole way with all the windows down and the breeze had cleared away the cobwebs from his mind. Even though it was only ten o'clock the sun was already beating down from the cloudless sky, today was going to be a scorcher, but Arty knew that no matter what the temperature outside, his blood would be chilled to the point of freezing in his veins once he pulled off the main road and make his way up the long winding country lane that led up to the farm house and it's awaiting ghosts.

Arty vowed that today would just be a flying visit, just to put his mind at rest that the big heavy door he had put up with its industrial sized bolt and padlock combination was intact, maybe he would do a quick walk around the house's perimeter, giving the metal grill covered windows and back door a cursory going over. But never inside, he would never willingly set foot inside that cursed place again, only when

he had no choice, then things were out of his control. And then only to survive to fight the sickness another day.

Or at least that's what he told himself, because deep down he knew that if he would only allow himself to get caught the next time, all this would be over. One day perhaps, if the sickness ever took him over again. One day and it might all be over.

On the really bad days (thankfully now few and far between) Arty could spend all day and sometimes into the night compulsively checking and rechecking every inch of the Farm house's exterior, looking for even the slightest sign that someone had been inside and discovered the place where he kept those poor souls who had fallen foul of the sickness.

"Damn that Woman!" Arty shouted out loud and slammed his fist on the steering wheel. But even as he cursed Mary Keller, Arty knew he was really cursing himself. He didn't have to return her bi annual phone calls, but he had come to see them as a test of his strengthening character. His stupid pride had caused this trip out to his own private hell. A cruel smile played across his dry lips. Maybe he should just kill the bitch and get it over with. The smile instantly vanished from his face. That was something he had no choice over. The *other* him dealt with that side of things.

The turning off the main road appeared up ahead and Arty let out a low moan. Despite the heat he felt the sweat on his forehead turn to ice water, his stomach knotted and for a moment he thought he might actually throw up. He sucked in several mouthfuls of air until the feeling faded somewhat. "Fuck," he cursed and vaguely entertained the idea of just keeping on driving off into the country side, just keep driving until the urge to check the farmhouse subsided. Except he never did. He had on occasion driven past, only to turn around a hundred yards down the road and make the turning from the opposite direction just the same. Today he was so agitated due to the fact he hadn't had to make this journey for months now, since Keller's last visit

in fact, that Arty didn't even try to fool himself that he was in control enough to just keep on going.

So Arthur Willard hit the indicator and turned left onto the dirt road and slowly drove up towards the large wooded area at the top of the hill, knowing only too well what would emerge through the trees just a short distance ahead.

And then there it was, the place that had such a hold on him. The Farm house. The elements had taken their toll on the structure since Arthur had last been out here, and as he pulled the car up outside, he sat for a moment to take it in. Although it still looked structurally sound enough, the whole front of the house was a mass of drying ivy, which had worked its way into the stone creating the beginnings of a network of cracks in the mortar. The heavy metal sheets he had bolted onto each window were showing signs of rust and he knew they would need replacing in a couple of years. And just like the re-pointing of the stone work it would all have to be carried out by Arty himself.

This place was Arthur Willard's picture in the attic, no matter what he did when the sickness over took him, it didn't register so much as a line on his young looking face. This was where his sins took their toll, it absorbed them into its very brick work as well as hiding the evidence of his homicidal rages inside. He wondered how many more unfortunates would have to die before the place rotted on its foundations and collapsed in on itself to reveal the horrible secrets inside. And when it did, Arthur could only imagine what it would do to his body and soul once the spell was broken and there was nowhere left for his sins to hide.

It was so hard to believe now just how happy he had been growing up here as a boy. The farm house had been his sanctuary, now reduced to a guilty secret. Those past memories so faded as to be rendered meaningless. Perhaps, looking at it now, he had just dreamed those care free days and his care free childhood spend safe in its arms.

Arty got out of the car and looked through the thick trees at the side of the house to the village that was situated half a mile away. He had noticed as he had turned off that several new houses had sprung up on the village's perimeter, suburban civilization was edging ever closer to the farm house with each passing year, and Arty knew it wouldn't be long before the place was surrounded as the village realized its ambition to become a town. Even now Arty could see a new sold sign in the adjacent field to his. What would be built there? He wondered with a growing sense of foreboding. It was easy to imagine a fresh crop of new houses that would be no more than an acre away. Houses with people, families with young curious children perhaps. The farm house would be irresistible to young adventurous minds. The haunted house up the hill. What self-respecting youngster wouldn't want to explore its half imagined horrors? Christ, he would have done the same as a boy, goaded by friends.

Would that be how it ended? Arty wondered. The fucking 'Goonies' stumbling on the house's clandestine purpose? Time was not on Arty's side and if he was honest, a great part of him just wanted it to be over. With that thought his attention was almost magnetically drawn back to the farm house. *'Not just yet, Arty dear boy,'* it seemed to say, *'we've still got business together you and I. Do you really think you could survive if I spewed forth my putrid secrets?'*

Arty grew anxious, it was like looking at the place with new, paranoid eyes. Even just a quick glance at the exterior threw up half a dozen potential entry points. The windows didn't seem quite so secure anymore, the re-enforced door looked like balsa wood, one good kick and it would splinter into match wood. A passing rambler or dog walker from the ever expanding village could easily slip inside. Oh and then Mary Keller would finally know why Arty was so reluctant to sell.

His heart grew heavy, all thoughts of this being just a flying visit faded. And Arty knew he would be here for hours. Tortured by every inch of the place. Checking and rechecking, running his fingers over the

crumbling brick work, searching desperately for a weak spot that might make the walls come tumbling down, until his fingers bled.

This was Arty penance, and he rushed towards the house with a zealot's haste, happy to pay it. Because deep down Arty knew he deserved nothing less.

NINE

"Hey Reece, it's just me. I know you'll be getting ready for tonight's shoot, but just thought I'd give you a quick call, see how things are going. I'd better hang up before I end up leaving a long rambling message which used up all of your voice mail memory... Kind of like I am now... So, everything's ok here, give me a call tomorrow if you get chance. Don't mess up any shots. See ya." Jenny hit the call end button and tossed the phone onto the kitchen table. She knew Reece wouldn't have time to pick up the call, and that was why she had rung him when she did. She just needed to speak to someone, not speak *at* someone, for company she supposed, but also just so she wouldn't have to sit at home in silence. (Even the newly rediscovered CD's had rapidly lost their escapist appeal after today's drama.)

Jenny had been sitting at the kitchen table with the cordless phone in her hands for a good half an hour since she got back from town. She had hit the speed dial God knows how many times but always cut off the call before it connected. The events of the day still laid too heavily on her mind for it to be distracted for long by anything else, she had tried earlier but in vain. The first thing Jenny did after she had left Mill Studios, was make damn sure she picked up her new prescription. With everything that had happened since she had listened to the tapes, she needed the comfort of knowing none of it was due to any type of relapse. She had always taken her meds right on time and she would make sure that continued to do so, it was more

important now than it had been at any time since she had left Bloomfield.

With that task accomplished, Jenny knew that what she needed now was some kind, any kind of distraction. So she had hit the shops in town, mostly window shopping until her feet were sore, then she had taken in a particularly bad movie and treated herself to a meal at Akbar's Monday afternoon all you can eat Buffet. But nothing had worked.

That was because she knew deep down she was going to have to listen to the tapes again, and sooner rather than later. But just now she couldn't bring herself to do it alone. Reece would be gone for another four maybe five days. She told herself she should wait for him to get back before tackling the Nagra once more, she wasn't going to tell him what she had heard, or what she had thought she had heard. Christ no, he would be on to Kapoor before she could finish her sentence and have her carted back off to the Monkey farm.

Jenny just felt that she needed someone in the house when she did finally listen to the tapes again. For comfort, for knowing he was close. But there wasn't anyone else. That was the sad truth of her life at the moment. All her friends had faded into the background while she was sick, and she didn't blame one of them. She had been Queen Bitch to all of them, before she had been diagnosed. Things were said, horrible hurtful things. Bridges were burnt and only Reece had stuck by her through it all.

But Reece wasn't here, was he? And could she really wait another five days to listen to the tapes again? She had to know if there was something she had missed. What little she could make out was condensed so tightly on the tape that she could quite easily have skipped past something else, something important. What she had heard was unsettling enough, but not enough for Bromlyn to disappear off the face of the earth, to leave her Husband and Two children without a word, not even to let them know she was safe. If indeed she was.

That brought another problem. What if she did find that hidden part of the tape, the one that sent Bromlyn into hiding? Jenny shivered at the thought, but there was no denying the fact that what little she had heard, coupled with Bromlyn's disappearance had sown a seed in her mind. She had to face the fact she *had* to know what was happening here. It felt like a physical need to listen to them again, like having a hit of a drug you know is bad for you, but one you just cannot stay away from. Maybe it was just curiosity. Those voices came from somewhere, from someone. And having heard them once she had a burning need to go deeper, find out who they were. Who this butcher was.

Of course you know what curiosity did to the Cat? Jenny smiled grimly. Had it really only been less than twenty for hours since this had begun? It felt like she had been living with this knowledge for days now, if not weeks. It was a strange intoxicating mix of fear and exhilaration. Jenny wondered if this was how it started out for Bromlyn. But she didn't dare wonder if it would end the same way for her.

An hour later, Jenny found herself sat once more at the study desk with the Nagra and the two tapes in front of her. This time she had come prepared with an A4 pad of paper and two pens. Even if it took all night she would document everything she heard on the tapes. She decided to start with the second tape this time, the one with the short sharp burst of static, the one with the voices. It was strange, she had fled this room in shock and terror last night but now it felt right to be here. If anything, now that she had given herself over to the task, she couldn't wait to hear those pitiful voices again. As with last night, her palms were sweating and her heart was racing, but tonight in anticipation not trepidation.

Still, she wondered as she picked up the second tape and turned it over in her hands. Why had Bromlyn had used an old Nagra? She worked for a well-financed Film and Television facility and that would

have given her access to all manner of state of the art sound recording gear. Even a PC or Jenny's own out of date lap top, with the right software would have been better than this antique. With modern post-production software you could slow the sound right down to within a fraction of a second, set the thing to play on a loop and listen over and over with just one click of a mouse button. Jenny's own Nagra was so out of date she couldn't even buy a cable to connect the machine to her lap top if she had wanted to try it that way. Instead she was left to manually feed the tape through until she hit the right spot.

Jenny threaded the second tape and manually wound it until the sound meter went mental once more, she slowly fed it through with the volume at 10 but as before most of this section was totally inaudible to the human ear. Still she went through it another two times but with the same result. So she wound the tape on further, until with growing excitement she reached the burst of static. Her heart was hammering and she felt an almost electric sense of expectancy. She held her breath without realizing it. *Chop.... Chop.... The... butcherssss... Back...*

She wrote down the words on the pad, taking care to note the tapes counter. This section was seven minutes into the inaudible section. She played it again, slower. The voice, or voices were so distorted at this speed it was impossible to make out their number or sex. But she could make out the low drone of scraping underneath, but again at this speed it could have been anything, little more than a low rumble, but it was instinct, for want of a better word, Jenny *felt* it was metal scraping against metal. Yes that made sense, don't Butchers do that scraping thing to their knives to sharpen them?

Was this recorded in a butchers shop? She wrote, then without thinking. These voices, could they be animals? Waiting for the slaughter?

"Jesus, Woman!" Jenny scolded herself. "Get a grip!" She scribbled this out. If she was living in a cartoon, maybe! But no matter

how weird her life was at the moment, it hadn't descended into the realm of talking animals just yet.

Then came the scream. Jenny felt it jolt through her fingertips and up her arm like an electric shock. Tears came instantly to her eyes and she had to bite back a sob. "So horrible," she breathed and had to force herself to play it again, as slow as was humanly possible. It made her feel physically sick, she could only imagine what terror had produced such an unearthly sound. She was glad when it was cut short, and the sound meters needle died once more. She let the tape play on for a good few minutes, just in case she had missed another audible section from before, but the needle stayed glued to zero for the duration.

Now for the blank tape. Jenny unspooled the first and replaced it in the Nagra with the one she couldn't make anything out on. She cued it up and just let it play in normal speed, volume maxed out, she closed her eyes concentrating and just listened...

Jenny jolted awake, what seemed like a just a second later, awakened by the tape unspooling as it came to the end. Disorientated, Jenny sat up straight in the chair, her back ached from where she had been slumped forwards on the desk, and she rubbed her tired eyes. The click, click, click of the unspooled tape catching on the Nagra as it rotated drew her attention back to the machine. What the hell had just happened? The Nagra tape was twenty minutes long when played at normal speed, she had just started it at the beginning and the next thing she knew it had played out. Twenty minutes gone in the blink of an eye. Jenny switched off the machine and sat in silence for a moment, trying to compute what was going on. Her thoughts foggy from sleep.

The pen, which was in her hand, which she had no recollection of having picked up again after threading up the second tape, fell from between her fingers and clattered on to note pad which was laid on the table next to the Nagra. Jenny squinted at it, below the words she had

transcribed from the first tape was a nonsensical mass of frantic scribbles and scrawls, some written with such force that the paper was torn here and there. Underneath, she could just about make out the vague sketch of what could have been a figure, plainly drawn with long flowing hair, but Jenny had then scribbled over and over it (in her sleep?) She leant forwards to get a closer look, still groggy from being awakened so suddenly. Yes, definitely a figure underneath, a crudely drawn outline with very basic facial features, eyes, nose, but missing a mouth of any kind. There was something about it that made Jenny go cold.

She pushed the pad away and ran her fingers through her hair. "Jesus." She threw off the remains of sleep with a vigorous shake of the head and was contemplating coffee, and lots of it, when the phone rang in the bedroom. Jenny jumped up, glad of the distraction and jogged through into the bedroom to answer it. She got another shock seeing the time; 11:30pm. She had started listening to the two tapes at about 8pm. Reece must have finished early tonight.

She snatched up the phone. "Reece?" She was greeted with silence. "Hello, Reece, you there?"

She could faintly hear someone breathing shallowly on the other end. Then after an age. "Did you hear them?" A voice whispered hoarsely.

It was a woman's voice which threw Jenny for a second then her heart skipped. "Bromlyn? Brom is that you?"

"Did you listen to the tapes?" Her voice was stronger now, insistent.

"Yes," Jenny replied. Now she was fully awake.

"So you heard them?" Bromlyn asked. "Please God tell me you heard them?" Jenny winced at the desperation in the Woman's voice.

"Bromlyn, for God's sake, what's going on? Don't you know the police are looking for you? Where have..."

“Just answer the fucking question!” Bromlyn snapped harshly.
“Did you hear them!?”

“Christ, yes,” Jenny answered. “I heard.... Something. Voices.”

“Oh thank God,” Bromlyn's voice flooded with relief. “Jenny I need to see you, can we meet? Tomorrow?”

Jenny was suddenly reticent, yes of course she wanted to meet with her, she had a million questions, but there was something about where manic switching of emotions the Woman was exhibiting. It felt too much like herself, not so long ago.

“Jenny?” Bromlyn almost shouted.

“Look, Brom, I don't know... Where did you get those tapes? Why use a Nagra?”

“Not now!” Bromlyn snapped back. She sounded like a woman balancing on the edge of sanity to Jenny. “Please, Jenny, please come, I really need to see you.” Her tone was pleading now, tinged with grief. “I really need your help.”

Jenny took a breath, she had to admit in the end she needed to see Bromlyn almost as much as Bromlyn needed to see her. So many questions would go unanswered if she bottled out of this now.
(Whatever *this* was)

“Alright,” Jenny relented. “Where?”

“Oh God, thank you,” Bromlyn gushed, Jenny could hear tears were close and could only imagine what state the Woman was in physically. “Erm, let me think... Somewhere, somewhere bright, somewhere public.” There was a pause where Jenny could only hear her ragged breathing, then. “Roundhay Park. You know the Children's playground, near the restaurant?”

“Yeah, the place where you can hire those peddle boats, by the lake?” Jenny knew the place well.

“Yes, yes that's it. Say about Nine tomorrow morning?”

“Ok, sure,” Jenny said, secretly thankful it was such a public place.

“And you mustn't tell anyone,” Bromlyn insisted. “No one can know about any of this. Not yet. I don't want them to lock me up.”

Jenny winced at '*lock me up.*' “Ok, I promise,” she replied.

Bromlyn began to sob down the phone. “Oh, Jen, thank you.. And I am, so very sorry... It's just that I couldn't think of anyone else. I'm so, so sorry..”

“Hey, hey, Bromlym, It's ok...” Jenny said. But wasn't sure if Bromlyn even heard her she was crying so much now. “I'll see you tomorrow.” Jenny suddenly wanted the woman off the phone, her sobbing was cutting right into her and she felt tears of her own sting her eyes.

“Ok... I'll see you... Tomorrow...” Her voice trailed off, exhausted but at least she and stopped crying and sounded ready to hang up.

“Brom!” Jenny snapped, she had one more question that couldn't wait.

“Yes?” Bromlyn replied weakly.

“What are they? The voices?”

She heard Bromlyn sigh heavily on the other end followed by a long pause. “I think they're the dead, Jen.”
Then she hung up.

Jenny's legs gave way and before she knew it she was on her backside on the bedroom floor with that nerve shredding scream from the tape ringing in her ears.

TEN

Although Jenny was glad they had agreed to meet in such a public place, it did seem like such a contradiction for someone like Bromlyn, who had done her best to avoid detection over the last week or so, would want to meet in such a well-populated place like Roundhay Park. Especially as it was during the School Summer holidays, and on such a beautiful August day like today, the park would be chock full of people enjoying the British Summer while it lasted.

She could have picked an out of the way bar or hotel somewhere where they could hold this clandestine meeting without worry of discovery. Bromlyn was after all, now officially a missing person. But how had she put it on the phone last night? She wanted to meet somewhere bright, somewhere public.

Thinking back to how terrified Bromlyn had sounded, Jenny was only too glad she had agreed to meet at the park. As she walked from the car park and through the park itself, even though it was only half past eight in the morning, the place was already starting to fill with scattered pockets of families getting set for a day in the sunshine. The roller bladers and joggers were out in full force winding their way along the network of paths that crisscrossed the park.

It was quarter to nine when Jenny arrived at the cafe by the lake. Although the place would not open for another fifteen minutes, several of the cafes staff were buzzing around the decking area where you could sit out and enjoy the scenery whilst having your coffee, preparing for what was bound to be a busy day ahead.

Close to the cafe was a large children's playground made up of several wood and rope climbing frames a rustic style roundabout, and an impressive looking wooden fort. Half a dozen children were already in the playground climbing all over the place running around and otherwise shouting and screaming the place down, while several

grown-ups sat chatting casually, reading the morning papers and of course occasionally kissing the odd skinned knee better.

Jenny stood watching the kids play for a moment and felt the growing anxiety which had been building up inside her since she had awoken (again from an unremembered nightmare) fade somewhat at this perfectly normal scene. It was a beautiful peaceful day in a beautiful peaceful park. A million miles from the darkness and dread that surrounded the tapes and those voices trapped on them.

Perhaps this was why Bromlyn had chosen to meet here. The nightmare world the tapes inhabited didn't seem so bad out here and watching the kids play and the day unfolding into another sunny one, the hold they had over Jenny had diminished considerably, so much so that she even caught herself half wishing Bromlyn wouldn't show up at all and cast a dark shadow over the day.

That was of course when she appeared, walking along the footpath that ran alongside the lake on the other side of the playground. Jenny caught sight of her through the jungle gym. She was dressed entirely in black with her head bowed one hand thrust in her coat pocket the other grasping a canvas sports bag. And it wasn't until she trudged closer that Jenny saw that her usually bright red hair had been hastily dyed black to match her outfit.

Bromlyn didn't notice her at first as her eyes were down cast, she just sat down at a picnic table close to the cafe by the water, her shoulders slumped like she had the weight of the world on them.

Jenny took one last look at the children and the normality they represented and made her way around the playground and over to where Bromlyn was sitting, the Woman looked like some kind of middle aged Goth. And when Jenny reached her, Bromlyn looked up at her with bloodshot eyes, her skin, which had always been pale was almost translucent with its lack of color. She clearly hadn't slept in days, the fatigue was etched all over her face. The shock of her appearance must have registered on Jenny's face because Bromlyn gave her the thinnest

of smiles in greeting. There was no other word for it. Bromlyn looked like death.

"You'll have to forgive my appearance, Jenny." Bromlyn said softly. "I'm not at my best at the moment."

"No, it's, ok." Jenny said. Along with lack of sleep, Bromlyn clearly hadn't bathed in days either, her hair was a matted mess and she stank of stale sweat and fear.

"I don't sleep much, lately," Bromlyn said stating the obvious. She gestured for Jenny to sit opposite her, which Jenny did. For a long moment neither woman spoke. Finally Bromlyn nodded her head.

"You can say it. I look like shit."

"What happened to you, Brom?" Jenny asked. "I went to the studio yesterday. They said you'd gone missing. It's been two weeks now since anyone has seen you."

Bromlyn looked genuinely alarmed at this. "Two weeks! Are you sure?" She looked forlornly off over the lake and gave a slight shake of her head. "Has it really been that long?" She said to herself. Tears came to her eyes until they were twin pools matching the water close by. "God," she whispered.

Jenny leaned forward and took a hold of one of Bromlyn's hand, which made the other woman start. Jenny felt a pang of guilt seeing her distress, it wasn't that long ago that she wanted to tear strips off Bromlyn for getting her involved in all this. But looking at her now, it was like looking at herself eighteen months ago. She felt a chill run through her when Bromlyn's lost, red rimmed eyes met hers.

She squeezed Bromlyn's hand reassuringly. "The police are looking for you, Brom. You need to go home, get some help."

"No!" Bromlyn pulled her hand away. "I can't, not yet. I can't take all this home with me..." She looked terrified at the prospect. "That's why I've changed the way I look." She pulled roughly at her badly dyed hair. "Can't go back, not until I know."

“Ok, ok,” Jenny placated. “But you should at least call your husband. Let him know you're alive.”

Bromlyn shook her head weakly, then the tears really came and she began to sob. “Oh, Jen, I'm so sorry... I'm so sorry I got you involved in all this...”

“Hey, come, no, it's alright.” Jenny rushed around the picnic table and sat down next to her and held her tight. Bromlyn buried her head into Jenny shoulder and began to sob uncontrollably now. “It's ok, let it out, you'll feel better. Just let it all out.” She told her and just held her close until the worst of it was over.

It had taken some work, but Jenny had finally managed to persuade Bromlyn that they could both do with a strong coffee and something to eat. She had to practically drag Bromlyn up onto the decking outside the cafe after she had finished sobbing and sat her at one of the tables while she went inside to get the drinks and order up two bacon sandwiches.

“Here you go,” Jenny placed the tray on the table and transferred the cups and plates onto place mats in front of them then lent across and put the tray on an empty table behind them.

“Thank you,” Bromlyn said absently. She was staring off to the boat house just below the cafe where two attendants were busy hiring out brightly colored peddle boats to a group of kids who were crowded around the water's edge each impatient for their turn. “It all seems so...” Bromlyn said. “So, normal.” As if she couldn't quite believe normality were possible anymore. “Almost real.”

Almost real? Jenny frowned and studied the Woman for a moment. “Bromlyn?” Bromlyn didn't seem to hear her, she was still staring intently at the children by the water. “Bromlyn?” Jenny said a little louder and Bromlyn finally turned to look at her with unfocused eyes. “What's going on here?” Jenny asked. “Where did you get those tapes?”

“I recorded them,” Bromlyn replied. She thought for a moment then looked genuinely shocked. “Christ, nearly three weeks ago now.” She shook her head slightly and took a large bite out of her sandwich. “Feels like a life time ago.” She added still chewing.

Jenny sipped her coffee, Bromlyn took another large bite, she clearly hadn't had much of a meal for a while. She was slimmer than Jenny remembered, no not slimmer, gaunt. Slimmer would have suited her but she just looked malnourished. Another bite and the sandwich was nearly gone. “I needed that,” she said smacking her lips, she wiped her greasy hands on her already stained trousers and took a gulp of coffee. “I feel almost human again.” She looked up at the bright blue sky. “Almost.”

“Bromlyn, come on, focus,” Jenny said sharply, but the other Woman just kept staring up. “Bromlyn! You said you recorded the tapes. Why use an old Nagra? Shouldn't you have been using a digital sound set up?”

Bromlyn looked back to her as if she had only just remembered she had company. “Do you feel different?” She asked. “Since you heard them?”

“Bromlyn, please, stay focused.” Jenny had to take a breath to stop herself from raising her voice, frustrating as it was, she needed to keep Bromlyn as calm as she could if she was going to get anything coherent out of the Woman. “Let's start from the beginning. You say you recorded them. Where? Why?”

“It was with work, we were out in the country somewhere. Some small village, out in the middle of nowhere. Can't remember where.” She frowned, concentrating, trying to remember, biting her nails. Then, “No, can't remember...”

“And the Nagra?” Jenny asked.

“Oh,” Bromlyn smiled slightly but it looked more like a grimace to Jenny.

“The program we we’re working on, it was a period piece, set in the early nineties, about a film crew invading a village to make a film. I think it was supposed to be a love story. Ironic really, there we were invading the place for real. Art imitating life and all that.”

“Brom, concentrate. So, that’s why you had a Nagra. But surely you didn’t record the sound for real on that?”

“It was just a bit of fun,” Bromlyn continued. “We had finished shooting and I needed to get some atmosphere sound, and since we already had the Nagra as a prop, I thought it would be fun to record some real atmosphere with it. Like in the old days. I just let the tape run for a while and wandered around the outskirts of the village with my headphones on. That was the first tape, the one with the voices on.” Her face took on a haunted look as she remembered. “But now I think about it, it didn’t make any sense using a battered old Nagra. With its shitty sound quality compared to what we use today.”

“So why did you?” Jenny pressed her.

Bromlyn looked across the table at Jenny with fear in her eyes. She took a long time thinking about this. “It made sense at the time. But now... Now I think it was them, calling to me through the headphones.”

“Bromlyn!” Jenny snapped a little harsher than she had intended. “Don't say that. That's...” *Crazy? Wasn't that how her psychosis had first manifested itself?* She sat back in her chair and told herself to calm down. This wasn't getting her anywhere. “Ok, Brom. You said that was the first tape, what about the second? The one with nothing on it?”

Bromlyn flinched at the recollection. “That’s just it, I distinctly remember recording the first tape, like I said I did it for old time’s sake. But the second...” She choked back a sob before continuing. “I don’t remember recording that one at all. I don’t even remember threading it onto the machine.”

The breath caught in Jenny throat. Just as Bromlyn couldn't remember recording that tape. Jenny couldn't remember listening to it. One moment she pressed play, the next, twenty minutes had gone by and she was left with a sore back and those maniac scrawling's she had made in her sleep.

"I must have been wandering around for ages," Bromlyn said. "I snapped out of it when the second tape had run out and was flapping on the reel. And I was in the middle of some field a good half a mile from the village centre."

Just like me, Jenny thought but couldn't bring herself to validate what Bromlyn was saying.

Bromlyn shook her head. "It was *them*, Jenny." She insisted. "The voices."

"No," Jenny waved the theory away, she had to. That way led to madness, and that was one road she didn't want to travel down again.

"When I got back to old mill." Bromlyn went on regardless. "I played the tapes and they were blank. Or so I thought. I couldn't hear a thing at first, despite what the sound meter was telling me."

"Then you slowed it down." Jenny said.

Bromlyn half smiled, her eyes unfocused as she spoke. "I couldn't tell you why I did it. Maybe something I recorded told me to? I really have no other explanation. But if I hadn't recorded them on a Nagra. I never would have thought to slow the tapes down manually.. I never would have heard them."

"Them." Jenny said examining the coffee dregs in her cup.

"The voices from the first tape." Bromlyn said with reverence. Then she added firmly. "Do you believe in ghosts, Jen?"

Could such a question be more out of place than in this serene setting? Jenny wondered. She answered quickly. "No, I don't."

"But you heard them," Bromlyn said with no little surprise.

"I heard... Something, voices." The children were laughing down by the water. All in peddle boats and splashing around in the lake now.

One of the attendants made a half-hearted attempt to quiet them down, but gave up knowing a losing battle when he saw one. Jenny found herself drawn to the sound, like an anchor to reality, God knows she was getting precious little of that out of Bromlyn. It was that or was she more worried that the Woman might be closer to the truth than sanity allowed.

But Bromlyn had said something in passing before that Jenny hadn't picked up on until now. *'Did you feel different after listening to the tapes?'* And she had. Not, cut herself off from the world, dye her hair black in a half arsed disguise type of different, she wasn't so obsessed with what was on the tapes. At least not yet. But it had left her feeling somehow different, *tainted* by what she had heard for want of a better description. And with that, a growing obsession to get to the source of the voices. She tried to push the thought away, but then Bromlyn said.

"There's more stuff on those tapes, more we can't hear."

"Yes, I know," Jenny had to admit. But *ghosts*? Then she suddenly had a sane thought, which was something of a relief. "Maybe you picked up a pirate radio station, on your mic. Happens all the time, you know?" This was quite true, especially if Bromlyn was using a radio mic, but she still felt she was clutching at some pretty thin straws.

"They are trying to tell us something," Bromlyn insisted.

Jenny suddenly wanted gone from here, from Bromlyn, as she got a huge sense of foreboding from the Woman. "I, I can't do this," she said, the words getting caught in her throat. "I shouldn't have come. And you shouldn't have given me those damn tapes." Jenny was in flux, she desperately wanted to know more about the voices, but to put it simply, Bromlyn scared her, the Woman clearly wasn't well and the thought of Jenny going back to the Monkey house suddenly loomed large in her mind's eye. She reached for her already empty coffee cup and instantly pulled her hand away, it was shaking violently. "You

should have left me alone," Jenny added and rubbed her hand with the other.

But Bromlyn barely seemed to hear her. "I think something terrible happened out there," she said.

"Brom," Jenny snapped. "Listen to yourself, it's..."

"Madness?" Bromlyn said and Jenny saw she was smiling slightly.

"I didn't say that. And believe me," she said bitterly. "I know mad."

"They said you heard voices," Bromlyn fixed her with a steady gaze. "When you were sound recording."

So that was it. The stupid bitch thought she had a kindred spirit in Jenny, she felt her blood begin to boil. "What?" She snapped venomously.

"Through your head phones." Jenny felt herself getting more and more angry at her sudden cold demeanor. Bromlyn's mood was up and down like a yoyo.

"Yes I fucking heard voices," Jenny almost shouted. Bromlyn raised an eye brow but nothing more. "Lots of them. Through my headphones, through the radio, Tv. That's because I am... Was sick, Bromlyn.." Jenny's voice was cracking with emotion now, tears of frustration stung her eyes. "It was all in my head. Can't you understand that? It was a chemical imbalance," she sounded like Kapoor now.

"But *this* isn't in your head," Bromlyn said and it stopped Jenny dead, all she could do was gawp at her. "Is it?" Bromlyn asked softly now. "Because I've heard them too, and you do feel different, *changed*. Don't deny it."

Jenny may have nodded her head in agreement but she couldn't be sure. She tried to speak but nothing came out but a strangled sob. Changed? If anything she felt infected by the tapes.

Bromlyn's brow furrowed seeing Jenny distress. "I need your help, Jenny."

Jenny definitely shook her head this time, and hard. "No," she said. "Why don't you just go home, Bromlyn. Go home to your husband and kids and burn those damn tapes?" She pushed her chair back making it screech on the wooden decking and got unsteadily to her feet.

A look of shock flashed across Bromlyn's face. "Jenny, please..."

"No!" Jenny said. And waved a hand at Bromlyn to silence her. "I can't do this," she said through tears. "Don't you understand? I can't slip up, not again..."

"No, Jenny, please, just wait, one moment, please give me two more minutes," Bromlyn pleaded. "Please, just let me show you what happened with the second tape." She looked up at Jenny, her bloodshot eyes wide with fear.

"The blank one?" Jenny asked and put both hands on the back of her chair for support. Suddenly the day wasn't quite so bright anymore, it had grown dark, like the rings under Bromlyn's eyes. Jenny was vaguely aware that she was panting, but held off the urge to do the sensible thing and turn and walk away.

Bromlyn nodded. "Please?" She looked like a frightened child as she gestured for Jenny to sit back down. "Two minutes."

"Ok," Jenny relented, regretting it already but sat back down all the same.

"Thank you," Bromlyn gushed and bent down to rummage through the bag by her feet. "It's not blank, Jenny," she said as she searched. "We just can't hear what's on it." She took a pile of crumpled papers out of the bag and placed them in a heap on the table in front of her. "But Christ, it's not blank." She added with gravity.

She began frantically sifting through the papers, desperately searching for something in particular. "I was listening to it, late at night. Just letting it play to see if anything came through. I was so God damn tired. I must have fallen asleep."

Jenny perked up at this, she had done the same last night hadn't she? "Go on," Jenny told her cautiously.

Bromlyn selected several sheets from the chaos in front of her and slide them across to Jenny. She had a look on her face like a child showing off her homework. "When I woke up," Bromlyn continued. "I had drawn these."

"You did these?" Jenny spread the papers out in front of her to get a better look. One was filled with line after line of no nonsensical scrawls, she could make out the odd word here and there. 'Butcher' of course chief amongst them, but the entire page had been written and rewritten all over in a myriad of different hands and styles.

"That's not my hand writing, none of it," Bromlyn said pointing to the page.

On another page was what appeared to be a sketch of something, again drawn and redrawn a dozen times until it was almost beyond recognition. Jenny looked closer through the mass of lines. It was what could have been a large house or houses, surrounded by crudely drawn trees with a long meandering path way leading up to what looked like a covered porch and beyond that a front door. The more Jenny studied the drawing, the more she could make out. Again the picture was rendered in half a dozen or so different styles, some with no little artistic skill.

"Jesus," Jenny gasped. On the porch, standing by the door was a child's nightmare vision of a butcher, dressed in a crude Butchers apron and holding a knife. Jenny traced her finger over the picture and felt a chill. The face had been violently scribbled out by the artists. Being faceless the figure looked all the more disturbing.

"Chop, chop the butcher's back," Bromlyn whispered reverently. Jenny nodded, she was shaking now.

Bromlyn selected one of the other pages and pushed it in front of Jenny. At first glance this one appeared just to be another mass of scrawls. Some so deep they gouged the paper here and there. Jenny shrugged, it didn't seem to be anything more than that. "Look closer,"

Bromlyn said in a haunted tone. "Look deeper, un-focus your eyes a little."

Doing as Bromlyn instructed, Jenny screwed her eyes almost shut and on closer inspection looking at them like this, Jenny could now see that the mass of swirls and scrawls were in fact dozens, if not hundreds of screaming faces. Jenny drew in a short sharp breath and pushed the paper away.

"You did all of these?" She asked shaken.

"Someone did," Bromlyn said. "Through me, and looking at all the others, more than one person I'd say." She pushed yet more evidence across to her. Jenny could only manage one quick glance at each, her head was beginning to spin.

"This is all too much," Jenny signed wearily and rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. She had been concentrating so hard on the pictures that she could feel the beginnings of a killer headache forming. "I can't do this," she stated and looked at Bromlyn who took a few moments to shift into focus, when she did Jenny could see she was crying again. "I'm sorry."

"But, look at them," Bromlyn pleaded spreading the pictures out on the table.

"I see them," Jenny snapped harshly. She glanced around the decking area, while they had been talking the place had really filled up. Lots of normal people, families enjoying a summer day in the park without a care in the world. She almost hated them for it. The sound of someone noisily draining the last dregs of a milkshake through a straw, drew her attention to a small Girl in a blue summer dress and curly jet black hair sitting at the table next to her. Her Mother was sitting opposite busy texting on her mobile while her daughter tried again to wring out another few drops of strawberry goodness from the long glass.

The Girl looked across at Jenny and frowned, Jenny got a flash of the childish butcher picture in her head and for a moment the Girl

looked dead to Jenny, pale shallow cheeks, with tight grey skin stretched so tightly over her skull you could clearly see the bone underneath. The light went out of the Girl's eyes. Leaving them dead, lifeless.

Then the image was gone and she was looking at a normal eight year old again. The Girl just shrugged at the crazy woman on the next table and returned to her all too empty milkshake.

"God," Jenny hissed through her teeth and turned back to Bromlyn who had tears streaming down her cheeks now in black streaks from what was left of her mascara. She looked like Alice Cooper on crack. "I'm leaving," she told her firmly.

The Woman just shook her head slightly and mouthed something Jenny couldn't make out. She had clearly thought the pictures would be a deal breaker. "P.. Pl..." was all she could manage. *Please*. The imploring, devastated look in Bromlyn's eyes said it loud and clear and Jenny felt it like a blow to her heart.

"I'm sorry," Jenny said, her voice was like smoke it was so thin. She tore her gaze away from Bromlyn's and as she did so she caught a glimpse of something familiar in one of the pictures on the table, half obscured by another. She moved the picture to one side to get a better look and actually felt the color drain from her cheeks.

A mouth less Woman, framed by a mass of scribbles, exactly like the one Jenny had drawn herself the night before. Bromlyn caught her reaction and lean forward to get a better look at the picture she was transfixed by.

"You've seen her," Bromlyn's eyes flashed with excitement now. "You've seen her too,"

Jenny shook her head numbly. "I, I've got to go." She made to stand but Bromlyn reached across and caught her arm. Jenny had no strength left to resist, she slumped forwards and exhaled, so Bromlyn let her go.

Jenny stared blankly at the picture, it was so like hers she could have drawn them both herself. Was she too now infected by this obsession? All she had to do was think back to the last day, how the need to know what was on the tapes. Had they taken a hold of her, just like Bromlyn after all? God help her if it was so. Jenny had come to this meeting for answers, hadn't she? And these answers, like it or not were tied to Bromlyn. Perhaps only together could they unravel this terrible mystery. Only a few hours ago, although it felt like days, Jenny could hardly contain the morbid fascination the tapes had awoke in her, practically reveled in it. She had been so relishing her new role of detective. Now she simply felt cursed.

"When I see that poor Woman with no mouth, I hear the words '*we have no voice*' in my head. They need us, Jenny," Bromlyn said and made a sweeping gesture with her hand over the pictures. "I'm sure of it."

They, the dead. Ghosts? Victims? All this from a few whispered words on an out of date tape recorder, and Jenny's much cherished equilibrium was slipping away by the moment. She so desperately wanted to get up and run away, run home, to Reece to normality. But deep down she knew she didn't have a choice, not anymore. Having listened to the tape, she was part of this now. The will to resist this madness was fading fast.

When Bromlyn spoke next the first wisps of a dark cloud drifted towards the sun overhead, on cue to match Jenny's darkening mood.

"This is what we need to do next," Bromlyn had clearly taken Jenny's catatonia as acceptance, as, to be fair, had Jenny herself. "I've transferred the tapes to two mini disks, state of the art tech, the best money can buy." Bromlyn smiled slightly. "They'll have a fit at work when they get the bill for the transfer." The smile faded perhaps at the memory of work and the everyday life which seemed so far away now.

"Go on..." Jenny prompted with a feeling of absolute dread. Her mouth was so dry it came out as little more than a croak. She cleared

her throat. "You transferred the tapes." She finished.

It did the trick, Bromlyn's far away gaze returned to the here and now. She nodded vigorously. "We can take them into work, tonight. I've checked the online work schedule, there won't be anyone in. My swipe card and passwords still work okay, guess they don't think I'm dead just yet." She frowned at that and faltered for just a second before continuing. "I think, if we can listen to the tapes digitally and on one of our high end audiovison systems, we should be able to separate the voices, filter out the different frequencies, maybe hear what's really on the second tape, the..." Bromlyn paused trying to find an apt term. "The dream tape.... Then maybe we can find out what they want. Find out if we can help them."

"And then what?" Jenny asked. It was strange but actually having some sort of a plan helped.

"Honestly? I don't know," Bromlyn said. "But I have a feeling, that if we can help them. Then maybe we can get back to some semblance of normality again. I can go back to my life. And you can get back on with yours."

Slim chance, Jenny thought nihilistically. But as they say slim hope is better than no hope. But deep down she knew the more they found out, the deeper they scratched the festering scab of this wound, the more it would leave a scar.

Jenny looked over the paper chaos in front of her. This was what was going on in Bromlyn's mind and she was going to follow her?

"Jenny, will you come with me, tonight? I don't think I can do this on my own."

Misery loves company.

Jenny stared off into space like she was contemplating the request. Like she actually had a choice.

"Yes," Jenny said, of course she did, that was what people with no choice always say. Besides it is always easier to follow than to lead.

ELEVEN

He was sick, wasn't he? And as such blameless in all this. Arthur Willard was as much a victim of this whole sorry business as those he had killed over the years. Perhaps more so. They were at peace now, while he continued to suffer. Living in constant fear of the next visit of the sickness and the murderous consequences that it would inevitably bring.

Eight women dead, perhaps more. Arthur could still see their faces, their horrible, twisted faces. And could still hear their screams echoing in his ears. So much so that since it had all began he couldn't bear to be in silence, even for a moment. He would sleep with the radio on, but tuned to static, anything to drown out the lingering sound of their passing.

But it wasn't his fault, it was the sickness. He had never taken pleasure in the killing, quite the opposite, it horrified and repulsed him. And why? Because, after all he was just a normal person, with an illness, and as such, what normal person would enjoy something like that? And every time it had happened down through the years, Arthur had tried desperately to give himself up, but the sickness wouldn't let him. He would try to leave telltale signs behind at the murder scene, clear sign posts, or so he thought, to his identity so they would come for him and put an end this waking nightmare, but they never did.

Arthur knew nothing about crime scene investigations (he had never even seen the TV show, it was too close to home.) But even after his best efforts he never left any evidence behind. It was the sickness again, that engine that drove him during those hated murderous frenzies that ended in some innocent bleeding their life away in his arms. It would wipe the scene clean of any trace of him.

Not once during the six years this had been happening did the police get even close. There was nothing on the news or in the papers.

How was that possible? Each victim had been picked at random, and the crime was never planned, yet none of them ever seemed to be missed. There were never any heartfelt appeals on the TV by grieving parents or spouses. His victims vanished of the face of the earth and no one seemed to care. The sickness again, always one step ahead.

He knew, technically he was a serial killer, but did not count himself amongst that sick breed. During the early months he had researched the subject avidly in the hope of finding some clue, some trigger in his past that would explain what he was and why it was happening to him. But he didn't meet any of the normal criteria. Arthur had never been a misfit, although he was an only child, he had never felt like a loner or an outcast. He had many friends from school, who he would nod to and pass the time of day with if he happened to bump into them in town.

Indeed if he ever did get caught and the head shrinkers delved into his past they would never find any of the usual common denominators that marked a serial killer. He had two loving parents, both dead now and greatly missed (but not obsessively so). He had never been beaten or abused, in fact he was hard pushed to remember ever being so much as smacked as a child. Arthur Willard had been a good boy and much loved. Happy. He had never heard the voice of God urging him on to cleanse the world of the whores and perverts. Indeed, before the sickness came and even, like now, in between bouts, he was the picture of liberal normality. Live and let live was his motto, as long as you don't hurt anyone, have a ball, whatever bodily fluids or imaginative props that ball might entail.

The key to it all was the sickness. Quite simply when it came, he went.

As he would tell himself over and over. Arthur Willard wasn't a bad person. It wasn't his fault, it was that thing buried somewhere deep in his subconscious. Hidden in that dark place, the place where the sickness slept.

But slept it had done, and for more than a year now. And so now wasn't the time to dwell too deeply on such horrors. After all while it slept Arthur was enjoying one of the most cogent murder free periods of his adult life and he was grateful for it. The nightmares and the murderous rage, those twin heralds of an approaching attack of the sickness hadn't surfaced for many months now. And as he examined his boyishly handsome face in the bathroom mirror. Arthur Willard even dared to hope that maybe, just maybe, it would sleep forever.

TWELVE

The Doomsday clock on the kitchen wall read nine twenty. As did the one on the cooker and the one on the phone in Jenny's hand. All of them conspiring to drag her thoughts to Bromlyn's midnight meeting at Old Mill Studios and away from the little pocket of sanity she was currently hiding in, also known as home.

Normality was over rated anyway, time was whispering in her ear, as was sanity come to think of it.

"Brom, you bitch," Jenny hissed. "Why me?"

Tick-tock, the wall clock replied, not that I'm counting... Well I am, that's what I do. Don't hate me for it... Two hours forty minutes to go by the way. I'm just saying...

The name Jenny had selected in her mobile's phone book faded for the fifth time as the display went back into standby mode, due to lack of activity. She absently clicked an arrow button and the display lit back up once more as did the name, for a sixth time now. KAPOOR.

You've been looking at that damn phone for twenty minutes seven seconds now, the ticking clock reminded her. I'm just saying...

And it would probably be another twenty, Jenny thought. Her thumb hovered tantalizingly over the call number button. But what could she say? 'Hello Doc, so just callin' to tell you I'm off to a

clandestine meeting with a Woman in a couple of hours (*and forty minutes,*) who believes she has recorded the voices of the dead on an old tape recorder, and we're going to see if we can hear anything else which might help us figure out what's going on with them.'

Simple enough from a former mental patient. What could possibly be wrong with that? Kapoor would impart some words of wisdom and make it all better. Unless it was Thursday, that's poker night. Jenny was going to smile at her own joke when she suddenly realized she had absolutely no idea what day it was. Reece had left on Monday morning, she had spoken to him every day since, hadn't she? And how many times was that? Two, three?

Don't ask me, said the clock on the wall, *I'm a clock, not a calendar.*

"Jesus," she breathed and finally put the down the phone on the kitchen table and then addressed the mouthy clock on the wall. "If you actually start speaking to me out loud, and not in my head" she told it. "I'll book back into the Monkey Farm myself."

Jenny had made a point of making sure she had started taking the new lower dose of medicine Kapoor had prescribed for her. The thought that all this might be in her head scared her and if anything did take another turn for the surreal tonight, she needed to know it was real. Or whatever real actually passed for these days.

God she was so tired. If Bromlyn hadn't been so intent on secrecy, they could have gone to Old Mill during the day to run the second tape, *the dream tape*, as Brom had called it, through whatever technical wizardly they had up there. Instead of midnight, the witching hour. But at least she wouldn't be alone, two lunatics are better than one, she mused. Safety in numbers, even if you were both nuts!

Nuts, mad, fruit loop, etc, etc. Jenny had called herself all these and more since Bloomfield, it used to be a great source of sick amusement to her, comfort even. A way of thumbing her nose at whatever mischievous creature the universe had conjured up to infect

her with it. The one she had beaten. But lately it was a joke that was wearing pretty thin.

Beaten for now, but could you ever be truly cured?

Relapse was a horrible word and one Jenny had tried to remove from her vocabulary. But tonight it kept forcing its way into the back of her mind, especially now that she was so tired and had too much time to contemplate just how the night might end.

And with that it actually occurred to Jenny that she might be making this whole thing up in her head. That this was some massive and intricate paranoid delusion. All of it, the past months out of the Monkey Farm, life at home with Reece and now this lunacy with Bromlyn, a Woman who had popped up out of the blue to ruin everything. Just one big lie her brain was telling her.

She had of course had that feeling from time to time, it was only natural. And it was times like those that Jenny would just screw her eyes tight shut, count to ten then open them. So far, although she had thankfully not felt the need to do it over the past months, each time she had done this, she had always opened them to find that nothing had changed and she wasn't back in Bloomfield bouncing off the walls.

She knocked superstitiously on the table in front of her. "Touch wood," she said. But this time she would be dammed if she was going to give in to the old paranoia, close her eyes and count to ten. No, this nightmare was a waking one. All too real, but she knew that she would not be able to rest until she could put a face to those poor souls on the tape. And if they were the dead, she would have to see them laid to rest before she could move on.

Jenny was tired, so very tired. The world around her was fading into a surreal haze, she had been living on her nerves since getting back from her meeting with Bromlyn, and now she had hit a dip as she had entered this calm before the storm. So much so that she felt like a faded projection of herself, she was sitting at her kitchen table, the world

around her was real enough. But she just wasn't quite there in it. Like the owner of one of those voices on the tape. Somewhere in between.

When Reece had called earlier, he had said that she sounded strange, different somehow. That's because I am, she had almost replied. I'm in the twilight zone, that place between reality and some other ethereal place where the dead called out in the darkness. Reece was worried about her and she knew he would come straight back home if she had asked, she could hear it in his voice, almost like he wanted to come riding back on his white charger. That wasn't fair on him, she knew that, but still her mind went back to her conversation with Kapoor. That Reece might be one of those types who needed to be needed. I do want your help from time to time, she thought, but I don't need it, not to survive.

So Jenny had told him everything was fine, but couldn't wait for him to come back to her. The latter was true at least, but still, she took heart from just how much stronger all this would make her. If it didn't kill her, to paraphrase Herr Nietzsche.

THIRTEEN

Jenny drove to Old mill studios this time. A midnight stroll along the Leeds to Liverpool canal towpath wasn't something you did alone. Despite all the changes to Leeds City Centre and the surrounding area over the years, midnight in a big city was the same the world over. Not a place to go wandering solo without a large caliber hand gun or a black belt in martial arts. Neither of which Jenny possessed.

Still, she had to walk from where she parked the car on a side road near a large brewery which was still pumping out beer even at this late hour. The smell of hops was heavy in the warm summer night air and followed her as she made her way to the studios, but thanks to the exclusive nature of the cafe bars in this district she didn't have to walk a

gauntlet of braying drunks or the street walkers that frequented the centre at this time. Maybe I'm losing my looks she mused when she wasn't propositioned once on the way.

When she got to the studios, although the surrounding buildings including the late night restaurant opposite were brightly lit, Jenny found the place was in darkness and she half hoped Bromlyn had decided to wait until morning to digitally dissect the tapes, or better still given up the idea altogether in favor of sanity. Jenny checked her phone but there was no message either way, so she waited.

The clock on the Parish church on the other side of the canal struck twelve and as it did a shadow walked across the brightly lit courtyard by the late night restaurant across from the studios. The shadow was Bromlyn, and the harsh artificial light did nothing for her gaunt features as she approached Jenny. She now looked like a Goth scarecrow.

Bromlyn's pallid face broke into something resembling a smile as she reached Jenny. "I still wasn't sure you would come," she said softly.

"Neither was I," Jenny admitted.

"Hmm," Bromlyn nodded, "Come on." Jenny followed Bromlyn across the courtyard and over to the studios entrance. "I double checked the online work schedule," Bromlyn said as they walked. "No one will be in tonight, so we shouldn't be disturbed." When they got to the front doors, Bromlyn gestured over to a block of old looking flats some way off, which had somehow survived the modernization around them. "The security guard, Dodds, lives in one of those, so we'll have to keep the lights off until we get into the sound post-production suites on the second floor, the windows are on the other side so he won't be able to see us then."

"Doesn't he do rounds or something?" Jenny asked as Bromlyn rummaged around in her bag and produced a white plastic swipe card with a black metallic strip down one edge.

“Every couple of hours I think, if at all. I've been waiting here a while, he did a sweep at half eleven, that gives us more than enough time.”

Jenny glanced at the Henry Moore statue rip off, it didn't look half bad in the artificial street light. She was about to ask Bromlyn who's bright idea the statue had been when she heard a long beep as Bromlyn swiped in and the doors opened with an audible click.

“Let's go,” Bromlyn said and slipped inside. Jenny hesitated for a brief moment then followed; After all it wasn't technically breaking and entering if one of you actually worked there. Was it?

Once inside the darkened reception area, Bromlyn walked briskly over to a control panel on the wall by the reception desk, just as the alarm began to beep-beep-beep a warning tone, then she punched in a five digit code on a key pad and the beeping stopped. “At least they haven't changed the alarm code,” she whispered and nodded towards a set of stairs leading up to the next floor. “Let's go, mind your step. I should have brought a torch.”

Bromlyn and Jenny made their way up to the second floor like thieves in the night. This floor stretched out down a long corridor with several doors on each side, at the very end Jenny could just make out another set of stairs through the gloom. “Jesus, this place is a rabbit warren,” Jenny whispered as they walked down the corridor to the next set of stairs.

“Changed quite a bit since you were last here, I guess.”

“Not half.”

“Well that's what close to a hundred grand gets you.”

Jenny let out a soft whistle, it felt strangely comforting despite their skulking to be talking about normal everyday things. Jenny looked across at Bromlyn and could tell she felt the same, especially when they past a large painting on the wall. “That painting there cost five grand on its own.” Bromlyn whispered and Jenny stifled a laugh. Perhaps there was hope for them still.

“Brom?”

Bromlyn stopped at the last door before the stairs and using the swipe card again opened it and motioned for Jenny to go in.

“Brom,” Jenny paused by the door and looked at the Woman through the gloom. “Brom, promise me you'll call your Husband...” What was his name?

“John,” Bromlyn prompted softly.

“Yeah, sorry.” She gently took Bromlyn by the arm and studied her face in the half light. “Promise me, no matter what we hear or what happens next. Promise me you'll at least give him a call, to let him know you're okay.”

Bromlyn met her gaze and Jenny could see her eyes sparkle with tears, so she squeezed her arm reassuringly. Bromlyn took her hand in her own and rubbed the back of it. She nodded ever so slightly. “Thank you, Jenny,” she said. “I can only imagine how hard this is for you. And once again, I'm so sorry for getting you involved.” Her voice was low but firm, she was clearly relishing having a concrete cause of action and more importantly someone to take it with.

“Promise me?” Jenny pressed her gently

“Promise.”

With the pact made Jenny let Bromlyn usher her inside.

The room lay in near total darkness so Jenny instantly stopped unsure of her surroundings, Bromlyn moved forwards until she was little more than a grey shadow against a large window with its blinds closed. She snapped on a lamp attached to a large mixing desk which was located to the right of a key board and two thirty inch flat screen computer monitors, and it illuminated the room. Not for the first time tonight. Jenny whistled. It was like walking onto the deck of the star ship Enterprise. The mixing desk had a dizzying array of slides and dials.

“Come on in,” Bromlyn said and placed her bag on the one of two chairs and took out the disks, then tossed the bag onto the floor.

Jenny ran a bewildered eye over the mass of technology in front of her. "Now I remember why I didn't take much of an interest in the post-production side of sound recording. I bet you need a degree just to turn this thing on."

As if to prove her wrong, Bromlyn fired up the mixing desk and attached computer system with the flick of a couple of switches. The mixing desk lit up like a NASA technician's wet dream, hard drives whirred into life and the sound of their large cooling fans filled the room.

"It's not as hard as it looks," Bromlyn said and put the first of the small disks into a mini disk like player in the middle of a tower of devices housed in a strong metal cabinet.

"Which disk is that?" Jenny asked as she pulled up a plush leather chair next to Bromlyn's.

"The dream tape," Bromlyn replied and scooted her chair closer to the desk, keyboard and mouse. She gave the mouse a shake and one of the monitors came to life, showing a time line bar at the bottom of the screen, Bromlyn clicked and dragged an icon which brought up a more classic looking view, which included the normal play, pause, stop, fast forward and rewind as well as bar chart type sound meters, bass, treble, as well as what looked to Jenny untrained eye like a ECG type section which she guessed were frequency monitors.

Bromlyn moved the mouse over the play button on the screen and turned to look at Jenny before continuing. The light on the mixing desk lamp only lit half her face but Jenny could still clearly see the fear in her eyes. Jenny nodded and felt her heart flutter as Bromlyn clicked play.

A vertical red line began to slowly move down the time line bar at the bottom of the screen marking off the seconds as the disk played. Jenny's breath caught in her throat as the sound meters on the monitor all instantly went bezerk. But no sound came through the two massive speakers, which were located on the back wall behind the computer desk and wouldn't have looked out of place at an Iron Maiden concert.

Bromlyn clicked her tongue on the roof of her mouth in frustration and leaned over to the mixing desk and moved one of the many slides up. Jenny could see the volume column on the screen rise up into the red but still nothing came through the speakers.

“This thing is packed with sound,” Bromlyn said, her voice edged with irritation. “Just looked at those readings!” They were all peaking in the red now.

“There's not even any background hiss,” Jenny noted and gestured towards the speakers which were still silent even as the volume increased.

“Let me try something.” Bromlyn said. The mouse arrow flicked around the monitor as she applied various filters to screen out different frequencies but nothing changed. The meters were all fluctuating madly from nothing to maximum. “Doesn't make any sense.” Bromlyn said biting her lip. “It's all there, right in front of me, these speakers should be blowing.” She sat back in her chair exasperated, she looked close to tears. “No matter what frequency I try, nothing. I don't know what else to do.”

“Maybe there's nothing that you have here that can pick it up?” Jenny asked, she felt a slight pang of guilt, she could see how deflated Bromlyn was, but she was just relieved. They had tried, hadn't they? What more could they do?

“Let's try the other disk.” Bromlyn said and Jenny's heart sank. Bromlyn closed down the audio track and replaced the dream disk with the other. She hit play once more but decreased the speed to ten percent and moved the needle on the time line forwards until it came to the section with the static blast.

Jenny exhaled as the speakers hissed into life. “Not too loud, huh?” She wiped her sweaty hands on her jeans and braced herself for the inevitable thud, thud.

“Okay,” Bromlyn whispered and lowered the volume, she clicked on a couple of filters and leant forwards, listening intently.

Then it came, that deep bass *thud, thud*. The sound meter peeked into the red in time with it. Followed by the first of the voices, underscored with that metallic scraping sound. Much clearer than before thanks to the benefit of modern technology. Even at this speed the words had a real weight of emotion.

"Butcher, chop, chop, the butcher... The butchers back... Chop, chop, the butcher's back..."

"Jesus," Jenny uttered and the room seemed to close in around her. Bromlyn clicked on the time line taking it back to before the sound spike and hit play again, five percent speed now, she also adjusted the frequency the computer was picking up on. As the thud, thud began again it sounded different now, harsher, more real. Jenny suddenly felt claustrophobic, the feeling deepened at the voices came through the High Quality speakers, the bass was so low in them she could feel it in her chest. Bromlyn clicked on another filter as the voices began and Jenny could clearly make out several voices now. She was about to ask Bromlyn to turn on more light, when she heard something new. Another burst of inaudible chatter but below the original one.

Bromlyn perked up. "Did you hear that?" She took the time line back and altered the frequency once again and played it over in a loop.

"What is that?" Jenny asked with trepidation.

"Hold on," with each pass of this new section, Bromlyn stripped away filter after filter and manually changed the pitch and frequency. As she did so, the faint almost inaudible sounds became slurred words, indistinguishable from the din surrounding them but gradually becoming clearer still. Jenny gripped the sides of her chair and her sweaty hands spilled slightly on the leather, she actually glanced at the door as the words began to unscramble and fought the urge to run screaming from the room.

Until finally Bromlyn locked on to the right frequency and the words came through still barely recognizable but definitely there, half a

dozen voices fighting to be heard, each word almost overlapping into the next.

A thud as if heard from a distance.... *"Butcher.... Back... Butcher's back with another one for the drop.. Another thud... Reachhh out... We, must reachhh outtt.. Someone else.... Someone closessss... Make her hearrrr, Somewhere close... She still breathssss.... Not one of usss... Not one of the Butcher's... Not one for the drop... Make her understand... Reach out... make her hear us.... No one hears us... No one hears the dead... We are lost... We have no voice... We have no voice...."*

"We have no voice," Bromlyn uttered weakly, and the image of Mouthless Woman flashed into Jenny mind's eye in vivid detail, but real this time somehow. *We have no voice.*

"Stop." Jenny said. But Bromlyn leaned forwards closer still as if transfixed. Listening intently with quiet terror, tears streamed down her cheeks. "Bromlyn, please..." Jenny was sobbing now.

"We have no voice, we have no voice..."

"Dear God." Bromlyn said, she sounded terrified but just couldn't stop herself continuing to tweak with the filters and frequencies. "They're talking about me, somehow they knew they could communicate with me, through the recorder."

"This is impossible," Jenny said. "Brom..."

Bromlyn waved a hand at Jenny without taking her eyes off the screen to silence her. "There's more," she said. "Underneath."

Jenny heard it too, and tasted bile at the back of her throat. A low rumble underneath the voices. "What is that?" Despite her growing unease, Jenny couldn't help but push her chair closer to the desk until both she and Bromlyn had their faces three feet from the monitor.

"Wait," Bromlyn expertly clicked off several of the filters she had applied to isolate the voices until they faded away. Now all they were left with was the low rumble. She took all the treble out of the sound and boosted up the bass even further. "C'mon, c'mon," she said through gritted teeth to the screen. "What are you?"

“Sounds like, sounds like another voice,” Jenny strained to hear but couldn't make out any words, the sound was so low in pitch the speakers were physically vibrating now.

Bromlyn hit one final filter and the sound came through very loud, very clear. It was a Man's voice, but it wasn't words it was articulating. It was a deep, booming terrible sobbing. So pitiful, so disturbing, both Women gasped out loud at the same time. But neither of them could stop themselves listening with morbid fascination.

It was the heartbreaking sound of utter despair.

Bromlyn gave a strangled sob and began to shake uncontrollably. “Oh, Jesus, Oh God...” The words got caught in the throat as she began to hyperventilate.

This pulled Jenny back from the edge of joining her. The sound seemed to suck all the life out of the room. Another moment of it and Jenny felt as if she would slash her own wrists.

“Brom!” She shouted over the horrible noise and took a hold of Bromlyn's shoulders who was staring in open mouthed terror at one of the undulating speakers, pulsing in time with the sobs. “Bromlyn, turn it off.” Jenny pleaded and shook her violently. Bromlyn shook her head numbly more in an 'I can't' than 'I won't' gesture. Her trembling lips were mouthing something Jenny couldn't hear over the booming sobbing which was still repeating though the speakers filling the small suite with choking desolation.

Somehow Jenny mustered enough cogent thought to push past Bromlyn and hit the power switch on the mixing desk, this instantly killed all the lights on it, but still the sobbing kept coming. “Jesus,” Jenny said and then saw the power supply which led directly to the computer's hard drive. She switched it off and the monitors and whole system, including power to the speakers died.

But still the sobbing came through the now dead speakers. “How do you turn this fucking thing off!?” Jenny screamed at Bromlyn who was now staring at the blank monitor. “Brom!!”

Bromlyn turned and gave Jenny a look of horror that all but froze the blood in Jenny's veins. "It is off," she sobbed. She held up the disk, she had already ejected it but still it did no good.

"Come on!" Jenny grabbed Bromlyn by the collar and dragged her to her feet, then after one final look back at the violently shaking speakers, she pulled Bromlyn out of the room and once they were out into the corridor she violently kicked the door shut. Both Woman broke in to a run which took them down the stairs, which they took three at a time and finally through the reception area and outside into the warm night air.

"It's impossible, it's impossible," Bromlyn repeated over and over, until finally she collapsed on to the stone floor of the court yard, pulling Jenny down with her, where they held onto each other for dear life and cried until they could hardly breathe.

Across the court yard, Jenny could see the restaurant was still quite full with late night diners. How could they sit there? She wondered dully as Bromlyn's whole body racked with sobs against her. Eating and drinking, laughing and joking without a care in the world.

The answer was simple, and bitter to swallow. Ignorance is bliss.

FOURTEEN

As Jenny drove them back to Bromlyn's bed and breakfast accommodation through deserted peaceful suburban streets, neither Woman spoke, both were lost in their own thoughts. Jenny's mind raced as she tried to process what they had heard. There could be no doubt now, they were the voices of the dead, somehow recorded at a subliminal level onto the tapes. But so what? What did that actually mean? They were dead, and by the sounds of it murdered by this Butcher. Jenny shuddered as the crude image of the Butcher Bromlyn

had drawn, the one guided by another's will, with its smudged features, came to mind, accompanied now by that terrible cavernous sobbing. She cursed and tried to get it out of her head. What could she do for them anyway? No one would believe them, especially with Jenny's past.

Next to her Bromlyn was muttering something to herself and actually rocking back and forth ever so slightly. Jenny had seen that action a million times back at Bloomfield and it made her sick seeing it again. The shadow of that damned place seemed to be looming large over everything lately and getting darker with every new revelation. She silently cursed Bromlyn not for the first time for dragging her into all of this.

"We, er. We have to stop all this now," Bromlyn said in a matter of fact tone. She nodded to herself and continued staring out into the dark road ahead. "Yes, we should forget all about this." She plainly liked the sound of the idea because she smiled.

"What?" Jenny asked. "What do you mean? We can't just stop." But Jenny had to admit it did sound good, just walking away and leaving the dead to their fate. But could she really rest while they could not? She had never felt so torn. And the easy way out had never felt so tempting.

"There's nothing we can do anyway," Bromlyn shrugged but still didn't look at Jenny as if scared the growing incredulity on her face would make a lie of this new found common sense. "Yeah," She continued after a moment. "Who's gonna believe us anyway? We take the disk or those tapes to the police, they'll lock us up." She gave a little laugh.

'Lock us up,' That gave Jenny a chill. "Don't say that!" She snapped a little harsher than she had intended. "Besides," she took a breath and softened her tone. "You started this, remember? I didn't want anything to do with any of this. Shit, I never should have let you talk me into it." She looked at her white knuckles as she squeezed the steering wheel harder.

“I just want it to stop, now.” Bromlyn said. “I thought maybe there was something we could do, but...” She shook her head. “It’s just all gone too far.”

“You’ve got that right.” Jenny was torn between the logic of what Bromlyn was saying and somehow wanting to help those poor people, although she had to admit she hadn’t the first idea how. It was just the two of them, and clearly Bromlyn had made up her own mind to walk away. And who could blame her? Christ, voices of the dead? What could they do? After all dead was dead. Sure, they had definitely stumbled onto something supernatural here, but real nevertheless. But again it all came back to that same simple question. What could they do?

Bromlyn finally looked across at Jenny. “I’m so sorry.” It was barely a whisper.

It was so heartfelt Jenny had to catch herself before she burst into tears. “I know,” she said softly and placed her hand on Bromlyn’s knee, she glanced at the Woman to see her eyes were brimming with tears. Bromlyn smiled weakly and squeezed Jenny’s hand.

“I think I’ll go home tomorrow.” Bromlyn said a little firmer.

“That’s great, Brom’” Maybe she was right after all, Jenny felt bad for admitting it but it really was the only, for want of a better word, sane choice. “There really isn’t anything we can do for them. Christ, I wish we could help them, but I for one wouldn’t know where to start.”

Verbalizing it, Jenny actually felt the weight lift. Could it really be that easy? Yes, now that they were away from that horrible sound, all those tortured voices, the damn *influence* of them, it sounded Good.

There was no shame in it, they were way out in the twilight zone here. No one, not even the dead, could expect any different. “Yeah, the sooner we put this behind us, the sooner we can try and forget it.” Jenny suddenly had a feeling that in just a couple of months all this would seem like a bad dream until eventually she would doubt any of this had ever been quite what it seemed now. Voices of the dead?

Bullshit, probably just some rogue pirate radio station they had picked up. Banality would seem like bliss after these last couple of days.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forget any of this.” Bromlyn said as if hearing Jenny's thoughts, her wishful thinking. “Jesus, sometimes I think I can still hear them.” Bromlyn pressed her hands over her ears. “In my head. Ever since I listened to that first tape.” She fell silent for a moment and squeezed her eyes tight shut forcing tears to stream down her face.

“Hey, hey come on Brom. It’ll pass, you’ve been obsessing over those damn tapes for days, it’s no wonder you can’t get them out of your head.”

“God I hope you’re right.”

“You’ll see, give it a couple of months and all this will seem like a bad dream. You’ll see me in the street and you’ll be embarrassed about how you’re feeling now.”

Bromlyn smiled ever so slightly but it lit up her weary face. She took her hands off her ears and looked at Jenny. “Still, I’m sorry I got you involved in all this. Especially after what you have been through... Before.”

“I know. But in your place I can actually see the logic in it. The voices in my head where just that, in my head. This was the real thing. No wonder you were scared facing it alone.”

“Weird fucking couple of weeks,” Bromlyn said and they both laughed out loud, it felt so good to let the tension of the last couple of days go neither of them wanted to stop.

And so the pact was made, they would walk away from it all, put it behind them and get on with their lives. Fear gave way to a tangible sense relief.

For a few moments at least.

The car radio suddenly burst into life at full volume making Jenny and Bromlyn cry out in shock. “Jesus!” Jenny felt the car swerve

violently to the right as she almost lost control completely. "Shit!" She shouted in panic and steered hard to the left to compensate, the wheel jerked wildly as the car weaved all over the road, narrowly missing a row of trees, until finally she regained control. She eased off the accelerator and braked hard until the car came to a stop in the middle of the deserted road. She hit the steering wheel with her fist. "Jesus!"

She turned to Bromlyn who was madly fiddling with the radio in a vain attempt to turn it off. "How do you turn this thing off?" She shouted over the din. Jenny watched as the auto tuner went mad scanning impossibly fast through dozens of channels. The din was deafening in the confines of the car. "I can't turn it off. What the hell's wrong with it?"

"Leave it!" Jenny snapped at Bromlyn and slapped her hands away in frustration. She hit the off button but the radio continued to blast out, it was beginning to pick out words from the various channels as it sped through them, it was an inaudible babble at first. "For Christ sake." Jenny turned off the ignition but the radio just carried on all the same, scanning impossibly fast through the various channels picking out the odd word here and there from news channels, chat shows to late night phone-ins and the weather until the random words began to form sentences.

Stop... Him... Stop... Him... Help us... We have... No... voice. The car's speakers were distorting with the sheer volume.

Bromlyn covered her ears, and screamed; "No!! Make it stop, shut them up, shut them up!!"

We... Have no... voice... Butcher, butcher... chop... The Butcher's Back... Stop... The horror... We, have... No voice... We... Have... No... Voice...

"Oh, God, it's them." Jenny listened to the disjointed plea coming from the radio and had to fight the growing urge to just start screaming. "Brom, it's them."

"Make them stop!!" Bromlyn screamed, hysterical now. "Please I can't stand this! Why can't they just leave us alone?" She fell forward in

the seat sobbing uncontrollably, still trying in vain to block out the cacophony. "Please!!" She hammered her fists on the dash board.

When as suddenly as it had begun, with a sharp burst of static the radio died. Leaving Jenny and Bromlyn with nothing but their ragged breathing.

"Oh, thank Christ," Bromlyn sobbed. But all Jenny could do was stare at the radio in disbelief, she tried to speak but couldn't. "Thank Christ, thank Christ." Bromlyn repeated over and over.

"They knew." Jenny said plainly finally finding her voice. "They knew we were going to quit." Something in the rear view mirror caught her eye.

"Let's just get out of here." Bromlyn said, wiping the tears from her face with the heels of her shaking hands. Jenny didn't answer she was staring into the rear view mirror. "Jenny!" Bromlyn said sharply. "Jenny, snap out of it we have to go." A moment before Jenny's face had been flushed with color, now it was deathly white. She mouthed something Bromlyn couldn't make out. "Christ Jen." Bromlyn looked over her shoulder in frustration and out the back window.

Bathed in the red light of the cars brake lights, as if for dramatic effect, was a Woman wrapped in a white shroud standing in the middle of the otherwise pitch black street some ten feet behind them. A Woman with no mouth.

"We have no voice," Jenny said vaguely, unable to tear her eyes from the mouth less face of the phantom.

"Jenny, drive." Bromlyn said. She punched her hard on the arm when she didn't answer and Jenny finally looked at her as if in a daze.

"They knew," she said to Bromlyn weakly. Fear clouded her thoughts but Jenny knew it was true, somehow they knew and had made this one final effort to convince them. Jenny had the overwhelming urge to get out of the car and go to the Woman. It all made a fuzzy logic. If she could only talk with her, she could find out how to help them. They wanted to be at peace, that much was obvious

but both Jenny and Bromlyn were floundering, unsure what they could do to help them.

She made a move to open the door, but Bromlyn caught her arm. "Jenny! What the hell are you doing?" She dug her nails into Jenny's arm which wrenched her back to reality.

"Huh?" she looked around suddenly aware of where she was.

Outside, the Woman took a faltering step closer and Jenny caught the movement out of the corner of her eye. She jolted back to reality in a heartbeat. "Fuck me," she cursed and started the car. It sparked into life with a reassuring roar and Jenny floored the accelerator. The tires squealed in complaint as they fought for purchase on the tarmac and then took hold and the car sped away. Jenny couldn't help but glance into the rear view mirror to see the Woman disappear in a cloud of exhaust fumes.

"This is fucking insane!" Bromlyn shouted and began to sob uncontrollably again.

"You saw her, didn't you? The Woman, from the pictures we drew." Jenny asked, she looked into the rear view mirror again but the road behind was empty. Bromlyn didn't answer, she just sobbed into her hands. "Answer me!" Jenny screamed. "Tell me you fucking saw her too!"

"I did," Bromlyn said weakly.

"What? I didn't hear you."

"I said I did!!" Bromlyn screamed back, and then broke down again.

Jenny struggled to see out into the dark road ahead as she sped along, there were no street lights this far out of town and she had tears in her eyes, she swerved suddenly as the car nearly left the road but managed to straighten up again. She told herself to calm down, which was easier thought than done. Fear had given her a heavy foot and a glance at the speedometer confirmed she was doing nearly fifty, which on these dark and narrow roads was tantamount to suicide. She eased

off the gas, but kept glancing behind convinced the Woman would be there every time she did.

“Jenny!” Bromlyn screamed and pointed out into the road ahead. Jenny snapped her head back and just caught sight of the mouth less Woman standing in the middle of the road dead ahead. It was lunacy to wonder how the hell she got there but Jenny though it all the same. That done she had no time to even think about swerving and all she could do was brace herself for the impact. Bromlyn did the same, she slammed her feet on the glove compartment and brought her arms up to her face in anticipation of the windscreen exploding all over her.

The car was on the Woman in an instant, but the moment it should have hit her, she was gone. There was no sickening thud as flesh (dead or alive) met hurtling steel only a blast of ice cold air as they drove through the space where she had been a moment before, which took Jenny breath away.

The car died, headlights, engine, everything gone. Its electrics faded at the moment of impact leaving it to coast to a halt. All Jenny could do was stare at the dead dashboard in disbelief. Bromlyn turned to her in a panic. “Start it, start it!” she screamed, her breath clouding in the ice cold air. She looked around frantically, then back at Jenny who was still frozen in shock. “Jenny, For Christ sake, we have to get out of here before she comes back.”

“It’s dead.” Jenny said softly as a strange sense of calm came over her. The air in the car was still so cold she could feel the sweat freeze on her arms.

“Well try it again!” Bromlyn was sobbing now.

“We have to help them,” Jenny said after an age and finally turned to look at Bromlyn. “We can’t ignore this now. Don’t you see?” She said. Voices on a tape was one thing, but to actually somehow force your way, albeit briefly, into reality was something else entirely. One final desperate plea for their help. And it was one Jenny could no longer ignore.

“No.” Bromlyn said and shook her head. “I’m done with this.” She began struggling with her seat belt and finally got it off. “No more,” she said and stumbled out of the car.

“Brom!” Jenny made a grab for the Woman but she was out of the car before she could reach her. “Shit.” Jenny took off her seat belt and got out. Steam was rising off the car’s body work as the balmy night air began to warm the frozen metal.

Bromlyn was looking around the deserted sleepy country road but they were alone. She cupped her hands around her mouth. “We can’t do anything!” She screamed into the night. “Can’t you see that? There’s nothing we can do! Leave us alone, leave us alone!”

“Brom, yes there is.” Jenny moved around the car towards Bromlyn.

“No.” She said firmly and took a couple of steps back as Jenny approached her. “Jenny, don’t touch me!” She held out a hand to stop her.

Jenny held out her own hands defensively. “Brom, it’s ok.”

“I can’t do this, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay.” Jenny slowly moved towards her, Bromlyn shook her head as the tears came again but she didn’t stop Jenny as she pulled her close and hugged her. “It’s okay.”

“I can’t, I can’t. I know this is all my fault...”

“No.” Jenny said softly.

“Yes, it is, I started all this, I got you involved.” She sobbed into Jenny’s shoulder and for a second Jenny thought she might faint. She moved Bromlyn over to the car and she leant her against it.

“Shh, come on. Let’s get out of here.”

“But the car...”

“It’ll start, I’m sure of it. They don’t want to hurt us, they just need our help.” Jenny knew this with an absolute certainty. She secretly promised them she would somehow help and as she did the car’s electrics sparked back into life, still in fourth gear, but with no one

inside to drive it, the car lurched forwards a couple of feet but instantly stalled and came to a stop.

“I can’t...” Bromlyn said softly.

“I know, and that’s fine. But I can.” Jenny told her. “I don’t know how yet, but I can. I’ll figure something out.”

“Then I think you’ll need this,” Bromlyn pulled a mini disk out of her pocket. “I was going to destroy it, but if you are determined to continue, you’ll need it.”

Jenny took the disk. “Is this...?”

“The second one, the dream tape.”

Jenny took the disk and then opened the passenger door and helped Bromlyn get in. “First thing’s first, let’s get you home.” She jogged around to the driver’s side, she looked around but the Woman was gone, she had half expected to see her, half hoped she could give her some indication as to what Jenny needed to do. But whatever it was she would just have to figure it out for herself. She got in and the car started first time.

By the time Jenny pulled the car over to the side of the road and parked outside the bed and breakfast Bromlyn was staying in, the first light of day was warming the early morning sky. Both Woman sat in silence for a full minute, Jenny was exhausted but her mind was racing. She knew she had to try the dream tape disk again, that was the one from which all the images in her head came from, the Butcher, the mouth less woman, the house, everything that linked the dead to the outside world.

It was Bromlyn who finally broke the silence with yet another apology. “I wish I could help you, Jen, but I can’t, I’m sorry but I think if I don’t get away from all this I... Well I don’t know what I will do.” She put her hands over her ears again. “I can still hear them.”

Jenny instinctively did the same, but all she could hear was the blood rushing in her ears. After all Bromlyn had listened to that second tape a dozen or so times over the last week and whatever was on it had

somehow seared itself into her subconscious. Jenny didn't relish doing the same but she knew it was really the only way. For that she would need to get a hold of a mini disk player, then she could use her own computers simple audio software to listen to the tape on a loop.

"Please be careful with the dream tape, Jen." Bromlyn said as if she had read Jenny's mind.

"I will." Jenny suddenly wanted Bromlyn to be there when she did finally listen to it, to watch over her, but she knew that was asking too much. Bromlyn was teetering on the edge of sanity as it was, and that was a place Jenny was all too familiar with. But she'd made the promise and she had to stick with it, she instinctively knew the mouthless Woman meant her no harm, but she also knew she was taking a hell of a risk with her own already fragile sanity delving into that dark place where those voices dwelt, but she had no choice.

"Call me in a few days," Bromlyn said with no real conviction.

"Are you going home?" Jenny asked.

She nodded. "But first I need to get some sleep, try and get things straight in my head before I go back to all that normality." She shrugged ever so slightly and the hint of a smile played on her lips. "If I can. Still don't know what I'm going to tell John." Then after a moment she added. "Please be careful." And before Jenny could answer she was out of the car. Jenny watched her as she hurried up the steps towards the B&B and disappeared inside.

"I will," she said to herself. Jenny looked up through the windscreen at the rapidly lighten sky. She caught her reflection in the rear view mirror. "Do you know what you are doing?" She asked it already knowing the answer, but replied anyway. "No, I didn't think so."

Arty Willard was awoken by a scream of terror. He sat bolt upright in his bed, drenched in sweat as the scream continued and it took him several nerve shredding seconds to realize the scream was his own. He clasped his hand over his mouth to stifle the sound and screwed his eyes tight shut and cast his mind to happier times, until the scream and the horror in the pit of his stomach finally subsided just a little.

It was the dream again, after so long that terrible signal of worst to come. If he wasn't vigilant, this night would only end one way. The sickness.

The dream, Arty cursed it. Always the same. He had been walking down a nameless street having just left a house he had never lived in, it was, as it always was in the dream, a quite beautiful day. Like a Children's afternoon television show on crack. Everyone was smiling, even the cats and dogs he encountered, the flowers, trees and the very houses themselves all smiling like some demented cartoon world in which he was the only thing real.

The smiling sun shone down from the flawless blue sky. Arty closed his eyes and turned his face up to let the warmth of it caress his cheeks. And that was when the rain started. He felt the first specks on his face whilst his eyes were still closed, heard the beginnings of the pitter patter as it hit the pavement at his feet.

"Mummy, Mummy," A child's voice, but without any of the usual music to it. "Look at the funny man, he's covered in red. Has he been painting?"

Something in the Child's voice grated on Arty's nerves. The rain was heavier now and Arty frowned and wished it away. "Rain rain go away, come back on that annoying kid's birthday," Arty chanted to the heavens. Perhaps he thought, if he kept his eyes tight shut he could wish it all away. But the rain only got heavier and began to soak him through to the skin. The rain was warm to the touch, like a tropical shower, but this rain had a coppery smell to it. Arty licked his lips and

of course as he always did in the dream, tasted blood. Panic now. Was he injured? Had that annoying kid hurt him somehow?

Arty opened his eyes, the rain of blood was now a raging torrent hammering down on the street, it washed down the road in a flood of crimson, the drains over filling in an instant at the sheer volume of liquid of it. Arty looked around in horror, he saw the child now with its Mother across the other side of the street laughing and pointing at him. Neither had so much as a spot on them. The blood came down in sheets all around them but somehow left them untouched.

And that was when Arty knew. The sickness was back and one of those two spotless humans would be its next victim. "Run!" Arty screamed at them. "Run before it gets here!" But this just made them laugh all the more.

Arty frantically looked around for the sickness and then he saw it, standing in the middle of the road, cleaver in hand, just a dark shadow in the torrential red, red rain. But unmistakable in its long leather butcher's apron. Its shoulders were moving up and down, he couldn't see its face (never could) but he knew it was laughing. And although the sun was blocked out by the endless sheets of red pouring from the sky, it glinted off the cleaver all the same.

The sickness was back and that meant only one thing. Someone would die. Arty looked across at the still laughing Mother and child through the blood in his eyes.

"Please, run," he sobbed weakly, but he couldn't even hear the words himself above the deluge. The child was a boy, that meant safety. Arty wiped the blood from his eyes and took a long melancholy look at the Mother, he knew her from somewhere, somewhere local, the sickness had probably seen her through Arty's eyes passing on the street one day and marked her for death. "I'm sorry," he shouted across at her. "I'll try to fight it, I promise... But it always wins."

The dream as always was just so damn vivid, it clung to his subconscious even now that he was awake. "Jesus," Arty breathed and swung his legs out and sat on the edge of the bed, shaking like he had a fever. "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." He ran a hand through his hair and it came away wet, he instantly tensed, his logic still half in half out of the dream and with his heart hammering, he squinted at his hand, but it was just sweat. Of course, what else would it be?

"Get a grip, Arty," he told himself, but the fear was like a cancer in the pit of his stomach, he smacked his lips and tasted bile. His temples throbbed and he could only imagine how high his blood pressure was getting, he felt his face flush as the pressure in his stomach grew. The sickness was near, perhaps over his shoulder right now, grinning a razor blade gash of a smile at him. Arty instinctively glanced over his shoulder whilst absently rubbing his stomach, but he was alone. At least physically alone.

Arty dragged himself to his feet and the moment he did so his rebellious stomach cramped violently. "Fuck!" The word came out like a hoarse bestial grunt. Arty doubled up in pain, the pressure which had started (as it always did, like a dark mass in his gut) was pumping through his veins like a poison, working its way to his brain. And Arty knew what that meant. The dream, the feeling like he was decaying from the inside. All tell-tale signs the sickness was near. Arty tried to shake it off as he staggered through into the large en suite bathroom.

Once inside he leaned against the chilly tiled wall and looked at himself in the full length mirror on the opposite wall. Firstly through narrowed eyes, so he could just make out his dark shape against the white walled room. Then gradually, hoping to lessen the impact of what he might see, Arty slowly opened his eyes wider. He let out a gasp of relief to see himself staring back. When the sickness took a hold, his face would twist out of shape, and that smile, like an open wound, would snake across that twisted face.

But it was just him, sure he looked like he was about to have a heart attack, his usually pale face was flushed to the point of being boiled lobster red. But at least it was Arty Willard, just. Arty winced as the fire in his veins intensified. "No!" he shouted at the mirror. It had been gone so long, the sickness. Why now? Why ever again? "It's not fair," he cried. His head was hammering fit to burst, he had to act fast or the sickness that was building up would soon over power him completely.

The Mother from the dream street suddenly flashed into his mind's eye. This spurred him on. He needed to relieve the pressure before it over took him completely.

Sobbing now, Arty rushed over to the bathroom cabinet on the wall above the sink to his right and opened the door. He fumbled though the usual toiletries, nothing unusual here to the casual observer, until he found what he was looking for; he took out a white plastic tooth brush holder and fumbled to open it, like an addict desperate to get to his syringe. Finally managing to get into it Arty took out his salvation. The only thing so far he had been able to find that could keep the sickness at bay, even if just for a short while.

Arty held the scalpel up and it glinted in the light like the wink from an old friend. He let out a sob of relief and then put the blunt end of the scalpel into his mouth so he had two free hands and then tore off his t-shirt and boxer shorts so that he was naked in front of the full length mirror.

Everyone has secrets. In that respect, Arty was no different to anyone else. He had read somewhere, or maybe it was the movie. That the infamous B movie director Ed Wood, who was a transvestite during the forties and fifties, used to wear a bra under his uniform when he fought in World War Two. And that when he was in combat, he didn't fear death, just the thought of being wounded and so he would have to be taken to a hospital and they would discover his secret. The man would rather have died than face the humiliation of discovery.

And so it was with Arty. While he longed to be uncovered as the killer he was, in those desolate hours directly after the sickness had finally left him, once it had satisfied its blood lust and he was left shamed and empty inside. In the times when he was just plain Arty Willard, he had his own secret and like Ed Wood, if he was ever unclothed his secret would be revealed, and with it would come a one way ticket to the insane asylum.

Arty took the scalpel out of his mouth and looked at himself in the mirror. His skin, from just below the neck to the wrists, any place that was hidden when he was clothed, was covered in hundreds of deep scars. Not long after the sickness had first taken hold, Arty had discovered the only way he could keep it at bay, when the dreams and the gnawing in his stomach came, was to cut himself. So the pressure that even now threatened to blow his veins right open, would be released like the turn of a pressure valve and so divert the explosion of murderous rage that lurked somewhere deep inside him.

The multitude of scars covering his body stood testament to his battle with the inner demon that dwelt in the darkness of his subconscious. To him it was a badge of honor, there was hardly an inch of his flesh that was untouched. And Arty bore the mutilation with pride. Each stroke of the blade was a victory against the sickness. Put simply, when he bled, others did not.

A sudden searing pain in his stomach brought Arty to his knees with a cry of anguish. The sickness, fighting back with a growing desperation. It knew if he could carve another network of scars into his skin before it could take a hold of him completely and release the black bile bubbling up inside him, when it would be lost once more in the darkest recesses of his psyche. Arty gritted his teeth and with great effort straighten up and got to his feet once more. "Fuck you," he spat and gripped the scalpel tightly. He let the blade brush lightly over his skin, retracing over the scar tissue of some old wound. He relished his part most of all, that tantalizing moment before the cut. Anticipating

the blades sting and the sweet relief that would flow out of his body with the blood a heartbeat later.

He winced as the razor sharp point pierced his skin, just above the back of his left wrist, then he slowly cut up his arm in a lazy spiral motion, up past his elbow only stopping when it reached the tender area just under his arm pit. Arty gasped in almost pleasure as the white hot pain followed the blade up his arm like an electrical shock. His head swam and for a second he almost passed out. Arty lent against the wall of the bathroom in a stupor, he was only vaguely aware of the scalpel clattering to the tiled floor.

Better. He could feel the rage dissipating with each shallow breath.

So much better.

He looked down as the blood poured down his arm, making rivulets of red as it ran through old wounds, snaking its way down until it was dripping from his fingers and onto the white tiled floor, violent clashes of color though the haze of the impending unconsciousness that was washing over him in waves now. Then slowly as the blood poured, the pressure in his head faded as did the acid in his stomach. He let out a breath and made a fist, lifting it up to his face and squeezed, forcing the blood to run through his closed fingers and with it final relief. The sickness was gone.

That was when Arty hit the floor and passed out cold.

Time seemed to jump cut and before he knew it, Arty was sitting on the toilet seat and he was now treating the new wound with iodine and applying a clean fresh bandage. He had done this so many times down through the years, that he could apparently literally do it in his sleep.

Arty finished by taped off the bandage with practiced efficiency, using his free hand and teeth to rip off a strip of adhesive medical tape and expertly sealed off the material in a tight dressing. He flexed his hand and nodded as a job well done and then touched his thumb with each finger in turn just to make sure the deep cut up his arm hadn't done damage to any of the tendons. All the digits still worked nicely. And so, content at a job well done, Arty set about cleaning the blood of the floor of the bathroom.

The blacking out was nothing new, but to not only black out but then to have nearly completed cleaning and dressing the wound before he was fully conscious again had never happened to Arty before. Still he mused, as he wiped up the blood off the floor with a dirty bath towel, his head was clear and his stomach no longer had that dreaded black knot in it, so he wasn't going to think too much about this new twist in his fight against the sickness and its consequences. It was gone, he was still here, and with a fresh new trophy scar to pick at as it healed over the coming days and weeks. And that was good enough.

Once he was satisfied the bathroom floor no longer resembled a slaughter house, Arty decided to go back to bed for another couple of hours of well-earned sleep, without the fear of anymore bad dreams. Then maybe when it was light, he would go into town and treat himself to a shopping trip, perhaps that new shirt (long sleeved, of course) he'd had his eye on. After all he deserved it. A hero shouldn't feel guilty for spoiling himself in celebration of a battle won, and the life of a Woman he did not know but had quietly, selflessly saved.

As Arty strode back into the bedroom, feeling like a million dollars, he caught a glimpse of several drops blood on the bedroom floor at his feet. Then before he could register what that meant he instantly fell to his knees and vomited violently all over the carpet. Gasping for breath he grabbed the side of the bed and pulled himself to his knees.

Laid out, quite neatly on the bed was that all too familiar butchers apron and next to it, the filthy canvas bundle containing half a dozen razor sharp knives and of course, the sickness' favorite weapon of choice. The meat cleaver.

“Jesus, no!” Arty screamed and ran back into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He pressed his naked back against it as the door began to shake on its hinges as blow after blow hit it, as if someone (or something) on the other side was kicking hard at it, trying to get in, get to Arty. “Leave me alone!” Arty screamed and began to tear at the bandage on his arm in a desperate bid to re- open the wounds we had so carefully dressed minutes before.

Bang! Bang! On the door. Arty began to sob. Christ he was such a fucking idiot. The sickness had been here all along, hiding at the back of his mind. It had been the sickness that had dressed his wounds while he had blacked out and had laid out the butcher's apron on the bed as some sick joke, just when he thought he was safe.

When the sickness was this bad, it felt like a physical being, some heartless entity he was powerless to fight. Arty knew, even in this distraught state that this was all in his mind, but that didn't stop the door banging violently against his back all the same. Maybe he was doing it himself, flinging himself against it but somehow blocking out the motion. He would never know.

“I am a fucking lunatic,” he said quite calmly as a red mist descended over his vision. The banging at the door stopped. “Such, a fucking lunatic.” He was grinning now, the pain in his arm nothing more than dull far away sensation. It wasn't bleeding but that didn't matter anymore, there would be plenty of blood soon enough, and there was nothing that Arty fucking Willard could do about it. The sickness was back in all its terrible glory and no amount of self-mutilation could change that, until its blood lust had been sated once more.

The naked man turned to face the mirror once more to look at himself.

And it was not Arty Willard that stared back...

SIXTEEN

Even though the events of last night had drained all the energy out of her, Jenny found that once she got home, back to reality as Bromlyn had put it, sleep was impossible. It was nearly six in the morning when she finally slipped between the sheets after taking a long hot bath but although she was desperate to rest her aching limbs, her mind refused sleep. That silent promise she had made just a few short hours before weight heavy on her mind. She hadn't made it lightly, far from it, and she fully intended to carry it out somehow. But now as she lay there safe and sound at home in her own bed. Studying the bedroom ceiling with the early morning sun filtering softly through the bedroom curtains, and the sounds of the world outside her window slowly waking to another day of normality, it began to dawn on Jenny that she had absolute no idea how she was going to fulfill that promise.

The key was that second tape, that much she did know, the dream tape and the subliminal message that lay deep within it. But how was she to unlock it? Would simply listening to it be enough? And if it was, another question; Did she really want those images running around inside her head?

After little more than two hours of fitful sleep populated once again by half-forgotten nightmares, Jenny had set about trying to find a suitable mini disk player that would accommodate the dream disk Bromlyn had made. It was well into the afternoon when she found herself in Leeds and she spent the rest of the day in a kind of waking dream, the memory of last night's events never far from her mind. She

was tired as hell but running on adrenalin and a never ending chain of takeout coffees. She was so spaced out that, when Reece called her on her mobile once the search for the Mini disk player had finally borne (very expensive) fruit. She wasn't the least bit surprised when he opened the conversation with:

“We are blowing shit up tonight,” he said enthusiastically.

It wasn't the strangest thing she'd heard over the last twenty four hours.

“Awesome,” she replied distractedly.

She sat her weary bones down on a bench next to the canal and sipped on her latest cup of coffee, it felt good to sit and she knew if it wasn't for the coffee she could quite easily nod right off mid-sentence to Reece.

“You sound dog tired kid,” Reece said. “You sleeping okay?”

Jenny nodded forgetting she was on the phone, she watched as the sunlight caught the canal water which rippled hypnotically and then managed, “Hum, yeah.”

The shopping trip to town should have been a relatively easy chore, or so she had thought, but her somnambulist state couple with just how far sound technology had moved on since she had been away from it had turned the search into a near mission impossible. Firstly she had made a fool of herself in Curry's, when the spotty sales assistant had told her in no uncertain terms that he had never even seen a disk like that before let alone something that might play it. But they did have a great line in MP3 players if she was interested. She wasn't.

Bromlyn had said the disk was state of the art and she had been right. It had taken Jenny all afternoon and a trip to every Audio visual and music equipment retailer in the city, of which there were quite a few, until out of desperation, she had tried an old friend from her

student days, Brian, who thankfully still worked at Yorkshire Television which was based in Leeds.

After an awkward five minute verbal dance in which they caught up on what each had been doing since they had last worked together three years ago, throughout which Brian had heroically managed to skirt around her time at Bloomfield. He had suggested a small second hand amateur radio and recording studio supply shop, which was secreted just out of town near the Irish centre on York Road. Apparently the guy who owned the shop could lay his hands on practically anything, old or new. So Jenny had trudged up there and just caught the guy as he was shutting up for the day.

She was too tired and too desperate to put up much of a fight when the owner took one look at the disk, told her that yes he had exactly the player she needed, but it wouldn't be cheap. And Christ how he was right. Five hundred and Fifty pounds, and the player wasn't even close to being new or the latest model. On a better day, she would have told him where he could shove the thing and then gone home and hit ebay. But the voices couldn't wait and neither could she. And feeling like a crack addict in need of a fix, she charged the player to Reece's 'emergencies only' Credit card. A fact she declined to tell him now that he had called her.

“You ok, Hon?” Reece inquired pulling Jenny's thoughts away from the water and the days exertions, his voice sounded tinny through the phone and so far away.

“Yeah, just tired. So what are you blowing up?” She asked.

“Two, count 'em, two cars. Midnight shoot, should look amazing.” His boyish enthusiasm, which would have normally warmed her heart, just felt hollow now.

“Hmm,” was all she could muster in way of response, she put down her coffee and picked up the mini disk player, placing it on her lap. Tears came to her eyes out of nowhere as she got the sudden and

acute realization that nothing, not her relationship with Reece, her new life of equilibrium, might ever be the same again after tonight. She suddenly knew with absolute clarity now that listening to the dream disk, especially in her own dream like waking state, was going to work. But then what? She had an over whelming urge to throw the player in the canal and beg Reece to come home.

A cool breeze off the canal water rose Goosebumps on Jenny's arms and she half expected to see the mouth less Woman's watery figure appear from just under the rippling surface. *We have no voice.*

"And I have no choice..." she whispered. "Do I?" But the Woman wasn't there and she didn't drown the player. Jenny exhaled deeply with something akin to grief and bit back a sob.

"Oh, Jenny, love. Are you sure you're okay?" Reece asked.

No! She wanted to scream at him. I'm all alone. You left me, Bromlyn left me, Kapoor left me. No one knows what it's like here. No one knows what I know and what I have to do, all alone. Just like in my deepest darkest moments of despair. Shut away in my room at Bloomfield, doped up to the eye balls and screaming at the shadows all around me until my throat bled.

No one knows what it's like to live your life with the threat of a place like Bloomfield hanging over your head every waking moment. *'Be a good Girl Jenny, take your meds, Jenny. Say what we want you to say, feel what we want you to feel. Normal, that is. Even if it's just a mask of sanity, don't you let it slip, not even for a moment. Because if you do, we have a nice cozy room here for you Jenny Drayton, one with wall to ceiling padding so you can't do yourself any mischief. So tell me, how do you feel?'*

"Jenny?"

Tears were streaming down her face now but she just let them come. "I am normal." She said to the rippling water. *I have a piece of paper that says so.*

“Jenny? Of course you're normal. Come on,” Reece pleaded. “Talk to me. What's wrong?” There was a hint of panic in his voice now.

“When I was a kid,” Jenny began, she was vaguely aware that she was rambling, but somehow that seemed okay, so she just let the words come.

“When you were a kid, What? Reece prompted.

“When I was a kid, there was this guy, some old bloke who you would always see walking around town, every day he would be there, rain or shine. And he would always have this small transistor radio with him. If you were out and about shopping you could guarantee you would bump into him, three, four times in an afternoon. Anyway, he would always have his radio pressed up against his ear, and he would be chatting away to it, listening really intently, but it wasn't even turned on.

Once I actually saw the back of it, and you could see the part where the batteries should have been, the cover was missing and you could see there were no batteries in it. The thing wasn't working but he clearly thought he could hear something through it. And whatever he was hearing, he was talking to.”

She could see him now, in her mind's eye, wandering about, but it wasn't until now that she realized he was always so smartly dressed, clean shaven, not your typical nutter about town. Jenny of all people knew one of the first things to go when you lose your mind is your personal hygiene, your self-esteem. But not 'Radio Man,' take away the radio and talking to yourself bit and he could have been anyone's Grand Dad. He was never distressed or abusive, certainly not drunk. Just a normal guy, who maybe knew something no one else did.

“Jenny, you still there?” Reece asked.

“Yeah,” she replied lost in thought.

“I'm not following what you're on about. You sure everything is okay?” Jenny could hear the concern in his voice, but it didn't really register.

"I haven't thought about that old guy for years..." She said. "Even when I was going through those bad times, where I thought I was hearing voices..."

"Jenny?"

"Thing is, we all knew he was a nutter. Thought he was, anyway. But what if? What if he really could hear something. Voices, voices from beyond. It was too easy, too safe for us just to reject him out of hand. But what if they are all around us, even now, but we just can't hear them? Imagine how frustrating that must be. Screaming in the darkness but no one can hear you. And suddenly someone can, but then society tells them they are sick and need help. Until they medicate the gift right out of them."

Out of me.

"Jenny, please, just listen to yourself, you sound..." He cut himself off mid-sentence.

Like I used to? Jenny thought.

"Jen, you're scaring me."

You don't know what fear is Reece. Believe me. "Look, I'm okay," she finally said feigning levity. "Just tired, please don't worry about me. Okay?"

"You sure? I can come home early if you like?"

"No," she said a little too sharply. "Really, I'm fine. I can handle a few day on my own you know." She deliberately let a hint of accusation creep into her voice.

"I, know, I know," Reece said defensively. "I just worry, that's all."

"Reece. I'm fine," Jenny told him firmly. "Enjoy your night shoot."

"I will... I'll see you in a couple of days, okay?" He sounded almost hopeful, like he half expected her to leave him or something. Jenny felt a sudden power shift in their relationship. He was actually afraid she

didn't need him anymore. She wanted to tell him she did, but stopped herself. Because at that moment she wasn't sure she did.

"Sure," she said and was alarmed at the lack of conviction in her voice. Then the feeling turned quickly to something akin to satisfaction. She liked this new power she had over him. She felt strong within herself for the first time in ages, even a little cruel with it. She was finally in control of her own destiny for good or bad. *She* was in control for once.

"I love you," Reece said meekly.

"What's not to love?" Jenny replied and hung up.

SEVENTEEN

Jenny Drayton took her meds like a good girl and settled down in front of her lap top. She had briefly contemplated flushing the lot of them down the toilet, even with Kapoor's lower dosage she could feel them manipulating her emotions, or perhaps that was just fatigue and her imagination. What had stopped her getting rid of them was that she knew at some point, hopefully soon, she would need to confront someone about the voices, maybe Reece, maybe Kapoor himself or even the police if the dream disk gave her the information she so desperately desired, that of the location of those poor dead souls trying to break through into the waking world.

If she truly was to put them to rest, she couldn't do it on her own, and Bromlyn was worse than useless to her now. No, she had to face the fact that she might need to sell this whole crazy scenario to someone else, and if so, she would be damned if they would dismiss the whole thing as a relapse and blame her not keeping up with her medication.

At least that was what Jenny told herself, but now that she was sat in the study with the innocuous looking three inch disk in her hand and she caught her reflection in its mirrored surface. She realized she needed to believe herself that this was all real, and if she had stopped with her meds, then she knew deep down that this could all be in her imagination, Christ knows it had all seemed so real before, then she was ill. Not like now, this time she was certain it was real, no matter how surreal it all seemed.

But with all that conviction she still had a nagging doubt in the back of her head that if this was all in her head after all, then it would be the death of her. She was being pulled towards something she had no control over, that much was certain. An inevitable confrontation, but with what she still didn't know. The dead? The Butcher? Anything but her own psychosis.

So she had kept up with her medication, just as Kapoor had subscribed, so that in the end, whatever this was, it was real.

"This is real," she said to the disk and tapped it on the wooden desk. She then inserted it into the disk player, which whirred into action. A moment later, her laptop's simple media player appeared on the screen. As it fired up, Jenny put on her headphones and adjusted the band over her head so they wouldn't be dislodged if she nodded off. A 'Checking new media' box flashed up. The crook she had bought the player of had sworn it was compatible with any computer as long as it has a sound card and at least Windows Media Player. Jenny didn't know that much about her own machine but she knew it at least had that. The computer's egg timer loomed large as it thought. Then just as Jenny was about to reboot the thing the disk loaded and showed a running time of twenty minutes on the media player's time line. The computer had designated the disk as 'unknown' and a prompt appeared asking if she wanted to save the file and if so what name to use.

"Unknown. You got that right," she said leaving it as that and brought up the play options. She selected the play back speed to

normal and set it to play the whole recording in a continuous loop, and pushed the volume control to maximum. She would not be able to hear what was on this tape, even with all the technology at Bromlyn's command she couldn't even get background hiss off the tape, so Jenny had decided just to let the thing play, on a continuous loop and just listen to the silence, let whatever was on there just seep into her subconscious.

Jenny positioned a new A4 pad of paper next to the Lap top and made sure she had a pen in her hand. She gripped onto it tightly. Unlike when she had listened to the first tape, which seemed like a lifetime ago now, the fear of the unknown she had felt then had been replaced by an almost overwhelming sense of anticipation. Whether it was instinct or some ghostly guide, she knew this was the right thing to do. She was sure of it. And no matter how long it took (she had at least two days until Reece returned) she would sit here until she had the right path to follow, this is what the voices wanted, she had their attention, now it was up to them to lead her.

“Show me,” Jenny breathed and clicked play.

As she sat there the fatigue that had been building up all evening suddenly washed over her, she carefully rested her head on the table in front of the lap top and closed her eyes. The silence in her ears helped her drift off to sleep almost immediately, she didn't even try to fight it.

Seconds later she was completely under, she was so far gone she didn't feel her hands spasm sending the pen spinning across the study behind her and knocking the pad off the table and onto the floor. Nor did she feel as her finger nails begin to lightly scratch the wooden surface of the desk top.

The disk played on as she slept, looping into its second cycle, then a third, as outside in the real world dusk gave way to night.

Jenny slept on through it all, and the disk kept on looping, now on its fifth play. If Jenny would have had the sound meter displayed on screen as she listened and if she had been awake, she would have seen

it going berserk, even though there was no sound she would have been able to physically hear coming through her head phones to back it up.

Perhaps if she had seen that, and how her nails continued scratching at the bare wood of the table top like they had a mind of their own (or were guided by others). Then maybe she would have stopped listening.

Then maybe things would have turned out differently.

'Show me', she said told them, and show her they did.

EIGHTEEN

First came the terror, the feeling washed over her with such vivid clarity, a feeling like she had never come close to, even in her darkest hours at Bloomfield. It felt like death was behind her with a bony hand on her shoulder and it was slowly turning her to face it. It was at once her own terror and simultaneously that of many others. All of them close, each experience a little different, subtle personal nightmares all played out in the same landscape of hopelessness and death, all a little different but with one common author. The Butcher. An omnipresent malevolent presence radiation pure horror like some insane beacon of evil. They had all suffered the Butcher's attentions and all suffered the same fate.

'*Show me*,' that was what she had wanted, so the voices took her by the hand as she slept and led her through their shared pain. Jenny was sure she was screaming now, but she had no body of her own, she was floating in darkness bourn up by the dead. She was legion, each victim's vessel, the weight of their suffering threatening to crush the breath from her sleeping body.

Suddenly Jenny could see now, as if through a haze and it took her several seconds to realize she was looking through some type of

material, she couldn't move, nor could she feel much of anything and of that she was thankful as it dawned on her where she was. The material she was looking through was a shroud of sorts, which was pulled away from her eyes by her unseen hosts given her a better view of horrors to come.

This was the route they had all taken at one time or another, bound in a sheet, rocking back and forth. It looked like she was in the back of a van, she could see, but still she couldn't move. She internally screamed at her body to struggle free of the sheet but it wouldn't obey. How could it? She instantly knew why. You can't move when you are dead, Jenny. This is how they all made their final journey, wrapped in a dirty blood soaked bed sheet tossed around in the back of a transit van as the Butcher drove them to their final resting place.

As the realization began to sink in, the van drew to a stop and out of the corner of her paralyzed gaze she saw the back doors being flung open. A grey insubstantial figure leant over her and the next thing she knew she was being dragged out of the van and hit the ground hard. Still wrapped in the dirty sheet, all she could do was watch the blue sky above her, broken up by the occasional tree branch as the Butcher dragged her along the ground.

She caught a fleeting glimpse of the top of his head, dirty blond straggly hair covering his face, hiding his identity. If only she could get a look at his face. Jenny tried as best she could to memorize every detail that was playing out in front of her paralyzed gaze, because she knew this was one trip she did not, would not take again and if it was to service any purpose at all she had to remember everything.

She was unceremoniously hauled up onto a wooden porch now, and she saw the outside of a large house, there were dark dead trees all around. The place was in a wood somewhere, she made a mental note of that, as she was then dragged through an open door and into the house itself.

Cobwebs hung down from a damp stained high ceiling, a broken light fixture passed over head as she was then dragged through the entrance hall and into another room. Where she lay on her side now facing a large bay window, bright sunlight fought to filter through heavy curtains, but the room was in a gloomy half-darkness. So this is where he brought them, a rundown deserted house. Jenny remembered the crude drawing Bromlyn had shown her of the Butcher standing in front of a large house, it even had a large window like the one she was looking at now.

The Butcher's legs passed before her eyes and he shoved her onto her back with a dirty boot and once again she found herself staring helplessly at the high ceiling. The Butcher knelt over her and moved to remove the sheet, his face was inches from hers on occasion and by rights she should have been able to clearly see his features, even in this light, but just like a street full of witnesses to a car wreck, each of her guides had their own half formed memory of what the Butcher looked like. All slightly different than the next until his face was little more than a patchwork mosaic of undulating ever changing images, the only constant was the color of the Butcher's blond hair, only it's length and style changed from moment to moment.

If she'd had a voice, Jenny would have screamed in frustration. This put paid to her fantasy about being able to identify the murderer through the dream, she only hoped any sketch she might even now be frantically scribbling on the pad of paper would be a better rendering of his face than the maddeningly vague vision before her.

Jenny was rocked back and forth as he roughly unwrapped the makeshift shroud, on one tilt to the left she caught the brief glimpse of a hole in the bare floorboards at her side, then she finally came to rest on her back once more. It took a moment for her addled brain to process what she had seen and then it came to her, it was a trap door of sorts, in the floor but seemed too small to fit a body through. *Another one for the drop*, the voices on the first tape had said.

What she saw next would have made her scream in terror if she hadn't been frozen, and instantly explained why the trap door, which was no more than two feet square would indeed be big enough. A blur of movement as the Butcher reached to something on the floor beside him, then it came up into view and the meager light coming through the window glinted off the highly polished blade of a vicious looking meat cleaver.

He was a Butcher after all. The first blow came down to Jenny's left, where her arm would be, she mentally braced herself for the searing pain that must surely follow, but felt nothing, her whole body just rocked violently as the cleaver hit flesh. The Butcher struck down again and again until the limb must have finally been severed, because he tossed something she was glad she couldn't see off to where the trap door was.

Then he turned his attention to her right arm. As the cleaver rose once more over his head, Jenny saw the blade was now covered in congealed blood and lumps of flesh. She silently cursed the dead for putting her through this, they couldn't agree on the Butcher's face, but they clearly remembered this part in sickening detail. Surely there must be another way than making her experience this horror. Making her one of them, even if only as a witness.

These were the thump, thumps, on the tapes, she realized, the Butcher chopping up his next victim as heard through the floor boards by the dead already rotting in the hole below. *'Chop chop, the butcher's back.'*

Her body was buffeted violently back and forth like a rag doll with each hacking blow as he worked on chopping off her right arm now and again she as glad she couldn't see or feel the damage he was inflicting on her prone body.

He moved to the legs, which he attacked with increased vigor. He rained blow after blow down on them, Jenny tried desperately to tune the scene out. *Wake up, wake up*, she screamed in her head. *Please let*

me wake up, she pleaded to the dead, but they were as deaf as she was helpless.

After much effort, the Butcher tossed the severed limb off to one side, down the trap door Jenny assumed. Then unable as she was to move or look away, Jenny caught the sickening sight of her severed right arm as he threw it across her body and away with the rest. As it passed in front of her face, Jenny could have sworn she got a whiff of blood, but quickly put that down to her imagination and the vivid detail of her dismemberment being carried out quite literally before her very eyes.

The Butcher came into view again, covered in gore, he grabbed a hold of her hair and yanked her head to one side. Jesus Christ he was going to decapitate her. What followed was a blur of movement as he hacked at her neck, her head came loose and the room spun madly as it was then tossed into the hole with the rest of her ruined body.

Darkness, blessed and absolute followed. And she thanked God for it.

NINETEEN

After drifting in a state of absolute shock for so long she felt like she may never emerge from the darkness again. Then just when she thought she was lost, Jenny was awoken by the smell of blood, which at first she assumed was a residue sensation from the nightmare. But when she tried to open her eyes, her left refused to obey, the lid was stuck shut by something. She was sprawled on the table presumably the position she fell asleep in, with the left side of her face resting on the wood. She tried to sit up but the whole left side of her cheek was stuck to the table. She put her hands palm down on the table to push herself away from it but searing pain shot threw her fingertips.

“Oh, Jesus,” she gasped and wrenched her face off the table, it came away with a sickening sound like a plaster ripped off a wound, she slumped back in the chair and stared down at the table with her one good eye in horror.

It was covered in sticky drying blood, her blood.

“God, Oh Jesus!” Each one of Jenny’s finger tips was a bloody mess, half her nails were missing or split down to the quick. She could see deep gouges in the wood of the table top, she had scratched what looked like a picture of some kind into it during the dream which had all but destroyed her fingers in the process.

Her head spinning, Jenny got to her feet, her blood matted hair was plastered to her face obscuring her vision even further. The headphones, still attached to the laptop, which was now on the floor of the room, still playing, were still around her neck, the wire tightened as she staggered back pulling them around her neck, she grabbed at them which sent white hot pain through her damaged fingers then she tossed them away. She backed out of the room unable to take her eye off the bloody pattern scratched into the table top, she hit the door with her backside, knocking it open and she tumbled through the doorway and onto the landing.

Jenny fell backwards onto the floor and lay there for a moment trembling in shock, then using her elbows rolled onto her knees and half crawled half walked on them into the adjacent bathroom.

Once inside Jenny pulled herself unsteadily to her feet, using her arms and elbows and leant against the bathroom door frame, she was about to turn on the light when she caught a glimpse of her face in the mirror. She cried out in shock, even in the half light, the whole left side of her face was covering in matted hair and dried blood, her left eye was stuck shut with it. Jenny swooned suddenly nauseous and stumbled forwards to the sink. Somehow she managed to turn on the cold tap using the palms of both hands and ran her ruined fingers under it. “Fuck!” she winced in pain, but the shock of the freezing water which

burned her fingers like acid, brought her back from the brink of passing out.

She splashed the water on her face which made her gasp. Blood mixed with water and dark shards of her fingernails spiraled down the sink. Seeing this her stomach flipped and before she could react she vomited violently into the sink. Jenny's legs gave from underneath her and she hit the bathroom floor, the vision in her one good eye failed, and for a terrifying instant she was blind. She screamed and clawed at her face in desperation, again the pain from her fingers pulled her back from the brink of unconsciousness. She forced her left eye to open but both refused to focus.

Gasping for breath, Jenny crawled blindly on her hands and knees and back out into the light of the landing. The world was just a collection of light and dark blurs all around her, she lent her back against the wall and began to sob uncontrollably. Images from the dream flooded her already over loaded senses, coupled with the smell of stale blood, sweat and vomit, she felt as if she was back in that cold horrible place with the dead, drowning in the darkness.

A thud from somewhere pulled her back from the approaching hysteria and Jenny held her breath. Did she hear that? Was it her heart pounding in her ears, or just an echo of that horrible chop, chop chopping from the dream? Another thud and a voice, yes she definitely heard a voice but couldn't make out what it was saying or where it was coming from. Then it came again. The thug thud thud of the Butcher's cleaver. *'Chop chop the Butcher's back'*. But this time she was convinced it was here, in the real world, and coming for her.

She was no longer in the dream she knew, the pain and sickness were proof of that. This was reality and he was coming for her, somehow, through the dream? Coming to stop her helping the dead? Thud, thud, footsteps on the stairs getting closer. Jenny cried out in anguish. The mouth less Woman's face flashed into her mind's eye.

Was it her, or one of the other dead coming for her, demanding her help? The victims trapped in that dark hellish place?

But what could she do? She had seen glimpses of the house, where seemed out in the middle of nowhere, seen through the eyes of the dead, but it was all just fleeting images. What did they want her to do? How could she help?

A dark figure melted out of the haze at the top of the stairs at the other end of the landing and stopped, she thought it spoke again, probably some plea for help, but the words didn't reach her even though they were now only ten feet apart. "Please," Jenny pleaded as the figure approached. "I don't know what you want me to do." She held up her blood-soaked ruined hands to it as if in some kind of explanation.

"Oh, Jen," The figure said with a voice tinged with such grief that Jenny thought she knew it from somewhere. And then it fell to its knees in front of her. It was sobbing now. "What have you done?" Warm hands took hold of her outstretched hands at the wrists and pulled them gently down. The shape's face came in close to her. "Oh, Christ Jen, what have you done?" Reece said. And seeing the anguish in his eyes, Jenny passed out.

TWENTY

It was the smell of coconut, of all things, that brought Jenny around this time. She slowly opened her eyes and for the briefest of moments thought she was laid in bed in a hospital room, maybe even Bloomfield. Her heart skipped a beat, but although the room was in near darkness she began to be able to make out familiar shapes around her as her eyes adjusted. There was that God awful wardrobe they had bought in a moment of madness from Ikea, her dressing gown hung on the back of the half open door. Jenny let out a slow soothing breath.

She was still at home, in her own bed. As her senses returned she could vaguely remember Reece carrying her into the bathroom and laying her in a warm bath, her hair was still wet, the coconut smell was her shampoo. Reece had gently cleaned her up as she drifted in and out of consciousness. Her finger tips were throbbing in time with her heartbeat, she raised her hands to see fresh bandages on each of them.

Despite the trauma of the dream and its bloody aftermath, Jenny felt an overwhelming sense of serenity, like nothing she had felt for years, if ever. Her thoughts were foggy, which she put down to her exhaustion, and she was finding it hard to keep hold of a thought for more than a few seconds before it drifted away like smoke. But the feeling was constant.

Finally thought, one thought took hold as she lay there processing what was happening to her. She was filled with a renewed sense of purpose. The voices in the darkness under the floor boards of that house had spoken to her. For whatever reason, she and Bromlyn had been chosen to help them and that's what they *had* to do. She was sure they were in that old house, somewhere hidden and if she could find them, she could silence their pain and put them finally to rest.

A flicker in the light coming from the hallway outside her room drew her gaze to the door. Reece was standing there, he smiled as best he could but his blood shot eyes betrayed his pain. "Hey," he said thinly.

"You know for a moment there I thought I was back at the monkey farm," she told him, the words came out in a hoarse whisper, Jenny swallowed, her throat felt sore, she wasn't surprised.

"No, you're home." Reece said unable to maintain eye contact with her.

"And so are you," she said.

Reece shrugged. "I was worried about you."

"I can't think why." Jenny said and looked away. She felt numb to everything but the task at hand. Even to Reece's pain which was obviously so acute. But at that moment it meant nothing to her. It was

harsh but she didn't care, she had to get to Bromlyn and convince her to help her find that house where the dead were waiting for them, waiting to be laid to rest. And she knew Reece, if anything, would be a hindrance to that. He clearly already thought she had slipped back into the arms of madness once more. Well maybe she had, and so what of it? At that thought she remembered something from her time at Bloomfield.

She half smiled as she stared up at the ceiling. "You know, there are three kinds of people in a nut house?"

"Yeah? Reece said weakly.

"Yeah. That's what we always said at Bloomfield. There are three kinds of people in a nut house. The quiet ones. They're trying to figure out the meaning of life. What it's all about. Then you've got the ones who laugh all the time. They have been told the meaning of life but, being nuts, they've forgotten it." She felt sure she was grinning now. "And then you've got the ones who can't stop screaming. They've been told the meaning of life, and they can't forget it." She could see Reece out of the corner of her eye, he shuffled from foot to foot awkwardly and she heard him exhale.

"And which one where you?" His voice had an edge of grief to it which almost touched Jenny, almost.

She smiled mischievously. "Oh, I was a screamer," she said a little too gleefully. With that she turned onto her side away from Reece, and thought she heard him sob as he left the room.

Sleep seemed to come in an instant, then just as quickly Jenny jolted awake. The bedside table light was on and it was still dark outside. She sat up, a little disorientated again. Then despite her new found hard edged stoicism, she suddenly burst into tears.

Kapoor was sitting at the foot of the bed. He immediately scooted over and she crawled into his waiting arms, like a child waking from a

nightmare. Kapoor didn't say a word he just held her tight and rubbed her back reassuringly as she sobbed her heart out.

After the longest time, Jenny finally pulled away, and got back under the covers where she felt a little safer. Kapoor looked weary, almost as weary as she felt. "I'm not mad," she said as steadily as she could. He smiled and leaning forwards brushed the hair away from her face. She suddenly knocked his hand away making her fingers sting.

Kapoor being here had upset her equilibrium, caught her off guard and she didn't like it, it felt if anything, like a trap, set by him and Reece. As if they had never quite believed she had recovered. And for a moment she hated them both. "I'm not!" she snapped. Jenny knew she would have to be on her guard or she would be right back in Bloomfield before the first light of day.

"It's okay, Jenny." Kapoor said softly, he held out his palms defensively.

"Don't look at me like that!" Jenny bit her lip, *calm down*, she said to herself. Don't lose it now, not in front of him. They need you, the dead need you. You're the only one who can help them. She wished she could open up to Kapoor, wished it would all make sense to him, but how could it when it barely made sense to her and she was right slap bang in the middle of it all?

"This is new," Kapoor said nodding grimly towards her damaged hands. Jenny hid them under the covers without thinking.

Jenny suddenly felt faint. And caught a bitter taste in her mouth. He's given me something, she thought, drugged me in my sleep? She checked her arms for any sign of a needle hole. Kapoor saw this and frowned. "What have you given me?" She said.

"Nothing."

She couldn't see or feel anything on her arms. She smacked her lips, could she taste something on her tongue? That old familiar bitter taste. *Lithium*. The bastard had made her drink a dose of Lithium while she slept. "What have you given me?" She repeated.

“Jenny, I’ve only just got here.” He held out his hands to show they were empty. “Please, calm down.”

“Fuck you! I’m not going to let you dope me up,” Jenny snapped back, she frantically searched his face for any sign of deception of which as a Doctor she knew he could be a master. “Not anymore.” She slammed her head back down on the pillow breathing hard in frustration. She screwed her eyes shut trying to regulate her breathing. This wasn’t going well. If she didn’t calm down the bastard was sure to get her sectioned and then what use would she be climbing up the walls at Bloomfield with the screams of the dead in her ears. Knowing she could do nothing to help them.

Tears came again. “I don’t want to go back.” She sobbed.

“I know, Kapoor whispered. “I know.”

She opened her eyes to see tears in his. He tried a smile and once again stroked the hair off her face. “I’m okay,” she said keeping as calm as she could, “I am okay,” it was more to herself than Kapoor. “I’m okay.”

Exhaustion dulled the fear and anger somewhat as she lay there and before long they slowly gave way to fatigue altogether, the Lithium, or whatever it was Kapoor had poisoned her with, was taking hold of her, clouding her thoughts, before long she would be out of it completely. Kapoor sat whispering words of comfort Jenny could barely hear as a drug induced sleep finally overcame her again and she drifted off once more.

Then Jenny came around for the third time that night she was alone, but through the fog of waking she could still hear Reece and Kapoor talking down stairs in the front room, heatedly debating her fate no doubt. She stiffly got to her feet and as quietly as she could and went through into the bathroom. She knew she couldn’t take the chance that Kapoor hadn’t slipped her a sedative as he’d claimed, she felt half-conscious as it was without further help from the best modern medicine had to offer running through her veins.

Jenny knelt in front of the toilet and stuck her bandaged fingers down her throat, she gagged, but couldn't get her fingers far enough down her throat to make herself vomit up whatever crap Kapoor had given her. She cursed and tore the bandages off the fingers of her right hand with her teeth, she gasped in pain as the wounds reopened but made sure she didn't look at the damage she'd done, she needed to be conscious if she was going to get out of here and didn't need to be passing out on the bathroom floor before she got anywhere. She made a fist, digging her damaged fingers into her palm, she had to grit her teeth to stop herself crying out as the sharp pain gave her the adrenalin boost she needed to keep going.

"C'mon," she forced two bloody fingers down her throat, she gagged again and spat out a mouthful of bile, then tried again, the third try was a charm and she vomited violently down the toilet. "God, damn!" It hurt like hell as her throat was still red raw from before.

Jenny slumped onto all fours, in the confined tile lined space of the bathroom her retching had sounded deafening. She held her breath and listened through the pounding in her ears for any sign Reece or Kapoor had heard her. But there was nothing, she remembered to breathe again then hauled herself up using the sink, where she splashed cold water onto her face and rinsed out the taste of blood and vomit from her mouth.

Being careful not to use her fingers, Jenny rested the balls of her hands on the edge of the sink and looked at her sorry reflection in the mirror. And a hollow cheeked scarecrow looked back. "Jesus." She turned away a little too quickly making her head spin, she lend her backside against the sink and waited for the wave of nausea to pass. She sucked in a lungful of air and held it, screwing her eyes tight shut. Multi colored specks danced under her lids and Jenny felt herself pitch to one side.

Instinctively she reached around and grabbed hold of the sink with both hands which immediately send white hot pain through her

fingertips. She had to bite her lip to stop herself from screaming, but the sudden shot of adrenalin shocked her out of her stupor and when she finally opened her eyes her vision was clear and focused.

She came out of the bathroom and was about to go back into the bedroom to get dressed when she saw the door to the spare room was slightly ajar. She tentatively nudged it open with her toe, the smell of bleach stung her nostrils as she slipped inside.

The lap top was sitting on the chair and Jenny could see that Reece had already scrubbed the table clean, which explained the bleach. Although several drops of blood stained the carpet where they had dripped while she slept, and dreamt of the dead. She shuddered and moved over to get a better look at the table top. The deep red gouges in it made her fingertips tingle.

The picture she had scratched there was the final piece of the jigsaw. It was a crude rendering of the house, a thumb nail sketch (literally, she mused grimly) divided into four quarters the way a child would draw a house, complete with triangular roof and square windows. But in the downstairs room was a figure no child in its right mind could imagine, the Butcher. Standing in the middle of the room next to what looked like an open trap door. Yes the one she dreamt and beyond that the hole in the floor her dismembered corpse had been thrown down and at the bottom, a mass of splintered blood stained scratching's was what looked for all the world like screaming faces.

The dead where in that house, taken there as she had been in the dream, taken there and slaughtered by the Butcher, then dumped, body piled upon body under the floorboards. Jenny wrapped her arms around herself, ignoring the pain in her fingers and examined the scene before her with a sense of relief, finally she had a clear sense of what her needed to do, but also growing horror, although it had only been in a dream she had been there, hacked to pieces as she watched on unable to turn away, then thrown into the dark with the others. It still felt all too real.

Raised voices coming from downstairs pulled Jenny back from that dark place. By the sound of things down there, a decision had been made and whatever it was Jenny knew it was one she shouldn't be around to see. The table top had only confirmed all that she already knew. Proof, if proof where need, where this journey would take her next. A journey she only now realized was only a few days old, so much had changed in that short time, the fallout from which she would have to face later. Right now she had to get gone.

Jenny went to the top of the stairs and listened downstairs. Reece and Kapoor were going at it again, she could only pick out snippets of the argument but the intent was crystal clear. Reece blamed himself for leaving Jenny alone to mutilate herself and Kapoor for not spotting the signs at her evaluation. She desperately wanted to go down there and bang their heads together, and make them understand no one was to blame, that she had never felt so alive, and for want of a better phrase, so sane, despite the obvious appearance to the contrary.

This was no relapse, far from it. She had a purpose, her aimless life now had meaning. She was a savior of lost souls. But now wasn't the time, the explanations would have to wait until she had proof. A dozen bodies and were they were hidden would make believers out of everyone.

Jenny suddenly froze, Reece and Kapoor, still arguing, came close to the living room door.

"There has to be another way," Reece protested. Yes they had decided her fate alright.

Kapoor spoke next. "Reece, come on, you know I don't like this anymore than you do. But you saw the table, she did that with her fingernails for Christ sake. I've never seen anything like that in my life."

She could see their animated shadows dancing on the hall wall. "But she had come so far." Reece said, his voice sounded strained, he was obviously close to tears. They moved back into the room again out of clear earshot, Jenny cursed and took a couple of steps down the

stairs, but retreated back to the top an instant later when she got a glimpse of Kapoor pacing. He disappeared again but not before she heard him say. "I've made the call, Reece, I'm sorry but the ambulance is already on the way."

One word, Jenny thought bitterly. *Sectioned*. Kapoor had had her sectioned while she slept. She knew he would, but the shock still chilled her blood. She had to get out of the house and away before they got here or she was lost.

Jenny rushed back into the bedroom but the effort made her head spin so violently she half sat half fell onto the bed. A sudden wave of nausea swept over her again and she put her head between her knees. Her head pounded as the blood rushed to her brain but at least the urge to vomit slowly subsided.

"Come on girl," she whispered to herself. "Keep it together, keep it together." She gingerly lifted her head again and squinted around the dimly lit room trying in vain to focus on anything. "Shit," she cursed, either it was the loss of blood or some of Kapoor's sedative that had managed to make its way into her blood stream, but which ever it was she couldn't see straight for the life of her.

She closed her eyes and took several deep calming breaths and after a few moments the thumping in her ears subsided and she opened her eyes again. "Thank Christ." Although her sight was far from perfect she could see much better now and so, taking care not to rush too much Jenny slipped out of the oversized T-shirt she slept in and pulled on a fresh t-shirt and a pair of clean combat trousers, a pair of socks and her trainers.

She came back out onto the landing and glanced over the banister. Reece and Kapoor were still talking down in the living room. She could see the table next to the front door and on it her handbag which had her car keys and mobile inside. She slowly began to creep down the stairs, wincing with each footstep as she tried to keep the noise she was making down to a dull roar.

When she got to the bottom of the stairs Jenny paused. Reece and Kapoor were now in the kitchen by the sound of it which made access to the front door a little easier. She was about to reach for her handbag when she heard something that broke her heart. Reece began sobbing loudly from the other room and for a moment Jenny thought maybe he had seen her, she glanced down the hall but both men were still definitely in the kitchen and out of sight. The sound of his pain was so raw it made her gasp out loud.

“Hey, hey, come on old man,” she heard Kapoor say, and Jenny just caught herself taking a step towards the kitchen. She forced herself to stop and turn towards the front door.

“Oh, Jesus,” Reece was sobbing uncontrollably now, “Jesus I just love her so much.”

Jenny tried to fight back tears of her own but they came all the same, she scooped up her bag and half blind fumbled to open the front door. She stumbled out into the cool night and just managed to silently close the door again when she started bawling like a child and staggered unsteadily over to her car, she didn't even try to hold back the tears now she was out of ear shot, she just let them come. When she reached the car she took a look back to the front door and although it was closed, she half expected to see Reece or Kapoor come running out at any moment.

She stood there panting and waited but neither of them came. So with great effort Jenny unlocked the car door and fell inside. She had just about enough wits left not to start the engine straight away, the driveway was on a slight slope and she knew from previous experience of having to bump start the thing on cold winter mornings, she could let off the handbrake and coast off the drive onto the road and get enough momentum to take her half way down the street before she would have to start the engine.

It took both of her damaged hands but she managed to release the handbrake and she felt the car begin to free wheel away from the house,

as she pulled it onto the road Jenny glanced back at the house and promised once she got to Bromlyn's she would call Reece, tell him she would see him soon and that everything would be okay.

And Christ if she got through all this in one piece, maybe she could finally tell him she loved him. But more importantly she would tell him that it was okay if he couldn't wait for her again, that if she had lost him, it wasn't his fault, he was a good man who had been through so much with her and never once complained. No one, least of all her, could blame him for leaving this time. After all she had put him through and when all this was over she wouldn't blame him if he wasn't there when she got back. *If* she got back.

It felt like driving into a black hole on auto-pilot, Jenny was barely aware of anything except for her aching finger tips, and the growing sense of dread with a chaser of desperation that was ebbing and flowing through her consciousness. She had the feeling she was leaving an old life behind for a future she had no way of knowing what would bring, sometimes her heart would hammer fit to burst out of her chest, the next she was almost catatonic. Her thoughts were like smoke again, just when she grasped a half formed idea, it drifted away into the darkness that encased the car as she drove.

The street lights blurred like a time lapse movie, long lingering trails of illumination stretching away in the rear view mirror like she was travelling at warp speed. Jenny was aware of the telltale effects of whatever Kapoor had given her while she'd slept, she had been drugged too many times in the past not to know even though she had thrown up the majority of the drug, some had made its way into her blood stream and was now coursing through her veins, clouding her judgment, slowing her reactions. She could have been driving thirty seconds or as many minutes for all she could remember of the journey. Time was a nonsense. She couldn't even feel the road under the tires, it was like the car was gliding just off the tarmac.

"Jesus," she slurred, her mouth was dry and still tasted bitter, her lips numb. If she got pulled over right now, the police wouldn't need to breathalyzer her, they would be able to hear it in her voice. Christ if she got out of the car, she was damn sure she would fall flat on her face. And that would end this particular chapter in her little adventure before it had even got going. She would be back in Bloomfield before the engine cooled.

Jenny fumbled down by her left and by more luck than judgment found the electric window switch, she pressed it with the knuckle of a numb finger and the window opened. She had hoped for a cool night

air to shock her awake, even a little, but the air outside was too barmy to offer anything but the mildest respite from her growing stupor.

With great effort, Jenny tore her heavy lidded eyes away from the road to glance at the speedometer just for a split second, but the dashboard, which would normally be lit up like a jumbo jets flight deck, was too dark to make anything out. Even this movement made her head spin, a moment later, she was aware of the sound of squealing tires, off in some distant universe. And if it wasn't for the subconscious shot of adrenalin this gave her, Jenny would have plowed straight into the oncoming car that some lunatic was driving on her side of the road. Reality, and that primal survival instinct kicked in and she pulled the steering wheel hard to the left. The cars headlights filled the windscreen, blinding her. The car sounded its horn which screamed at her like a banshee and swerved to the left in a mirror action to her own.

The incident was over in a heartbeat and Jenny looked in her rear view mirror to see the cars blood red tail lights disappearing into the night. She pulled the car over to the side of the thankfully deserted street where it stalled, and at once she realized, judging by how much she had swerved to the left, if the other car had really been in her lane as she had first thought, then she should have mounted the curb and by rights have crashed into the row of gardens lining either side of the street. "Christ," she breathed. She had been the one who had drifted into the right hand lane, she had no idea how long she had been cruising there, but thanked God the other driver had been awake enough to avoid her. Secondly, her drug addled brain finally processed why the dashboard had been so dark. She had been driving with no lights on the whole time. That and she hadn't even put on her seat belt.

She slammed the steering wheel hard with both hands and screamed as white hot searing pain shot up her arms. She drew her damaged hands in under her chin and sat there sobbing to the point of hysteria. She looked at her bloody finger tips through the blur of tears. How had it come to this? Driving through the night like a drunk, almost

killing herself, and what would have been worse, the poor bastard in the other car. She took in faltering lungful after gasping lungful of air between sobs. In just a few short days, her life had imploded in on itself and she was suffocating under the weight of it all.

Jenny had lost everything in the world that meant anything to her. Her much cherished and hard fought equilibrium. And with it, undoubtedly Kapoor's respect '*We are all so proud of you, Jenny*' he had told her. She had been so proud of those words, now they cut her deeper than any self-inflicted wound.

And what of Reece? The Man who had loved and supported her unconditionally throughout everything. And she couldn't even tell him how she really felt, how she loved him more than she could have ever thought possible. She had been so caught up in her own world, just like now with the Bromlyn and the tapes, to the detriment of everything and everyone around her. "God," she sobbed, "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry..."

Perhaps they would all be better off if she had have crashed, and joined the dead she had tried so hard to save. People die, that's what they do. Death has a reassuring predictability about it. People you love die, one minute they are there, the next gone forever. Sure it's hard, almost unbearable at times. But you move on. You *live* with it. Reece and Kapoor, Jenny's Mum and Dad, would go on, perhaps in time, thinking Jenny had been nothing more than a bad dream.

She suddenly went cold, calm. Her breathing slowly regulating and her mind became crystal clear as a dark epiphany washed over her. It is so easy to over complicate things sometimes, when you are knee deep in your own preoccupations. Of course they would be better off, all of them, including herself, if she had gone straight through the windscreen, a quick relatively pain free end to her worthless, wasted life. They would be free from the lingering, wearing suffering that Jenny must bring to all their lives with her pathetic trials and self-obsessed misery.

Jenny flicked on the headlights on full beam illuminating the road ahead which veered sharply off to the right a hundred yards on and ran parallel to a ten foot high solid brick wall which surrounded what looked like a disused factory beyond. Take the corner a little too fast and a careless driver could quite easily skid off the road and slam sideways into the wall causing all kinds of damage to your precious car. But if you didn't turn at all... Even in Jenny's old Fiat, going flat out from a standing start you could get to fifty, maybe even sixty in a hundred yards.

She started the engine and pumped the accelerator with her right foot so it screamed in protest as the rev counter needle shot into the red. This sparked off a distant memory in the muddled mass at the back of her brain of sitting at the table in the office back home, eyes glued to the sound meter on her old Nagra. Jenny smiled, there was a perfect symmetry to it all. That flickering needle was the start of all this, how apt another would signal the end.

"It will all be over soon," she told herself and the words gave her great comfort. She sounded just like her Mother, perhaps before a much dreaded trip to the dentist when she was a child. 'Be brave kid, life is full of little moments, just like this. Take them one step at a time and you'll be fine.' "Not this time, Mum," she said to the desolate road ahead, her bottom lip trembling. This non-descript road that she had perhaps driven down dozens of times through the years with no idea that this would be the place where she would die. Shouldn't such a significant place give you at least a slight shudder as you passed it? A subconscious portent of things to come?

Jenny reached into her handbag which was on the passenger seat next to her, she tipped out its contents, and having to use both hands, managed to pick up her mobile. Her parents would be sleeping at this hour, so there would be no danger of them picking up the phone if she called. She would have to compose herself somewhat, the last thing she

wanted was to leave a desperate rambling suicide note of a message for them to pick up in the morning over breakfast.

She didn't want that to be the last thing they heard from their only Daughter. But what would she say? Goodbye? Sorry for failing you so badly my whole life? No Grandkids for you, just the lingering pain of a dead child who couldn't hack it in the real world, and the inevitable feelings of your own inadequacies and failings as parents that must accompany the unwanted membership to that particular club?

She could see their faces in her mind's eye now, clear as day. The way they had looked when she had finally been released from Bloomfield. Both of them looked years younger as if they couldn't quite believe they had her back once again and it had sheared away those lost months spent mourning her. Their Daughter was back once more, in mind now, as well as body and not the hollow shell they had seen waste away right in front of their eyes and could do nothing to help. Jenny remembered that was the first and last time she had ever seen her Father cry.

Tears came to her eyes now as they had to his. "Oh, Dad," she choked out. He hadn't broken down like her Mother had. His big blue eyes had just filled up and true to form when he saw how shocked she was, he had lightened that most tense of situations, the way he always did, with a flippant remark. "I've got something in my eye!" He had quipped. Normality had never felt so good.

Or was all that just another dream? Because here she was, back where she had been months ago, different location, same desperate thoughts. "Fuck," Jenny turned on her phone, trying to think of a fitting epitaph to leave for herself. But what words could a Daughter say to her parents when she would be dead, by her own hand, when they got the message in the morning? She was about to turn the phone off again, when it vibrated with several missed call messages.

Reese, no doubt, probably with Kapoor in the background chipping in some inadequate words of wisdom, he was useless over the

phone, it was all in the eyes with Kapoor. He could sooth you with a look or well-timed raise of the eyebrow. Sure enough, three of the four were from Reese, she deleted these without listening until she came to the last, which was from an unrecognized number. Jenny didn't know why, but she held the phone to her ear and listened.

The message was silent, save for light breathing, and for a moment Jenny expected to hear the voices from the tape come through with one final plea. She braced herself for their breathy tones but nothing came. And for an age the voice mail was silent until Jenny's nerve finally gave out and she moved her bandaged thumb to the end voicemail button.

"Jen..." A voice breathed. It was Bromlyn. She had given Jenny her number but she had forgotten to put it into her phonebook. "Jenny, it's me, Brom..." Her voice faltered. "Please, call me..." Her voice sounded paper thin and hoarse from crying. "Before you do anything, call me, I was wrong, I shouldn't have dumped this on you, and then left you alone with it... Please call me, I want to help... I want you to know, despite what I said, despite how you must be feeling right now... You are not alone in all this."

'You are not alone in all this.' Seven simple words that saved Jenny Drayton's life.

The breath seemed to be sucked from her lungs, it was like sitting in the vacuum of space, the car, outside, everything around Jenny melted away, replaced by a profound nothingness. The moment only lasted a heartbeat as if some unseen deity had just hit the reset button on her emotions, a giant reality check exploding in her head showing her with horrifying clarity what she had almost done.

Two things dragged her back to reality. The realization that she would live, then, came the soul crushing guilt, and with it Jenny lost control again, she fell forwards against the steering wheel, clutching it

close to her chest and began to sob, but this time with relief. She had been so close to ending it all, just giving up and destroying so many lives in the processes.

TWENTY-TWO

It was beyond cathartic. Jenny must have sat there sobbing for a good ten minutes or more, before she was finally able to regain her composure enough to let go of the wheel and sit back in her seat, she gathered her thoughts now, just about enough to contemplate returning Bromlyn's call. Her throat and hands hurt more than ever, but her spirit, which had been broken beyond all hope of repair just minutes before, fair soared now.

She was filled with an almost overwhelming sense of euphoria. For all intents and purposes she had, in her own little way, survived a near death experience and it had lit every nerve ending in her body, damaged or not, on fire. Out of nowhere she screamed, but it was a scream of defiance, she had cheated death on this anonymous back street and it felt better than any drug, legal or otherwise that had coursed through her veins before. A pure adrenalin overdose straight to her soul, jump starting it back into life.

Lightheaded and laughing, Jenny hit return call on her mobile using the indicator lever on the side of the steering wheel to push the button thus saving her fingertips from further abuse. The phone rang once, then Bromlyn's tentative voice came through. "Jenny?"

"Brom, Brom thank you, thank you!" She gushed. "You have no idea what you've just done. Jesus! Thank you."

"Jenny, you okay?" Bromlyn asked wearily. And with it Jenny could only imagined how she sounded. Out of her mind, textbook manic depressive. She took a breath and told herself to calm down, where was still so much to do. Firstly it dawned on her she had no idea

how to get to Bromlyn's. The one and only time she had been there before, she was 'distracted' to put it mildly.

"Oh, sorry Brom, yeah, I'm okay, well sort of, a lot has happened, but I'm still kicking and screaming. I just love your timing that's all." She paused to collect her thoughts, a quick glance around told her she didn't recognize this street at all, the houses, the factory up ahead, she wasn't where she had initially thought she was and it was disorientating. She would have to get to a main road and get her bearings before continuing.

"Bromlyn, I'm coming over..." She stopped mid-sentence, her soaring heart dipped just a little. Wasn't Bromlyn going home the last time they had spoken? "Brom, where are you?"

"Still at the bed and breakfast, Jenny, what's happened? Did you listen to the dream disk?" Her voice was laced with trepidation.

Jenny exhaled and checked the clock on the now illuminated dashboard. It was three-fifteen AM. It had only been a matter of hours since she had sat down at the table in the study but she could have sworn it had been days ago so much had changed. She held up her free damaged hand and it all came flooding back once more, she felt a faint stab of despondency once more but it faded no sooner than it had registered, unable to take hold this time. Another small victory.

"Jen?"

"I think I have a good idea where they are, Bromlyn. Can you remember the village where you took the recording?"

"Yes, I've been thinking about that. It's a place called New Hadley, it's about two hours or so, out of Leeds. Jenny, how could you know? What's happened?"

"I wouldn't know where to begin over the phone and I'm so damn tired I can barely think straight," Jenny replied honestly. Now that the adrenalin was starting to wear off, coupled with the sedative Kapoor

had given her, Jenny felt a sudden dip in her energy levels, her eyes were already growing heavy as it was.

“Do you have a Sat Nav? I can give you the post code if you like?” Bromlyn asked.

Jenny couldn't help but smile at this, she glanced around the ancient fiat. “My phone doesn't even have the internet, Brom. Does that answer your question?”

“Okay,” Bromlyn said with an audible sigh, she sounded almost as fatigued as Jenny did, judging by the time and the fact that Jenny could well imagine all Bromlyn had done since they parted was pace a groove in her carpet wracked with guilt and indecision. It must have taken a lot of courage for her to call Jenny. “Where are you?” Bromlyn asked.

“God knows,” Jenny said. “But I don't think I'm too far from a main road.” She was aware her voice was slurring again. “Keep talking, okay? While I drive? It's not exactly legal, but using a mobile while driving would be the very least of my worries if the police pull me over.” Jenny had a feeling that if she broke what tentative connection she had with Bromlyn over the phone it would be somehow permanent and she would be lost again.

Having her close like this, even if it was just by proxy, made her feel safer. How the hell she thought she could do this on her own she would never know, but all that was before the dream. Jenny eyed the wall up ahead as she started the engine. That was proof positive she needed Bromlyn as an anchor in this surreal sea she was sailing on.

“Of course I will, Hon.” Bromlyn said reassuringly. “Jenny, you sound... Won't you tell me what's happened?”

“Later, when I get there, at the moment I wouldn't know where to start.” Jenny put her phone on speaker and turned the volume right up, it wasn't exactly state of the art hands free but it would have to do, she placed it on the dash board in front of her.

Jenny struggled with her seat belt and after a little effort managed to click it home. “Right, let's go.” She said more to herself than Bromlyn

and pulled the car slowly away from the curb and drove on down the street like an old lady, hunched forwards, clutching the steering wheel as tightly as her finger tips would allow. "Talk to me, Brom."

"About what?"

"Anything... Anything but what we really need to talk about. That can wait. Right now I just want to get to yours in one piece."

"Okay," said Brom. There was a long pause as Jenny drove slowly on and she was beginning to think she had lost the connection when Bromlyn said almost brightly. "I called. John, just like you said I should. Thanks for that, it did me the world of good to hear a friendly voice." Her voice trailed off again for a moment. And Jenny concentrated on keeping the car on her side of the road. "Do you feel..." Bromlyn continued. "Since this all started, I mean." She broke off, then. "Christ, sorry I know you don't want to talk about it just now."

"No, it's okay. Something's I'll have to show you, when I can think straight." Jenny flexed her fingers which throbbed dully, and she tried to push the dream out of her mind, which wasn't easy. "But if you've got something on your mind. It's okay, go ahead. Just keep talking, and if you hear a crash, I've driven off the road in my sleep." This made Jenny smile grimly to herself.

"It's just," Bromlyn went on. "Sometimes, I feel like this whole thing is a dream, y'know? I was sitting here just thinking about it, in the dark. Thinking why I got you involved in all this. I think, deep down I just needed someone to share this with. I know I was wrong to assume you would know what I was going through. Because of what happened to you before..."

Jenny could hear the tone in her voice darken as she spoke and she wondered how close Bromlyn herself might have come to driving into her own particular wall. Those ghosts, voices, whatever the hell they turned out to be had a lot to answer for. Or now she thought about it, the bastard who had killed them did. The Butcher. "It's not your fault, Bromlyn." Jenny said and pulled onto a main road. But still she

was the only car on the road, "Hey, I know where I am now." She said brightly. "I've just seen a sign for the A Sixty-four. I'll be coming up to the Killingbeck roundabout soon. Christ knows why I came this way."

"Other things on your mind," Bromlyn offered bleakly.

"Something like that," Jenny said. If she remembered correctly, there was a large Police station somewhere on this road, and sure enough as she came to a roundabout up ahead Killingbeck Police station appeared from behind a McDonald's on her left. She gripped the steering wheel just a little tighter and concentrated just a little harder as she went round the roundabout and continued straight up the empty carriageway. She checked her speed, forty right on the nose, and took a glance in her rear view mirror half expecting to see flashing blue lights, but the road behind was as deserted as the one ahead.

"Okay, not too far now," Bromlyn said. "You want to follow the signs for the ring road. How are you holding up?"

Jenny squinted at a road sign up ahead, her normal twenty-twenty vision failing her, the letters seemed to jumble together until they made little or no sense at all. She narrowed her eyes and eventually she made out 'Ring road'. "Jesus," she said rubbing each of her eyes in turn with the heel of her right hand, she could smell antiseptic as she did from the now tatty bandages on her fingers, this made her mournfully wonder if her nails would ever grow back.

"So, you called John?" She said returning her attention to the road and not crashing. Her head lolled forwards for a second making her jump, she checked her driving line and corrected it slightly as she was getting a little close to the left hand curb. A lone taxi came speeding down the road going the other way, the only living soul she had seen since the poor bastard she nearly killed earlier, then it was in her rear view mirror and away.

Christ, she just wanted to sleep now, a week should do it, then perhaps by some miracle when she awoke she would find that all this, like Brom had said had all been just some bad dream.

“Yeah, and he said the kids were fine. He told them I was away for a few days, so as not to worry them. He just sounded so damn relieved...”

Bromlyn had been talking for God only knew how long before Jenny managed to tune back into what she was saying. Jenny checked the road again, she had travelled an alarming distance without really realizing it. She had been through at least two Roundabouts that she knew of and was now on her way out of Leeds.

“He’s going to call the police, tell them I’m okay. I guess I’ve got a lot of explaining to do, once all this is over.” Bromlyn said.

You and me both, Jenny pondered and studied the road up ahead which had a faintly familiar look to it. “I think I’m close,” she told Bromlyn and felt a rush of relief as she saw a turning she remembered from the other night.

“Great, I’ll guide you the rest of the way.”

And so after a journey that should have taken a little over twenty minutes. Jenny turned onto the street where Bromlyn’s B&B was situated an hour after setting off. She had crawled through thankfully deserted roads, with Bromlyn giving periodic directions and more importantly mundane conversation that had not only kept Jenny’s wandering mind on the road but more importantly away from thoughts of the dream tape and any lingering suicidal tendencies she may have still been harboring. And that was good enough for now, considering how the drive had started.

If Jenny needed any confirmation of the disheveled state she was in, then she got it from the look of disbelief that flashed across Bromlyn’s face when she half climbed, half stumbled out of the car. Bromlyn’s mouth was opening and closing but nothing was coming out, she shook her head in shock as Jenny stood in front of her swaying slightly. All Jenny could think to do was hold up her hands for Bromlyn to see as if in way of explanation, she shrugged slightly as she did.

That was when tears came to Bromlyn's eyes and she finally found her voice. "Oh, Jenny..." she said weakly her voice sounded distant, coming from the bottom of a deep pit somewhere, and she stepped towards her with open arms. It was enough to trigger the release of the tentative hold of self-control Jenny had been clinging onto on the drive over here, and she collapsed into the shocked Woman's arms, sobbing uncontrollably. Bromlyn held her up as Jenny's legs turned to jelly. "I've got you," she whispered through her own tears. "I've got you." Jenny closed her eyes and held on tight, she could feel Bromlyn's breath against her ear like a Mother's kiss.

TWENTY-THREE

For the first time in what seemed like forever Jenny felt safe. The truth was she was so fatigued from recent events that it was hard for her to feel much of anything else. By rights it should have been a kind of numbness that enveloped her body and mind now that she was at rest, but for whatever reason her unconscious mood was bordering on light. It was as if she had been living in constant fear, running for her life through a dangerous landscape with hidden dangers around every corner. But now at last she was in a safe place where nothing bad could touch her ever again. And it was a spell she was reluctant to break.

Jenny had no idea how she had gotten inside after collapsing into Bromlyn's arms last night. Whether the Woman had physically carried her or just gently guided her to her room from the street she did not know, nor now that she was tucked up safe and warm in Bromlyn's amazingly comfortable double bed, did she care. Jenny pulled the thin duvet up around her chin and with a contented sigh she curled up into the fetal position and tried to cling onto the last wisps of sleep a little longer if she could.

She screwed her eyes tight shut not wanting to let in the real world with all its dramas and heartache, for a little while longer at least. The only sour notes in this blissful lullaby she was floating in were her fingers and thumbs, which periodically barged in to the tranquility giving her ten dull aching reminders of yesterday's traumas. But even the vague recollection she had of the all too vivid horrors she had dreamt whilst listening to the dream disk could not quite pull her from the serenity she was basking in.

Somewhere deep in the recesses of her contented mind she knew sooner or later she would have to wake and reluctantly let the world with all its uncertainties back in again, she knew she was just on a lay by on the road to the Butcher's house and whatever secrets it had in store for her. But at this very moment that was a fate waiting for somebody else. Because where Jenny was, everything was, alright with the world. The dead would have to wait just a little longer while she drifted away. After all where could they go? And hadn't she earned this precious calm before the storm?

Through the mist of sleep Jenny became aware of a soothing voice close by. Bromlyn was talking in a hushed and measured tone. Jenny couldn't help but try half-heartedly to pick up on what she was saying. Bromlyn wasn't speaking directly to her of that she was sure, but whatever she was saying the words seemed too insubstantial to break through to her sleep dulled senses. She tried to eavesdrop, but not too hard, and it wasn't long before she gave up and a deep sleep took her into its arms once more.

And Jenny dreamt. She dreamt she was in some psycho surreal celestial court room. Its shimmering walls on closer inspection were made of nothing more than undulating smoke, nothing about the place was fixed, the benches of the public gallery that surrounded her up high were mere darker shades of the same smoke that made up the whole room, and those sitting there were mere shadows.

The jury off to the side of where Jenny was standing, were just blank barely distinguishable forms dressing in flowing white robes the consistency of clouds. Bromlyn was the only figure in front of her of any real solidity in the constantly shifting environment. She was in the witness box giving what sounded like testimony to a shadowy figure seated on a large billowing chair up high, looking down on them all.

He to was at first glance nothing more than more undulating light with smudges of grey. His face shifting in and out of focus as Jenny looked on and tried to concentrate on the shifting features of his face. He seemed to me listening intently to Bromlyn's evidence. Then as she watched, his face took on a faintly familiar look, one she had seen a million times before, but at first couldn't place, then a certain tilt of the head brought his face clearer still. Kapoor.

Jenny was in the dock, and apart from Bromlyn, she was the only true constant to the whole scene, on trial no doubt for letting her mask of sanity slip so much of late. She leant forwards straining to hear as best she could to what Bromlyn was saying. Jenny gasped as Bromlyn's features shifted as she spoke to faintly resemble her Mothers face, then no sooner had it formed then it shifted on once more, this time to the Woman in the shroud from that nightmare car journey back from the studio, but now she had a mouth and spoke with Bromlyn's voice. The images forming and reforming right before her should have been disturbing, but Jenny almost found them comforting. They were as one, defending her to Kapoor's heaving, bloated Judge, defending her sanity.

Against all appearances to the contrary they insisted, she was sane, and just, through circumstance, walking a different path to most of late, and one, no matter how much she protested, she could not be allowed to deviate from until she came to its end, regardless of what she might find there, and if she would be able to find her way back again.

The dream world around Jenny suddenly began to dissipate as if toughed by a light breeze, but paradoxically as it faded, Bromlyn's

words began to come through clearer than ever. "She's safe," she was telling someone. "And as well as can be expected. That's all I can say for now. I'm sorry, but you'll just have to believe me." Bromlyn paused, her voice thick with emotion. And the dream world around Jenny was gone now, replaced by a faint orange glow, which she recognized instantly as sunlight registering through her closed eye lids.

"Please," Bromlyn continued. "Once this is all over... You'll see, I will be able to explain everything. And Reece..." Jenny's heart skipped a beat at the word and she slowly opened her eyes. Bromlyn was sitting at a small table by a large window, almost silhouetted by the bright sunlight shining in from a cloudless sky outside. She was hunched forwards talking on a mobile phone. She looked almost angelic, a distant cousin to the shimmering dreamlike defense lawyer she had been moments ago. And as Jenny listened she was still defending her, but not to Kapoor this time, but to Reece.

"Reece," Bromlyn continued clearly fighting back tears. "She's not having a relapse, you have to believe me, it's much, much more than that. But I couldn't put it into words for you now, although Christ knows I want to." She paused, listening. Jenny could just about make out Reece's voice through the phone but try as she might she couldn't make out what he was saying. "No, she's sleeping... Reece I'm sorry, but I promise you it'll all be over soon. And Recce." Bromlyn swallowed hard before continuing. "It's not Jenny's fault, never forget that. None of this is her fault... It's mine." With this Bromlyn hung up. She put her free hand to her mouth and stifled a sob. "Fuck," she cursed, but managed to keep herself together with a cleansing short sharp breath.

"It's not your fault," Jenny said softly, Bromlyn started and turned to look at her. Jenny smiled as best she could trying in some small way to comfort the Woman, and it was only now she noticed Bromlyn's hair was back to its natural fiery red, accentuated by the sunlight behind her. "I like your hair."

“Huh? Oh,” Bromlyn tossed the mobile, which Jenny recognized as her own, on the table and self-consciously ran a hand through her hair.

“You called Reece,” Jenny said and sat up slowly, but still the action made her head spin. As the duvet fell away she noticed she was still dressed in her jeans and t-shirt which were crumpled from her sleep but she didn’t care.

“You just kind of collapsed right there,” Bromlyn said motioning to the bed. “Thought I’d let you sleep.”

“That’s okay,” Jenny replied and swung her legs over so she was sitting on the edge of the bed now. The room was simply furnished but had a homely quality to it which was rare for B&Bs. “I have a feeling I could have slept in a suit of armor and not woken up last night.” Jenny saw that her bandages had been changed. She wiggled her fingers at Bromlyn. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” A pained expression crossed Bromlyn’s face as she looked at Jenny damaged fingers. She moved to speak but stopped herself.

“What did Reece say?” Jenny asked and with great effort got to her feet, her whole body ached and as she stretched she could hear her joints crack. “ooppfh,” she groaned. Jenny caught a whiff of stale sweat, she desperately needed a shower, but that would have to wait for now.

Bromlyn gestured to the seat opposite her and Jenny slumped down into it, she could feel the warm sun on the left side of her face from the window and it felt good. “He’s worried about you,” Bromlyn nodded down to Jenny’s hands which where resting on the table, Jenny instinctively removed them to under the table. “He said you were in quite a state, when he found you.”

“It’s, not what it looks like,” Jenny said defensively. “I didn’t do this to myself.” She paused seeing Bromlyn’s expression of surprise. “Well, okay, but it’s hard to explain.”

“Like voices of the dead on a tape?” Bromlyn said raising her eyebrows. “Come on Jenny, what happened? If you can’t tell me?”

Jenny’s mouth went suddenly dry as she thought of the dream and waking to the bloody house she had scratched on the table top with her ruined nails while she had slept. She tried to swallow. “Can I have a glass of water?” Jenny asked.

“Of course,” Bromlyn said jumping to her feet, Jenny watched her go through into the en suite bathroom. She was struck by how much they had both changed since that fateful first meeting in Roundhay Park. It was as if, in telling Jenny about the voices, giving her the tapes, she had somehow past on the repercussions that knowledge brought with it, onto Jenny. Bromlyn looked so much like Jenny had remembered her from before, full of life, the polar opposite to that shadow of a Woman in the park.

Jenny couldn’t help but feel a flash of resentment, Bromlyn seemed liberated by the burden, the burden she had now passed onto her. She shook off the feeling, if that had been the case, Jenny would quite literally now be dead, laid on a morgue slab somewhere after ending her life in that anonymous Leeds side street last night.

Bromlyn had come to accept that she had an equal part in this, she could have gone home, never left that message on Jenny’s phone. If she had have done that, just as Jenny had foolishly told her to. How would she have lived with the guilt of Jenny’s suicide? Perhaps she would have learnt of it, weeks later when all this would have seemed like a life time ago, just some bad dream she had all but shaken off.

Then out of the blue, someone, maybe at her studio would have casually dropped the bomb shell. *‘Hey, Brom, you hear about that Woman? I think she used to do some freelance work here a while back before she went crackers. Apparently she topped herself last month. Stupid bitch drove straight into a wall after ripping all her finger nails out. Say, didn’t you know her?’*

Just when Bromlyn would have thought all this was behind her, the guilt would come crushing down, out of the blue. Would she be able to survive that? Or would she be yet another victim of Jenny selfishness, knowing she was the Woman who pulled the pin on this whole nightmare to begin with. The rush of survival euphoria she had felt since waking drained from her like a diabetics sugar dip. Her head swam at the reality of it all.

“Jenny? Jenny, you ok?”

“Huh?” Jenny had zoned out, she didn’t even hear Bromlyn come back into the room. The Woman was standing right next to her, holding the glass out water with a look of concern on her face. “Oh, yeah,” Jenny finally replied and flushed slightly, she was supposed to have spent the time gained when Bromlyn went to fetch the drink by preparing herself as to how in God’s name she was going to articulate what had happened to her since they had last met. A good place to start was by putting her damaged hands on the table again. She started at them for a long while as Bromlyn set down the glass and once more sat down opposite her.

“Jenny, what did you hear, on the disk?” Bromlyn asked. When Jenny looked up from her hands to meet her gaze, Bromlyn had the look of someone who knew she had to ask the question, but wasn’t really sure if she was ready for the answer.

“It wasn’t so much what I heard,” she began. The images from the dream came to her mind’s eye. The house, being dragged helplessly into it. And finally the cleaver coming crashing down again and again. *Chop, chop*, and of the fleeting horrific glimpses she got of her own mutilated body. Jenny awkwardly picked up the glass of water with both hands like she was wearing boxing gloves. Bromlyn moved to help her but sat back as Jenny managed to take a sip and carefully placed the glass back down on the table.

She locked eyes with Bromlyn, the Woman looked terrified, which somehow had the opposite effect on Jenny. Sure, she could give her every graphic detail about what it was like to be hacked to death. But

that wouldn't help either of them find the house, it wouldn't get them any closer to solving the riddle and setting the dead to rest.

And strangely, now that she thought of it, Jenny felt protective of what she had witness, almost felt it gave her a kind of kinship with the dead that Bromlyn could never have. It made Jenny feel all the more allied to them, part of some horrible exclusive club.

"Fucking hell," Jenny said and shook her head and almost laughed out loud at herself for thinking such thoughts. Maybe she was going mad after all.

"What?" Bromlyn asked perplexed.

"Sorry," Jenny said dismissively. "It's just that there are some weirdly morbid thoughts going through my tiny brain this morning, that's all."

"Just take your time," Bromlyn said. "I'm here for you." And Jenny could see the poor Woman was racked with guilt. Jenny reached out across the table with both hands and tentatively took a hold of Bromlyn's. She squeezed them gently.

"I'm glad this happened to me," Jenny said and her voice rang clear with the truth of it. Bromlyn shook her head ever so slightly. Not understanding. "Don't get me wrong," Jenny continued as lightly as she could and gestured to her hands. "This I could do without." She tried a smile, but the joke fell faster than a lead bird carrying an anvil.

"What I mean is this," Jenny tried again. "I needed to go through this, listening to the dream disk, and all that happened afterwards so I could truly understand. I know what they are going through, Brom. I felt..." She faltered, no that wasn't right, she had been thankfully numb in the dream. "Not felt physically, but I can empathize with them, I was a first-hand witness to what they went through. I needed that to help me see what they had seen, experienced it in some small way. The disk and what was subliminally on it, was the only way they could get through to us."

"You know where they are?" Bromlyn asked.

Jenny nodded. "I got a glimpse of the house, the one from the pictures. It's in a wood somewhere, that much I do know. I think I would know it, if I saw it again." Again? She closed her eyes and could see its outline as if it was burnt onto her retina. But really she knew that she would be able to *feel* if it were close. "You said you were filming, out in the countryside when you made the original tapes."

"Yes, it's a couple of hours or so from here. But Jenny, It's in the middle of the country, there could be God knows how many houses in woods around the area, and we can't go snooping around them all, and a call to the police at this stage would get us both locked up."

Jenny kept her eyes tight shut, the outline was so vivid now. But this time it was as though she were looking straight on at it and not from that awful prone point of view from the dream. She felt she could do an accurate sketch of the place if she needed to. "Trust me," Jenny said with absolute finality. "I'll know it when I see it." The thought of actually being at that terrible place made the hairs on Jenny's arms stand on end despite the warm sun through the window. Her heart rate quickened, with both fear and a strange anticipation.

Bromlyn was silent for a moment, then said. "And him? The Butcher?"

Jenny exhaled. "No, I didn't get a good look at him, it was like none of..." What should she call *them*? "Them, the dead. It was like none of them could agree on what he looked like, his face, all of him really was just a confused, blurred, mess." She shrugged apologetically, then remembered. "But I'm pretty sure he has blond hair."

"Well then," Bromlyn said with no little trepidation. She glanced at her watch. "If we were in a horror movie, we should set off soon. That way it will be dark by the time we get there."

"I think we can wait a few more hours," Jenny said. She still felt groggy from her long sleep, plus she desperately needed to get something to eat and freshen up. She could quite happily soak in a bath

for the rest of the day. She looked down at her disheveled clothes. "I think I need a make-over before we get going anyway."

"My treat," Bromlyn said. "I think it's the least I can do. I don't know about you, but an evening of shopping and a meal out sounds just what the doctor ordered."

"That would be nice," Jenny agreed. Although she had never been much for girly shopping trips, the thought of an evening away from it all, a little slice of normality before whatever tomorrow would bring sounded just about the best idea in the world right now.

"Besides," Bromlyn said with an impish grin. "I can charge it to expenses through work. After all it was that damn job that started all this in the first place."

"In that case, I could do with a new pair of shoes as well." Jenny said.

"Maybe I will too." Bromlyn replied. Both women laughed but it was gallows humor and they both recognized it as such. Bromlyn's face grew darker. "Strange days," she added. And Jenny nodded.

Neither woman spoke for a good long while, until Bromlyn sat up straight. "You thought about what we are going to do, if and when we do find them?"

"Call the police," Jenny replied. "But I think we should leave out the part about how we knew where to look. Especially with my past."

"Look, Jenny. You know once all this is over, I will go to bat for you. With that Doctor. I won't let them lock you up again. I swear."

Jenny smiled and reached across the table and gently laid her hands on Bromlyn's again. "You never know, they may give us a double room there." Bromlyn returned the smile but her eyes betrayed the fear behind it. "Let's just find them first," Jenny added. "What will be after that, will be." She knew there was a real possibility she would go back to Bloomfield after this was over, especially if they found nothing. It seemed hers and the dead's fates were unequivocally linked in all this.

And would be decided with the toss of a fateful coin. Salvation and peace on one side. Oblivion and torment on the other.

TWENTY-FOUR

In a way, it felt like preparing for battle. And as such, any thought of treating the shopping trip as an exercise in retail therapy soon disappeared once the two Women arrive in Leeds town center. It was just after four in the afternoon and the place was still a hive of activity as countless shoppers wandered from shop to shop without a care in the world. Without either of them needing to vocalize it, they headed straight for the nearest outdoors pursuit shop. Jenny bought a pair of light weight combat trousers and sturdy hiking boots. She topped off the outfit with a plain black t-shirt and a thin red and black checked lumberjack shirt. Even though she knew it would be hot work tomorrow, she still needed to cover her arms.

Bromlyn, who had thought a head enough to actually pack a few clothes when she disappeared, only needed a pair of rugged hiking boots. Maybe just to be bloody minded, she chose the most expensive in the shop and insisted Jenny did the same.

The whole trip lasted little more than an hour and ended with an outing to Marks and Spencers where Jenny stocked up on toiletries and much needed underwear. They had then planned to go to find a nice restaurant somewhere out of the way and spend a pleasant evening trying to take their minds off the following day. But once their shopping had been done neither of them felt much in the mood for an evening out. So they decided to head back to the B&B where Bromlyn ordered out for a pizza and a bottle of wine. Jenny who hadn't taken a drink in years opted for a bottle of diet Coke instead.

Both women spent the rest of the evening lost in their own thoughts and picking at their food, they hardly spoke much at all let

alone about the house in the woods and what they might find there. And as night drew in, the atmosphere was more like a wake than the distraction it was supposed to have been. Then finally at a little after ten, Jenny admitted defeat and had gone to bed leaving Bromlyn sitting on the couch nursing a glass of wine, to stare blankly at the room's small television set, the sound down to little more than a murmur. It was more for company than anything. As Jenny slowly drifted off to sleep she watched Bromlyn's haunted face as she absently flicked from channel to channel in hope of finding some kind of solace. But by the look of it there was none to be had anywhere tonight. Jenny was happy to slip into a hopefully dreamless sleep minutes later.

It was just beginning to get light outside when Jenny was awoken from a very light and fitful sleep by voices. Her breath stuck in her throat as she realized it wasn't a dream. She lay there in bed, not moving, her heart pounding like a howitzer as she waited for the dead to whisper in her ear again. A moment past that seemed to last an eternity but there was nothing, no ethereal voices in the half-light so close they could be laid with her, just the sound of her own short sharp breaths. She concentrated, trying to remember if she had been dreaming, but if she had it was gone now, left behind in the realm of sleep. Jenny glanced at the clock on the bed side table: 5:34 am.

Then she almost cried out loud at a voice again, coming from across the room. She gripped the sheets and forced herself to turn her head, ever so slowly for fear of being seen. "Shit," she whispered in relief as she realized it was a familiar and real voice. Jenny rolled onto her side to see Bromlyn sitting at the table by the window, a dark shape against the fading yellow street light from outside. The left side of her face was illuminated by her mobile phone screen as she whispered into it.

She hadn't been dreaming after all and it wasn't the voices of the dead, just a Woman, scared out of her mind finding comfort from the

voice of a loved one. Jenny watched her as she spoke, her eyes reflected little diamonds as she blinked away tears. In that moment Jenny envied Bromlyn so much it almost turned to hate, as she thought of Reece, probably laid in their bed back home and she wondered if he was thinking of her, or perhaps he had already fled the house he had shared with his crazy, now ex-girlfriend. Leaving her to become nothing more than a cautionary antidote he would tell his friends about in the months and years to come, when it didn't hurt so much to remember.

She sighed deeply as she pictured his face and thought of all those times he had told her he loved her and she had waved him away with a flippant flick of the wrist. Christ, her heart felt like it might shatter if she breathed too hard.

Bromlyn laughed softly and whispered something to her Husband. Had she any idea how lucky she was? Probably, Bromlyn didn't seem like the sort of Woman who took the love of another for granted. The sound of laughter in the dead air of the room sounded harsh to Jenny. And even though it was warm and came from a place of genuine love, it failed to thaw her heart.

As she lay there in the gradually lightening room and tried to tune out Bromlyn's voice. Jenny didn't begrudge her this little respite from the fear of what today's little adventure might bring. It was just that it made her feel all the more alone. She studied the ceiling for a while in the vain hope that sleep would follow but it was no use, she knew it would elude her now probably all the way through until morning. So she rolled over quietly so as not to disturb Bromlyn and picked her own phone off the bedside table. She turned it on and instantly the phone vibrated as she got four voice mail messages and a moment later a text. She glanced across at Bromlyn thankful that she had remembered to set her phone to silent before turning it off last night, but the Woman was still so deep in conversation with her Husband, she probably wouldn't have heard it anyway.

It was with a sense of great trepidation that Jenny looked at the caller ID's from the voice mails, as she was damned if she was actually going to listen to them. Two were from Kapoor and the other two from a number she did not recognize. The police perhaps? Because of her damaged fingers Jenny had to use the second knuckle of one hand to delete the messages which wasn't easy but after a little fumbling she managed it. Once this was done she selected the text with the intent to do the same, when Reece's name came up. Jenny's heart skipped a beat seeing his name and she felt tears instantly come to her tired eyes.

She stared at the screen for what seemed like a full minute but couldn't bring herself to delete the message out of hand without reading it, she felt that she owed Reece at least that for all she had put him through, not just over the past couple of days but for most of their relationship.

Despite her fingertips she managed to open the text and steeled herself to what it might say. Jenny deliberately unfocused her eyes so that the words were nothing more than a green blur, as if slowly focusing them would somehow lessen the impact of what could well be a torrent of righteous abuse. And so she reluctantly let the words come into focus. There were only three of them.

'I love you.'

Jenny bit back a sob but could do nothing about the tears. She sucked in a lungful of air in an attempt to calm herself as best she could. After all she had put him through he still refused to give up on her.

The desolation she had felt as she lay there listening to Bromlyn melted away somewhat. She still had hope. If she could just get over this final obstacle she still had the chance of a life with Reece afterwards. She wiped the tears from her hot cheeks and read the message again and again, like a love sick teenager.

And if Reece would never stop believing in her, then why not Kapoor too? The text gave her a renewed sense that there really might be a light at the end of this seemingly infinite tunnel she was lost in. She decided then and there that she would *make* Kapoor believe that all this wasn't some relapse, she was sure she could never tell him or Reece what had actually happened here, but with Reece's never ending love and support she would make Kapoor believe she was still sane contrary to current appearances.

Hope. Such a small but powerful word and something to cling on to.

Jenny saved the text and held the phone to her chest like a talisman and with a sudden rush of relief she actually chuckled out loud.

"Shit, Jen, I'm so sorry. Did I wake you?" Bromlyn came over and sat on the edge of the bed. She held out her own phone which was now off as if in way of explanation. "I couldn't sleep so I phoned John."

"No, it's okay," Jenny said sitting up. "I got a text from Reece," she said beaming.

"Oh, shit," Bromlyn obviously could not see the broad smile on her face in the gloom. "You okay?"

"Better than I've been in ages," she replied. "Look I don't know about you, but I'm not going to get anymore sleep, and it looks like it's going to be light soon anyway."

"You want to make an early start. Get it over with so to speak?" There was hope in her voice.

"God yes."

"Great," Bromlyn leaped up from the bed. "We can get breakfast on the way. I'll make us some coffee, if you want to jump in the shower first. Then we can hit the road?"

"Sounds like a plan." Jenny held up her hands to show the tattered bandages hanging off her finger tips. "I could do with patching up again before we go."

“Sure, and don’t worry, I’ll drive. It’s been a while and I know I’m not insured for your car. But I think all things being equal, that’s the least of our worries.”

“The very least.” Jenny agreed and her good mood soured just a little as she thought of what may lay ahead.

TWENTY-FIVE

Although they were driving through some of the most beautiful scenery Yorkshire had to offer, the visual splendor was wasted on both Women, lost as they were in their own dark thoughts of what may lie ahead of them.

As it had been so early when they had set off, they had clear roads all the way from Leeds and out into the country. It took them a little over an hour and a half before they finally saw the first road sign for New Hadley which indicated they were a mere twenty miles away from the village where Bromlyn had recorded the fateful tapes.

Seeing the sign, Jenny was suddenly filled with a strange conflict of emotions, she had been so distracted by her own thoughts that the journey seemed to have flashed by in a heartbeat and now that they were on the last leg already she found herself wishing the journey had been longer.

“I think we should stop off somewhere for breakfast. What do you think?” Bromlyn said clearly feeling the same as Jenny.

“Good idea,” Jenny agreed. And it was only now that she realized she hadn’t really eaten anything of note in nearly two days. At the thought of hot food her stomach growled its agreement.

“If I remember correctly, we stopped off at a Little Chief just up here when we came on a recce of Hadley.” Bromlyn said. She took out her phone as she drove and made a face. “I also remember you can’t get a decent phone signal for shit out there, so if you have any calls to

make, you should do so when we stop. It's either that or a pay phone when we get there."

Jenny patted the phone in her pocket and thought of Reece's text. "No I'm good, thanks."

At just after eight AM, Jenny sat down to the biggest breakfast she had ever seen. The aptly titled 'Belly Buster.' The waitress had raised an eyebrow and asked her twice if she was sure that was what she wanted and now that she was confronted with the feast she could see why. But still she tackled the food with gusto and now she was half way through it she drained her second cup of coffee and was beginning to feel human again for the first time in days.

Taking a breather from the mammoth task, Jenny looked out of the restaurant's window, Bromlyn was on her phone pacing in the car park outside, she had already eaten her own albeit smaller breakfast and had excused herself to go outside. No doubt she was on to her Husband again, Jenny thought and picked at the remainder of her own huge breakfast. Before admitting defeat soon after.

"Feel better?" Bromlyn asked as Jenny joined her outside after paying with Bromlyn's work credit card.

"Tons," Jenny replied. Perhaps it was the combination of fatty foods and caffeine but she did feel ready to take on the world.

Bromlyn wafted a map at her. "We're all gassed up and ready to go. This is a local map," she said. "This'll show all the farms and what not out here. We should be in New Hadley in half an hour or so. After that..." Her voice fell away and she shrugged.

"Even now, after everything, none of this really feels real, does it?" Jenny said.

"No," Bromlyn looked around at the scenery. "You just can't imagine anything bad happening in a place like this."

"Yeah. Anyway, where to first?" Jenny asked, bringing them back to the task at hand.

“Let’s just get there and park up,” Bromlyn said. “When we were filming we parked up in a car park, it’s right in the center of the village. I say we start there and see where it takes us.”

Maybe it was the cold morning air, but Jenny found herself trembling slightly as they made their way over to the car. “How are you feeling?” She asked Bromlyn.

“Scared shitless, love. You?”

“Took the words right out of my mouth. Look, let’s just be careful. If we do find this place, we may need to get inside, we’ll need proof, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. But if we do find something. It’s straight to the police, Okay?”

“Of course.”

And for a moment both of them actually believed it might just be that easy.

TWENTY-SIX

When they finally got there, New Hadley turned out to be the sort of place that you drove through to get to somewhere else. Technically it could be called a town if you were feeling generous, but as they approached Jenny thought it looked more of a glorified stop off point, a place where you started your hiking trip, a place to park and maybe get a bite to eat before you took on the serious job of actually seeing the Yorkshire Dales proper. A village with ideas above its station really.

As they drove into village itself, Bromlyn’s face grew dark. This was where this nightmare had first begun for her. Jenny could see her knuckles turn white as she gripped the steering wheel. Bromlyn’s eyes darted from one building to the other as if waiting for something to appear out of nowhere. Like a Humvee driver in down town Kabul. But she was looking for ghosts not I.E.D’s. When they finally came to a stop

in the car park which was situated slap bang in the middle of the centre, she gave an audible sigh of relief.

They sat for a moment in silence, Jenny got out first, more to get away from the oppressive atmosphere of the car than anything. The moment she was outside and into the fresh air she was hit by the feeling that despite its quaint harmless appearance, something was very wrong with sleepy little New Hadley.

Somehow Jenny instinctively knew she would be able to identify the Butcher's house when she saw it. Not just because of the ghost writer style phantom sketches Bromlyn had made, if anything the myriad of styles were a hindrance more than a help. She had seen fleeting glimpses of the real thing in the dream, albeit through the filter of half a dozen victims recollections. But now that she was here, in the flesh, she knew she would actually be able to *feel* the place once they were close.

She looked around the car park and the village beyond, with its ridiculously picturesque setting, village green complete with pond (and ducks). It seemed to be all coffee shops and outdoors pursuits retailers. To anyone else, Hadley was the perfect model of a perfect Yorkshire Dales tourist trap.

But to Jenny something didn't seem right. It was a beautiful summer morning, the rolling hills that surrounded the village were covered in a light mist that would slowly dissipate once the sun took hold. Early rising hikers could already been seen dotted around the landscape. Idyllic was the only word that came to mind as she did a 360. Idyllic, save for a growing sense of unease that was creeping over her. It was more than just anticipation of what they might find and the promise of an end to all this. It was an almost physical weight bearing down on her. And it cast a shadow over the whole scene as if something was lurking nearby, blending in almost seamlessly with the beauty, unless, like Jenny you knew where to look, or what to look for.

“You okay?” Bromlyn asked from another universe. But Jenny didn’t reply. She just closed her eyes and tried to tune everything out except for that dark presence. She held her breath, concentrating for a moment and when she finally opened her eyes again she half expected to see something akin to a German impressionistic off kilter haunted house perched bold as brass on a nearby hillside. But of course there was nothing, nothing but that feeling of cold oppressive dread.

“Jenny?”

“It’s here, Brom,” She said without taking her eyes off the landscape. “I can feel it.”

“Well,” Bromlyn shook the map. “According to this, there are four farms close to the village. We should start with the nearest, which is a mile or so over that way,” she threw a thumb over her shoulder. “If we’re pretending to be hikers, I suppose we should walk. Maybe take the car to have a look at the ones that are further away?”

“Uh huh,” Jenny scanned the outskirts of the village. From where they were standing she could see one of the farms clear as day located some way off half way up a hillside. “You can cross that one off.” She pointed and Bromlyn followed her finger.

“Yeah, too modern.” She agreed.

“Too alive,” Jenny said. The farm was clearly a working one, she could see tiny sheep nearby, a red tractor, that from this distance looked like a child’s toy, slowly making its way across a field. The place they were searching for was a dead haunted place. It may not look like a horror movie location on the outside, but it certainly would feel like one.

“I’m going to ask around,” Bromlyn said. “See if any of the locals know of an old farmhouse or such around here. See if we can’t narrow things down a bit. Don’t go wandering off.” With this Bromlyn strode off purposefully across the car park and in the direction of some nearby shops.

“I won’t” Jenny replied but realized she was already alone.

That feeling of unease was now playing up and down her spine like a xylophone. Now she knew how a gazelle must feel when it catches the faint whiff of a lion by the watering hole. Her nerve endings were dancing, everything around her came into sharp focus, the colors more vivid than ever as she slowly looked around her surroundings for that telltale shape in the undergrowth. Her muscles tensed and she could feel herself shaking ever so slightly.

“Where are you?” She whispered. Jenny regarded her seemingly normal environment with a cool eye. Some part of her was genuinely amazed that normal, banal everyday life going on around here. People going about their normal business without a care in the world. Browsing the just opened shops, sitting in front of the quaint tea room across the green, talking over breakfast. Lambs to the slaughter, she thought. Couldn't they feel that dark foreboding presence? Feel the prowling beast close by? Biding its time somewhere close, just out of sight, waiting for the right moment to pounce?

Jenny suddenly remembered to breathe, she let out a long breath and shook her head. Beasts in the shadows? Jesus, she realized the events of the last few days, coupled with a sleepless nights were catching up with her. The sooner this was over with the better she would feel. Find the damn house, call the police, and put the dead to rest.

A cold breeze, almost like the touch of breath on the back of Jenny's neck, made her turn around and she half expected to see the mouth less Woman in white standing right behind her pointing to some far off corner of the valley and the haunted farmhouse beyond. But there was nothing but a harassed looking couple juggling a push chair, what looked like picnic supplies and two moaning children. Jenny smiled at the little slice of normality and watched the procession make its way out of the car park and across the road that ran straight through the village.

Her gaze followed the road as it wound through and out of the centre and off down the valley and away. The vivid red flash of a sports car driving off into the distance caught her eye, it was so at odds with the lush green and brown of the surrounding hills that it made Jenny think of blood. She watched it as it sped past a slow moving tractor and away. She couldn't help but smile as she imagined the tractor driver cursing the 'God Dammed tourist.'

The laboring tractor passed a long winding dirt track on its right as it continued on its way. Jenny followed the track which snaked up the hillside cutting between two fields one of which was home to the skeletal beginnings of what looked like new houses. The dirt track suddenly made Jenny think of the dream. Hadn't she been tossed around in the back of what she had assumed to be a van as it was driven over a rough road? Despite the rising sun and the warmth that came with it Jenny felt a chill. The track meandered up passed the building site for probably half a mile or so and then veered off to the left where it disappeared into a large thick wooded area close to the hill top. And Jenny forgot to breathe again.

As soon as Jenny had stepped out of the car she had felt like there was some dark, ominous presence secretly watching over the sleepy little town of New Hadley, Yorkshire. Tainting the place like the half-forgotten shameful secret of a seemingly flawless beauty queen who had killed her way to the top. An almost invisible malady, undetectable to the world at large, except for a select few, those with vision enough to look beyond the surface glamour and through to the darkness behind those glittering eyes.

"Damn," Jenny uttered with no little fear. This feeling was an almost physical oppression weighting down on her chest, making it harder and harder to catch her breath when she did breathe again. And with it the absolute certainty it was caused by the Butcher's shadow casting over the town.

And Jenny had been right. Just visible through the trees at the top of the hill she could just make out the outline of a dark structure within. It was too far for her to make out and great detail, but she knew instantly that she had finally found the '*lion*' that had been stalking her since she arrived.

"Jen!" Bromlyn came jogging across the car park towards Jenny, her face flushed with excitement. Jenny tore her eyes away from the house on the hill as she approached, but quickly glanced back again, half expecting it to be gone. But it was still there amongst the trees, watching, waiting.

"Jen," Bromlyn grabbed hold of her arm. "Jesus, you're not going to believe this..."

"Bromlyn..."

Bromlyn cut her off. "I was talking with this old Woman in the clothes shop over the road." She unfolded the map and ran her eyes over it for something without pausing for breath. "She said there are only a couple of old farm house close by. She gave me this whole spiel about how the recession has devastated the whole local economy, blah, blah, blah, and how a lot of folks are selling up and moving away..."

Bromlyn never looked up from the map as she rambled on. She ran a finger over it searching for something. "Went on about how all these out of Towner's have swooped in, buying everything up, knocking it all down to make new houses. Ruining the landscape and all that." Bromlyn rolled her eyes. "Crazy old cow thought I was looking to buy one, I think." She flipped the map over still not finding what she was looking for.

Jenny watched her but was still conscious of the shadow just over her shoulder. "Brom?" She said a little louder, but the Woman was in full detective flight now. So Jenny just let her get it out of her system. After all, the farm house wasn't going anywhere. Despite that she checked a second time over her shoulder just to make sure all the same.

“Shit, I knew I should have stuck with the Girl Guides.” Bromlyn said, she glanced around trying to get her bearings with a perplexed look on her face. “Anyway, if I could actually read this thing, the old Lady said that one of the farms around here used to be owned by a family called the Willis, Willard’s, yeah Willard’s. Nice folks, apparently etcetera, etcetera, terrible how they both died within months of each other. Quite romantic and all that, if in a sad way.” She finally took a deep breath and looked at Jenny who was almost sorry that she already knew the punch line to this particular bad joke. Bromlyn frowned slightly seeing the look on her face. “Anyway, their surviving son has let the place go to rack and ruin since then and despite everything has always refused to sell... And get this. Guess what they did for a living?”

“Butchers.”

Bromlyn nodded vigorously, her eyes gleaming. “Butchers, that’s right. The old dear pointed it out on the map, so if I could just find us on here.” She ran her eyes over it again.

“Brom?” Jenny said softly.

“I should be able to get us there. Jesus, Jenny, she said it was so damn close.”

“Bromlyn,” she repeated in her best school teacher voice. Bromlyn finally looked back up from the map which now looked like she had been eating fish and chips out of it, it was so crumpled. Jenny pointed up to the wooded area and the other Woman followed the gesture. “It’s there.”

“Oh,” Bromlyn said weakly. “Shit, you sure?”

“I can, feel it. But there’s only one way to be sure.” She pointed to the map. “Find a landmark, get your bearings from there. See if there’s another way to that wood without having to go up that dirt track. It’s bound to be private property and you would be able to see us ‘hiking’ up there for miles.”

“Yeah, good idea.” Bromlyn didn’t sound so enthusiastic all of a sudden and Jenny knew just how she felt. She put her hands on the

woman's shoulder which won a faint smile.

"We're just going to take a look, we can't be sure until we see it up close."

"Then what?" Bromlyn wanted to know.

"We, improvise." Jenny told her.

"Are we really doing this?" Bromlyn asked, looking more ashen by the second.

"We are. We have to, you know that."

"I know," Bromlyn conceded. "I'm sure we'll be okay. Besides, it's broad daylight."

"Exactly," Jenny said. "Now, let's have a good look at that map."

TWENTY-SEVEN

Once they had their bearings, it hadn't taken Jenny and Bromlyn long to work out a way of getting up close to the wooded area without drawing too much attention to themselves. There was a public foot path that ran across the top of a nearby hill and close enough so it would then be just a short detour off the beaten track to the wood and the building deep within its midst. If they were accused of trespass by some local busybody it wasn't too much of a stretch for them to say they were just simple out of towners who had been out for a day's walk and taken a wrong turn somewhere.

Although as the crow flies the farm house was only at most just over half a mile or so from the town, there was no direct route up there unless you headed across the fields, trespassing for all to see, or used the dirt track that lead off the main road and up into the woods themselves, but that was sure to be private property. So, firstly they drove along the main road that went straight through the village. This took them past the winding dirt track which lead up to the woods concealing the house. Bromlyn slowed the car slightly as they drew

level with the entrance and sure enough a battered sign read: 'Private road, strictly no public access.'

"The perfect creepy road up to the house on haunted fucking hill." Bromlyn said with no little venom.

Jenny nodded in agreement, she wondered how many times the Butcher had driven up that seemingly innocent road with his latest victim in the back of his van. She frowned slightly at the thought pushing it to the back of her mind and checked the map. "Keep following the road, it's a good couple of miles, but there's a car parked marked on here. I'd say it's a mile or so on foot from there." She said.

"I'd give my right arm for Google maps on my phone right about now." Bromlyn said.

"Yeah." With great effort Jenny fumbled with her phone and finally managed to open it. This won a sympathetic smile from Bromlyn making Jenny's face flush. "Still no signal, might be better up top." She gestured up the hill they were driving.

"How are your fingers?" Bromlyn asked.

"Hurt like hell." Jenny shrugged, it was the truth, the pain was a constant reminder, if one were needed, of the night before last when she had finally unlocked the mystery of where the bodies were. It was a high price to pay for the knowledge.

She just hoped they found what they were looking for and could finally put the dead to rest. Then it would have been a price worth paying. But for now, the pain in her fingers felt like nothing more than a down payment and she hoped that there wouldn't be any more blood to shed to pay the price in full for an end to all this.

Jenny put her phone away and concentrated on the lush countryside streaking by. The road took them across a quaint stone bridge over a meandering stream. The bridge was so narrow Bromlyn had to slow right down as they drove across, leaving nothing more than a couple of feet either side of the car. Jenny wondered how the sports car she had seen earlier had navigated the bridge, she glanced at the

stone work as they past and could see it was marked here and there with different colored paint scratches and she was almost disappointed not to see fresh sports car red amongst them.

Once they had successfully negotiated the bridge the road wound itself steeply up the hill side until after a few minutes it flattened out. A sign by the side of the road pointed the way to the car park and a large picnic area. It was a comfort to see that there were already several cars parked up, but their occupants were nowhere to be seen, all of them out on the various tracks and trails no doubt.

The two Women got out and scoped their surroundings, despite the strengthening sun, the air had that chill in it you only get when you are out in the countryside, and Jenny instantly regretted not buying a fleece when they were on their shopping trip in Leeds yesterday.

Now they were at the other side of the hill it was clear the wood, in which the farm house was situated, was a lot larger than they and first thought. The public foot path ran alongside it and at various points cut slightly through the wood itself, but where Willard's farm house sat one glance at the map confirmed they would have to take the plunge and stray off the path and deep into the woods themselves. Jenny thought of Hansel and Gretel and almost asked Bromlyn if she had any breadcrumbs with her.

"These trees are a hell of a lot thicker at this side." Bromlyn pointed out.

"Yeah, but judging what we could see of them from the town they thin out a bit where the farm house is." Jenny said. "Besides, they will hide us from any nosey walkers wandering around."

Taking a deep breath, Jenny set off purposely along the trail before her courage could fail her, Bromlyn had to jog a few steps to catch her up, she pulled the map out of a small ruck sack she had with her and consulted it as they walked.

"God, it's beautiful out here," Jenny said as she looked out over a lush sweeping valley to their left that seemed to stretch on forever. All

through the drive up here she had been too preoccupied to notice just how stunning the Yorkshire Dales scenery they were travelling through really was.

Of course, Jenny Drayton was a town Girl at heart and always had been. She hated camping and had never been a big fan of any type of outdoors pursuits. She remembered that once Reece had tried to drag her on one of his infrequent mountain biking trips and she had taken great delight in pointing out that anyone who sat on a bike without an engine, let alone pedaled it, was clearly off their head. But out her today, with all that was going on in her wreck of a life, she finally got it.

The brisk wind along with the breathtaking landscape seemed to dilute the nagging worry in the pit of her stomach. The problems that just hours before threatened to crush her will completely were still there, looming large but she felt so tiny out here and that made her feel somehow safer. And at this moment as they trudged through this Constable oil painting, that was good enough for now, and made the gargantuan effort of just putting one foot in front of the other knowing where each step may lead, that little bit easier.

TWENTY-EIGHT

They walked on together, each lost in their own thoughts and fears of what may come for a good twenty minutes. Neither feeling the need to vocalize what was running through their heads. Just two dots on the expansive landscape wandering through the Yorkshire countryside. In an hour or so the area would no doubt be full of hikers and mountain bikers each jostling for control of the footpaths. But for now it felt like they were they only two living souls out here, save for the odd orange or yellow dot of walkers off in the distance.

Jenny watched two such specs walking across the other side of the valley and wondered what it would be like just to stroll through

England's green and pleasant lands without a care in the world. She took a deep melancholy breath, the air was so clear out here it fair made her head swim. Maybe one day, she would come back out here with Reece. At this she rummaged in her pocket and felt her mobile there. That simple text of three words was her only link to him now. Without a phone signal, it felt like they may as well have been on the moon.

Up ahead was an old weathered looking stone wall with a stile that wound its way across their path and off down the hillside to the left of them. As they approached, Bromlyn took another look at the map. Off to their right was a narrow clearly seldom travelled trail that disappeared off into the woods.

"This is where we get off." She told Jenny, nodding towards the trees. "Near as I can tell this should lead close to the house."

To get to the trail they would have to clamber over a chain link fence that seemed to run the whole length of the tree line, clearly designed to keep wayward hikers out of the wood. Bromlyn climbed up onto the stile and gave Jenny a weak smile. She looked around just in case, but there was still no one around and then using a fence post as support vaulted over the fence landing deftly on the long grass on the other side. "No going back now," she said and waited expectantly for Jenny.

"No, guess not." Jenny replied and climbed up onto the stile and over the fence landing next to Bromlyn. "All this physical exercise and fresh air is going to kill me," she said with a playful grimace.

Bromlyn nodded in agreement and without another word they started along the trail and into the woods. Almost at once the trail took on a steep incline forcing both Women to push hard to keep their footing in the tangle of undergrowth as they trudged up towards the top. Jenny's thighs screamed in protest at the effort and she couldn't believe how out of breath she felt. She allowed herself a quick glance to

her left to see Bromlyn was just as red faced as she felt, her jaw set in determination as they slogged on.

Finally after what seemed like an age but was probably less than ten minutes the trail leveled out somewhat so they could carry on walking without having to take huge gulps of air.

“Jesus,” Bromlyn gasped and lent against a tree. She took of her small back pack and fished out a bottle of water. “And people do this for fun?” She exclaimed and took a large swig before passing it to Jenny.

“Lunatics,” Jenny said and took a mouthful of water and passed it back. She looked around her. Trees, trees and more trees. “Christ, it would be so easy to get lost in here.”

“Wouldn’t that be ironic?” Bromlyn said as they set off again. “So close, yet so far, wandering around here until we dropped.” She took out her phone again and Jenny could tell just by the look on her face that even though they were considerably higher up here, there was still no signal. “Fucking nature,” she said with a chuckle. “What this place needs is a phone mast, no one would see it in here.”

“That would mean that people around here would have to live in the twenty first century.” Jenny said, feeling even more of a towney.

Bromlyn set off first, trudging her way through the thick undergrowth, which almost at once began to incline again, her shoulders hunched as she slogged on up. Jenny could no longer see the look of grim determination on her face, but her gait spoke volumes as to her state of mind. Fear and trepidation. And that matched Jenny’s exactly. She followed on a few paces behind, the trail such as it was looking more and more like a dried up stream that had once flowed down the hill they were ascending once more.

The harsh ‘kak-kak-kak’ of a bird somewhere in the trees close by drew Jenny’s attention up into the tree tops. And a sudden flash of black and white movement, vivid and somehow at odds with the greenery, caught Jenny’s eye. It took her a moment or two to locate the bird again until it flew off once more, gliding effortlessly between the

thick branches. It was a Magpie. A common enough sight in the city but she hadn't expected to see what she had always thought of as an urban bird out here in the sticks.

What was that saying from when she was young about Magpies? She wracked her brains and then it came to her. *One for sorrow, two for joy?* Yes that was it. *Three for a Girl, four for a Boy.* Then as she remembered that long forgotten Children's rhyme, Jenny's heart suddenly skipped a beat and began hammering hard in her chest, like she had just seen a tiger in the trees and not a simple bird. *One for sorrow.*

The Magpie perched on a branch near the very top of the trail they were so slavishly following. Jenny found herself frantically looking around for any sign of another one. *One for sorrow.* But try as she might she couldn't find; *Two for joy.*

Not watching where she was putting her feet, Jenny tripped over an exposed tree root and was nearly sent sprawling to the ground. "Shit!"

"You okay?" Bromlyn called back and Jenny was surprised to see how far ahead of her she was. Close to the very top.

"Yeah, I'm good." Jenny replied and waved a hand dismissively at Bromlyn. But she was having palpitations now, as she desperately tried to locate the bird again and hopefully a companion for it as well.

'Kak-kak-kak.' There it was again, she followed the sound until she caught sight of the bird again, this time it was in the trees at the top, close to Bromlyn, who had turned away and had set off again, nearing the top of the trail, some twenty yards or so ahead of Jenny.

"Stupid!" Jenny cursed herself under her breath, but she couldn't shift the rising sense of dread sparked off by the bird and that idiotic children's rhyme. It was as if the lone Magpie (sorrow to give it a name) was some kind of harbinger of things to come. Jenny was almost frantically scanning the tree tops around her once again, desperate to break this jinx, imagined or not though it was. It was as if it was

nature's way of warning her away. *Beware of what you wish for out here in the woods city Girl. Because if you're not careful, you just might find it.*

The bird took flight again and Jenny kept her eye on it as best she could as she stumbled her way to the top of the ridge. She was so intent on the Magpie, that she almost blundered straight into Bromlyn who had stopped dead in front of her. Jenny halted next to Bromlyn, breathing hard with her gaze still on the tree tops. She watched as the Magpie glided to a graceful stop on a branch... Next to another Magpie, and Jenny almost hollered out loud in relief. One for sorrow, two for Joy.

Jenny leant forwards and put her hands on her thighs and just breathed. She felt instantly embarrassed and was just glad she had managed to keep it together enough, not to tell Bromlyn about the bird. Especially when another flash of monochrome flight caught her eye. Two more Magpies were fluttering away in a patch of thick bushes near an old crumbling dry stone wall.

"Jesus," Jenny chuckled at her superstition, but the flood of relief she had felt seeing the other birds was welcome all the same.

The warm feeling froze in her stomach the moment she saw why Bromlyn has stopped so abruptly. Saw the farmhouse in a clearing up ahead. A farmhouse she had seen before.

The *Butcher's* farmhouse.

Jenny gasped audibly as if she had suddenly been grabbed by the scruff of the neck and shaken back into the reality of why they had come out here in the first place. The Farmhouse was an almost exact three dimensional match to the myriad of renderings Bromlyn had shown her in that first meeting a life time ago in Roundhay Park. And of course her own painfully authored artistic version etched into her desk top back home.

“Oh, Jesus,” she uttered. No doubt now. There it was right in front of them. Neither Woman moved, it was as if an invisible barrier was holding them back. One last line in the sand they would have to cross if they really were intent on going all the way through with this. Theory and conjecture meant nothing now. This was the reality of their situation made solid in crumbling stone.

It was Bromlyn who took the first step. She gently took Jenny’s left hand in hers. “Come on,” she whispered and Jenny willed her feet to move, but they were in quick sand quite happy to plant there in the dirt all day if it meant not having to take another step closer to *that* place.

Bromlyn gently gave her hand a tug as she went and Jenny half stumbled, half walked to her side. Despite the pain it caused her, Jenny squeezed Bromlyn’s hand hard. Electricity shot up her arm from her damaged fingertips and gave her failing courage a much needed jolt. This was it, the nightmare house she had been to before. All she could hope for now is that she didn’t end this visit, real as it was, the way it had ended in the dream. *Chop, chop, another one for the drop.*

TWENTY-NINE

Jenny and Bromlyn crossed the clearing, hand in hand like two mourners at the head of a funeral procession and made their way across the dirt track that came to a stop in front of the farmhouse. It led off to their left where it disappeared into the trees and although they couldn’t see it, off down the hill where it met the main road at the bottom.

There were relatively fresh tire tracks cut into the dirt, someone had been up here, perhaps a couple of days ago, but it could have been much longer given the lack of rain and the shelter from the wind by the trees up here. The truth was it could have been a day, a week or even a month for all either Woman could tell.

They came up to the front of the farmhouse, all the down stairs windows that they could see were fitted with metal mesh sheets, as if against some approaching storm, and the heavy front door under the ramshackle front porch had a thick metal bolt across it complete with a large pad lock.

“Someone has something to hide,” Bromlyn noted, she let go of Jenny’s hand and moved up on the porch and up to the front door. She grabbed the heavy pad lock and tried to give it a shake, but it was so solid it barely moved. She stepped back and ran her gaze over the house, checking from window to window, they were all sealed up tight. The upstairs windows with wooden boards, but the lower ones were the most heavily protected. Each covered with heavy metal mesh which was bolted straight into the stone.

Jenny moved around to the right hand side of the house where the woods had encroached up to the side of the building, even growing into the stone work itself. There was little or no room for a person to walk around back from this side, so Jenny made her way to the left side, where the track cut through the forest and the trees were much thinner there. “Let’s try around back.” She said and set off at a brisk walk around the left hand side of the building.

“Then what?” Bromlyn asked as she jogged to catch up to Jenny.

Jenny feverously checked each window as she went but as the front this side was just as barricaded against prying eyes as at the front. Someone had taken a great deal of care keeping this place shut up tight. “We need to get in,” she said as she followed an over grown path which ran around the farmhouse. “It’s the only way to be sure.”

“We both know this is the place,” Bromlyn said, her voice edged with fear.

“But we still need proof,” Jenny replied. “And we can only do that if we get inside.” It was as if finally seeing the place she just *had* to get inside.

Jenny heard Bromlyn mutter something to herself at this, but continued on and around the back of the farmhouse. The back yard had a weed filled patio with the remains of a rotting picnic table, four cheap moldy white chairs were scattered around, two of which looked to have been smashed at some point. Off to the side near a fence which separated the back yard from the fields and prying eyes beyond was an old crumbling homemade brick bar-b-que.

It quickly became clear that the windows back here were just as secure as the rest of the house. "Shit," Jenny put her hands on her hips, deflated. She looked around for any kind of inspiration but there was nothing but trees. New Hadley was just visible through the thin tree line that shielded the farmhouse and she could just about see the main road down at the bottom of the large field at the back of the house.

"It's useless," Bromlyn said as she joined Jenny on the uneven patio. She made a half-hearted show of pulling at one of the metal grates bolted over a large downstairs window which didn't budge a millimeter. "Unless you want to come back with a blow torch?"

"If that's what it takes," Jenny replied with no hint of humor in her voice. Her eyes still running over the outside of the house looking for any kind of weakness. As far as she was concerned, this wasn't even open to debate. They had to get in, they had come too far and lost too much to give up now. She was even contemplating getting the car up here and ramming the God dammed front door in. Although she just about managed to keep that idea to herself. Besides, the simple fact was they really did have no proof. To the outside world this place was nothing more than a rundown abandoned farmhouse. They had to get inside.

Jenny finally turned to Bromlyn, acutely aware of how much of a mad Woman she must look like. She was almost panting now, they were just so damn close.

"What can we do?" Bromlyn asked, the fatigue was tangible in her voice.

“I don’t know,” Jenny replied harshly, her own voice was quivering with frustration. She could feel tears coming but fought hard against them. She took a breath seeing Bromlyn’s face fall. “I don’t know,” she repeated but much softer this time. “Something, anything.”

“Jen, listen,” Bromlyn said. “We’ve found it. I know how you feel, but finding this place is the main thing, it may be a first step to ending all this, but you have to admit, it’s a pretty fucking big one.”

“I know,” Jenny relented but felt empty inside all the same. She felt like the hope of ending all this was slipping away somehow.

“Let’s just take a minute,” Bromlyn said. “Think about what we can do next. And I’m not suggesting we give up.”

“Uhuh,” Jenny nodded, she knew Bromlyn was right. She picked her way through the tangled undergrowth and up to the house. She placed her palms on the wall and let her forehead rest gently against it. The stone work felt cool on her hot skin, almost soothing, considering what was inside, perhaps on the other side of this very wall itself. “Fuck,” she cursed closing her eyes. She felt Bromlyn squeeze her shoulder and heard her moving away.

“The whole place looks like it’s ready to fall down as it is,” Bromlyn said.

“Yeah,” Jenny uttered to the stone an inch from her face.

What had she been expecting? Now that she was here physically touching the place? That she would somehow be able to sense the dead that she *knew* were inside? Just as she had sensed the farm house, watching from the hill when they had first arrived? Yes was the simple answer, she rubbed the rough stone with the palms of her hands, but there was nothing. She actually knocked on it. *‘Knock-knock. Is there anybody there?’*

“Jen!” Bromlyn’s voice sounded someway off and there was an edge of panic to it. “Jen, get around here!”

Jenny turned away from the wall. She was alone. “Brom?”

“I’m round the side.”

Jenny made her way around to the other side of the house where the dense trees had grown so close to the wall that it took her a moment to locate Bromlyn through the thick tangle of branches. “Jesus, how the hell did you get in there?” She asked.

“It’s not that bad once you get in a bit,” Bromlyn assured her, but still she looked wedged between the branches and the wall. Then Jenny noticed another window, Bromlyn was peering through a gap, between the mesh and the wall.

“See anything?” Jenny asked hopefully.

“Yeah, this one isn’t as solid as the others, looks like a branch has grown in between it and the wall,” She pulled at a branch and it came away in her hand, Jenny could see the mesh give slightly as she did so, which made her heart soar. “Come on you bitch!” Bromlyn shouted but let go with a sigh after it wouldn’t give anymore. “We need something to use as a lever, I think the thing will come away, if not completely, maybe enough to squeeze inside. But I can’t get enough leverage here.”

“Just hold on,” Jenny said and darted back into the yard, she looked around for anything that might be of use. She went over to the picnic table, but the wood was far too rotten, it splintered into damp pieces when she aimed a frustrated kick at one of the legs.

There was the fence which was solid enough, but it would be a hell of a task breaking of one of the slats. “Come on,” she looked around still seeing nothing of much use. It was frustrating, but they could always go to go back to the village and get a crowbar or something. Then she saw the crumbling bar-b-que, which had a rusted metal grill, she kicked at it and the bricks fell away and the grill clattered to the patio floor.

It was rusty as hell but on closer inspection Jenny could see that it was actually made up of two separate pieces, each a good two and a half feet long and a foot wide. She stomped down hard with the heel of her hiking boot and the two pieces came apart. Because of her useless fingers, it took Jenny a couple of attempts to pick up one of the pieces

which was a lot heavier than it had looked. This gave her a burst of encouragement, if they could wedge it between the mesh and the wall and the window, there was no way this thing would bend or break despite its rusted condition.

“How about this?” Jenny carried the metal grate back over to the house where she was greeted by Bromlyn’s sweaty face peering through the branches, it lit up seeing the grate.

“Should do fine. Can you make it through to me, or do you want me to come back to you?”

“No, I’m good.” Jenny began to force her way through the tangled mass shoulder first, the twigs and brambles scratched at her face as she went and more than once the grate got caught in a branch and she had to wench it free, causing her long suffering hands to scream in protest, but she bit back against the pain and after what seemed like a full minute of struggling she finally stumbled through to where Bromlyn was waiting.

“Jesus, that was harder than it looked,” Jenny gasped and Bromlyn took the grate from her. Sweat was pouring down Jenny face, which was stinging from the scratches, she wriggled uncomfortably as her t-shirt was plastered to her soaking back but she had made it, she exhaled in relief.

“Nice one.” Bromlyn felt the weight of the grate in her hands and nodded appreciatively. Then she looked up at Jenny’s red face and winced. “Shit, you scratched your face pretty bad. You okay?”

“Yeah,” she wiped the sweat from her face with her shirt sleeve and sure enough it came away spotted with blood.

“Right, let’s give this bitch a try,” Bromlyn said through gritted teeth. She forced one end of the grate in between the rotting window frame and the metal mesh. Jenny saw with relief that the mesh, which looked a lot more solid than she had first thought, gave a little as the metal grate wedged firmly into place. Bromlyn pushed hard really putting all her weight behind the action and was rewarded with the

sharp sound of bending metal, and Jenny could see the stone around the bolt that was holding the mesh in place crumble slightly and the shaft of the bolt became visible as it was pulled out an inch or so.

“C’mon,” Bromlyn grunted and re-positioned the grate for another go.

“Here, let’s both try,” Jenny said and pushed her way through the branches so she was next to Bromlyn.

“You sure? Bromlyn asked uncertainly.

“Yes,” Jenny replied firmly and tried to keep her face from screwing up as she laced her screaming fingers through the rusty slats of the grate. She couldn’t help but hiss through her teeth at the pain and she caught a look of alarm on Bromlyn’s face. “I’m okay,” she said. “It needs both of us. And fuck it, I can always get a tetanus shot after all this is over.”

“Alright then. Let’s try pulling first, that wall looks ready to come away.” Bromlyn forced her own fingers through the grate and braced herself. “Ready?”

Jenny could feel the color draining from her face as the pain in her fingers soared past white hot, but she nodded anyway. She staggered slightly as her head swam from the heat and the sheer pain in her fingers. She closed her eyes. “Now,” she grunted.

Both women pulled as hard as they could and the mesh gave way several inches with a satisfying groan of bending metal. Bromlyn wedged the grate in further still by working it back and forth.

“Push this time,” Bromlyn shouted and as they did one of the mildewed window panes cracked in several places, along with a large part of the rotten window frame. Jenny slammed her shoulder hard against it and the window smashed altogether. The mesh came away from the wall further still leaving a sizable gap. It would be tight but it looked just about large enough for them to squeeze through and into the house.

“That’s enough, that’s enough, Jesus, my fingers,” Jenny exclaimed. She unlaced them and held them to her chest. The bandages were now

soaked through with blood and filthy with rust. She cried out and felt for a moment like she would faint dead away.

“Mind your feet!” Bromlyn shrieked as the grate fell away from the wall. Both Woman managed to hop out of the way as it clattered to the ground. “You okay?” She asked Jenny, breathing hard.

“Yeah,” Jenny answered breathlessly. She studied the gap. “You think we can fit through that?”

“Only one way to find out.” Bromlyn carefully put her arm through the broken window pane and after a short struggle managed to release the window’s catch. She opened the window outwards as far as it would go, the old hinges squeaked in protest. But she was still able to pull it open enough to create a gap wide enough for both of them to at least try squeeze through. Bromlyn put her head through the gap and squinted inside. “Ooff, smells like God knows what in there.”

“What can you see?” Jenny asked on tenterhooks.

“Not much, it’s really dark. You okay to give me a boost up?”

“Absolutely.”

“Right, here goes.” Bromlyn pushed in through the gap and managed to pull herself half in half out. Jenny, using her shoulder, gave her flailing legs something to push off of and she was then able to slip inside the dark room beyond with a grunt of effort.

As she prepared to follow Bromlyn into the darkness, Jenny had the sudden thought that once inside, she might not see the light of day again. She turned her face up to the rapidly strengthening sun that was coming through the trees in golden shafts of light. And just took a moment to let the light warm her face. Then she took a deep breath and hauled herself in through the gap, Bromlyn took a hold of her arms and began to drag her into the pitch darkness of the room. And what was beyond that? Only God and the Butcher knew.

Jenny eased her way through the gap and clambered through in to what she could now see was the kitchen. The window was directly over the sink so she had to edge forwards using her hands to steady herself on the grimy sink, she knocked over a long dead potted plant which was on the sill, it fell into the sink with a clatter, spilling dried up compost and twigs everywhere. "Shit," she cursed at the sound, which was accentuated by the silence of the room, but quickly realized their none to subtle forced entry would have alerted even the deafest of occupants long before now.

Bromlyn leaned forwards over the work top to help her through. And after negotiating the taps she pulled her legs inside and jumped down onto the linoleum floor. Bromlyn stared at her with wide eyes as Jenny took in the kitchen, which was covered in a thick layer of dust and seemed to have been frozen in time. There were still plates piled on the worktop next to the sink. A moldy dish cloth hung on a hook by the door. It was as if someone had left in a hurry never to return. It smelt of damp and rotting food. "Shoot the maid." She said dusting herself off.

"What are we doing?" Bromlyn asked clearly nervous as she pulled the window closed to cover their tracks.

"Breaking and entering." Jenny tried to keep her voice as steady as she could, but her heart was hammering in her chest. She looked through the open kitchen door, which led out into a long hallway and through to the large front door beyond. She knew, just *knew* they would find *them* here.

"Looks like no one has lived here for years," Bromlyn said.

Jenny nodded in agreement and motioned through the door. "Perfect place to hide... The bodies." She felt a chill. The walls in the hall way looked unnervingly familiar. She had been here, dragged through that door and into a room somewhere close. Jenny wiped her sweetly palms on her jeans. She felt an almost physical tug somewhere close to her sol plexus, as if some invisible thread was pulling her

forwards. "This is it," she said softly. "Brom, this is the place." She turned to Bromlyn who looked as terrified as Jenny felt. "I, I can feel it." She brought her hand up to her chest. "Right here."

"Then we should go," Bromlyn's voice quivered as she spoke, her eyes like saucers in the gloom. "Get back to the village, call the police." She pulled her mobile out of her pocket and cursed. "Fucking signal. Anybody would think we were in the middle of nowhere."

"We are," Jenny reminded her with gravitas, and she took a step towards the kitchen door. "I have to be sure," she said and taking a deep breath let the thread in her chest pull her into the hallway. To her right there where stairs leading up to the next floor, Jenny barely noticed them as she slowly walked, like a death row convict taking that long final walk to the hangman's noose down the hallway.

Up near the front door there where two doorways, the one to her left was shut, the other, she could see as she approached had no door on at all. Bromlyn appeared just behind her and placed a hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze, Jenny could feel her hand shaking. Jenny closed her eyes and let the invisible thread guide her. As she did so she got horrifying flashes of the dream, of being dragged in to this God forsaken place and into the room.

She knew it was the one to her right. She stopped instinctively knowing she was by the open doorway, she turned and felt a cold breeze on her face, it felt for all the world like the breath of the dead. Jenny could picture the room beyond in her mind's eye, but knew sooner or later she would have to open her eyes. And when she did, this journey that had started just a few short days before would be almost over. Almost.

"This is it," she whispered and wouldn't have been surprised if her breath misted as she spoke. Jenny opened her eyes and knew exactly what she would see, but still she wasn't ready for the impact.

And there it was, the slaughter room from the nightmare, real as day right there in front of her. The realization hit Jenny like a baseball

but a split second before she hit the floor. She heard Bromlyn cry out in shock a million miles away and thought she saw her out of the corner of her eye trying to catch Jenny before she fell, but she was too slow.

“Jenny, Christ!” Bromlyn shouted and a moment later she was leaning over Jenny who was staring dumbfounded up at the ceiling. If the shock of seeing the outside of the farmhouse knocked the wind out of Jenny, seeing the abattoir as she had come to think of this room, damn near stopped her heart. She looked at Bromlyn as she knelt over her and tried to speak but all she could do was suck in lungful’s of air, it felt like drowning, her mouth opening and closing like a gold fish but nothing came out. The light, such as it was in the room faded away taking all the sound with it. It was like the life was being sucked right out of the world. Jenny tried in vain to focus on Bromlyn until she too was gone, swallowed up by the darkness as Jenny slipped into unconsciousness.

THIRTY-ONE

Jenny started awake at the sound of a scream, she flailed on her back, disorientated as a dark shape loomed over her, she screamed again louder than she had ever screamed before. “God, no!” she pleaded as the shape moved in closer, she head was pounding like the Butcher’s cleaver, boom, boom, she held out her hands in front of her face and braced herself for the inevitable blow to come.

“Jenny,” a voice she recognized, high pitched, soaked in fear. Not the voice of a murderer, but that of a frightened Women.

“Please...” Jenny’s eyes finally managed to focus on Bromlyn’s terrified face looking down on her. “Brom?” She gasped in relief.

“Brom?”

“It’s me, you’re okay, Jenny it’s me.” Bromlyn shook her shoulders.
“It’s me.”

“Okay, okay...” Jenny shook the cobwebs out of her head and with Bromlyn’s help she got unsteadily to her feet. She leant against the Woman for support. “It’s okay, I’m okay.”

“Christ, Jen,” Bromlyn said, she face was ashen. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“What happened?” Jenny asked in a daze and rubbed the side of her head which was already coming up with a bump the size of an egg from where she had hit it on the bare floor boards.

“You just passed straight out, fell like a stone, bang your head something chronic.” She smiled weakly at Jenny. “I thought you’d dropped dead. Jesus.”

“Me too,” Jenny said and then forced herself to look around the room, she shivered, it was exactly as it had been in the nightmare. Totally empty, not a stick of furniture in the place, no carpet, just bare boards, the faded wallpaper peeling off the walls here and there. She glanced up at the ceiling with its network of cracks in the plaster, covered her and there with patches of damp. There was a solitary light fitting in the centre of the high ceiling, just dandling there with no bulb.

The dead had painted a very vivid picture of this terrible place. Now she could see it for real, she had to admit they were physic artists with an eye for detail.

“This is it, I presume.” Bromlyn asked gravely, but it was more of a statement than a question. “Where he brought them?”

Jenny had to clear her throat before answering. “Yes, the slaughter room, I guess you’d call it.” Bromlyn wrinkled her nose at the description, but it was the only one Jenny had. After all that was what this place was to the Butcher, of that she was sure, a place to practice his trade in peace.

Jenny turned around and looked across to the far side of the large room, and found it instantly. She pointed to the trap door, which was barely visible, unless you knew where to look. “That’s where they are.” The words hung in the dead air between them.

“Oh, God,” Bromlyn uttered and wrapped her arms around herself. “Yeah, I can see it.” She turned to Jenny who was rooted to the spot. “But are you sure?” She asked.

“Absolutely.” Jenny replied but couldn’t bring herself to move towards it. She met Bromlyn’s gaze and knew exactly what she was thinking. “But, I guess we *have* to be sure.”

Bromlyn frowned. “Yeah,” she said less than enthusiastically. “Suppose we have to check it out, before we go get the police. I mean, if it turns out to be empty...”

Of course Bromlyn was right, which didn’t make the task ahead any less daunting. Although Jenny knew with absolute certainty that was where they were, she had been sent sprawling down there into the darkness herself, albeit in a dream. She would stake her life on it, but still, there was that nagging doubt in the back of her mind. It was a dream after all, no matter how vivid, wasn’t it? She knew deep down what they had showed her in that dream state was fact, but she couldn’t be sure exactly when that collective memory was from.

The room looked the same as it had then, but then again the place probably hadn’t changed for years, left to rot out here and that meant there was the slight possibility what she had been shown was months if not years ago.

The Butcher could have moved the bodies. She was sure he wouldn’t, but still. Better safe than sorry. To the outside world she looked crazy enough at the moment as it was, but if they got the police here and there was nothing to show for all this, then she would be back in Bloomfield in no time. See you soon, Mad Maggie she thought grimly.

“Shit,” Jenny sighed. “Only one way to find out.” And with that she forced herself to stride across the room and over to the trap door, she was relieved when Bromlyn appeared at her shoulder.

The two Women stopped just short and Bromlyn took hold of Jenny’s forearm. “I’ll do it,” she said, her voice trembling.

“No,” Jenny gave her hand a gentle pat avoiding her own fingers. “We’ll both do it.” Jenny knelt down by the trap door, which was little more than floor boards cut into a square, they sat snugly alongside the regular boards so that even this close they could have just been nothing more than the floor itself, perhaps repaired some time ago with new boards that had now weathered into the same colour as the rest of the floor.

Bromlyn ran a hand along the slight gap and tried to get her nails under it. “Shit,” she cursed. “Wish we had a knife.” Jenny looked at her own useless fingers, there was no way she could help. Bromlyn’s face suddenly lit up. “Hang on, wait here.” She got to her feet and ran out of the room.

“Where are you going?” Jenny called after her.

“Back in a sec” Bromlyn shouted back.

Jenny gave a shiver now that she was alone, and looked around the sparse room which was dimly lit only by what light could force its way through the metal mesh over the large window at her side. The room had long since been cleared out of anything resembling domesticity.

The place was empty apart from a small cupboard door built into the wall close to the door, which she took to be a small cupboard that went under the stairs out in the hall, probably used to store a vacuum or some such. Once upon a domestic bliss. The door had several gaps in the wood and looked to Jenny like it had been attacked with an axe at some time, or maybe a cleaver.

She imagined the Butcher practicing his abattoir skills on it and felt suddenly cold at the thought. An oppressing feeling of cold fear seemed to radiate from the very walls in here.

“This should do it,” Bromlyn said brightly as she came back into the room. And Jenny saw she had what looked like a rusty butter knife. “Got this from one of the kitchen draws, there wasn’t much else, but it should do the trick.” She got down on her knees and wedged the knife

into the gap and pushed down. Jenny watched her as she worked at the wood, she had a look of almost gleeful determination on her face. "Come on," she coaxed. "Come on." Then the trap door suddenly gave and jumped open an inch. Bromlyn yelped in surprise and then worked the knife in deeper.

"There's no smell," Jenny said with a flash of panic, as the door opened up another couple of inches. Surely if there were countless bodies down there, the smell of rotting flesh should have been nauseating now that the door way opened even just a few inches. Jenny felt her heart sink.

"Help me," Bromlyn put the knife down and wedged her hands in the gap. Reluctantly Jenny knelt down next to her and using the balls of her hands helped Bromlyn open up the trap door even further. Now that it was opening Jenny could see hinges on the other end that had been expertly hidden underneath, no wonder you could see anything when it was shut. It seemed the Butcher had thought of everything.

Now both Women pushed the trap door open until it fell back onto the floor with an ear shattering bang and kicked up a cloud of dust. They stood up together suddenly as if something might jump out of the pit and attack them. At first neither leaned over the black hole to look inside. The smell of damp earth rose up through the opening and a hint of something sweet Jenny couldn't identify.

"What is that?" She asked. Bromlyn shook her head.

"Shit, we should have brought a torch." Bromlyn said as she looked down into the gloom. "Can't see anything." She sounded deflated and edged closer to the opening. "Christ, what shit Detectives we are."

"What if he moved them?" Jenny asked. "Bromlyn, don't get too close to the edge, the last thing you want to do is fall down there." She warned as Bromlyn leaned forwards.

"We need to get some light in here," Bromlyn said and reached into her pocket and brought out her mobile. "It's not much, but it

should help.” She knelt down by the edge and Jenny reluctantly did the same. Bromlyn pushed a button on the phone and the screen illuminated casting a murky green glow that cut through the darkness that filled the hole.

Jenny’s hand instantly came up to her mouth to stifle a scream, deep in the pit, some ten feet down she caught sight of a half rotted hand sticking up through a mass of tangled clothes and what could have been dozens of skeletal remains covering the earthen floor. She wheeled away in horror, the image felt like it was burnt onto her retina, she tried blinking it away but that just make the picture all the more vivid.

“Jesus, Jen.” Bromlyn stuck her head into the hole to get a better look herself. “Oh, God!” She screamed and got to her feet, she staggered away. “Oh, Jenny, Jesus, Christ, Jenny.” She fell to her knees. “Oh, Jesus, Jesus.” She repeated over and over.

All Jenny could do was stumble blindly over to the wall and put her hands out to steady herself. Tears filled her eyes, she choked back a cry somehow and pressed her forehead against the damp plaster breathing in mouthfuls of damp air, trying to keep from passing out altogether. She felt disgusted and strangely elated at the same time. Vindication had never felt so awful. “We did it,” she gasped. “We found them.”

She heard a loud bang behind her and turned to see Bromlyn had closed the trap door again, shutting out the horror they had just witnessed. She looked across at Jenny with haunted eyes. Tears were streaming down her face but she looked relieved. “You were right,” she said after an age. She wiped the tears off her face and rubbed the palms of her hands on her trouser legs. “You did it.”

“We did it.” Jenny corrected her with a weak smile.

“Jesus, thank you.” Bromlyn burst into tears and ran over to Jenny who moved to meet her half way, they embraced. Both of them crying

uncontrollably. They had done it. It felt good. Relief mixed with the horror of it all.

Finally, Bromlyn pulled away, her eyes ablaze all of a sudden. She looked frantically around the desolate room and absently clapped her hands, she rubbed them together as if trying to keep warm. “We, we need to get our stories straight.” She said almost manically without looking at Jenny.

“What?” Jenny watched her puzzled, she looked like she had ants in her pants. Jenny wiped her face on her shirt, she pressed her face against it and breathed through the material trying to calm down, her mind raced so much had happened in such a short space of time. She had gone from despair at the thought the pit might be empty to this strange kind of elation, it seemed sick to her that she was glad there were bodies down there. So many conflicting emotions, it was enough to make her head spin. She pulled her shirt back down, Bromlyn was pacing now. “What are you talking about?” Jenny asked.

“Our story,” Bromlyn replied. “We need to get our story straight, before we go to the police.” She gave Jenny a look like she was stupid.

“Oh, yeah, of course.” It hit her now, how would this look to the outside world. Two Women, breaking into a derelict house. The truth was out of the question. Jenny with her history of mental health issues. And Bromlyn officially a missing person. She could hear it now. *‘So what on earth made you pick this farmhouse, out here in the middle of nowhere?’* The police would ask, quite reasonably. And the reply? *‘Well officer, you see we heard the voices of the dead on an old fashioned audio tape. Then of course there was the dream. A picture of the place carved into a table top with Jenny’s own finger nails. And the mouth less ghostly encounter.’* Jenny laughed out loud. It was a hollow humorless laugh that bounced off the bare walls.

“We should stick to the hiking idea,” Bromlyn said, she was on a roll now, it was as if she made up alibies every day of the week. “I

contacted you, we have phone records to back that up. I was depressed, suffered some kind of break down.”

“Which of course I wrote the fucking book on.” Jenny said bitterly.

It wasn't aimed at Bromlyn but she winced all the same, she stopped in her tracks, her face dropped like she had been slapped. “Oh, Christ Jen...”

Jenny waved her away. “No, No, Bromlyn it's okay, it makes sense. Really.”

Bromlyn exhaled, relieved at this. “Sorry all the same, I forgot...” she said a little awkwardly.

“It's fine, really,” Jenny assured her. It did make perfect sense, Bromlyn reaching out to someone she knew has previous experience with a breakdown. Sure it left a bitter taste in her mouth, all those months spent in Bloomfield helping her lie her way out of this royally messed up situation.

“Ok,” Bromlyn said, she hesitated a moment, then could clearly see Jenny meant what she said and took heart from this and carried on. “We came out here, to get away from everything, you had convinced me to go home, I called John last night, but had a change of heart, so we came out here, just to get some space. Saw this place...” her expression went blank.

“We saw this place,” Jenny pick up from her. “Saw someone we couldn't identify leaving, from a distance, too far away to get a good look. Decided to check it out and found...” She nodded towards the trap door. “Them.”

“Maybe heard a scream?” Bromlyn added.

“Nar, that won't wash.” Jenny said. “This place has been empty for years. The last victim must have been months ago.”

Bromlyn nodded, but looked less than convinced. It was pretty tenuous alright, they would just have to hope the Police wouldn't care too much about the whys and hows, just the fact that they had God

knows how many bodies on their hands, and hopefully this place had enough clues to lead them to the Butcher.

“As long as we stick to that, it’ll have to do.” Bromlyn said. “I guess. But the main thing is we found them, and this nightmare is over. They’ll be at peace.”

“Yeah,” Jenny looked down at her hands, the grubby plasters were already starting to come away. With all the excitement she hadn’t felt them throbbing like before, but now they were making up for that with a vengeance. She held them up to Bromlyn. “We’ll have to put this down to a relapse.” It made her sick to her stomach. Relapse. What would that mean for her now that this was almost over?

She would just have to hope with all the furor that was bound to follow, that she could avoid Bloomfield, and Kapoor. Her pulse quickened, how could she explain this to Kapoor? She knew him all too well, he would blame himself for not seeing it coming. But would he send her back to the Monkey Farm? “Oh, God.” She said almost despairing.

“Hey, come on.” Bromlyn moved over to her and took Jenny by the shoulders. “They won’t do anything to you. You’ll be a hero, and they’ll say the relapse was down to me, stirring up old Demons. You’re not sick Jenny, not anymore. I promise you, no matter what happens, I won’t let them take you away. Imagine how that would look to the press. Heroine of the New Hadley farmhouse, locked away. I’d kick up such a stink they wouldn’t dare. I promise you.”

Jenny so wanted to believe her. It was one hell of a gamble, but she was in it up to her neck anyway now. Kapoor had seen the table top, he had already called the damn ambulance to have her sectioned again. She glanced over Bromlyn’s shoulder to the closed trap door and it calmed her somewhat. She had committed to helping them, no matter what the cost. “You’re right,” she said. “Thanks.”

No matter what the cost.

THIRTY-TWO

Jenny and Bromlyn took a little more time getting the finer points of their alibi together, just in case they were separated when they went to the police with all this. It still seemed flimsy to Jenny as she ran it through her head, but they really had no choice, and as Bromlyn had pointed out. Would the press really let them lock her up again after they went to the police? All she could do was to hope not and put it from her mind for now.

The main thing was getting those poor lost souls down in that horrible place properly buried, where their loved ones could come to visit, to finally be able to properly mourn their lost with a grave and a decent burial.

Bromlyn gestured to the door. "Come on, Jen, let's go. I've had enough of this place to last a lifetime."

Me too, Jenny thought and took a final glance at the trap door. Me too.

As they turned to leave, a harsh noise from outside stopped them both dead in their tracks. Bromlyn gasped out loud at the sound, but Jenny just felt like her heart stopped.

A van's diesel engine from outside, growing louder as it approached the Farmhouse.

"No," Jenny uttered in sick disbelief as the van could be heard coming to a halt outside the window. "No."

They froze staring at each other, Bromlyn began panting in panic. "Can't be," She almost shouted. "Fuckin' can't be."

Jenny winced at the volume and held her hand up to silence Bromlyn. "Just wait," she whispered. "Could be anyone." She moved over to the meshed up window and strained to see through the many small inch square holes in it. She squinted through the bright sunlight that stung her eyes after the gloom of the room and could just make out

a white transit van pull up outside. The door opened and a living nightmare got out.

“Let’s go,” Bromlyn pleaded. “Jenny, come on let’s get the hell out before...”

She stopped mid-sentence as Jenny spun around to face her, Jenny could only imagine the look on her own face from that on Bromlyn’s. Sheer blind terror.

“Jen?” Bromlyn uttered weakly.

Try as she might Jenny couldn’t get the word out, she mouthed it and Bromlyn turned ashen.

Butcher.

“Jenny?” Bromlyn’s tear filled eyes widened with horror. “Tell me this isn’t happening.” She was shaking visibly now, her hand went up to her mouth when Jenny didn’t reply.

Rattling at the front door, he was there already opening the padlock. If they made a break for the kitchen window they would have to go past it through the hall, he would surely catch one, if not both of them if they tried it, and Jenny was in no shape to run anywhere over three feet.

Time seemed to slow, every movement Jenny tried to make was impossibly slow, like she was moving under water. She was trying to speak but nothing came out of her mouth but a strangled little Girl’s sob.

“Jenny!” Bromlyn half shouted half whispered and winced as the rattling grew louder at the front door.

Then reality came flooding back to Jenny like a shark attack, and with it her survival instincts kicked in. “Jesus!” She snapped as she heard the heavy bolt being worked open, it sounded hard work and it gave them a few seconds grace before he was inside and on them.

Bromlyn started towards the door in a blind panic. "Brom, no!" Jenny whispered harshly, she pointed to the cupboard which judging by what she had seen of the layout of the house should lead under the stairs. She bolted towards it uttering a prayer as she did, she opened the door and got on her knees. The bolt outside finally slid open, he would be in any second now.

Bromlyn was still dithering close to the room's door. "Bromlyn! Come on," Jenny urged as loudly as she dared. And finally Bromlyn raced over and knelt next to her. The cupboard was no more than three feet high but went back into the stairs a good six feet or so, and it was thankfully empty. It would be tight but there was more than enough room for both of them.

Bromlyn let out a sharp breath as the front door began to creak open, by the sounds of it, the Butcher had to kick it with his toe end a couple of times to force it open all the way.

Jenny took a hold of Bromlyn's arm and pulled her into the cupboard after her, she pulled the rickety door as closed as she could but it left a good inch or two gap, they both back up until their backs were against the wall. They clung onto each other for dear life as the Butcher's heavy footfalls came into the hallway. Although Jenny could see fleeting glimpses through the gaps in the door and into the room itself she couldn't see into the hallway.

She screwed her eyes shut imagining him stood there, like the monster from the nightmare and thanked God she had only seen the back of him through the window and couldn't make anything more than a grey indistinct figure against the glare. She opened her eyes again and looked through one of the splits in the wooden door, she silently cursed, if he came in here, to the trapdoor, and if he had a fresh body with him, both she and Bromlyn would be able to see and hear every sickening detail.

She went cold, and glanced across to Bromlyn's terrified face. Bromlyn was staring through another gap to the trap door. She was

shaking so hard, Jenny could hear her teeth chatter. She held her closer still. And prayed this was just a flying visit from the Butcher. It was a vain hope, she knew. There was only one reason he would come back here, and she and Bromlyn, trapped in the dark here, would see it all.

Footfalls, going back outside now. “Just go, just go, just go,” Bromlyn said over and over like a mantra that she hoped would drive the Demon away. Sounds outside, clearly audible which meant the front door was still open. One of the transit doors slamming shut, then nothing for a moment, followed after what seemed like hours, by the Butcher’s boots again coming back inside and a horribly familiar sound. He was dragging something heavy across the threshold. “No,” Bromlyn whispered and buried her face into Jenny’s shoulder.

It was one of the sounds they had both heard on the disk. Dragging across bare floorboards, but different somehow, they were hearing this from above ground, the sounds on the disk were muffled, heard by the dead through the floorboards.

Jenny bit her lip to stop herself from screaming out loud as the Butcher came into view, she wasn’t sure if she was glad or not that in the gloom of the room he was little more than a dark shape moving around, occasionally illuminated as he passed a shaft of light coming in through the metal mesh over the window, giving a tantalizing glimpse if the side of his face, or his blond sweat plastered hair. The Butcher was grunting with the effort of dragging what could only be a body wrapped in a grimy bed sheet, just like the one she had been wrapped in in the nightmare. She swallowed a scream but couldn’t look away. Tasted blood as she had bit right into her lip.

The Butcher dumped the body next to the trap door and then walked out of the room once more. Jenny strained to see through the small gaps and stared at the pathetic bundle laid there and tears came to her eyes, before she could stop herself she let out a strangled sob, Bromlyn started at the sound and lifted her head up. Jenny instantly clapped a hand over her mouth and held her breath, thanking God the

Butcher was outside or he would have surely heard her. Jenny shook her head and Bromlyn squeezed her arm so hard it hurt.

“Should we...?” Bromlyn whispered but stopped dead as the Butcher came back into the room. He knelt next to the wrapped up body and laid a small cloth bundle on the floor. He unrolled it but with their limited view it was impossible for Jenny or Bromlyn to make out what it was, his back was to them, he leaned forwards hands working at whatever was inside.

Then Jenny caught a flash of light bouncing off steel. She adjusted her sitting position just enough to be able to peer through another one of the gaps. It was a meat cleaver. The Butcher slammed it into the floor boards by his leg making both Jenny and Bromlyn jump in unison. Jenny glanced at Bromlyn who mouthed an obscenity. Jenny nodded in agreement, they were both terrified but neither of them could look away.

The Butcher paused now, he turned his face up towards the ceiling and Jenny could see his shoulders moving up and down in jerky movement. Was he crying or psyching himself up for the grim task ahead? Or both? Jenny wished he would turn to face them so she could get as best a look at his face as their limited view would allow, but he still had his back to them, his matted hair shaking as he breathed. For a moment he didn't move, still looking up at God only knew what.

Then he screamed. It was an unholy sound that seemed to rip out of his very soul. Both Woman jumped again, it was quite simply the most heart rending, chilling sound Jenny had ever heard. A cocktail of utter pain and despair laced with white hot rage. He screamed again and Bromlyn covered her ears, tears streaming down her face, and for one horrible moment Jenny thought she was going to scream out loud herself. She shook her head violently from side to side. Jenny pulled took a hold of Bromlyn's head and held it inches from her face.

“Shh,” She whispered, barely a sound at all. She pressed her forehead against Bromlyn's, she could feel her ragged breath on her

face. Bromlyn sucked in air, nodded. Then moved back slightly so she could look into Jenny's eyes. She nodded again fighting back tears. She kissed Jenny on the cheek and they held each other close, like two children hiding from a thunder storm, both scared to death but taking comfort from their companion.

Out in the room, the Butcher was sobbing almost uncontrollably now, another sound from the disk, the dead had heard that pathetic sound from below God only knew how many times before. This time Jenny tried to block out the sound, it cut through her like a knife, she buried her head into Bromlyn's neck as the Woman gently stroked her hair.

She could hear rustling from outside and felt Bromlyn tense suddenly, her breathing became rapid, damn near hyperventilating. And Jenny knew the Butcher had unwrapped the body, she tried to pull Bromlyn's gaze away from the gaps in the door, but she pushed her hand away. Jenny forced herself to look at Bromlyn, but made sure she didn't follow her gaze outside.

Bromlyn's eyes were wide red raw and filled with tears and a hint of madness that made Jenny wince. She shook Bromlyn again but she couldn't look away. And so, like some kind of insane magnet, Jenny's eyes were drawn to the gaps in the wood, and beyond them the room, and the Butcher in the gloom.

She could just about make out a body on the floor, buckled legs jutting out awkwardly from behind the Butcher who was still knelt over it. Jenny felt her throat tighten, the nightmare she had experienced back at her house was playing out in awful Technicolor right before her. The Butcher bellowed with rage and she caught a glimpse of the cleaver as he raised it above his head.

This time it was Bromlyn who turned away just as the cleaver fell with a sickening 'thwack', cutting flesh and bone in one motion, he raised it again for another blow. Jenny found herself absently rubbing her arm for a phantom wound as another blow struck the body, she

could almost feel it now, each blow the Butcher made as he frantically hacked at the body, the limbs, thankfully almost out of her view came away at awkward angles.

'Whack, whack,' each blow more violent than the last. Coming faster and faster, the Butcher was gripped by some kind of frenzy now. Grunting with the effort as piece by piece he dismembered the body. But still Jenny couldn't look away, feeling every cut like she was the victim.

Her head began to swim at the horror of it, she was right back there under the cleaver herself, unable to move. She gasped and the breath caught in her throat and she almost choked on it, she swallowed hard, gripped by the obscene scene in front of her.

Then finally, it was over, the Butcher fell to his hands and knees gasping for air, he took a deep breath and screamed once more in frustration. He was sobbing again as he threw the body parts into the trap door. He got unsteadily to his feet and staggered away, revealing a pool of blood and gore on the floorboards where the body had been. Jenny gagged and just about managed to hold onto the contents of her stomach.

She heard the Butcher's uncertain footsteps go out into the hall and behind her into what she imagined must be the kitchen. Would he notice where they had broken in? Jenny just hoped in his state he wouldn't be aware of anything around him but the job at hand. She held onto Bromlyn again who was shaking like she had a fever, her shirt was soaked through with sweat. Jenny pitched forwards and nearly collapsed onto the floor in a dead faint. She felt Bromlyn grip her tightly, pulling her closer still.

Footsteps again as the Butcher came back in the room, quietly crying to himself, mumbling words Jenny couldn't and had no desire to hear. The smell of strong bleach stung her nostrils, she peered over Bromlyn's shoulder and through one of the gaps. The Butcher had a metal janitor's bucket and a mop. He poured out a bucket full of what

must have been neat bleach over the floor and began to mop up the Blood, swilling it down into the trap door.

“Fuck!” The Butcher retched and shambled out of the room again. He returned a moment later with another bucket of bleach which he again poured onto the floor and continued cleaning. He did this twice more cleaning the bare boards with meticulous care, until after what must have been half an hour, with the Butcher on his hands and knees obsessively scrubbing the floor boards with smaller and smaller brushes finally he seemed satisfied that all trace of blood was gone.

Once all the cleaning equipment had been taken away, the Butcher came back inside and stood in the middle of the room with his back to the cupboard, head bowed almost as if in prayer, he was mumbling again and swaying slightly from side to side. He stayed like that for a good five minutes, then without warning he spun on his boot heels and ran from the room.

THIRTY-THREE

Both Women held each other close as they listened, shaking so hard their teeth seemed to rattle. Jenny screwed her eyes tight shut and held her breath as the Butcher’s footsteps faded. Waiting, with her heart hammering in her chest fit to break her ribs. Waiting for that horrible moment when the Butcher suddenly turn back into the room, ran up to their hiding place and ripped open the door. *‘Surprise! Did you enjoy the show, ladies?’* But it didn’t come. A moment past and the front door slammed and she felt Bromlyn start at the noise, then she heard the bolt on the outside of the door be drawn across and the clickety clack of the padlock being put in place once more.

Finally Bromlyn released her death grip on Jenny and slowly pushed open the cupboard door with her right shoulder. Light, such as it was in the gloomy room, hit Bromlyn’s pale face, Jenny was transfixed

by the fear in the Woman's wide eyes as she listened to make sure the Butcher truly had left. And only when they heard the van door slamming outside and the engine start up, did Bromlyn dare to leave the relative safety of their hiding place. She moved slightly then stopped, Bromlyn looked down at her arm. Jenny still had tight hold of her sleeve, her knuckles showing white.

"It's okay," Bromlyn said breathlessly, and gave Jenny a weak smile, she gently took a hold of Jenny's hand and squeezed it. Jenny looked at it as she did so, not realizing that she was still clutching onto her, her fingers didn't seem to hurt at all. "It's okay," Bromlyn repeated and gently pulled herself free. Then the pain came flooding back like her finger tips had been dipped in acid.

"Wait here," Bromlyn whispered. Not that Jenny had any intention of moving even if she could coax her numb limbs into life. She blew on her damaged fingers in a vain attempt to soothe the pain.

Bromlyn moved swiftly over to the window in an awkward crouching position and took a tentative peek out through the window. The van's engine roared and drove off. "Damn it, I can't see the number plate." She cursed.

"Come away from the window, he might see you!" Jenny was surprised at just how weak her voice sounded even in the confines of the dark cupboard, it was as if she was saying it to herself. She drew her knees up under her chin, she was shaking almost uncontrollably now, playing the ghastly images of the Butcher at work over in her mind. Her head was pounding with the stress of it, in time with each blow of the Butcher's cleaver.

"He's gone," Bromlyn said a little louder. "Jenny, you can come out now."

Jenny shook her head, even though Bromlyn couldn't see her from her place over by the window. That was the last thing she wanted to do.

"Jen? Come on, we need to get out of here. Find a phone and call the police."

“No,” Jenny said. She couldn’t bring herself to come out, to see that room again after what had just happen in there, it had been bad enough before. Here, secreted away out of sight, she strangely felt safe hiding in the dark.

Bromlyn appeared in the small doorway and knelt down in front of Jenny. She said nothing at first, just gently stroked Jenny’s sweat matted hair. Then she leaned in and kissed her head. “He’s gone.” She said and tried to take Jenny hand and lead her out. “We need to go.”

“No!” Jenny pulled away and shuffled further into the small cupboard. She felt ten years old, hiding under her bed from the bogey man.

“Jenny it’s over,” Bromlyn coaxed. She went onto her hands and knees and drew in next to Jenny. “We’ve done it. We’ve found them.”

“T, Too late for that one,” Jenny stammered, she winched inwardly and absently rubbed her arm about where the Butcher had severed it in the dream, and for real to the poor Woman they had just witnessed slaughtered like so much meat. She just wanted to cry at the hopelessness of it all.

“Hey, hey, Jenny, look at me.” Bromlyn shook her ever so slightly. Jenny looked at her and tried but failed to focus on the Woman, she was nothing more than a featureless shape in front of her, not unlike the Butcher in the dream had been. Jenny tasted bile at the thought and shuddered, her stomach did a back flip and she had to swallow hard to stop herself from throwing up. She tried desperately to push the feeling out of her head concentrating instead on Bromlyn as she spoke again.

“That’s not our fault.” Bromlyn continued. “Let’s just make sure that poor Woman...” She faltered, clearly picturing the carnage they had witnessed. “Let’s just make sure she’s the last one. We can stop that sick bastard. Once and for all.”

“Yeah,” Jenny nodded in agreement, but even that small movement sent her already pounding head spinning. She sucked in air, feeling she would vomit, but that just made things worse as she tasted the thick

bleach smell in the air. “Oh,” Jenny gagged as an over whelming wave of nausea washed over her, the sweat on her face seemed to turn to ice as she retched violently. And Bromlyn shifted out of the way, just in time.

Jenny barely had time to lurch forwards onto her hands and knees, when her stomach cramped painfully and a moment later she vomited onto the floor. “Jesus,” she gasped, just managing to get the word out before she retched again and again, splashing her hands and arms and the cupboard floor with what was left of the contents of her stomach.

“Oh, Jen” Bromlyn did her best to keep Jenny’s hair out of her face and softly rubbed her arched back until the convulsions finally passed.

“God, I’m sorry,” Jenny sobbed, she wiped her mouth in disgust with the back of her hand. “Shit,” she made a face and spat unceremoniously onto the floor.

The small cupboard was now rank with the smell of vomit, bleach and for want of a better word, fear. Jenny limply held on to Bromlyn and let her half drag her out of the foul space and into the room. She didn’t even try to stand, she just sat down and rested her back against the wall and took in a few deep breaths, she winced at the strength of the bleach out here, but even that was better than the air in there.

“That’s it,” Bromlyn coaxed. “Take a breath. Hold on a sec’, I’ve still got some water in my bag.” Jenny watched through matted hair and tears as Bromlyn leaned back into the cupboard and pulled out her bag, she rummaged inside and took out a half full bottle of mineral water. She unscrewed the lid and the bottle gave a hiss. “Careful, it’s carbonated,” she warned. “Don’t drink too much, you’ll just end up throwing it right back up again.”

“Ok.”

“Here you go,” Bromlyn put the bottle up to Jenny’s mouth and she gratefully took a sip. She swilled the tepid water around her mouth and then spat the foul tasting liquid to one side. Then she took a longer swig and swallowed it. Jenny closed her eyes and grimaced as her

stomach growled in protest but relax a little when no further convulsions followed. She exhaled with relief and gave Bromlyn a weak smile. "Bow your head a little," Bromlyn instructed. "You're burning up." Jenny did as she was instructed and gasped as Bromlyn poured some of the water over her head. It felt so good, even if she knew it would do little to wash the vomit out of her hair. But then again this wasn't the time or the place for vanity.

"Thank you," Jenny gasped and leant back against the wall. She pushed her hair back away from her face and sat there for a moment. She felt like she had gone ten rounds with Mike Tyson then gone on an all-night drinking binge, all of which she was now paying for in spades. "Christ," was all she could manage to add.

"You think you can walk?" Bromlyn asked, she knelt in front of Jenny her face full of grave concern. Jenny gingerly shock her head in reply, she felt as weak as a babe. And for all she hated being in this room she knew it would be a while before she could walk out of it under her own steam. She would have to either sit a while to regain her strength, or poor Bromlyn would have to physically carry her out.

"We need to get help, Jen." Bromlyn said. She took a hold of Jenny's arms as if she was going to try pull her up, then obviously thought better of it. "Jen." She said defeated and then stood up fully herself, leaving Jenny where she was. Bromlyn paced for a few seconds, thinking. She nearly walked over to where the trap door was, but caught herself mid-step and pivoted away. "Jenny, I don't know..."

"It's okay," Jenny told her. "I'm not going anywhere," she nodded over to the trap door. Which was so well fitted into the floor boards, if she hadn't seen it open with her own eyes she wasn't sure she would have been able to spot it even from where she was sitting. "And neither are they."

Bromlyn frowned, she moved to say something but Jenny silenced her with a shake of the head. "I'll be five minutes, ten tops." She said.

“I’ll be here,” Jenny assured her. It was strange, but all of a sudden, Jenny just wanted to be alone in the room with the dead in the pit. She knew that soon enough the police would be here with their forensic teams and coroners with their body bags. Then whatever tenuous connection she had developed with them over the last days would be gone forever.

The nightmare was coming to an end for all of them, the living and the dead, but she wasn’t ready to let them go just yet. She wanted to say goodbye she supposed, crazy as it sounded. Or perhaps she was reluctant to let go to this twisted adventure she had been on. After all this, the thought of returning to the banality of the real world didn’t fill her heart with delight. Besides she knew once they were both back at the village, there was no way in hell the police there would let her come back up here to say her goodbyes. Deep down Jenny knew this was the first and last time she would be in the farmhouse. So whatever she needed to say to the dead, she had to say it before Bromlyn returned with the Cavalry.

“Okay,” Bromlyn finally conceded. She checked her phone one last time, just in case by some miracle it had found a signal, Jenny found herself praying it didn’t and was relieved to see the frustration on Bromlyn’s face. “Shit,” she was hopping from one foot to the other with indecision, unlike Jenny, Bromlyn clearly had no desire to stay in the house another second. Tears came to the older Woman’s eyes. “Ten minutes,” she mouthed.

“Hurry back,” Jenny replied not meaning it.

Bromlyn, nodded biting her lip, then without another word ran from the room. Jenny closed her eyes and listened as Bromlyn’s footfalls went off down the hall and into the kitchen. A moment later she could hear her struggling through the gap in the kitchen window. Then there was nothing but the birds outside and Jenny’s own breathing.

THIRTY-FOUR

It had all gone so smoothly, of course. The Sickness had seen to that. Planning everything in advance to avoid any chance of detection or failure like it had done so many times before. It had planned everything down to the minutest detail with a practiced precision of execution that would have made a Swiss watch maker weep. All without Arthur Willard's knowledge (not that that would be any defense if he did ever get caught, Arty knew and accepted.)

Hidden somewhere deep within his damaged subconscious.

So all he had to do was sleep walk his way through the nightmare, content that it would all go off without a hitch. The hunt, such as it was, had been short and sweet. His latest victim had been a late night croupier working for the Dragon casino in Sheffield. God only knew how she had been chosen, Arty couldn't remember the last time he'd even been to the town, let alone to the Casino. Not that any of it mattered, her numbers had come up in the Devil's lottery and that was that.

The only thing Arty was grateful for when the Sickness took hold was that he always had little or no recollection of the deed, just the vague sense of impending doom as he... *It*, closed in for the kill. And was doubly grateful for the fact that he never remembered one blood and terror soaked moment of the act itself. That particular pleasure was reserved, apparently for the Sickness and the Sickness alone to enjoy, and it was welcome to it.

No, Arty didn't have to participate in anything but body in the murder itself, his only task in the whole sorry business was to clean up afterwards. He would awake, as he had this morning, covered in blood in the back of his rented transit van next to the mutilated remains. This one had been no more than twenty at best he could tell, not that he could look at her for more than the briefest of moments. A mixture of

horror and shame averting his eyes and mind to anything but the task that he now had to perform.

Dispose of the body, butcher the remains and dump them into the pit at the farmhouse along with the others. It was moments like that when Arty wanted to drive with the evidence straight to a police station, then it would finally all be over. He had tried before, but the Sickness was never far away during these times, it had a hold on him as surely as if he was a puppet in some obscene play. The Sickness was always just out of sight of the audience but ready to tug him one way or the other if he tried to free himself from this nightmare.

Arty had just driven the freshly cleaned transit van to the end of the dirt track which lead away from the farmhouse and pulled out onto the thankfully deserted road, when he was suddenly hit once more by and almost overwhelming wave of nausea and deep crushing despair, it washed over him like a torrent of ice water taking his breath away.

The van swerved violently as he began to cry hysterically, his vision was instantly blurred as tears filled his eyes. "Oh, Jesus, Why me?" Arty wailed and pulled the van over to the side of the road, where it skidded to a stop narrowly avoiding a ditch which ran the whole length of the road. He held his head in his hands and sobbed uncontrollably, gasping for breath. He hammered his hands on the steering wheel. "Why me? Why me?" Punctuating each word by slamming his forehead against the steering wheel until he saw stars.

Arty slumped back in the seat and tried to catch his breath, which took a full minute of biting back further tears and rants. "Shh," he told himself. "Come on, Shh... Not, your fault." Arty rubbed his sore head and cursed himself softly. Finally his heart rate slowed and he was able to take a breath without a strangled sob following it. Arty looked down at his shaking, sweat soaked hands. Murderer's hands.

Sure he had scrubbed them clean, he was sure they would look spotless to any casual observer, whose fellows at the van rental place wouldn't have the first clue what these perfectly manicured hands hand

been up to since they had taken the keys to the transit, shook each of their hands in turn and paid in cash, always cash.

But Arty could still see the stains left by the pints and pints of innocent blood that had washed over them down through the years. Sometimes it amazed him no one else could, it was so vividly clear to him. Blood red stains that no amount of scrubbing and tears of remorse could ever truly wash away. Arty signed deeply as he thought of all the pain and misery they had caused while under the spell of the Sickness.

This was always the lowest point for Arty after the deed and the cleanup were done. That point before his memory of the event had fully melted away to that place somewhere between a half remembered nightmare and idle fantasy. This was the time it was still all too clear in his mind and that poor Woman's screams still seemed to echo around his skull. They would fade, as would the vivid recollection of what he had done. But not yet, it was still crystal clear, and Arty would be left to flounder in this limbo for a week or so.

Left alone with an almost physical feeling of crushing guilt that was twisting his guts into knots. It would be several hours before he could even think about eating if he had any hope of actually keeping the food down.

He absently wondered if all this anxiety would give him an ulcer, or perhaps manifest itself in a slow growing cancer eating him away like this acute guilt from the inside. The thought actually made him smile. The Sickness wouldn't let him turn himself in and as a result end it's sordid game once and for all, but maybe it had laid the seeds of its own (and Arty's) demise as an acidic side effect. Arty's way of subconsciously defying the beast within. Slowly, covertly, causing a revolution at a cellular level. Yes, Arty like the sound of that. He absently rubbed his complaining stomach and took a couple of long slow breaths.

Arty caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to see a Woman running across the field to his right. It took him a moment to process the sight. A red headed Woman, dressed for hiking and certainly not jogging, was running at breakneck speed straight across the field which lead up to the back of the Farmhouse.

She was too far away to make out the look on her face, but her gait was screaming panic as she careered through the freshly ploughed field. Arty followed her logical line of direction to see the village half a mile away in her path. Then he zipped back to her as she sprinted across the dirt track, over a hedge and continued across the next field which was without doubt the quickest way to the village.

And help.

“God damn it!” Arty opened the van door and looked right and left, the road was still deserted, he tried to think. Had she been at the farmhouse, all this time? She certainly wasn’t out for a mid-morning jog, she would have taken the road for that. Should he try and intercept her, before she could make it to the village? No, no, not in broad day light, besides, what if she really was just out for a run?

Arty flapped around with indecision, he took a step away from the van to follow her, then stopped in his tracks spun back around to the van. Should he get in, drive back up to the farmhouse? Or drive along the road in parallel to the Woman, in hope that she would eventually come onto the road where he could... What? Run her down? Grab her and pull her kicking and screaming into the back of the transit. Another one for the pit?

“What should I do? What should I do?” Willard shrieked in terror, flapping around like a lunatic. Now that it was suddenly a very real possibility, all the thought of capture, that long held dream of finally putting end to this, filled Arty with terror. “What should I do?”

He stopped cold. He heard the answer clear as day as if it had been screamed in his ear, and the answer came from that hidden part of his psyche where the Sickness dwelt. And for the first time in his life, Arthur Willard had been happy to hear it.

THIRTY-FIVE

It was all Jenny could do to crawl on her hands and knees like a drunkard slowly over to the trap door. The floor was still wet and stank of bleach beneath her, but she didn't care, she crawled on regardless until finally she flopped down on her front next the loose boards. She nearly rolled over on her back to stare up at the ceiling, as she had helplessly in her dream, but that would bring more vivid images to her mind's eye and with it she knew she would lose what little grip on her sanity that she had since witnessing the Butcher at work.

She already knew all too well what that last victim had been through and she had no desire to re visit that particular peccadillo and all that came with it. The fresh bleach stung her nostrils and made her head pound as she lay there, but it was still preferable to the smell of the freshly cut human flesh it was masking.

She lay there for the longest time, ignoring the harsh smell of the bleach, and felt strangely at home, close to them and then she had the absurd thought, more of a hope really, that the dead were somehow comforting the latest member of their ever expanding club of the dead down there in the darkness. A club that hopefully thanks to Jenny and Bromlyn, wouldn't have to suffer any more initiates. She smiled dreamily, she like the idea of that. Soon they would all be at peace, the living and the dead.

"Shh," Jenny said softly to the exposed floor boards, her voice like gossamer in the dank room. "It's all over now." She absently stroked

the wood with the palm of her hand as if that could give comfort to them. "He can't hurt us anymore," she whispered.

Jenny laid her cheek against the floor as she had done so often onto Reece's bare chest as they had laid together in bed. She closed her eyes and listened, hoping somehow to hear the slow beat of his heart, but there was nothing, just her own shallow breathing. She had to fight a sudden over whelming desire to rip up the boards and fling herself down into the hole where she now felt that she truly belonged.

And as she lay there, Jenny could have sworn she could hear them still, in the darkness, almost inaudible, but so very near. Whispering from the pit in response to her platitudes. But what were they saying? Words of thanks? No they were far too agitated for that. She pressed her ear to the floor in a vain attempt to pick out any recognizable words. No, she bit her lip in frustration. No voices, that would be lunacy without the aid of the disks.

But still, there was something, perhaps nothing more than a feeling, deep within her gut. Dread. For want of a better word. Fear of something, for something or someone. But what, her? The Butcher was long gone. Wasn't he?

"Shh," she said again, stroking the floor boards as you would a child's cheek that had just awoken from a nightmare. "Shh..." Then she heard it, clear as day and twice as terrifying, two words echoing in her head. "*Behind you...*"

She had heard the words as if someone had whispered it in her ear. It could have been the dead's impotent warning, or an all too real human voice taunting her from behind. Whatever, or whomever had spoken the words, she had definitely heard them. But she hadn't heard the door open behind her as she lay there, or the clumsy food falls of a serial killer slowly approaching. They had, if it truly was the dead's warning. But it had come too little, too late.

Jenny, cried out, finally hearing movement behind her now and rolled onto her back. The Butcher was so close he was almost standing

over her, and she was surprised to see that he was nothing more than a confused looking young man wearing some strange kind of chainmail like metal apron over the top of a thick brown leather one, staring down at her with something akin to disbelief in his eyes.

Not a monster, not a child's nightmare, just a man. Then she caught sight of the vicious looking carving knife in his hand. Jenny gasped and froze in terror as the Butcher raised the knife above his head and she got a horrible wrenching sense of Deja vu. Had the dream been nothing more than a glimpse into her future? A movie trailer to the main feature that was the location and means of her own death?

The Butcher just stood looming over her, arm raised ready to strike, but he seemed racked with indecision and the coup de grace didn't come as swiftly as Jenny had expected. All he needed to do was drop to his knees and plunge the knife into her chest. She held her breath transfixed like a deer in headlights, but still he didn't strike. "Who...?" he said after a moment with a shake of the head. "How did you..?" He seemed incapable of finishing off a sentence let alone Jenny.

"It's you," Jenny said almost in awe, the nightmare made flesh, and such ordinary looking flesh at that. What had she expected? Freddy Kruger or that guy from the Texas Chainsaw movies? He was more Norman Bates than Jason Voorhees.

"Me?" he replied, so weakly it was as if even he didn't know who he was.

Jenny felt a slight glimmer of hope as his arm slowly drop a little as indecision seemed to grip him. Her mind raced as she tried to think of something to say, some way of connecting with him. Then the hope, such as it was, faded as a shadow cast by some deep dark realization slowly crossed the man's face. It was like a mask of insanity falling snugly into place, she exhaled in terror as the confusion melted away completely from the Butcher's face, replaced by another look, one of pure malice.

A grin slowly spread across this new face. Now he knew who he was. "Me!" He said again, and this time it was a cold hard statement of fact. This was the Butcher she had feared, the one from the victims muddled memories, made flesh right before her and it felt like the temperature around her dropped twenty degrees in an instant.

Chop, Chop the Butcher's back all right.

Before Jenny could react, the Butcher bend down and grabbed her by the front of her shirt with his free hand, she let out a strangled yelp as in one easy movement he pulled her to her feet and spun around and half lifted half pushed backwards across the room until she hit the wall at the other end with such force that it knocked the scream that was lodged in her throat out in a high pitched screech of terror. The Butcher's eyes flashed with glee, seeing the fear he had induced in her.

He raised the knife again and Jenny instinctively reached up with both her hands to grab his arm. As she did so, the sleeves of her shirt rode up slightly revealing the network of scars on both her arms and to Jenny's amazement the Butcher relaxed his grip on her, again the knife wavered in his hand as he caught sight of the numerous old wounds.

A look of doubt flashed across his face and when he looked back up into her eyes, Jenny saw that look of confusion again, then, to her amazement it shifted from that of confusion to one of, if she wasn't mistaken, empathy. His face softened as he took in the scars. The Butcher shook his head and mouthed something Jenny couldn't make out. His eyes had the beginnings of tears in them.

Then as quickly as it had changed twice already, the look in the killers eyes glazed over once again until they seemed to Jenny as dead as a dolls. The dead eyes again glanced at her scared forearms, but this time there wasn't a trace of empathy in them.

"Here," the Butcher whispered. "Let me help you with that." His eyes lit up with something akin to childish glee. Mesmerized as she

was, Jenny was sluggish to react to the sudden flash of steel that zipped passed her face, she caught what she thought was a split second glimpse her own reflecting in the knife's blade as it passed within an inch or two of her face.

At first there was no pain, she was too intent on studying the Butcher's ever changing eyes for that. Then something wet and warm splashed her neck and chin, pulling her out of her daze just a little, then she saw blood splatter on the Butcher's shiny chainmail like apron, a shocking deep red against the polished square metal links.

She gasped at the sight and smelt that unmistakable coppery smell of her own blood as another gout hit his armored chest. "What...?" she breathed and her legs bucked beneath her but she felt the Butcher's arm slid around her waist and he held her up like a lover before another passionate kiss.

Then came the pain, white hot up her left arm. "Oh, God." Jenny tore her eyes away from the Butcher's and down to the hideous three inch cut across her wrist and forearm, which was still spewing blood in short sharp spurts.

"Shh," the Butcher whispered in her ear, his mouth was so close she could feel his warm breath. "Let it happen." Jenny swooned, there was something unnaturally soothing in the even soft tone of his voice, almost seductive and she half expected him to kiss her cheek.

"No," she said with little conviction.

"No?" There was no edge in his voice, he was simply sharing the most intimate of moments with her. She thought she shook her head but couldn't be sure. He pulled her closer still. "Open your eyes, look at me, I don't want to miss the best part." He said.

Best part? Jenny opened her heavy lidded eyes and looked up into his. She felt a faint chill of terror run down her spine. His voice was seductive and warm, his eyes were dead.

"Yes," he said reading her mind. "When the light fades from your eyes. An all too brief moment, blink and you miss it. Makes it all

worthwhile. If only Arty could see. Then the little fuck would understand why I have to come out to play.”

She shook her head. “Arty?” The Butcher smiled at her confusion. It was the most humorless thing she had ever seen and she felt a sudden wave of revulsion and with it a spark of reality.

The seduction was over and her survival instinct suddenly kicked in with a vengeance. Jenny braced herself against the wall at her back and pushed the Butcher hard in the chest with all her might. He stumbled back slightly in shock as he was caught off guard. It was only a step back but more than enough.

“Fuck you!” Jenny screamed in his face and jumped in the air and head butted the Butcher square on the bridge of his nose. She saw stars for an instant but heard a satisfying crunch as his nose shattered. The Butcher staggered back and tripped over his own feet which send him sprawling to the floor.

“Bastard!” Jenny shouted and kicked him as hard as she could in his balls forcing him into the fetal position. Jenny nearly joined him on the floor as she went light headed from the butt and blood loss. She grasped her bleeding wrist and stumbled over to the doorway and out into the hall.

Jenny glanced behind her, the Butcher was still reeling on the floor, but the bastard still had tight hold of the knife. She lurched unsteadily over to the front door, but stopped short with a cry of anguish, it was bolted and padlocked from the inside this time. In the room at her back, the Butcher howled with rage as he got to his knees, but still couldn't seem to get his equilibrium enough to get to his feet thanks to her kick in the balls, but Jenny knew it wouldn't be long.

Her mind raced, she looked down the hallway which led to the kitchen and the way she and Brom had come in. She ran the maths as quickly as her fear addled brain would allow. And it didn't take a rocket scientist to calculate that the Butcher would be on her before she could

clamber up over the sink and out through the narrow gap in the boarded up window given her current state.

That meant only one thing. Jenny started up the stairs, she rested her left shoulder against the wall for support as she ascended, the rotting steps complained under her feet as she staggered upwards, leaving a telltale blood trail in her wake. When she reached the top she turned to look back down. The Butcher was standing quite still at the bottom of the stairs looking up at her with something close to disbelief on his face.

“And where do you think you are going?” He said and Jenny took a little comfort at the pain in his voice. He shifted from foot to foot and winced, his free hand went to his bruised balls and he gave a sharp intake of breath. “There’s nowhere to run,” he said and twirled the knife in his hand so it caught the light.

Jenny struggled out of her checked shirt, and gasped at the blood stain on her sweat soaked white t-shirt underneath where the blood had seeped through making it look like a gunshot wound in her belly. She clumsily wrapped the shirt round and around the wound on her arm in a vain attempt to slow the bleeding, which had at least stopped gushing so much, perhaps it wasn’t as deep as she had first thought. She tightened it with her teeth

“Fuck you!” Jenny shouted down. She backed away onto the first floor landing, not daring to take her eyes off the bastard. Her thoughts were woolly from blood loss, the damp stained walls seemed to close in on her, she staggered and desperately wanted to just collapse on the floor, to curl up and die, living seemed at that moment was just too damn hard, but somewhere deep down she knew she had to keep going, buy a little more time.

The Butcher took one step, then another slowly up the stairs. He was in no hurry as he limped up further. Jenny chanced a look behind her, the landing lead onto a narrow corridor, she saw two closed doors on either side, but dismissed them instantly, then she caught sight of

another set of stairs at the far end, much steeper, leading up to the top of the house, perhaps to an attic. It would be a dead end, but maybe she could barricade herself in, if she had the time and the energy.

“Have sense enough to die, won’t you?” The Butcher taunted. She looked back, he was half way up the stairs now, still in no hurry, a look of pure enjoyment on his face. He gestured with the knife behind her. “That leads to the attic, be my fucking guest.” He rubbed the toe of his boot into a smattering of her blood on the next step. “You’ll be dead in five minutes anyway.” He grinned as Jenny stumbled backwards down the corridor and towards the attic steps. “Or were you hoping, your friend is going to bring help?”

Jenny froze. Bromlyn, he knew about Bromlyn. “Red headed bitch?” The Butcher added. Jenny almost fell to her knees in despair. She shook her head, no. The Butcher nodded yes, he was now three steps from the top, loving every minute of this. “Christ how she squealed when I stuck her. She went down pretty easy, begged of course, but then again don’t they all?”

Jenny let out a sob and had to force herself to start backing off again. “No,” she choked out. And again he nodded enthusiastically. “No!” she shouted the word this time and felt a much needed spark of hate run through her weary body, she staggered back a little quicker thanks to it. The Butcher reached the top and stopped. In the half light of the gloomy corridor Jenny could have sworn he frowned.

He tilted his head quizzically at her continued defiance. “Not you though.” There was a trace of admiration, tinged with sadness in his voice. “You’ve got...” He choked back a sob. “You’re different. I don’t think you’ll beg much at all.”

In that moment, he sounded like the confused young man who had first found her and she took heart from this, the man was clearly caught in the midst of some inner turmoil, even now. “Please...” Jenny felt her heels hit the bottom of the attic steps. “Please, don’t do this.”

It was the wrong thing to say, and she knew it instantly. Once again his face changed, back came that demonic grin, he walked slowly forwards again with a swagger in his step. "Ah, please," he mimicked. "So the begging begins, after all. That's more like it. Just like all the others. What was I thinking?" His voice was like steel now. "Different? Huh," he snarled with distain. "You bitches are all the fucking same." He started towards her at a pace this time, all thoughts of taunting gone. Jenny turned and clambered up the steep attic steps on her hands and feet. At the top was a trap door and for one horrible moment it occurred to Jenny that it might be locked. The Butcher's boots were at the bottom of the steps now. "Up, up, up she goes." He sounded almost bored.

With every last ounce of energy left in her failing body, Jenny slammed her right shoulder up into the trap door, something splintered, perhaps an old lock, but what every it was, the door gave way and she pushed up and into the attic. Once inside, she rolled away from the door and it slammed back down shut. She scrambled on top of it and waited for the Butcher to try and force his way through. And for the first time in her life, Jenny Drayton wished she were heavier.

THIRTY-SIX

Jenny screwed her eyes tight shut and waited, bracing herself for the onslaught. But a beat past, then another, she knew he must be right under her now but there was nothing. She adjusted the make shift bandage on her arm and held her breath, straining to hear.

Still nothing, for what seemed like minutes. Then he spoke, his voice coming from only an inch or two below through the wooden trap door. "I'm going to let you bleed to death up there, Girly. I've got all the time in the world. You've got maybe five fucking minutes. Then it's the pit for you and your redheaded friend. Sound good?"

“I’ve already been there,” Jenny shouted down defiantly. “And I won’t go back you bastard. And we’ll be missed,” She lied, “Soon the whole fucking world will know what you’ve done here. You’re finished.” For a second she believed her own words, for a second it was okay to die so the dead could rest.

They would be missed, by families and friends, but how would they know where they were? Jenny thought of Bromlyn’s family and it broke her heart. They had been so close to ending this, but of course no one knew they had come here. Bromlyn had been caught before she could get to the village and call for help. Had they really stopped anything? Or were they going to be just two more for the drop?

“Maybe it’s for the best,” It was the Butcher’s voice but different somehow. Resigned, perhaps even a little relieved. She could picture his face, softening again like it had on the stairs. But like then she knew it would pass. Whatever the hell was wrong with that guy, the lunatic side, the Butcher side, was undoubtedly the most dominant.

“Weak bastard,” she whispered resentfully and for the first time looked around the attic. It was much bigger than she had expected, it seemed to stretch over the whole top of the house, several slates had come away from the V-shaped roof above her, and more still over at the far end, letting in shafts of dust filled sunlight. The air was thick with the musty smell of damn and pigeon shit. It was all but empty, a couple of tea chests stacked up in one corner, a pile of old newspapers in another.

She suddenly realized she had been half expecting to find the bastards dead Mother up here, perhaps sitting in a rocking chair, Psycho style, or at some macabre dinner table in a wedding dress. But the only dead things up here in this horror show were a smattering of rotting pigeons. And her.

A fluttering sound drew Jenny’s attention over to the far end of the attic. A pigeon, mottled and panicked was desperately trying to get out through one of the larger holes in the roof. She watched transfixed

as it flew against the exposed rafters, it seemed blinded and attracted at the same time by the bright sunlight it was so desperately trying to fly towards and in its panic it kept catching its wings on the wood and slate undoubtedly doing it no small amount of damage. An obscure phase came to Jenny as she watched it, and it almost, almost, brought a smile to her face, gallows humor at its best. *'Stay away from the light!'*

The pigeon hit a roof slate full on and was sent spiraling to the attic floor where it laid stunned for a moment. "Go on," Jenny whispered, urging the bird on. As if it heard her, the Pigeon shook itself off and once more flew up again, this time choosing, probably more by luck than judgment a section closer to where the sloping roof met the far wall. "Go on," she said a little louder. At least something might be able to escape from this God forsaken place.

Once again the bird caught its wings on the ragged hole, but this time it managed to force its way through and disappeared out into the fresh air and freedom, leaving a rain of blooded feathers and dust in its wake. Jenny watched the feathers as they fluttered down to the filthy attic floor, she thought that the way the sunlight hit them, framing them almost like a halo, was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

It was so bizarre. With all that was happening. Bromlyn dead, a fate that she was rapidly approaching herself. Jenny felt like she might weep for the small victory she had just witnessed. She followed the shaft of light back up to the gap from which the bird had made its escape, she squinted, it was larger than she had first thought. The pigeon's panic had made it look like it could only just fit through, but if it had had the presence of mind to take it slowly, it could have flown straight up and out.

The slates were loose over there, Jenny had seen how they had shifted at the bird's impact. If she had any strength left and was able to crawl over to the other side of the attic, which was doubtful she had to admit. But if she could, then maybe she could somehow squeeze up through that gap, which could only be five or so feet high at its lowest

point (Jenny was five ten) and even if she could only get her head and shoulders through then she could call for help.

It was a hope, faint, but hope never the less.

An instant later Jenny's heart sank as she remembered the relative remoteness of the farmhouse. The village was half a mile away, the main road a quarter of a mile. Even if she screamed at the top of her lungs, would anyone hear her? And hadn't the Butcher snatched Bromlyn right out in the open? "Shit," she spat through her teeth. Think, think!

Her heart began to flutter madly and she clutched at her chest suddenly feeling light headed. Blood was still seeping through the shirt on her arm, so she tightened it as best she could using her free hand and her teeth, unconsciousness threatened to overtake her now and she had to close her eyes and just concentrate on breathing for a minute.

Calm, stay calm she told herself but when she opened her eyes again the attic was nothing more than an out of focus mass of greys and blacks, even the bright sunshine had dulled to nothing more than streaks of muddy water. She gasped, was this it? Is this what death looks like? Her breathing was becoming shallower with each breath. She was bleeding to death up here, just as the Butcher had taunted. No wonder he didn't feel the need to come bursting up through the attics door, time was on his side not hers. Jenny tried to blink her eyes into refocusing but if anything her vision grew darker.

Then the lights went out altogether.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Jenny snapped awake again to find she was face down on the grimy attic floor, she rolled onto her side disorientated and it took her a few seconds to regain her bearings. She was still alone, thank God. The attic door was still shut, either the Butcher hadn't heard her or didn't care that she had crawled off the door. Jenny looked around, she was now half way between the attic door and the far end of the room where the roof met the wall and the place where pigeon had made its escape.

"Christ." She had no recollection of crawling what must have been fifteen feet or more, one moment she had been fighting off unconsciousness, the next she was here, like the time frame of her life had jump cut a few minutes or so to hurry the action alone. She couldn't even remember making the decision to make a break for the hole in the roof herself, it seemed even that had been taken from her.

She glanced back over at the attic door, still shut, no living nightmare sticking his grinning death mask of a face up through it. It was the first bit of luck she had had since breaking into this God forsaken place, back what seemed like hours ago now. Christ only knew how long she had been crawling, could have been a minute or an hour for all she could remember. No matter, any indecision she had had of what to do next was irrelevant now, it was just as far for her to crawl back to the door in the floor as it was to the hole in the roof and any chance of survival she might have left.

The bird had led the way like a guiding light in the darkness and all she had to do was follow. Jenny suddenly thought of its white wings, caught so brilliantly by the sunlight and from out of nowhere she thought of the Woman in white, the mouth-less specter on the side of the road that night when they were driving back from the studio. She had appeared at the moment when both Jenny and Bromlyn had decided to turn their backs on the voices, to give up, just as she had wanted to give up now. The first physical presence when they had doubted any of this was real.

When she had first come up here and looked around, hadn't she seen that there was nothing alive? Of course she could have missed the bird, perhaps it was stunned by her appearance and frozen into inaction? But birds when startled always take flight, don't they? Jenny felt suddenly certain the bird was more than a coincidence, it was a sign, from *them*. A way out when she had given up. After all it wasn't a given that the Butcher would be stopped just because he had been discovered. Who else knew except her and Bromlyn? They had told no one.

"It's not done yet," she said out loud and mustered up every last ounce of energy she had left. "Not, yet." She gritted her teeth and began to crawl inch by painful inch over to the bright shaft of light filtering through the gap like a beacon of hope. She concentrated on the spot where it hit the floor, blocking everything out around her. The Butcher, the pain, her screaming fingertips, there was nothing now but that one last goal.

Another jump cut in time. Jenny opened her eyes to see bright sunlight. She must have blacked out again, because now she was right under the hole, sitting up with her back against the wall. The warm sunlight on her upturned face. She sobbed in relief, so close now, if she could only just somehow drag herself up the wall the gap in the roof would be close enough for her to at least get her head through, maybe even her shoulders or more. The gap was bigger than she could have hoped. It could be possible, if she had the strength to pull away the loose slates around the hole that then just might be able to force her way through it and up onto the roof itself.

Jenny felt her heart skip a beat, she could hear a bird's wings fluttering outside, the sunlight flickered above her as something flew overhead. The pigeon, or whatever it was, showing her the way. No doubt now, she had to make it, she had to finish what they had started.

“Oh, thank you.” She was hit by a sudden surge of elation at the thought, but conversely, instead of getting a much needed adrenaline boost, it over loaded her senses. She tried in vain to push up with her legs so that she could slide her back up the wall and get to her feet, but her limbs turned to water, her backside hit the attic floor with a jolt and her head hit the wall causing plaster to rain down onto her, stinging her eyes. She opened her mouth to let out a curse but was blindsided by unconsciousness before she had chance to utter the first syllable.

Jenny was vaguely aware of falling as it took a hold of her and for a horrible moment she thought the rotten floor boards had given out under her weight sending her crashing through them and to the room below. Her last recollection before she blacked out completely was a vain hope that if it had, then if she was lucky she would break her neck in the fall and be granted a quick painless death before the Butcher found her. And then she was gone as the darkness took her once more.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Jenny drifted in the darkness, it was that same cold place she had almost lost herself in during the dream. She was in the pit now, with the rest of the dead, of that she was certain. She had failed, just another victim, just like she had always been all through her life, just another failed attempt at something meaningful. But at least she couldn't fail anymore, now that she was gone. All hope had left her now. There was nothing, no life, no light, she was alone, drowning in darkness.

“My, but you got so close.” The darkness said all of a sudden, a second or an hour later. She was not alone, of course, the restless dead still drifted here. She was one of them now.

“I, I tried... I tried so hard,” Jenny told them weakly. “So very hard.”

Footsteps, moving closer, as did the voice. "I can see that." It was as cold and lifeless as Jenny felt.

"I'm sorry." She said.

"Sorry?"

"I tried to stop him, stop all this... For you."

There was a long pause during which Jenny thought she heard ragged breathing over what she realized was her own shallow breaths.

"For me?" The voice was a little different somehow, more emotion, more human.

"For all of you. Looks like I'll be staying for a while." Jenny continued. She wasn't sure if she had her eyes open or closed now. Either way it didn't matter, there was nothing but black all around her. "Another one for the drop," she said grimly. "I'm so sorry, we got so close..."

She began to softly cry and with the tears came something else, a dawning sense that she was returning to her body. The pain slowly returned to her fingertips and wounded forearm, followed by sheer exhaustion and then a horrible resignation. Jenny could smell her own blood again mixed with stale sweat and the dank odor of the attic floor.

She turned her face up once more and the blackness gave way to a murky orange. She felt the warming sun on her face. So she hadn't fallen through the floor after all. And she wasn't in the pit. She was still in the attic, sitting under the hole in the roof. She could feel the cool wall at her back. And she wasn't dead quite yet. But still the darkness spoke to her.

"Who are you?" The darkness asked.

Jenny thought about this for a long while before she replied. "A friend."

"Why did you come here?" The darkness wanted to know. "How did you know... What was here?"

"The voices."

"Voices?"

Jenny tried to swallow, her throat was so dry. “We heard the voices of the dead, the victims in the pit. God they were so scared, afraid, so very, very afraid. We just wanted to help you. Give you all peace.”

“I don’t understand,” the darkness replied. “I’m lost here.”

Jenny almost laughed at this. “Lost? Aren’t we all?” God the sun left so good on Jenny’s face. She let it warm her a moment before continuing. “We came to stop him. Stop the killing, lay you to rest.”

“Stop who?”

Why were they asking so many stupid questions? Hadn’t they led her here? Hadn’t they caused all this? “The Butcher, who else?” She said angrily.

A faint but audible gasp.

“Butcher?” The word was whispered with almost awe and tinged with fear.

“Chop, chop the Butcher’s back.” Jenny chanted. “We heard you, on the tape. We came to find you here just like you wanted. But I can’t do anymore, he’s won, he’s killed us all. And it’s all your fault.”

“I know.”

“You can’t imagine the hell I’ve been through... I just wanted to stop him killing again. Let you all sleep.”

“To help me... Stop the Butcher?”

She nodded.

Footsteps coming closer, Jenny heard the jangle of metal on metal and it set off a spark of recognition somewhere in her addled brain. She squinted against the sun in her eyes which was suddenly harsh now, blinding her to what was right in front of her.

Jenny let her head drop and the attic came into soft focus. As did the dark figure standing ten feet away. Something in the figure’s hand glinted in the sun. A flash of light on metal. Jenny’s failing heart sank.

“Butcher...” she breathed.

“Butcher,” the figure said as if still trying the word on for size. “I call him... It, the Sickness.”

Jenny concentrated hard on the figure in front of her, of course she knew who it was before he finally came into focus. But he looked different somehow, not the grinning maniac who had chased her up here, more like the confused young man from the abattoir room. He was dressed just like the Butcher, thick brown leather apron under the chainmail, and he certainly had the Butcher’s knife, the one that had cut Jenny so badly, but he was half the Man, his shoulders sagged as if the weight of the apron was weighting him down, his face, which could have been considered handsome in a different setting, had a haunted look of someone who had seen such horrors, and not only that, but horror caused by his own hand.

“You’ve killed me,” was all Jenny could think to say and she was amazed to see tears come to his eyes.

He nodded mournfully, not the Butcher now, just a Man.

“You killed us all.” There was no hint accusation in her voice, she was passed that now, she had accepted that fact.

“It’s not my fault.” He said softly. “There’s, there is something... Something wrong with me.” A look of horror slowly crept across his face. Tears came freely now, pouring down his cheeks. “You said you heard them? The people I... It...” He mouthed the word *killed* but couldn’t say it out loud.

“Yes, they led us here,” Jenny told him. “We promised we would help them find peace.” The young man winced at the word peace. As she studied him, Jenny could feel herself slipping away again as she sat there looking up at this shell of a Man. She was amazed to feel a stab of pity for her murderer.

Although she knew somewhere deep behind those sorrowful eyes, the real killer, the Butcher, was lurking. Waiting for the right moment. Maybe this was just all some act, maybe he was just milking this moment for all it was worth? She narrowed her eyes trying to spot

that spark of insanity in his eyes, but there was only pain. A self-loathing she knew only too well.

“I try to stop it,” he said. “Like you, I saw the cuts on your arms.” He grimaced looking at the blood soaked shirt wrapped around her arm, covering the wound he had caused. “The old ones,” he clarified almost embarrassed. “You know what it’s like, I can see that in you. I guess we’re not so different.”

Jenny wanted to contradict him but stopped herself. Maybe he was right.

The Man raised the knife and brought it up towards his neck and for a moment Jenny thought he was going to slash his own throat. But instead he worked the knife under the shoulder strap holding the chainmail and leather aprons in place. He twisted his wrist and cut it. The left side of the apron fell, so it was half on, half off. He then took the knife in his left hand and cut the strap over his right shoulder so the aprons clattered to the floor at his feet. “I need to show you something, so you’ll understand what I mean.” Jenny tensed as he took off his sweat soaked t-shirt and threw it to one side.

“What are you...?” But Jenny stopped mid-sentence, this wasn’t a prelude to rape. The Man’s whole upper body was covered with literally hundreds of scars.

“See?” He held out his arms for her to see. “I tried so hard.” He gestured with the knife to a relatively fresh wound snaking up his left arm. “You can see that, right?” His tone imploring. “How hard I’ve tried to stop it?”

“I know,” Jenny said taking in the numerous scars. And she did. She remembered that pent up frustration, of feeling like your head was going to explode, or that you needed to run off screaming down the street for no reason. Feeling like only a sudden sharp release of pressure would keep you sane. He cut himself to stop the pain. It was a contradiction she knew all too well.

He seemed to sense their shared experience. "I'm not a bad person," he said. "It's just the Sickness. It makes me do such terrible things." His face was a picture of disgust and self-loathing as he spoke. His eyes took on a faraway look as he stared into the sunlight shining down on Jenny. Then after what seemed like a full minute he finally looked back down to her. He winced as if seeing her state for the first time.

"So much pain," he whispered and let the point of the knife gently play over the legion of scars on his chest. "This," he gestured to the newest cuts. "Helps to keep the Sickness away. At least for a little while." He smiled sadly like he had seen all the horrors in the world and couldn't do a thing to stop them. "But in the end it always wins."

Jenny watched him as he spoke, he seemed to be getting slier by the moment having shed his metal and leather skin. His shoulders sagged and quite the saddest frown she had ever seen replaced that woeful smile. She truly felt sorry for him and she knew only too well about what the complete and total loss of control was like. But still she waited for that flash of malevolence to reappear behind those doe eyes.

"Where is it now?" She asked cautiously. "The Sickness?"

"Gone, for now. There was something about you, it called out to me. It chased the Sickness away." He frowned and shook his head. "No, not away," he corrected himself. "Into hiding."

"It'll be back," Jenny said. Her voice sounded ethereal all of a sudden, like she was fading away. She looked down at her blood soaked body half expecting it to turn to smoke before her eyes. Her mind was clouding over, she could feel herself slipping away again. Perhaps for the last time. "The Sickness will be back."

"Very soon." Fresh tears welled in his eyes, his voice was thick with regret.

"I'm... dying." Jenny breathed.

He nodded and fought back the tears as best he could. "I'm so sorry," he said to his feet like a scolded school boy.

“Stop this,” Jenny had to fight had speak, she was finding it harder and harder to formulate a cogent thought. She had to visualize each word in her head before she could speak it.

The Man looked up from his feet and cocked his head to one side, not understanding.

“Stop... It, coming back...” Jenny tried to make her voice have more substance. But she wasn’t sure if he had even heard her let alone understood. But then he nodded in recognition.

“It’ll be over soon.” He said, but Jenny didn’t know whether he meant her life or this whole murderous nightmare.

“No more killing,” she said.

The Man suddenly smiled. “No more killing,” he repeated. Then sighed forlornly. “Well perhaps one more...”

Jenny tensed for a moment at the action but it passed in and instant when he brought the knife up to his own chest and pointed it horizontally with the tip to his heart, he used his free hand to guide the point between his ribs. A thin trickle of blood ran down his chest as the very tip of the blade penetrated the skin. “Oh, the other Woman?”

“Bromlyn,” Jenny replied dreamily, her vision was hazy as she looked up at him. “Her name was Bromlyn Richards.

He shook his head slightly. “She *is* Bromlyn Richards,” he stated proudly. “The Sickness lied. She made it to the village. It was either try to snatch her in broad daylight, or come back here to see if she had seen anything. Of course that’s when it found you. The police are probably on their way right now. And I have to say I’m glad.”

Jenny felt her heart soar, the shock gave her a jolt of much needed, if all too fleeting energy. Her eyes focused on him. “She’s alive?”

He nodded. “Couldn’t get to her in time, the Sickness told me to come here, I think it knew the game was up. I guess it just wanted one more victim before...” He gestured with his chin to the knife. “I’m sorry, it can be so cruel.”

“Oh, thank God.” Jenny began to cry with relief. “So it is over?” He nodded again and smiled with genuine warmth. Jenny thought she heard the flutter of wings above her head. The dead were free to rest in peace after all, and she with them. Suddenly everything was alright with the world.

“Oh, by the way, my name’s Arty. Arty Willard.” He said.

“Pleased to meet you, Arty Willard.” Jenny felt her strength fading again, fast. She had to force herself to keep Arty in focus as best she could, but he was already growing hazy.

Arty looked down at Jenny with clear shining eyes. “Thank you for finding us,” he said. And pushed the knife into his heart right up to the handle. He let out a short sharp hiss of air through clenched teeth and crumpled to the floor.

Arty Willard was dead before he hit it.

THIRTY-NINE

Jenny didn’t feel anything. She had just seen a Man die, right in front of her, but it hardly registered she was so lethargic. She would be joining him soon enough, of that she was certain now. Bromlyn was alive, the Butcher was dead and his victims could rest. But had it been worth it? Losing everything, literally everything.

What was it all about?

Then suddenly there it was. A dawning realization that she was going to die here, alone, always alone. And it felt like flailing in ice water. A cold calculated realization made flesh. How many times over the years had she cut herself, in some self-righteous depression, half

willing this moment to come? *Be careful what you wish for*, she thought bitterly.

You stupid, stupid bitch! All those lonely nights, curled up in bed in the fetal position drowning in sweat, praying for death. Kept awake by nightmares sending electric shocks down her spine, running ever increasing worse case scenarios of some innocent utterly irrelevant event that may have happened during the day, through her fever addled brain. It tasted like acid in the back of her throat.

Better off dead. Better off than wallowing in the same self-pity as the dead she had uncovered, and so naively thought she could save since listening to the tapes, what seemed like a life time ago now. She was, after all in the end just one of them. A victim. She just didn't have the sense enough to drop over and accept her fate.

Until now. Had that been what it was all about, her finally finding out where she belonged, with the dead? The Butcher's cut wasn't so much as a fatal wound as a razor sharp edged wake up call. She had wanted affinity with his victims, fair thrived on it, and now, there it was, she was one of them.

Happy now?

It's time to stop pretending, the Butcher had said with his blade, cutting through the bullshit as well as her flesh with a well-practiced flick of the wrist. He was gone, at peace in some perverse way. But his logic lingered on.

Jenny, like it or not you've been dead for years, all I've done is shine a light on your hypocrisy, that illusion you laughingly called life. The fatal cut seemed to say to her.

Can't you finally see it now? You gave up on the land of the living years ago, all it took was my blade to wake you up. Stupid, stupid bitch, you are going to bleed to death up here amongst the pigeon shit, nothing more than another one of my victims.

But special somehow, take a little comfort from that at least. Special, if only in the fact you will be my last, and post mortem, no less. A fitting epitaph for a serial killer. And can you argue you deserve any better?

Jenny was silent, sitting there like a slab of meat as death approached like a shadow, moving effortlessly towards her. Her silence was a damning indictment and it brought acid tears to her eyes. *No I didn't think so*, Death sneered, that seemed the only expression it was capable of in this desolate place.

"Christ... What have I done?" Jenny uttered out loud. The despair in her voice was as tangible as a breath on a frosty morning. So much so that she could almost see it, certainly *felt* it. *Felt something*. And as such it was suddenly something she could cling on to. Like a long dead Ghost, who suddenly managed to move a glass on a table it had been flailing at for years.

She wasn't gone yet, she could still feel. Not yet a phantom in the pit like those others, she could still effect the waking world around her. Jenny fumbled desperately in her pocket for her phone with renewed purpose that had come from God only knew where.

Survival instinct? Shit, she would take anything now that the numbness was clearing from her mind. And with screaming fingertips took out her phone, fumbling as she did. She squinted at the signal bars on the phones display. One flickering bar. She must be high enough up here to maybe get out a call, if she was lucky. And wasn't she due a little luck just now?

"Fuck it!" Jenny shouted at herself in frustration as she tried in vain to dial three simple numbers: 9 9 9, She cursed her useless fingers, but in the same breath thanked them for actually *feeling* something. Painful though they were, that pain, that cocktail of razorblades dancing on her nerve endings meant life, meant she wasn't yet lost in the darkness death wore as a coat.

“What a fucking day,” Jenny said to the lifeless room. She tried the phone again, this time using the second knuckle of her right hand to hit the keys. But instead of calling the emergency services, something made Jenny call up the phone's address book and then Reece's mobile number.

She paused like she had all the time in the world when his name came up on the screen, her stomach tightened as she remembered the desperate call she had almost made to her parents as she sat in her car on the way to Bromlyn's, debating whether or not to end her life by ploughing into that wall up ahead.

What could she say? Sorry? But at least when all of this comes out you will have the cold comfort of knowing I wasn't crazy after all, despite the obvious evidence to the contrary. She tried to shake the indecision out of her muddled brain as she could feel unconsciousness and all it would bring slowly creeping up on her again.

With a heavy heart, Jenny looked around the dank dusty room she was going to die in. Not much of place to breathe your last, but in the end did that really matter? Whatever came next, if anything, wouldn't hinge on where you died, just how you had lived your life.

And how had she lived her life? It was getting harder and harder to remember anything that had come before. The blood loss had robbed her of even the most recent memory of Reece, she tried to picture his face but could only see the Butcher's. He had not only taken her life but her memories too. Perhaps that was how it worked, in some supernatural way he was slowly replacing Reece and her old life until there was nothing left.

Jenny's vision blurred and she tried to blink it back into focus, but it refused to obey. She was slipping now, fading away, she felt as if she was made of smoke and that the light breeze coming through the exposed rafters above her was blowing her away out of existence. Even the pain in her fingers and slashed arm had all but gone. She glanced

down at the phone in her hand and half expected it to fall through her fading fingers, but instead she saw it was ringing Reece's number.

Jenny gritted her fading teeth and with great effort raised the phone to her ear, willing him to answer. After what seemed like forever, she heard his voice and was about to speak (if she still actually had a voice left to form the words with that was).

"Hey, this is Recce, I'm either deliberately screening you, or I'm actually not here." Voicemail, shit. Jenny's heart fair broke hearing his voice, she let out a low sob, she so desperately wanted him to be here with her so she could see him just one last time, but all she had was his stupid comedy voice mail message... "Either way," it continued happily. "Please leave your message after the beep and I will either pretend not to have got it or give you a call back. Cheers!" The phone beeped and then there was nothing but dead air in Jenny's ear.

"Reece," she said, the word sounded vaguely like her own voice but spoken a million miles away as she drifted off into the ether. "Reece, pick up if you're there... It's me." Jenny held her breath willing him to answer. "Please..." The silence was deafening. And Jenny realized she could no longer feel the wall at her back as the numbness that had started in her finger tips slowly began to envelope her whole body. "Please," she choked out again. She closed her eyes trying to concentrate on just getting the words out, they were after all, going to be her last.

"I, I just wanted to say, that I'm sorry, for everything, and I don't know if it makes any difference at all, but I'm thinking of you, now as I'm sitting here in this God forsaken place, thinking about us. About all the times I didn't tell you how I was really feeling. I wanted to Reece, whatever you think of me after all this, please believe me. I always wanted to tell you what you meant to me, but I just couldn't... You were always so open with me and all I ever did was shut you out." Jenny paused as the words became sobs in the back of her throat. She took

another moment to compose herself and try to keep a grip on reality for just a few moments longer.

And with great effort finally managed to add: "I love you."

The phone slipped from her hands but Jenny didn't feel a thing, she didn't even hear if hit the floor if it did. For all she was aware it kept on falling forever, her head lolled forwards and she had the mild sensation that she too was falling, into oblivion. The room faded away into a grey blur, then slowly that too faded to nothing.

And next, Darkness.

FORTY

They called it the *Farmhouse of horrors*. The title ran in the papers and on the twenty four hour news channels for days afterwards and their sales and viewing figures went through the roof. It seemed that each new day brought another startling revelation about what the police found up there. Slowly, one by one names and faces were attached to the dead. And by the time the forensics teams had completed their grim task they had identified ten bodies in total. And with each name came a picture, usually taken in happier times, at a Wedding, on holiday or at some social event, always smiling to camera, eyes alight with the possibilities of what life would bring them, each unaware that light would be so brutally snuffed out long before its time.

Grieving relatives were paraded in front of the almost rabid news media, each with a fresh tale of woe to tell and all you had to do was turn to page five for their heart breaking story, or wait until after the weather if the tv was more your style.

In the furor no one dared to mention that most of the victims were unwanted waifs and strays and that out of the ten Women, only six had been formally reported as missing. That little tit-bit would no doubt come out later if it was deemed that anyone would actually care, the reporters tucked it away in their collective slow news day files, just in case. But inevitably no one really cared about how they had lived only how they had died.

As is so often the way, no one outside the genuinely grieving family and friends cared much either way for the names and lost lives of the victims, and their faces would soon be forgotten when the next horror of the week came along. In time, they would just become known as *The Ten*. It was after all a nice round figure that looked great in bold on a front cover.

What did it really matter, in the end, who they were when they were alive? It was only now that they were dead and how they had been killed that they were of interest to the public at large. '*The Ten*.' They had been nobodies before and would soon return to anonymity once more. They were the victims, numbers on a score board next to the name of their killer.

Now, that was one name the press and public would not forget. It was just a shame there would be no show trial to drool over. He was dead, just like his victims, but unlike them he would never be forgotten. He would become the subject of sensationalist books and documentary's on the Crime and Investigation Channel. Maybe even a film, if he was deemed charismatic enough. (But then that was something any hack screen writer worth their salt could concoct if the demand was strong enough.)

After all, we all remember the Yorkshire Ripper, Peter Sutcliffe, the Moors murderers, Brady and Hindley. But could any of us name any of his victims? Only those close to the horror could. They were part of an exclusive club no one would want membership to. They alone would never forget the faces and names of their loved ones.

And so now one more name joined the roll call of infamy, written in blood red block capitals next to Fred and Rosemary West, Crippin and all the others, names to send a shudder down the spine of the collective consciousness all the way back to good old Jack The Ripper. And what was more he too had a catchy media friendly serial killer nick-name to strike fear in the heart and grab the headlines.

Arthur Willard: *'The Butcher'*. The double digit killer who dressed in a butcher's chainmail apron while he butchered his victims like cattle before dumping their dismembered remains in a pit he had made in his childhood home.

It had been the leaked photo of that blood splattered apron that had sealed Willard's place in serial killer folklore. It was just a shame, the more cynical had noted, that Willard hadn't also worn a mask of human flesh to go with the outfit, but then again you can't have everything, can you? Besides, then came the coroner's report to reignite flagging media interest in the case.

For years, it was revealed, Willard had been cutting himself, to such a degree that it was said that he had literally hundreds of cuts over most of his body. It conjured up images of a self-mutilated freak show of a Man, dressed in Butcher's mail manically wielding a meat cleaver. There were even gory artists impressions in some of the more lurid red top newspapers.

Then there was Willard's death. He killed himself, supposedly in a fit of remorse, by a single, well aimed stab to the heart. Death had come

quickly, and saved the killer the dubious honor of a trial and the inevitable life behind bars in Broadmoor that would follow.

The Butcher persona that had built up in the media was the exact opposite to the rather pathetic photo the papers ran of Willard, the worst one they could find, of course. Taken at some charity fund raiser or other, he was so none descript that he barely stood out in a crowd of three. But wasn't that always the way? The Jekyll and Hyde personality of any self-respecting Serial killer.

Arthur Willard (no middle initial, he was too boring even for that!) ticked all the right boxes. He was '*such a quiet man*' his suitably shocked neighbors remarked. '*Always so polite, clean and well turned out, a model resident.*'

The papers and TV drew a blank everywhere they turned in their rabid attempt to find some juicy revelation, hidden in his past that might explain Arthur Willard's secret self. They found nothing, and that made Willard's growing infamy all the more enticing. In fact the closest they got was an interview with Willard's somewhat overdressed Estate Agent. Who said she had harbored her own suspicions about Willard for some time now. This she based solely on the fact that no matter how much money he was offered, he had steadfastly refused to sell the farmhouse.

Unbidden by reporters, who of course now knew why Willard wouldn't part with the place. She went on to explain how the place was situated on prime redevelopment real estate. Recession proof, he could have asked his own selling price and still hand his hand bitten off by a legion of developers eager for the land. She lamented that the land would now probably go to waste, and she seemed more devastated about that than the fact she knew a serial killer and might (half the press secretly wished she had) ended up as one of his victims.

So all in all, Arthur Willard was an enigma. It was as if every once in a while, Arthur Willard would disappear off the face of the earth, and

when he returned, it was with another victim. So many questions. Why he did what he did, what drove him to multiple homicide?

But alas to the world at large these questions would remain unanswered.

Epilogue

Bloomfield Manor was a place that would never really change. The view from Kapoor's office window, looking down onto the lush greenery of the hospital's vast grounds. The patients who were lucky enough to be allowed out to enjoy the last throws of summer could be seen sat under trees, or wandering around on the grass, picking flowers or chasing birds. The staff, dotted around here and there keeping a discreet distance but never too far away.

Doctor Kapoor's office had a distinct air to it, the musty smell of old books, kind of like a library, but with the hint of cigar smoke from where the Doc' would sneak a drag or two in between consultations, more often than not, hanging half out of the window now that you weren't allowed to smoke inside anymore.

His massive oak desk, cluttered as always with piles upon piles of notes and papers. A prime example of what Kapoor would often describe to anyone who would listen as organized chaos. Kapoor himself was sitting behind the desk, his glasses perched precariously on the end of his long nose as he jotted periodically in his note book.

Even his silver fountain pen was the same, and he often had to shake it vigorously to get the ink flowing, it was expensive but had never really worked all that well, but it was a present from his first wife, the only one he still spoke to so it was precious to him, he even liked the fact it would clog from time to time, it gave it character.

Doctor Amir Kapoor was a man of science, even in the often muddy waters of clinical psychology it was the bed rock of his life. He truly believed there was a scientific explanation to everything in his work. No matter how wondrous and complex the human psyche was, once you dug deep enough you could unravel the cause and effect of its defects, be it a chemical imbalance or some long suppressed traumatic event. There was a reason, if sadly not always a cure, for everything the Human brain could throw at its owner.

So why couldn't he explain what had happened to Jenny Drayton? Relapse? Certainly, But that didn't even come close to scratching the surface of what had happened to Jenny. Kapoor only wished he could wrap it all up that neatly and easily. He would have gladly taken the blame for lowering her medication dosage, and as such causing her sudden, violent descent back into full blown psychosis. He could live with that, if not easily, at least it would satisfy his faith in medicine. But the truth was, the dose she had already been on before he lowered it even further was little more than placebo as it was.

Then there was the possibility that the relapse had been brought on by the arrival of Bromlyn Richards into Jenny's life. Who's own recent behavior had seen her disappear without a trace, only to emerged days later when she contacted Jenny by sending her those tapes.

The tapes. Like it or not, all this started for Jenny when she received those old reel to reel tapes. She had been listening to a copy of one on her computer when she had mutilated her hands in that horrible way.

Kapoor exhaled, remembering that awful night. The tapes had been blank, he had to remind himself. He had listened to them himself after Jenny had slipped away sometime whilst he and Reece were down stairs, discussing her fate. Kapoor flinched remembering the table top and poor Jenny's ruined fingers. Had he missed something in her at their last meeting, something lurking just below the surface? He had gone over his notes from that day, over and over dozens of times, but could find nothing in them that would point to what had happened next.

Kapoor took out an A4 photograph from under a pile of papers on his desk. A photo he had taken himself of the table top with its crudely wrought rendering of a house.

A Farmhouse. *The* farmhouse, the one that had been splashed all over the papers. He shook his head and pushed the photograph to one

side. The truth was he didn't need to look at it. The picture Jenny had so painfully created was as deeply ingrained in his mind's eye as it was on the wooden canvas on which it had been carved.

The tapes were the trigger, of that much he was sure, but what had Jenny thought she had heard on them? He had played them over and over, as he had with the disk copy Jenny had been listening to that fateful night.

They were all blank. Yet they had sent Bromlyn Richards into hiding and Jenny... Kapoor's own finger tips tingled in sympathy with Jenny's own. Then both Jenny and Richards had gone off on what could only be described as a quest into the Yorkshire Dales.

Of course the official line the Police had been given was that they had gone there to clear their heads. And it had been deemed just blind luck that while they were up there they just 'happened' to stumble across the Farm house and the Butcher. Bad luck in Jenny's case.

A farmhouse that had a striking resemblance to the one Jenny had scratched onto a table top a day or so before.

Kapoor rummaged through the paper chaos on his desk until he found a copy of the Sun newspaper which had a picture of the farmhouse taken just after the police had finished clearing away the bodies. The blood red banner headline above it luridly exclaimed: *The Farmhouse of horrors.*

He put the newspaper next to his photo of the table top. If you had shown the Sun's picture to someone and then asked them to recreate it, scratched on wood using only a six inch nail. Jenny's version would have won first prize.

Explain that one science.

But science was deafening in its silence. Kapoor absently tap, tap, tapped his pen on the desk as he tried to untangle the puzzle before him.

“Christ,” the silhouette at the window said. “You could really drive a Girl insane with that incessant tapping, Doc.”

Kapoor looked up from the photographs to the miracle standing there. He had to look away an instant later for fear he would tear up. She looked so gaunt, even skinnier than she had before and oh so pale. But that was to be expected, he knew. Besides, all she had been through it was a wonder she looked so good.

She was alive and getting better day by day, and that was more than enough for now. Kapoor rubbed his tired eyes, as much to disguise the fact he had tears in them after all more than anything. “How are you feeling?” He asked hoarsely.

It was a question he had felt the need to asked about every ten minutes since she arrived, he just couldn’t help himself. It was as if he half expected her to drop dead right in his office. That or finally admit that she was in fact a ghost and fade away forever.

How am I feeling? Jenny Drayton asked herself. And the one word answer she came up with was the most shocking thing about being back at Bloomfield.

Safe. Such a small word, and until now not Jenny’s favorite four letter one when it came to describing how she felt about the Monkey farm. But that was how she did feel. Safe, warm, alive. It was hard to believe she was back at Bloomfield hospital, a place since those dark days she would only have entered kicking and screaming, even the smell conjured up demons once upon a breakdown.

But not now. After all she was wearing her own clothes and not a strait jacket. The visitors badge was clipped to her blouse pocket and unlike all the other times she had been back, she hadn’t felt like tapping it for luck once since she had arrived.

That little victory, she knew was probably more to do with Reece, who had insisted on coming with her this time and who was right now sat outside Kapoor’s office, being subjected to Kapoor’s secretaries bad

coffee, all the while ready to burst in on them at the first sign of the orderlies piling in to take her back to a room with wall to ceiling carpets.

He would stop at nothing to rescue her from their clutches if needs be. He had said as much to her this morning on the drive down and she knew he was only half joking. But Jenny wasn't afraid of the old place anymore. She had seen and faced much worse in the last few weeks and had lived to tell the tale. Bloomfield held no fear for her and never would again.

Reece had begged her not to come of course, when Kapoors letter arrived. It was all strictly off the record, she was free to turn it down if she wished. Even after everything that had happened the authorities were more concerned with the fact that she and Bromlyn had led them to Willard's lair and ended his killing spree.

She was a heroine of sorts and you couldn't very well section a heroine, could you? It just wasn't done. Jenny knew the real reason. There had been a reluctance on the part of the police to dig too deeply into why She and Bromlyn had been at the Farmhouse that day, and they were more than happy to bury the uneasy questions the whole matter brought up. Everyone knew there was more to it than met the eye. But everyone, the police, even Reece were more than happy to leave that particularly tangled knot untied.

Reece had just been glad she was alive and had accepted everything unconditionally as the price he happily paid just to have her back, alive and more than willing to tell him out loud on a daily basis just how much she loved him. Jenny knew she would tell him everything one day, what had driven her and Bromlyn up to New Hadley. But that day was a distant dot on the horizon just now.

Jenny stretched her arms out and yawned and this instantly made her wince, she could feel the legion of stitches in her arm pull at the action. She looked down at the bandage on her wrist and was relieved to see no blood seeping through the material.

Jenny touched each one of her fingers against the thumb on her hand just to reassure herself that there was no tendon damage. The Butcher's cut had been deep, nicked the artery, but there would be no lasting damage the doctor had told her. Just another scar to add to her collection.

Her mind instantly flashed back with almost painful clarity to the Butcher's body, the way he had displayed his own scars to her with something a kin to pride. He had clearly thought their shared passion for self-mutilation had given them a sick kind of affinity, and in a twisted way he was right. Because hadn't it been that link between them that had ultimately saved Jenny's life?

She shuddered, remembering that cold look in his eyes. What in a person's life could turn them into such a monster? No, not monster, that was too simplistic, society's way of dismissing such behavior. Evil was something that every human was capable of, history was testament to that. But God forbid we should look too closely at our own desires and fantasies. Better to label the creature that actually chose to act out such feelings as evil, a monster.

Inhuman? All too human more like. We have a half a dozen adjectives to hand in such circumstances when needed to distance ourselves from the 'monsters' out there.

Not that any of that mattered to Jenny. She had popped up for a brief cameo in the horror movie that had been Arthur Willard's strange life. Just in time for the end credits. So what did it really matter what made his mind tick just slightly out of time? He was gone, at peace. A peace that he now shared with his once tormented victims, of that Jenny was sure.

She didn't begrudge him that, she felt it too, and so did Bromlyn. Jenny had only seen Bromlyn briefly during the madness of the last few weeks, but it was written clearly on her face, and judging by the smile and slightest of nods she had given Jenny, it was there in Jenny's face too. A peace they had both earned.

And also without any prompting they had both stuck to their hastily authored alibi that they were hiking to clear their head and had stumbled across the farm house and seen the Butcher dragging the body inside. Jenny thought it was a pretty thin one, but the Police seemed only too ready to accept it without too many awkward questions. After all the facts were plain to see, the Butcher was unmasked, his victims discovered and had now all be identified and laid to rest properly.

This brought her back to why she had agreed to meet Kapoor. She was now officially free of Bloomfield. But she still felt like she owed the old Doc' some kind of closure in all this. Judging by the amount of papers and files he had accumulated on the case he had spent the time since she had been rushed to hospital and survived (thank you Bromlyn Richards and a vaguely remembered pale faced village doctor.)

Apparently it had been touch and go for a while considering the massive amount of blood she had lost, but in the days and weeks that followed she had made what the hospital called a remarkable recovery. In that time Kapoor had clearly been obsessing over what had happened and his part in it all. He kept asking her how she was, instead of what he really wanted to know. How did you know they were hidden there, how did you know about the farmhouse?

She glanced around at him to see that he was comparing the photo of the table top with the photo of the farmhouse again. His kind face set in a frown of incomprehension. Just like Reece, Jenny knew she would tell him everything one day. Just not yet. Still she wanted to give him something.

"None of this was your fault, Doc." She told him. He shook his head almost unperceivably and shrugged. He looked so lost, Jenny found herself suddenly desperately missing the light hearted, totally in appropriate banter they had shared throughout the years.

"I want you to start coming back to see me, on a semi-regular basis." Kapoor finally said. "I know you don't have to, it's just..." His

voice trailed off.

“It’s just that you need answers,” she finished for him.

“Something like that.” He replied and turned his attention back to the photos on his desk. Jenny could see he was desperate to ask her about them, it was fair bursting out of him. He was like a lost soul who’s God; Science, had suddenly deserted him when he needed Him the most.

“There are some questions that just don’t have answers, Doc.” She said and came over to his desk. He pushed the two photos across it and turned them towards her. Jenny perched herself on the edge of his desk. She kept her gaze on his tortured face. She didn’t need or want to look at the pictures. She had more than enough reminders literally etched onto her own flesh for that.

“I can’t accept that, Jenny.” He said meeting her gaze. His face softened and tears came to his eyes. “But I’m glad you’re okay,” he said softly.

“And I am,” she reassured him.” She tapped the side of her head. “In here and out.”

He smiled, it lit up his weary face but couldn’t quite reach his eyes. “The police are calling you a hero,” he said.

She shrugged. “Yeah, well what do they know?” Jenny absently began to flex her damaged fingers. The fingernails were well on their way to growing back, but they still bothered her from time to time. She couldn’t help but glance at the photo of the table top on Kapoor’s desk as she did.

“I’m never coming back here, Doc.” She said with a brutal finality, and heard him take in a sharp intake of breath. “But I want you to always be a part of my life.” She added just as firmly. “And I expect to see you on a nauseatingly regular basis.”

“Except Thursdays,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

“Yeah, I remember, Poker night.”

She look down at him, tears were now streaming down his cheeks. "I love you." She told him. "You're not going to get rid of me that easily you old Quack."

"Good," he said. "And I'll tell you what, I won't even charge for house calls."

"Deal." She held out her hands and he gently took them. For the longest time they just looked at each other.

It could have been a full five minutes before Kapoor finally nodded towards the twin renditions of the Farmhouse of Horrors and asked. "Come on Drayton. What really happened here?"

One day, Jenny thought, one day and hopefully soon, but not today. Then an impish grin crossed her face and she winked at the Old Man. "Can't tell you that Doc," she said. "You'd think I was crazy."

E N D

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