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IVORY

Steve Merrifield

Awakening

Prologue

Phillip Mayhew surveyed London's buildings as they stretched out from beneath the crane cab into the grey haze of smog on the horizon. The site was at the heart of Camden where three high-rise blocks of flats had been demolished. The neglected and dated buildings had been cleared to make way for a smaller affordable housing development. He thought it a shame they would be low-rise and lose the arresting view that North London had to offer over the basin of the city and its landmarks; the skinny finger of the post office tower, the glittering glass gherkin and the group of skyscrapers around the obelisk of the Canada One building at Canary Wharf.

The crane's cab creaked in protest against a gust of wind that leaned heavily against it. The sway became a lurch as the winds strength built and it was several minutes before he felt the crane shift back into its centre as the current of air weakened. The floating-like motion didn't concern him since he had spent fifteen years working with cranes in his time in the building trade. As a labouring lad if there had been a crane on-site he would ask to go up it and if a foreman actually refused him he would sneak up anyway. That kind of mischief had got him suspended from sites for a few days, but he had taken his punishment of lost earnings like a man, and would then commit the same crime again if he had wanted to.

The days of being a labourer were far behind him now, but he still couldn't shake his love of being in the cab of a crane. As an architect he had even less reason to be up there than his crane stowaway

Ivory

days, but it was well known by those around him in his office that whenever he visited a site where one of his company's designs were being built, he had the quirk of giving a foreman a laugh or a coronary by asking to go up a crane. No one had any reason to suspect that today his motive for his visit was different.

Although his body lacked the energy of his youth and the climb had exhausted him, the experience had lost none of its appeal. It was a combination of things that drew him to the crane cabs, the view obviously – it didn't matter what area the site was in, the height always made for an awe inspiring panorama. The constant listing drift of the crane was how he imagined it would be as a bird suspended in a thermal updraft. There was also the sense of power through being in control of a giant arm that would reach down and lift heavy things from the ground and move them effortlessly around the site, like Zeus in the *Clash of the Titans* film moving people around like pawns. He laughed as he remembered fantasies he had as a lad of plucking miserable foremen up from the ground and depositing them high up on builds on exposed girders.

However, what had drawn him to the crane today was the solitude the cab gave him and the much needed sense of escaping the mess that he had made of his life. At that moment in that place – his cherished place – he experienced a comfort and a peace that he imagined faith would give to those that had it. He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and produced a dog-eared photograph of his wife Brenda and their three boys. He rubbed the corners, trying to smooth it out, but the creases were too deep. He couldn't fix it. Like the family in the picture – he couldn't fix what he had done.

The love he felt for the family in his hands sharpened his guilt into wicked barbs in his chest. He and his wife had planned their life well. In the early years they hadn't allowed their love for each other to distract them from their university courses, and they had made it through four years of living in different parts of the country while they studied. They then threw themselves into their respective jobs and getting themselves noticed by their employers. Once the money had been good enough they got married and bought a house and allowed themselves the luxury of a family, with the knowledge that they could

Ivory

give their children the good start in life they had both lacked themselves.

Over the thirty-five years they had known each other, Brenda had gained some weight to her face and her skin had lined in the delicate areas around her eyes and mouth, but she was still attractive and was all he had needed to fulfil his fantasies. He had the love of his wife, and his fantastic boys and he was a success in his job. That was supposed to be enough.

It had been enough. *Until he had seen the girl.*

He had never considered straying before – it was against his moral code. Yet he had. She was unusual in appearance but strangely attractive. Considering the probable thirty year age gap she would never have looked at him twice if she hadn't been a prostitute. Going to a prostitute was something else that he would never have considered, yet he had been to her many times now.

He had felt shame every time. It was an awful feeling. A feeling that he had wanted to cut out of him if he could, along with his sin, but his shame hadn't been potent enough to stop him paying for her again and again. The cancer of guilt had grown with every visit. He had no idea of the going rate for such services, but knew she was expensive. Even if she had cost less he had seen her every other day for months on end and he would still be facing the same financial crisis.

He had tried to stop himself, but she was beautiful. Even after the first month had destroyed his personal savings, he hadn't been able to stop himself squandering the family savings, money that had been reserved for his boy's education, their deposits on property and cars, and the nest egg for Brenda and himself in retirement. All gone on sex with a prostitute. Brenda was due an annual statement any time and his betrayal would be uncovered.

He stifled a sob. He hated himself. Yet that wasn't enough to stop him meeting the girl. He would make up for it. He would replace all the blood money he had wasted and his family would never know what he had used the savings for. He might even retain the love and respect of his wife and boys. He looked at the cityscape of north London. It was a powerful panorama that imbued him with inner strength. He felt more than the weak man he had become. He felt free.

Ivory

Like a bird. Like a Giant. Like a God. Like the young man that had craved this view throughout his dreams and achievement of love, family and success.

Clutching the photograph of his family he stepped out of the cab and plummeted. The air rushed over his body, pulling at his clothes like a thousand snatching hands. After this industrial accident the insurance pay-out would cover all his debts. He did it for Brenda, the girl who had lived next door to him as a child. The girl he had courted, the woman he had married. Did it for the babies he had cradled, the young men he had raised. He did it for his family. He crammed his mind with their faces and scenes from their life together like his own imagined heaven. They would be the last thing in his mind as he died. It would secure his link to them in the afterlife. Christmas's, births, birthdays, picnics, day trips.

A face filled his mind. It was a pale phantom of a face with blackness for eyes. The girl. The thoughts of his family scattered. He slammed against the concrete below and burst open. The last thing in his mind and heart was not his family, but his guilt.

Part One

*“Beauty is mysterious as well as terrible.
God and Devil are fighting there,
and the battlefield is the heart of man.”*

Fedor Dostoevsky

Chapter One

Dark bloated clouds swathed the night sky in a low crawling ceiling, haemorrhaging their substance over London, turning the dark grey streets into stretches of black glassy marble infused and splashed with the reflected lights and neon signs. Martin Roberts' Volvo estate hit a puddle with the impact of a hydroplane touching down, sending fans of silvery water into the air like wings. The lights of the streets were distorted by the vertical veins of rain and the watery pearls that twitched across the glass away from the direction of the car.

The outside world was a blur in Martin's peripheral senses, swept away by the trudging march of Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 in A that strained the speakers of his music system, blocking out the sound of rain rattling onto the roof and the hiss of the tires thrashing the puddles. The music's steady climb to its crescendo imitated the rage that was building from the red lights and busy junctions that seemed to conspire against Martin's need to get home and end his evening. The track came to its quiet close but instead of another pounding classic taking its place it was replaced by bouncy notes and saccharine voices – the Tweenies. One of the boys CD's had been left in the CD changer. Ditched by the powerful classic tracks his mood suddenly had nowhere to go, and he had been so enjoying his rage. Feeling passion instead of the constant mire of his underlying melancholy and frustration was a refreshing change.

There was a clear stretch on the Charing Cross road, the Tweenies would have to stay for the moment, he gripped the wheel and aimed his car at the night-time streets, and the Tweenies sang as he floored the accelerator and charged to gain some ground on his trek across the city. He had been forced to take an indirect route home due to the major water pipe and sewer restoration and replacement project taking place at various points across the city. The road works had forced drivers into unfamiliar territory, causing them to hesitate and change their minds and directions, snarling the roads with traffic even at this late hour. He slowed as he approached a Queue of glaring red eyed break lights. He had gained a couple of hundred metres. Hardly worth breaking the speed limit. Guilt soured his gut before being diluted

Ivory

within his stagnant reservoir of other unpleasant feelings. The journey and the nightmare driving conditions were the crown on a shitty day.

Martin stabbed a finger at the CD player and switched to the next classical CD and his red mood soared with Wagner's Valkyries. The point when the evening had become a write-off with his hopes strangled and his pride smothered, had been when the little wanker Richard Hadleigh won the award for best piece at the University Departmental Achievement Ceremony. The 'UDAC's' as they were called on the campus, were the universities equivalent of the Oscar's. The judges had said that Hadleigh's work 'Conveyed the artists struggle with repressed emotions and hidden desires'. It was a piece that had symbolised his 'coming out' in his second year at university.

Everyone knew Hadleigh was a raving woofter. It wasn't a secret, it wasn't even something many people batted an eyelid at these days. It was almost fashionable. The amount of lads that he had seen hanging from Hadleigh or locked to his face over the last three years didn't seem much of a 'struggle'.

The cars burst of speed was halted as he reached Oxford Street and even though the lights were in his favour, he was forced to inch himself across the streets traffic. This award meant that Hadleigh had won the Universities Art prize two years running, which was a rare event that had only been achieved by Martin himself. Martin's second win had been in Hadleigh's first year at the University, after which they had met and forged a relationship of mutual admiration; Martin for Hadleigh's developing talent and passion and Hadleigh for Martin's generous teaching of his own honed skills. Their needs had been mutually met within the role of student and teacher. It had come just when Martin had first sense his creativity being stifled from a long tenure as lecturer, and Hadleigh's passion had been infectious. Their shared bond through canvas acrylics and oil had been broken when Hadleigh defected to sculpture. A sudden and mysterious coup that had left Martin without a protégé.

A route-master bus lurched out in front of him, belligerently ignorant of Martin's existence and right of way, causing him to suddenly punch his breaks, leaving him with his heart in his throat from the narrowly avoided collision. Scantly clad girls hung out of the rear

Ivory

door, one of them waved a bottle of champagne at him. A hen-night hiring. That meant the bus that was now ahead of him on Tottenham Court Road would be a fixture in his view and an obstacle until their paths diverged.

Martin was an artist. A painter. A *traditional* artist. He didn't understand sculpture – especially metal work. He could become one with the paint and command it with a subtlety or a passion most canvases were not fortunate enough to be graced with. In the past he had created portraits with a photographic realism that had captured life and emotion, and landscapes swept in bold strokes that emphasised their drama. Sculpture could compliment its subject and be both beautiful and inspiring of emotion, but its tangible reality in the three-dimensional world had a brutality and force that Martin struggled with. Hadleigh's work in metal sheeting and salvaged machine parts was not what Martin considered being sculpture, it heralded from a school of art that Martin could not reconcile himself with: where a stack of bricks or some frozen animal halved and suspended in formaldehyde could be regarded as art. It was the Emperor's new clothes of the art world.

The lights were out at Euston Road and he pushed the nose of his car hesitantly forward trying to measure the approaching gaps in traffic to see if he could risk pulling out onto the road. The sudden loss of the flattering draw on Martin's knowledge and Martin's talent being the focus for another's inspiration, and the sense that his opinion and approval were needed to validate Hadleigh's success, had caused the smouldering embers of Martin's creativity to cool, and his talent had gone into remission. He found himself in a state of impotence. He had tried his best to resurrect his muse, working all year in his loft studio, mixing subtle hues and vibrantly skilful strokes to create life like some gothic necromancer. Yet what he had created had been a Frankenstein's bastardisation of his previous works. An imitation of his past glory that wasn't strong enough to sustain a soul of its own. He could, and would, blame Hadleigh but it was a demise that had only been delayed by his brief work with his student. Martin was losing his art. For that reason, Martin hadn't deserved to win the award.

Martin slammed his foot on the accelerator and lurched into a gap on a spray of surf. He held his breath as the headlights of the Mini

Ivory

Cooper he had cut across filled the car and blazed angrily in his rear view mirror. When there was no shunt from a collision he puffed out a breath he hadn't realised he had been holding. He needed to calm down, although he was definitely not going to put the Tweenies back on to help him.

He was a son, a head of department, a teacher, a husband and a father, and each of these roles conspired against him with their own conflicting demands and responsibilities and drained his creativity. With the lack of his art, he was increasingly believing that he was an intellectual hypocrite in his role as art lecturer and head of the art department since he was teaching to create from the soul and from the passion within when his own were so diminished he barely had enough to sustain him his wife and his children. As hard as he found it difficult to accept he found that his family were equally as unsatisfying to him. His life was not how he had expected his life to be, although if he were asked to imagine the details of what he had wanted his life to be like he wouldn't have been able to answer, all he had ever wanted was his art and to be a master of it. He often struggled to understand how this life had even come about.

At the corner of the British Library the traffic lights amber winked out and a red light burned in its place. He cursed and slammed his foot on the break. The stream of traffic on the Euston Road tauntingly left him behind. Life, which for Martin was family and love, was meant to influence his art, and his job was meant to fund his life. Stripped back to basics they were relationships of necessity; symbiotic. Yet his family and his job were also distractions that drained his resources, creatively and financially, and without his art they seemed without function.

A green light allowed him to resume his journey, but the resentment generated from his reflection caused him to lose patience with the main roads, his thick fingers, whitened by their grip, yanked the wheel to one side and turned the car sharply off the Euston Road and into a side road. He hadn't travelled these roads for some time and he was sure their layout may have changed since the St Pancras developments but he hoped to weave through the streets more as the crow might fly rather than the intended express of the main roads. He

Ivory

took road after road and was as uncertain of the direction he was taking on these back roads as he was in life generally. At the age of forty-three he expected to be settled and taking life in comfortable strides, not stumbling and looking back unsure what had tripped him.

The car continued its journey into a residential area and on a whim he pulled into a narrow street. Most of its streetlights were out and the shadowy houses crowded in on him. Some had the odd light on behind curtains, but most of them were dark. The occupants asleep or judging by the houses rundown condition the houses were abandoned. The light from his headlights kept the darkness ahead of him, and hollowed the shadow out of the road, the rain falling in constant dizzying glitter in the beams. Suddenly his lights pulled something stark white from the dark road ahead like a ghost suddenly made manifest. There was a sharp noise, the sound of a thousand voices screaming out before being cut short by the crunch of metal and splintering glass. Martin lost sight of the road as he was thrown forward from breaking and yanked back in place by the tension of his seat belt. The white shape had gone and the light from his headlights had returned to picking raindrops out of the dark before the now stationary car.

Martin found an uncomfortable rigidity in his leg and relaxed his foot from pressing the brake-peddle to the floor. He still held the wheel, but the anger that had crushed his fingers to it had gone. His hands fell trembling into his lap and he sank back into the seat. With a faltering hand he clicked the stereo off and thanked fuck that the kids hadn't been in the car.

He didn't know what had happened. A man in an alley-way parallel to the car seemed caught mid motion, poised in a pose of running, before he turned on his heels and disappeared into the alley. Without the stereo the only sounds were the idle of the engine, the squeak of his windscreen wipers swiping mechanically back and forth shunting the rain from his vision, and the drum of a thousand fingers on his roof and buckled bonnet as the rain rattled down.

The bonnet was crumpled. He had hit something, yet there was no car, no motorbike, there was nothing before him that could have caused the collision. A bollard? One of those wrought iron posts made

Ivory

to look like a cannon. That would easily have caused the damage, but it wouldn't have been in the middle of the road.

His heart joined the sounds in the interior of his car, drummed into the tempo of the falling rain, each quickened quivering beat launched an unbearably debilitating shiver of anxiety through his nerves. He remembered that his headlights had caught something. The bonnet was buckled. He had hit some-*thing*. The bonnet was buckled.

The rain drummed.

The wipers swayed.

His heart pounded.

He remembered the blur in his headlights.

It had hands that had risen up in defence. It had had a white face.

He had hit some-*one*.

The perceptions of headlights, the rain, the wipers, the tick of the cooling engine, the tremble of his hands, the echo of his heart all clambered around his head, then scattered away from a pale hand that reached up from before the car and slammed onto the bonnet.

The slender feminine hand spread palm-flat, the fingers working and probing to gain some purchase. His tongue trembled in his slack mouth. His heart's uncertain beat in his throat. The hand tensed, as if bracing against dragging its body upright and back to its feet, then slid on the slick surface and abruptly disappeared back over the edge out of sight.

Chapter Two

The light from his headlights reflected from the narrow corridor of parked cars and picked out the overbearing walls of the canyon of houses that reached up into the night around him. The shifting silver grain of the rain gave the world beyond the windscreen the quality of a scratchy black and white film playing out. The dark shape of a man ran and stopped in the mouth of an alley in the terrace, but Martin was distracted from registering his details by the girl that fled from that direction. The girl darted into the road so suddenly that by the time Martin had turned his head to catch sight of her again she was framed in his headlights. It was strange that he could see it so clearly in his memory, yet hadn't had time to realise what had happened when it had actually occurred. He had hit the girl at forty-miles an hour in a thirty-zone with a hulking Volvo estate.

The tyres had gripped at the road and surfed the rain wash before biting the tarmac in a screeching slide that had joined another sound. A choral sound of infantile voices wailed then abruptly ceased as his bonnet crumpled with a cacophonous crunch and the car slammed to a halt. The howl had been unnatural, but then all the noises that played back to him from that moment frightened him with their intensity and their unexpectedness.

Martin sat in his car for what seemed like an eternity. The man that had been in the alley, who in Martin's memory had been part of the same body of movement as the girl, was gone and had not returned. A weight suddenly lifted from him and all the detail of his world came flooding back around him as the cloying treacle movement of shock time dissipated into the vividness and urgency of real time. Martin prayed it hadn't taken him the length of time it seemed to have taken for him to react. He wanted to think that if someone's life hung in the balance, after the shock and the consideration of driving off, he would make every second of that time count.

He popped his seatbelt, flung his door open and hauled his considerable weight out of the seat. After the stuffiness of the car the rain was like needles of ice on his face and neck and soaked his white dress shirt to his sweat clammy body with the shock of a cold compress.

Ivory

He rounded the broad front of the vehicle and crouched at his victim's side with a sickening nausea in his belly. The girl was sprawled before the car on the gritty tarmac that had been washed into a textured glass by the fall of rain. He whined a noise that he had never heard himself make and swore at the world.

Her pose looked painfully uncomfortable. Her arms and legs had been thrown into unnatural disarray from the impact. The front of the car stood poised over her fragile form, the bumper buckled in, the bonnet curled up like a lip snarled to bare the ragged teeth of its shattered radiator grille. The car was just a foot away from being parked on top of her body. The headlights poured over her dispassionately with their glaring white eyes, lighting her white skin and clothes into an overexposed whiteness.

She was luminous in the light except for the dark marks where she had been dirtied from her rag-doll roll along the road, and the blood that was lit into brilliant scarlet against the white of her flesh. It was like blood on snow. Martin dialled for an ambulance on his mobile phone and crouched between her and the lights to shield her from their glare. In the shade of his bulk the colour of her blood lost its vividness, yet her hair and skin maintained its unnatural whiteness.

Her eyelids twitched the smallest of movements.

Speaking on the phone, panting against his fear, he reached out a hand that trembled with shock and the bitter cold of being soaked on a November evening, and shielded her face from the rain. It could easily have been the fall of the rain drops that had given the impression of her eyelids moving, but he preyed to a God he didn't believe in that they had moved by themselves. That she was indeed still alive. That he hadn't killed her.

Her eyes flicked open with the suddenness of a trap being sprung.

He fell onto his rear in shock but was instantly sobered by the soaking chill of the ground. He repeated himself on the phone to the operator after a cry had made his last statement unintelligible and he returned to his haunches. The movement of her eyelids had startled him but it was the sight of her eyes that had toppled him.

Ivory

The rain had driven the lids shut again and he questioned what he had seen. Giving a shaken approximation of his location to the robotic sounding operator he knelt forward, not caring that the slurry of rain water on the road was soaking him. He shielded her eyes again and they reopened.

Her eyes were as black as jet and made more striking by the white eyelids that framed them. There was no coloured iris, no white of sclera, seemingly just yawning ciliary muscles leaving only pupils with the draw of black holes contained behind each lid.

Ivory had been taken to the University College Hospital, a modern glass building opposite the gothic orange brick Victorian façade of St Pancras. It was a place that Martin was familiar with having two boys. He sat with his head in his hands and stared down into the glassy black surface of a cup of coffee. He had bought it from the department's vending machine, but it was too hot to hold let alone drink. He had bought a Mars bar too, more for comfort than for hunger, but he hadn't eaten it. It was in his pocket, he didn't want to be seen satiating his needs in these circumstances. He wanted to get out of there and escape, he thought of King's Cross with its Platform 9¾ with the baggage trolley half-way through a wall on it's way to the train to Hogwart's. Finley had made him take him there countless times in the hope of spotting one of his favourite characters. Martin liked the idea of having a magical escape route, and not just tonight.

The polystyrene cup sat on the scuffed linoleum floor at his feet, staring back up at him with its well of black like one of the girl's eyes. Those fully black eyes. What did it mean? Had she been on drugs? He had heard one of the nurse's whisper 'brain damage'. There was no way of knowing for sure at the moment.

The ambulance staff had found a medical bracelet on her wrist. Beneath a black caduceus symbol and engraved statement that declared that it was the patient's wish not to receive any medical examination or treatment whatsoever. There was a phone number that was to be called in case of emergency, and this had been done. Although this had made it difficult for the hospital staff to determine the extent of her injuries, the attending doctor had ruled that the patient's wishes were to be respected

Ivory

and she would not receive an x-ray or even a stitch. Besides a nasty gash to her head, which had looked to Martin as if it really could do with a stitch, and some other grazes and bruises she had seemingly escaped serious injury. She was apparently responsive to a certain degree, with shakes and nods of her head to questions and suggested examinations and treatments. That had to rule out brain damage. Could her eyes really be like that naturally?

She was now sleeping off the shock within a curtained cubicle ahead of him, although the nurses were convinced that she was feigning sleep. The staff had found that the pockets of her three-quarter length white Mackintosh coat had contained a supply of condoms and a fat roll of money. There had been a business card printed with the word 'EBONY' with a mobile phone number beneath it. Martin had heard a nurse say the number on the card matched the one on the medical bracelet, and in response a nurse had mouthed, 'Pimp?' It struck Martin as strange that a pimp would take such responsibility for her care. Perhaps she was an illegal immigrant and her pimp wanted to ensure that she didn't get caught or escape him through an accident such as this.

He struggled to accept that she was a prostitute. Curiously it didn't alter her allure. Her startlingly white hair and skin and her contrasting black eyes were strangely engaging. He wondered whether it was the peculiarity of her appearance that attracted the porters, nurses and doctors to her side on what appeared to be a busy night for the A&E department.

Martin's police questioning was already out of the way. He was relieved he hadn't been drinking. He didn't understand why the police had kept asking about a second vehicle, and was unsure exactly how many points he would gain on his license, or whether the police were going to charge him for dangerous driving. When the girl had recovered they would take her statement to see if her version of events corroborated with Martin's explanation that she had run out in front of the car. If their stories didn't match then the police would investigate the scene to determine his speed.

The girl had yet to speak. When the discomfort or pain from the nurses handling of her overcame the resistance of her pretend sleep she

Ivory

would shake or nod her head to questions. One of the nurses surmised that she was foreign and couldn't speak English, and that fitted with Martin's assumption that she was an illegal sex worker, maybe trafficked. He had half-watched a *Panorama* documentary on it whilst painting. Another nurse had suggested that to keep silent against the pain she must be experiencing from her injuries she had to be a mute. If that were the case then he didn't understand what had caused the sharp ululation that had seemed to be formed from more than one voice when he had run her down. He had never imagined tyres on tarmac could make such a human, full of terror and defiance, as if the world cried out in grief and outrage at her being struck down.

The girl was clearly still in her teens, but the taboo freshness of her youth was saved from being a vulgar guilty attraction by her classical beauty, for with her eyes closed she had the poised majesty of any sculpted Greek or Roman face that he had studied in the British museum. He was unsure whether it was her young age, her abhorrent job, her current situation, the innocence that seemed to cling to her, or a combination of all these that drew upon his sympathy. He took it as a point against society that it had turned perfection into a whore, and corrupted such a rarity as beauty into something that could be bought and used to satisfy ones needs. He found some consolation in the fact that those that used her would do so within some guilty dirty secret that could only sully their experience, and they could 'have' her but never own her. He caught his own naivety; her pimp *owned* her.

The painfully skinny and scruffy young male nurse that Martin had relayed the incident to before the police had arrived, studied him with a look of curiosity and disbelief. He stalked over to Martin, a scarecrow in a tunic.

"I think you're all finished here."

Martin stood and rubbed his closely cropped ginger beard as he considered what he was going to ask from the nurse, knowing that he was going to push his luck. "If you don't mind, I would like to see her."

There was the briefest twitch of the man's long but sparse eye brows. "I don't think that's appropriate, do you?" He suddenly wore a fixed smile. "You have shown your concern by staying around. I am sure it's been noted."

Ivory

In the fantasy world that he only dared to play out in his head he punched the cynical nurse to the floor. “Seriously, I just want to see that she’s okay.”

“So would we, but considering she would only let us clean her up a little, even we don’t know how she is. And once her next of kin collects her I doubt we will be seeing her for a follow up exam.”

That idea made him want to see her even more. Martin sighed. “I just want to apologise to her. She deserves that at least. I want to let her know that I care that this has happened and that I didn’t just leave her.” The nurse gave an exaggerated nod, Martin was sure the nurse wanted to accompany the gesture with a roll of his eyes as he readied himself to reject the request. “Look if you’re worried I might put pressure on her to corroborate my story or that I might *bribe* her in some way then stand in the cubicle with me. I am not ashamed of someone seeing my guilt. If I *did* want to bribe her or intimidate her then I could sneak back later. Hospitals aren’t known for their security, you know.” Martin huffed a half-laugh, trying to make himself sound reasonable. “Besides it looks like she earns more in a night than I earn in a week. I don’t think what I could offer her would sway her when she can probably quite rightly sue my arse off.” He hadn’t thought of that until he had said and hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

The nurse did roll his eyes now as he motioned Martin towards the cubicle, as if Martin was going to give him cause for regret. The nurse made a triangular parting in the curtain and poked a thumb over his shoulder. “In you go then.”

Martin jogged the few paces to the curtain, but was stopped by the nurse holding up a cautioning hand. “You’re good at making a reasoned point but you might want to remember that she might forgive you in there, but I sincerely doubt her ‘next of kin’ will. Personally I would not hang around for him to arrive.”

Martin’s guts chilled and loosened and a sense of urgency overtook him. He stepped hastily beyond the curtain, he would have to make this quick – he didn’t relish the idea of that encounter.

He was confronted with his victim.

The bare strip lighting lit her flesh, less than his car headlights had, but her skin and hair still held a strikingly brilliant luminescence.

Ivory

Her eyes were closed. Martin approached the bed with a quietened step and measured pace. He realised there was a reverence in his step that he hadn't felt since the days when he had followed his father up to the altar in church. He had abandoned his father's catholic faith in his teens mainly because he was an atheist but also because it hurt his father. The powerful architecture of 'God's' houses of stone and coloured glass, and the magical ritual thrall of the Eucharist had always created awe within him, and he felt that same awe now. He threw a conscious look at the nurse who stood watch over him, but found that the nurse's attention had been drawn in on the sleeping girl.

Martin rested his hands on the raised chrome cot sides in the same way his father had done with the brass rail around the Holy Mother to support him as he dipped down to one knee and genuflected, it was ridiculous that the moment seemed to conjure the memory of such a gesture. He struggled with a need to laugh at the connections his mind was making, especially now he had no God, but all thought of laughter was banished as he realised the blue and purple bruising on one side of her face and a puckered crimson break in her skin that ran across half her forehead above one eye. Martin stole himself against the realisation that he could have been staring at a corpse – and it would have been his fault. He clenched his hands against a tremor of guilt, which quickly became a start as her gently rested eyes flicked open. Then there was fear as her obsidian eyes stared into him.

Faced with the precipice of the deep fall into her eyes, memories were conjured of how he had felt as a child when his father had told him that God was not only watching over him but could see *into* him, and all his sins were made bare. Martin felt shame before those black eyes, but it wasn't the child's guilt for touching himself and thinking about Lilly Mcgreggor round the corner or Mrs Jenkins tight fitting blouse, as an adult it was shame for driving angry and for not seeing the poor girl in time.

"I'm sorry..." his voice quavered. "I didn't see you..."

Her black raven stare fluttered as she blinked several times in close succession as his words seem to bring her around to some level of consciousness. Her head turned a little towards him and her pale lips blushed with the faintest hint of pink, seemingly delicate like petals,

Ivory

parted into a thin fragile smile. He was so surprised that she might smile at him the gesture had an intimate quality. Curiously she did seem genuinely warmed by the apology and pleased to see him. Then he remembered the man in the alley. Perhaps he had saved her from something worse than a car accident tonight. The man had seemed to be chasing her.

This unexpected reaction to Martin's presence appeared to cause the nurse to shift uncomfortably from one foot to the other. He didn't understand the discomfort the young man seemed to experience from this smile being aimed at Martin. Surely the gesture exonerated him in some small way. Something blossomed in his stomach in response to that smile. Something he didn't recognise. It was warm and light, yet dense like candy floss.

The curtain was swept aside and Martin and the nurse both spun guiltily on their heels.

A large black man filled the opening that had been made. A large winter coat covered his broad barrel of a chest and dropped to just below his knee, giving him the impression of an immovable and imposing monolith. The oversized thick lapels were fastened close to his neck making his round head appearance like a boulder balanced on his shoulders. His face was chiselled with a hard scowl of brooding determination. Jet dark curls of wiry hair clung neatly to his head like moss with a rich weave of greys and silvers. His eyes squinted closed. He brandished a long piece of intricately carved wood before him. It was too long and thick to be a cane and too short to be a staff. He held it in a commanding grip that angled the wood down to the floor without allowing it to come into contact with it. He held a worn and antiquated black leather Gladstone bag in the other hand.

Martin swallowed against the constriction of his throat. He was thankful that the nurse broke the silence as he was sure he wouldn't find his own voice. The young nurse's objection to the man's presence started strong, having been startled by the large man, but it began to trail off as he realised who the man was.

The black man's face darkened, creasing around his words and gathering shadows under the harsh lighting as he spoke. His voice was deep, arrestingly commanding and well articulated, and he possessed a

Ivory

curiously haunting undulating dialect that Martin considered to be a mix of French and German. “I am fully aware this is a private area, and yes; I am looking for someone, but it appears that my search is now o-ver.” The authority the man possessed was chilling.

The nurse and Martin looked to the girl, whose smile was suddenly more definite and flickered with life. Not the greeting Martin was expecting her to have for her pimp. He experienced a twinge of jealousy that was both unexpected and uncomfortable in its clarity and its inappropriateness.

A tight smile briefly softened the black man’s features in response to her smile, several gold teeth winked among his yellowing originals. “She is my ward,” the man announced precisely. The smile dissolved and his fierceness returned. He pressed the point of his staff onto the floor and rested both hands on its flat head, posturing behind the claim. “I have come to take her home.” His shuttered eyes flickered and flashed the whites of his eyes as if there was a building power within his head that culminated in his eyes snapping fully open. Martin found the force of the man’s statement emboldened by two blank white eyes staring into him.

Ivory

Martin had returned to his vigil outside the cubicle. The coffee in his trembling hands had cooled but was too bitter to be enjoyable. The Mars bar in his pocket had become more appealing, and he wanted nothing more than to cram it in his mouth and devour it, but he didn't know if the black man would want to talk to him again. The man had asked to be alone with the girl, the girl who now had a name, 'Ivory'.

Martin could see why he called her that, but it couldn't be her real name. It had to be her 'street' name – if there was such a thing. The blind black man called himself 'Ebony': 'Ebony and Ivory'... Martin strangled a laugh at the absurdity of it. It wasn't that funny but he needed a reason to laugh tonight. He knew the humour that ached to be free was relief that the girl wasn't hideously maimed and disfigured, disabled or dead, and that she didn't seem full of hatred for him – although he was sure he had misread the smile she had sent him. He was also relieved that Ebony had restrained any ire and not revealed any intention to knife him or shoot him, that neither the girl nor the pimp were interested in the nurse's insistence that they contact the police regarding Ivory's statement about the accident. When the nurse had looked at Martin after this exchange there had been a look of disappointment on his face. Little shit.

The curtain around Ivory's bed snapped open and the man called Ebony stood facing Martin but stared through him with blinkered slits of white while talking to a nurse Martin hadn't noticed entering that area. "I have looked after the girl for all her existence."

At first Martin thought he was making the statement to him and he had stumbled over how to reply until Ebony's voice whip cracked the air again, the peaks of his voice cut as precisely as a scalpel blade while the lows were as soft and gentle as silk. "I believe *I* am *capable* of deciding whether or *not* she is *fit* to travel." He stalked forward, with his staff held before him like some totem of power or status. The girl emerged from his silhouette like a sun reborn from an eclipse. She was standing and walking with apparent ease, and this startled Martin. Surely she would need to stay overnight?

The girl snaked an arm through Ebony's and despite being blind, he lead the way with a determined step, his long coat swept out from his

Ivory

body and gave the appearance that he was gliding. Martin was arrested by her black glossy eyes that were fixed upon Martin as she walked with Ebony in his direction. In seconds her route took her past and beyond him to the doors. She turned her head a fraction, the slightest of movements, and her petal lips blossomed once more for him. A ‘thank you’?

Then she was gone.

That was it.

Gone.

Strangely he felt bereft. As if her leaving had dragged his insides after her. That was it. The encounter was over. He found himself sitting, weakened by the moment being over, the experience passed. The night had been an exhausting rollercoaster for his emotions, with the exhilarating climb of his anger followed by the plummeting despair of fear and guilt from the accident, and then that strange warm feeling inside him that he normally only found after a cup of tea and a pastry or a chocolate bar. There was also the discomfort and dissatisfaction that her absence created within him.

Chapter Three

The car had been undriveable and Martin had arranged for it to be towed away, Jenny couldn't have left the kids to come and collect him in their Ford Focus estate, so he made his way back home to Finsbury Park by cab. He pressed the money into the drivers hand and left him to keep the little change that would be left from the fare. He stood before the dark edifice of his home. It had been a stressful place to be lately, they had a busy life as it was with the kids and their little friends needing ferrying about to and thro after school and at weekends but Peter his father-in law had had a heart attack three weeks ago and they had been driving to the hospital in Suffolk every other night so that Jenny could be with him and her mother. Thankfully he had recovered well and was home now and the normal chaos and demands of family life had returned. He couldn't wait to get in and close the door on the night.

He dead locked the door and planted his keys home on the flat top of the stairs newel post. The hall was dark except for a strip of light that filtered through the part open door to the back room. He could tell by the volume of light that it was coming from the standard lamp, and that Jenny would be in her armchair beneath it with a book in her lap that she wasn't really reading for the worry. He had text her that he had hit someone with the car and she had wanted him to call her, but he didn't want to have to deal with her angst on top of his own and he sent her updates by text. He would have to recall all the events to her now. The thought of having to revisit it all depressed him. He just wanted to have a drink and something to eat and go to bed. He decided that he wouldn't tell her that the girl he had hit was a prostitute, or about her strange appearance.

He pushed the door open and peered in to the room. Jenny was sitting in her chair under the standard lamp, leaning out from her chair like a cat alerted to a noise and poised to spring to life, her book closed in her hand with a finger hooked into the pages to keep her place.

"It is you. I thought one of the boys had come down again."

"Hi." Martin said gently. He tried a reassuring smile but he wasn't sure how it looked from the outside.

Ivory

She dumped the book on the side table and jumped up to him and threw her arms around him. He did the same back although he didn't feel the need to. A hug wasn't going to change what had happened, and it was getting between him and a desperately needed cup of tea and a sugar fix.

"I was so worried," she said into his chest.

"I told you not to. I'm fine. And as far as I know the girl is okay too."

"You were so lucky."

He really, *really*, didn't need to be told that. He had been saying it to himself enough, and it always led into thinking about how badly it could have turned out and how close he had come to killing someone that the guilt was tangible. "I know." He shifted his hands to her face and moved her away from his body for a kiss. She looked pale and drawn with worry. It made her look old. He kissed her then ran his hands down to the tops of her arms. He had successfully broken the hug and held her away from him. "Even if I had been driving under the speed limit instead of on it I still would have hit her. She just ran out of nowhere."

"Awful."

It was more awful that he had been speeding but he couldn't face Jenny's ire at his stupidity on top of his own self-criticism. "Yup. It was pretty much the finale of the evening. Oh, and I'm pretty sure the car is a write-off." He moved around her, back into the hall and then into the kitchen. He went straight to the kettle, offered to make Jenny a drink that she turned down, and went about making himself a tea. He nodded to a cluster of coloured sheets and a crudely fashioned trophy on the breakfast table. "What's all that?"

Jenny scrunched her eyes and shook her head as if trying to shrug an annoying fly from her nose. "Oh, it was Oscar and Fin they made you a few things to cheer you up after not winning." She held up two coloured sheets of paper painted with even more colours. "They are your very own UDAC certificates congratulating you on how amazing you are, and your very own prize-winning cup." She pointed at the trophy made from things he recognised from the recycling bin. "I would advise looking and not touching though." She flashed her hands to show

Ivory

palms and fingers as gold as the trophy. “Not sure whether the paint they used is going to dry or not.”

He felt a suitable tug on his heart strings at the cuteness of the gesture but nothing could console him from losing. “That’s really nice.” He blew on his tea.

“Well, how are you?”

He rummaged through the breadbin. He knew that she was now asking about the UDAC’s. He was angry that the accident had stolen the focus from the awards night, but felt guilty for thinking feeling that way. It was hard to demand people acknowledge his pain when he had traumatized someone else by nearly killing them, but losing tonight was like proving a point that he had been trying to make for some time. For six months he had been struggling to paint with any conviction of talent and he had told everyone around him that he was failing, that his work was rubbish, and that he wouldn’t get a UDAC this year. Maybe tonight would finally convince all those that had smothered him with platitudes. Tonight he was a failure. “Shattered.” It was the only answer he could manage but it summed up how he felt physically and emotionally after months of preparing to lose. He plucked a yum yum from a packet and took a hearty bite and chased it with a sup of tea. It felt hot sweet and doughy in his mouth. Comforting.

Jenny closed on him and placed her hands on his belly. “I’m really sorry it didn’t work out.”

“Not as sorry as I am.”

“I was gutted when you text me the news. I just wanted to be with you.”

He felt a bruise of guilt for not letting her go. “I know.” Maybe he should have let her come tonight. He wouldn’t have been driving in one of his rages then.

“Did you speak to Richard?”

Martin took another bite and sip and shook his head. Thankfully Hadleigh had been surrounded by congratulators after winning. Martin had caught his eye when he was sure he couldn’t get away from the crowd and gave him a nod of recognition and a gesture of applause that saved Martin from actually having to talk to him.

“Did he deserve to win?”

Ivory

It was a strange question for Jenny to ask and a difficult one to answer. He didn't like sculpture in metal, but the piece entitled '*square peg*' had an aesthetic to it. It was a large sphere of oxidised Iron with one hemisphere being ripped open from within by an emerging cube of polished steel mesh. Within this cube was a white plastic sphere that lit up every three minutes, starting with a soft orange glow that built into a brighter more vivid colour. It's brightness distracted the eye from the mesh case it sat within and lit up the inside of the large sphere that it emerged from, revealing that the sphere's interior surface was lined with rusted bolts, nails, hooks, razors and barbed wire.

Martin pulled out the small business card that described the piece. He had arranged that every piece on show by the art department had cards printed for people to take and deliberate over as they looked the item over. " 'It is about 'coming out' as different in a world that can be cruel to non-conformists, and how if given time the '*square peg*' can be seen as something else; something acceptable.' I know I hate sculpture but the piece did actually say what is printed on that card. It was good. It was personal, it spoke to the people that viewed it, and it made a comment on society that the individual could relate to, it evoked sympathy and empathy. Everything that my work did not." During her own private viewing Jenny had carefully and sensitively suggested that Martin's entry had lacked these points. She stared at the darkness outside the kitchen window as he fed them back to her.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You're an art critic. I value an honest educated opinion over the desperate clichéd positivity of fawning apologist friends." He popped the last of the yum yum in his mouth.

"This is really getting to you isn't it?"

She had lived with him for the last six months, he didn't need to answer.

"Honey, you have a good job, you're a dad with kids that love you, you have a nice home, and you're married to a wife that loves you to bits." She bopped her pelvis against his, except his stomach stopped it a foot short of his groin and was a reminder of how out of shape he now was. He regretted the Mars bar he had scoffed in the cab and the yum yum he had just eaten.

Ivory

She kissed him again. “You’re a good kisser.” She ran her fingers through his waves of hair and traced them down his neck, causing him to flinch as they tickled their way down to his shoulder and then his collar bone. “You’re a good lov-er,” she said huskily in a mock-sexy voice.

“Not now. For Christ’s sake.” Of all times. Not now. Feeling like a loser

“When is a good time?” She snapped.

She stood before him with her chestnut hair hanging untidily about her face where it had slipped out of her crude ponytail, and any suggestion of shape or form to her body was smothered by the old baggy and tatty jumper that served as her housecoat when she slouched over the ironing, cleaned the toilet or did the cooking. She had hardly put much effort into a seduction attempt. A quick fuck wasn’t going to make everything better. He didn’t want to have to switch off his feelings to meet her needs.

“Clearly not when I have fucked up twice in one night!”

One of the boys called down with a whiny voice and Martin swore at himself for shouting and waking him.

Jenny held both thumbs up and flashed him a fake smile. “Score. Now you have made it a hat trick.” She backed away to the door, heading to the crying from upstairs. “You’re hardly ever here emotionally.” She whispered. “I was just trying to find a way to connect.”

“Very opportunist of you.” He bit back.

“Someone has to seize the moment and take the initiative. It sure as hell won’t be you.”

“Okay, next time your father has a heart attack I will give you a quickie on top of the tumble fucking dryer.” He hissed at her as quietly as his rising anger would allow.

She stormed off up the stairs with tears in her eyes. He slammed the breadbin lid against the wall, snatched another Yum Yum from the packet and shoved it whole into his mouth and gnashed bitterly at it, swallowing with self-loathing.

Chapter Four

Phil McDonald stood with one hand on his hip and the forefinger of his other hand pressed to lips pursed in contemplation. He studied the large canvas that dominated one end of Martin's studio classroom that held the picture that had failed to impress the judges the night before. Martin rolled his wedding band around his ring finger. The band had thinned after twenty years. Strangely it was symbolic of how he and his marriage had both worn each other down over time. Jenny re-plated hers every year, kept it flawless and in shape.

"It *is* a good piece," Phil, or Donnie as everyone knew him, spoke his conclusion from behind his finger.

Martin rested against a desk with his arms folded and nodded. "Thank you. It was a shame the judges didn't think so though."

"Is it too challenging?" He grimaced and rubbed a hand over his shiny scalp. Donnie's dark hair had receded to the sides of his head long before Martin had met him and befriended him on the campus.

He shrugged. "Isn't art meant to challenge, Donnie? Whether it is to challenge the imagination or the intellect."

"I can see what you have done. It's a retake of Fildes' *Houseless and Hungry* isn't it?" He cast a hand over the picture and circled the line of youths in hooded tops and baseball caps propping themselves up against the wall of a job centre, smoking cigarettes and texting on mobile phones. "These Chav's that dominate your picture are the modern vision of the 'destitute' that Fildes portrayed. But you aren't forcing people to acknowledge the underclass as Fildes was, are you?"

Martin answered with a smirk, but that wasn't enough for Donnie who hooked his thumbs in his red braces and stared seriously at him over his thick black rimmed glasses until Martin shook his head in concession.

"You have made the line-up of youths as a view from the window of a Starbuck's coffee shop, almost making them background to the foreground characters in the café; children in school uniforms consuming expensive drinks and cakes at a table, and they are flanked by a couple of staff members at work. It could simply be a snap shot of a high-street scene but through the way that you have composed it you

Ivory

are making a commentary on society. One of the workers is black and bringing the children drinks, the other has olive skin and cleaning a table. Both are made to stand out as they are clearly not Caucasian as all the other characters are. In the mid-ground we have a youth carrying out a Starbuck's coffee in the direction of the job centre.

“Your picture is asking it's viewers to reconsider their perspective of poverty – the unemployed of your picture all with their luxury items and spoils, and despite the vacancy advertised at the edge of our view on the coffee shops notice-board the ‘foreigners’ are the only ones willing to work, and they have ended up serving ‘our’ unemployed youth. The children in the café are a warning about breeding yet another generation of consumers conditioned with capitalist expectations, who would rather claim from the state than take on a job offering a minimum wage.”

Martin applauded and Donnie gave a brief mincing dance on the spot followed by a flourished bow.

“Well, *I* love it. It's a brilliant capturing of a moment. Not just of a scene in a high street but of a moment in history. However, you are not content with that.” Donnie held up a cautioning finger before a serious face. “The teenage girl in the coffee shop with her back to us has an open compact. The looking glass is directed out at us the viewer and you are directly challenging us to take a good long look at our own hypocrisy. Whatever form that might take.”

Martin nodded again, but a little uncomfortably.

“Splendid touch, however, only a few of us are modest enough to admit our flaws with any serious contemplation. It is a fantastic picture of the world that leaves us with an uncomfortable view of ourselves. And in answer to your earlier question; yes, art is intended to challenge us but is it too much of a challenge to accuse an audience of hypocrisy and then ask for their favour?”

Martin thrust his hands into his trouser pockets. It had been the same point Jenny had made when he had unveiled it to her. He knew to trust Jenny's opinion and had known he was going to lose out on the UDAC. It had been the reason for not wanting Jenny there. She would have been watching him all night waiting for his inevitable disappointment and then been impotent in the face of it. “That's a fair

Ivory

point. Challenging works like this might hang in the Tate today, but in their own time they struggled to get gallery space.”

“As one of our students might say it’s like you’re giving the world the finger.”

Martin laughed. “I suppose.”

“I know we tend to keep our conversations strictly aesthetic but it has been difficult not to be aware of your melancholy of the last six months. I think a little of this irritation and frustration with yourself and the world has crept into your work.”

“Good observations all round.” Martin didn’t want this to be an opener onto his personal issues. “I’m also sorry your play didn’t get the accolades it deserved. It was good stuff.”

Donnie made dramatic jazz-hands in the air. “Ah yes, *Rom & Jools: a rom-tradg*’ an imaginative re-working of one of the bard’s greats by one of our creative writing students, some outstanding acting, some fabulous direction on my part. Overall a faultless performance...” his hands dropped and his voice soured. “spoiled by the ugliest Juliet I have ever seen.”

“I didn’t like to say, but she wouldn’t have been my first choice.”

“She wasn’t mine. Not with that nose; like a shark fin cutting through the balcony scene. Faculty politics. Daughter of a major sponsor.”

“Was Bea disappointed?” Bea was Donnie’s wife, and she also worked at the university, in the Drama department. Bea was short for Beatrice. Martin had suggested to Jenny that it was short for ‘Beard’, for Donnie was the gayest straight man he had ever met. Bea was the one and only thing that made people that met Donnie suspend their belief about his sexuality. At one of Bea and Donnie’s dinner parties all the guests had drunk far too much and had descended in creating porn star names for each other, someone had suggested ‘Phil MacCafferty’ for Donnie and everyone had cried with laughter – even Donnie and Bea, as if they knew why the name was especially funny. Martin had joked with Jenny that if Donnie ever did ‘come out’ Donnie would be the last person to realise it.

Ivory

“She was a little disappointed. You know how she likes to relive her glory days through her students and productions.”

In her youth Bea had made quite a name for herself on the west end circuit. That was when Donnie and Bea had first met. Donnie had showed Martin a photograph of her from those days, dressed in what little costume there was amongst the plumes feathers and rhinestones she was all legs and cleavage, quite something to behold. That was some time ago now though and he had never known her as lithe and proportioned. She had gained the weight of three other chorus girls and attempted to disguise her broad frame rather flamboyantly with floor length dresses and heavy poncho’s. With the end result being that she looked like she had the body of a hippo draped in a stage safety curtain. Martin thought it ironic that this straight man trapped in a gay body had fallen in love with an actress and ended up married to a theatre.

“It was clear that the girl playing Juliet was more than capable of acting her way out of a paper bag, so we didn’t have to worry about her talent it’s just that we would have all preferred she actually act from *within* a paper bag. All that money in her family and not a touch of cosmetic surgery in sight.”

“Maybe you should do a modern re-take of a Greek tragedy next year.”

Donnie pointed at Martin and squealed a laugh. “Yes! Masks all round. I could get all the funding I need from investors with ugly offspring.” He nearly lost the pastel orange sweater that had been draped over his shoulders by its arms, and he quickly clawed it back into place. “Bea and I wondered if you might like to join ourselves and a select number of the other faculty members who didn’t get the recognition of a UDAC, and commiserate in good company with some fine food and wine this Saturday night?”

Jenny would love the opportunity to get out and be normal, and Bea and Donnie’s dinner parties were usually good fun, but Martin couldn’t stand the thought of being around other people at the moment. It was draining enough making the effort with Jenny and the boys let alone a whole room full of people in a party mood. “We’re between babysitters at the moment, and I’m not much fun at the moment.” Bit of a lie and a bit of the truth, it was usually a good combination. Like art.

Ivory

“Pass me another babysitter I’ve torn this one’, eh?” Donnie laughed and nudged Martin. “Well, if you change your mind about the diner party let me know. It’s never the same without you kids there. I’m off to the faculty ‘VIP lounge’ for a break. Coming?”

Martin shook his head and said he had some work to do. They both commiserated each others losses again and with a wave Donnie minced out of the room. Martin watched him leave then returned to the large room at the back of the classroom that served as a storage area. He passed between the metal storage units stacked with art equipment that dissected the room into narrow walkways. He reached the back of the room and dragged a stool out from between some boxes to a cupboard, he unlocked and opened the doors wide, and sat before the easel set up inside on the middle shelf. The shelves below were crammed with his personal art materials. This was his space tucked away at work where he could snatch moments to create. Both his one-to-one tutorial students had cancelled and left him the whole afternoon to work. He reached down to the shelves below and pulled out a large sketch pad and some pencils.

He closed his eyes and held the graphite to the page. Now he would wait for his hand to move and see what it would create. This was what Jenny called his ‘free associating’, where he would allow his mind to wonder across a page and create lines and shapes free of his conscious control. After a time he would allow himself to open his eyes and frame and block sections of his work and search for inspiration. His hand moved across the page.

Martin’s thoughts scattered as a soft laughter broke the quiet. He sprung from his stool and pretended to be checking the shelves for something. He slid his small wire-framed spectacles down his nose and peered over them as Richard Hadleigh stumbled backwards into the store room, propelled by a youthful lad with peroxide yellowed hair. Hadleigh slammed into one of the shelving units with his arms pinned outstretched, and there was mischief in the boy’s eyes as he stared into Hadleigh’s face. The blonde’s hands fell to the waist of Hadleigh’s jeans and with a twist he popped the buttons of the fly open. Hadleigh offered a faltering unconvincing protest which the boy ignored and dropped promptly to his knees. He knelt there, poised, daring Hadleigh.

Ivory

“We shouldn’t. *Not here*,” Hadleigh breathed.

The boy’s face became mockingly serious and he gave an exaggerated shake of his head. The smirk returned and he yanked Hadleigh’s jeans open and lunged forward.

“You are right, Hadleigh. You shouldn’t,” Martin stated with a stentorian voice.

The younger boy jumped up and stumbled over some of the equipment surrounding them. Martin watched with a merciless grin as Hadleigh doubled up to fasten his jeans. He smiled at his perfect timing. “Canvases are expensive enough without having them dashed with your Greek love.”

The two boys bundled through the door. Hadleigh tried to recover himself, whilst dragging the boy after him, who after the initial scare didn’t seem worried at being discovered. “I’m sorry you didn’t win last night,” he stated. He paused in the doorway his face a deep red and pained by his own words. “I mean – I thought your piece was very good...”

The peroxide boy sniggered at Hadleigh’s fuel on the fire apology and earned a flash of genuine anger from Hadleigh as he shrugged him off.

Martin smiled as genuinely as he could against the dead feeling he had when he looked upon Richard. “Thank you. I should never have entered it. It wasn’t a contender. A wasted opportunity.”

Richard tucked strands of his jaw length hair behind his ear, straightened his back and puffed out his broad chest as he began to recover himself after his embarrassment. “It was a contender.”

Martin nodded curtly. “Congratulations on your achievement.” He smiled in an attempt to relieve the tension of the moment, but he felt it twist into something cruel that altered the intended lightness of his tone. “Now will you kindly take the love that dare not speak its name from my art rooms and find a more appropriate venue.”

Hadleigh looked awkward then frustrated and then disappeared through the door. Martin heard Hadleigh’s angry tone but not the words that Hadleigh used to chastise his boy.

Martin experienced a confusion of emotions; satisfaction at having seen Hadleigh embarrassed, the resurfacing of anger toward him

Ivory

for changing his medium, guilt at having such feelings for someone he had admired and liked for such a long time, and mournful for the breakdown of their relationship. The feelings pulled him in too many directions so he ignored them and returned to his sketch pad. He sat back down took up his pencil and closed his eyes once again.

It was no use. He felt dirty inside his body and his mind was busy. He slouched over his belly and stared at the white page and the single charcoal grey line he had managed to produce before he had been interrupted. The line was around seven or eight inches long, started and ended with a distinct curve and wavered in between. It was the side of a face and the curve of a forehead, the depression of an eye socket, the swell of a cheek bone, the gradual decent of a jaw into the curl of a chin.

Martin blocked the image in his mind and worked the pencil across the page, with a few fluid lines the face was framed by a fall of long hair, a couple of quick flicks of his pencil and he had the suggestion of a mouth and a nose, and with some careful touches the face was given eyes. He applied shading to the face and gave her flesh and texture. He pressed harder as he began to detail the eyes, and that was when he recognised who he was channelling. It was Ivory.

He expanded the dark of the pupils and the sketch began to look increasingly unnatural. The eyes played such an important role in any portrait, the compliment of light and detail had to be right, and their gaze had to have the appropriate character. If there were too much detail the eyes would dominate, while too little attention would cause the face to change and the focus for the portrait would be lost. Likenesses were made with the eyes and if there were any detail missing a portrait would lose something of it's identity and it would become a doppelganger staring back with an unnerving tell of it's deception.

He filled one whole eye with graphite, relieving his pressure on the pencil when he required a softer shade of grey to suggest the change of light on the curve of the eye, leaving spots of paper completely to create glittering dapples of white light. It didn't look right.

Martin flipped the sheet to the back of the pad and started again. Almost immediately his pencil took the wrong path and he was unable to capture the contour of the face that he had created earlier. After several false starts he decided to work on the eyes alone, being able to

Ivory

create solid black eyes that looked natural was a unique challenge. He had hoped that by recreating her eyes they might lead him into recreating the rest of her face, but no matter how much reflected light he put in them they always left his attempts at her face looking like hollow masks. Creating eyeless beauties or vamps that might best dominate the cover of a pulp horror novel. The more he worked the pencil the further she seemed to fade from his memory and became more difficult to capture on the page.

After an hour and eight pages of abandoned sketches he had something reminiscent of the face he could picture in his mind. It was one face among many others that had ended up being strangers. He tore the quarter of the page from the pad and pinned it to the corner of the large easel set in the cupboard.

He turned the pencil on the canvas and began to create an enlarged version of her face. A sense of proportion and scale for copying enlarging and reducing images came naturally to him, but was strangely evading him in this task and actually became something he had to work at. After what felt like a frustrating return to being a student learning his art again he had managed to reproduce a sketch of the face on his canvas. It still wasn't an entirely convincing likeness of the face that haunted him from his memory. He hoped that the fluidity and forgiving nature of paint might make it easier for him to recreate Ivory's face.

He pulled out a tub of acrylic paints from the bottom of the cupboard. Oils would take too long to dry and would impede the frenetic channelling of creativity that would be taking place as he tried to conjure her into being. He added a retarder agent to some water to slow down the drying process of the acrylics so that he could continually mix, layer and sculpt the paint *alla primer* on the canvas.

He lined up tubes of Golden paints, a variety of colours that he was sure he would need and selected a range of Kolinsky sable-hair brushes to be close at hand. He closed his eyes. Slowed his breathing and remembered. He remembered the glittering rain. The chalk and charcoal sketch of the road drawn from the darkness by his cars headlights. The only visual memory of hitting Ivory was one smeary frame of her, overexposed in his lights with her arms raised in defence,

Ivory

blurred into angel wings with the motion. His hand trembled with the memory of the accident but his desire to see that face again steadied him. His brush went to work and he quickly layered a dark brown background around the crudely sketched face, automatically bringing her stark contrast with the world into being.

Ivory had been in his mind for much of the day, not surprising considering the shock of the car accident, but despite her distinction the exact details of her face were frustratingly out of reach to him. He had caught the bus to University that morning, but had broken his journey with a visit to the garage to inspect the damage to his car. It was a write-off. It was an old banger and the insurance wouldn't pay out much. Now they would either have to dip into their savings or have to get by with the one car for a while. More stress.

In the clarity of daylight the damage was frightening. The thick metal of the bonnet was creased like tin-foil around the impact point. The whole front of the car was an inverted curve as if he had slammed into a wide pillar of granite and not the fragile frame of a girl. The damage puzzled Martin. Ivory should have been a contorted bloody mess of twisted shattered limbs, not a sleeping beauty tipped from a glass case. He frowned dismissively at himself, but could feel the tension of his uncertainty affecting the ease of his movement and the grace of his brush.

His brush paused.

He thought of their parting moment at the hospital and that smile, and tried to conjure her face from the shades of memory that seemed to dissolve under the light of his concentration. In his memory she emerged from the cubicle with Ebony and the purpled blotches and the thin cut were gone. His memory was losing detail or he was being impatient and skipping details to get to the smile that would follow. Yet with this moment replayed he was sure her healed appearance was a fact he was only now realising.

Martin shook his head dismissively and countered the momentary doubt with confident strokes of his brush. Yesterday had been a long and tough day: a full day of lecturing, organising the department for the scrutiny of the campus during the open evening and

Ivory

the stress of the awards party. Then the accident. It was hardly surprising that his memory was playing tricks on him.

Martin walked up the path to his home with his head cowed against the fall of the rain, and keyed open the front door. He shed the rain from his green wax jacket with a few shrugs of his shoulders and shakes of his arms and deadlocked the door behind him. He placed his keys upon the balustrade, took off his coat and kicked off his shoes wearily. He had walked more today with his public transport commute than he had done in some time. His aching feet took comfort in his cushioned slippers as he weaved his way through the boy's school bags, gym packs and lunchboxes that had been cast off on their way through to the family room. He stopped in at the kitchen and leaned in. Jenny had her back to him doing some hand-washing at the sink with the dishwasher burbling away and the tumble dryer rumbling in the background.

"Hello," she called with little commitment beyond her chore.

He beamed enthusiastically at her even though she had yet to look up. "I've done a painting. I want you to see it."

She glanced over her shoulder blankly, returned to her chore for a moment then dried her hands to follow him through to the family room.

Martin headed over to the grey metal PC station set in the alcove between the French doors and the fireplace. He ruffled Oscar and Fins mops of hair. "Off you get boys." He waved away the 'oh dad' protests. "You can pretend to do your homework on it later."

"Oh dad, I have something to show you..." Oscar raced as he jumped down from the swivel chair that he had been sharing with his younger brother.

"Later." He began to close windows down on the desktop. One of them was the homepage of Arsenal Football Club. The grounds were in the area and a few of the boy's friends supported the team, but Martin detested football and didn't understand what the two boy's saw in it. It made them a little alien to him.

"Aw dad, I want to show you now," he whined.

"Later!" Oscar stalked, sulking to the door. "And then you have a treat! This morning you had my acceptance speech in gratitude of the

Ivory

awards you bestowed upon me last night, but tonight we celebrate with takeaway Pizza.” Oscar broke from his mood and joined Fin in cheering. Kids were easy to please.

Jenny shot him a disapproving look. “But I have meat out of the freezer...”

He waved his hand at Jenny also. “Then it can go in the bin. You have had months of my melancholy, a night off of cooking is the least you deserve.”

“You don’t have to do things like that. We’re married.”

“Marriage isn’t an excuse to be bad company.” With a couple of clicks of the mouse he replaced the gaudy website the children had been looking at with his Photographic software. He connected his camera phone to the PC and opened the file he had created earlier. With a couple of clicks the image of the painting he had completed that afternoon filled the screen. “Right then, my-wife-the-art-critic, what do you think?” That was his pet name for Jenny as she had been critiquing a show of paintings for the *Art Monthly* magazine and they had met over one of his paintings.

“Who is she?” Jenny asked with a fleeting frown.

“Does it matter,” he dismissed incredulously. “Do you like it?” he enthused.

She hunched over the screen and took control of the mouse and zoomed in close to the photograph. He watched her exploring the flow of visible brush strokes, studying where they crossed and converged, where colours merged built and faded. It was her attention to the details of a painting that had attracted him to her. He aspired to achieve perfection and she aspired to find it. He remembered asking her when they had first met, what it was in a painting that attracted her; “I prefer work where the brushwork; the prods, the whips, the sweeps, the curves, the stroke and the caress of paint, can all be recognised when the work is studied closely. It’s not just the image created through paint, but by recognising the brush strokes it’s almost as if I can feel the movement of the artist’s brush, the grace of the hand that masters it. I love paintings where the artist is inviting you into his art in that way, showing you his secrets. Sharing an art only a few that might see it could replicate and for those that can’t then the artist is sharing

Ivory

something like magic.” It was her passion for art that he had fallen in love with.

She stood back up and wrapped an arm around him and squeezed him. “Honey, it’s great. I mean it’s only a photograph of your work but it looks great. Your form and style is back, but it seems fresh. There’s an invigorated fervour to it.” She gestured at the picture with her hand, but then it wavered, reflecting the uncertainty in her voice. “The actual content is... very different for you.”

Martin’s body stiffened and Jenny’s arm shifted at sensing it, he quickly draped his arm around her and kept her close to him. “You’re holding back. Don’t hold back,” he scowled over a smile.

“It’s marvellous as a surreal work, it’s just – *the eyes*... I find them a little chilling – but I was unsure if that was your intention.” Martin released her and folded his arms as he studied the painting through Jenny’s eyes. “It’s a great painting... Honestly,” she added and gave him another squeeze of a hug.

He had struggled to wrestle Ivory’s details from his memory and had taken an impressionistic approach to capture the motion-blur of her dashing in front of his car and raising her arms defensively. “Obviously it’s an artistic interpretation, but essentially that is what she looked like.”

“Yes, but not the skin colour and the eyes, surely...” Jenny goaded, an uncertain grin stretched tight across her face, not willing to be made a fool of. “Who is she?”

She was right. The contrasting details of her features were fantastical. “Who? She’s a student,” he said it so genuinely and spontaneously the lie surprised him.

“That explains it,” she expressed. “Goth? Dodgy contact lenses thick black make up and an aversion to sunlight? Oh, to be eighteen again.” She rolled her eyes and gave a playful slap to his rear as she returned to her chores.

It was only easier for Martin to reconcile himself with her unusual appearance as he had seen her in the flesh and blood and she was undeniably real and her appearance genuine. Part of his motive to paint her was to be able to set his eyes upon her again and marvel at her uniqueness and her beauty. The sketching, the painting, the whole

Ivory

creative process had been exhausting but also rewarding. The portrait marked a return of his art but his joy had been short-lived for it lacked the quality of life, the accuracy and realism that could anchor Ivory's features into being accepted. He still hadn't exorcised her from his mind, and his memories of Ivory were becoming fleeting wraiths with phantom details that circled his mind and taunted him with their presence. Fading memories were of no use to him if he were to successfully recreate her in acrylic or oils.

Chapter Five

For a moment Candy forgot herself and pulled her coat around her against the cold as she stood her ground on Arven Road. She allowed her jacket to gape so it didn't obscure her breasts. She didn't want to cover those babies up. After all, they were her store front windows. You wouldn't keep the curtains closed on the John Lewis Christmas display. She enjoyed her job but for the autumn and winter months. She had never been one of those girls who bared their legs for a night out no matter the weather, she prized the warmth! As soon as there was a chill the jeans or leggings would be out. Except when she was in street mode, they weren't practical for the street. She didn't even bother with underwear. In the cramped confines of a car it just complicated things. She glanced back down the street into the dark and could make out the soft lighting within King's first floor flat. It would be warm in there.

The older girls had told her it used to be better before the clean up at King's Cross, you could stand out on the main road and feel safer for it. In the early hours of the morning the roads around the station would be as busy as Oxford Street in the day with punters crawling by on the prowl. You could make a night's wage in a couple of hours and because there was so much passing trade you could afford to be fussy about who you went off with. You had the toilets at the station to freshen up between jobs, café's to keep warm in and get a cup of tea, plenty of sleazy B&B's where you could book a room for an hour if you were lucky enough to find a punter that would pay for it, and a taxi rank with licensed cabs ready to take you home. Door to door commuting. Candy had only ever known Arven Road. The trade had been forced into back streets and cul-de-sacs. This road had been due to be demolished around the time St Pancras and the surrounding area had been redeveloped, but for some reason it had been left as it was and didn't even exist on *A to Z* maps anymore. It was a road that led from the residential areas into the industrial units and was crossed by an iron bridge carrying the King's Cross rail line. No cosy amenities here.

Candy had blagged quite a few easy nights in King's flat, drinking King's vodka smoking his weed, posing for his dirty pictures and letting him have his way with her. He hadn't called her in from the

Ivory

street for some time now though. He had found himself a new playmate. He saw her quite often, more than Candy, or any of the other girls. Fucking bitch; sitting up there in the warm, enjoying the spoils and only having to take one dick for the night, and a nice one too. Then being paid with the cut that King took from all of the girl's wages. He had seen him pay her and the roll of cash had looked fatter than he gave any of the others for such a night.

She wished she had the balls to gate-crash but King didn't like it when people interrupted him when he had company, and she had always done her best to never get on the wrong side of King. He was a psycho. She had heard about girls being slapped and punched for calling on him unnecessarily. Normally the only time King was called upon was for public relations issues; paying off a pushy copper with money or with a free 'lunch' courtesy of one of his girls, or sorting out disputes over prices or non-payments, and that usually resulted in the customer in A&E with busted ribs or a new facial feature. She had also seen King's eyes when he was with that girl and she didn't like it; they were mad eyes. Despite that bitch being up there and getting paid with Candy's cut it wasn't worth the hassle. She worked the street because it was easy money and she would suck it up and make do with the cold. Occupational hazard.

Candy shielded her eyes against the headlights of an oncoming car as it turned into the street and parked up. The lights stung her eyes and lit up the whole street. "Fucking newbie," she cursed under her breath while keeping a smile on her face as she squinted in the cars direction. King paid little shits to pull down the security lights of the houses at the end of the street where people still lived, and shimmy up the lampposts and smash the streetlights. Keeping the road dark meant there were more places to work a punter.

This guy was a newbie that was for sure. Looking for sex that he never had and would never get from any wife he might have stashed away somewhere. She strutted down to his side window but stood with a foot angled to her side to expose the inner aspect of her leg and cause the hem of her skirt to ride up a little. He stared at her and then looked away, licked his thick bearded lips then looked back, his eyes flitting

Ivory

from place to place. He appeared shifty and nervous. He didn't wind down his window. Rude.

She knocked on the glass. The overweight man looked uncertain then looked back towards the road, and for a moment she didn't think he was going to acknowledge her, then he lowered the window a couple of inches. He must have realised how ridiculous the gesture was and lowered it further. The glass had already started to steam up in his car from the humidity of his anxious breaths. She imagined that his body would be as slick with moisture as the glass was. He was pale with terror, or disgust, either a loathing for her or for himself, She could tell that he would be the anguished type that would have to be talked through every step until he got going, and then he would gorge himself on the experience and be finished shortly after starting. His kind made her want to shower before during and after and they also frightened her a little. She worried where that loathing could lead to. It reminded her of the danger involved with what she did, and that she wasn't a good-time girl and that her life wasn't the easy-going care-free existence she presented to the close friends and boyfriend that knew how she made her money. She preferred the experienced punters because their hang-ups didn't come out and they both had a mutual understanding of what they were there for. It would just be sex for him. Money for her. Done. Have a nice night. Please cum again.

Still, it wasn't good business to get a reputation as being picky and choosy. She figured that the majority of the punters were there because they normally got rejected by the women they approached and they didn't want to take the risk of being rejected by a prostitute. Equal opportunities was everywhere.

“You wanna turn off your headlights? The girls down there are trying to work and all that light will put off their customers. Some of them girls don't look that great under strong light. Like those weird looking fish you find at the bottom of the oceans. They can't all be blessed with my fine looks.”

Martin fumbled for the controls for the headlights and caught a glimpse of the spray of powdered glass on the road, lit up like diamonds in his cars beams, a gritty reminder from the scene of the accident. He

Ivory

switched the headlights off and the dark rushed in. Most of the street lights were out and the majority of houses this end of the street were boarded shadowy husks. The dark hazel girl, no more than twenty years old, wavered in the window and her heels clicked and scraped the pavement as she bobbed from one foot to the other in the bitter cold. He didn't know what to say to her.

As if reading his uncertainty the girl's full lips, made-up to be vivid purple to match her skirt and top, broke over her milky white teeth in a broad and disarming smile. "Hello, I'm Candy. how can I – *help you?*" her voice was slow, seductive and suggestive of euphemism and descended into a throaty coquettish giggle.

Martin was unsure how to answer.

"What do you want?" her lips pursed into a tighter sweeter smile.

The question startled him from his daze. *What did he want?* He had gone out in the Focus under the pretence of needing to put petrol in her and driven like an automaton to this place. "I'm looking for a girl."

The dark girl tossed her head back in a laugh that started deep and then mellowed. She shook her head and her mop of springy raven and died blonde curls quivered around her face. Her arms crossed and she yanked the hem of her tight fitting tee shirt up to her chin. Her bare round breasts bounced and jiggled as she laughed, "What do you think these are; testicles?"

Martin tried to ignore them and smiled against his discomfort, feeling his cheeks burn. "No. No – I mean I'm looking for a specific girl."

Candy's face dropped into a measuring and untrusting wariness. She shoved her breasts roughly back into her top with one hand as if she was stuffing fruit into a bag. She cursed venomously as if she couldn't believe her poor luck. "You're a copper aren't you?"

"No, no." He shook his head roughly. "I was involved in a crash here last night. I hit a girl, and I'm looking for her."

She straightened up, disinterested, her eyes had hardened into glassy marbles and she rested her free hand on her hip. She pouted on a cigarette, lit it and took a deep drag. "You are looking for Ivory then."

Ivory

Martin experienced an arc of energy in his gut that could have launched him from the car at the mention of her name.

She looked down at him took another drag and huffed a sulky smile. Smoke drifted from her bitter lips as if at the mouth of a volcano. “The look you have on your face. I’ve seen it before you know; you aren’t the first.” The smile snapped from her lips like the slack cracked from a whip. “She isn’t working tonight. Not the streets anyway. King has her at his flat.”

“Who’s King?”

“Jeez, you are new to Arven!” She paused in consideration of whether to trust him. “He’s her pimp.”

“Not Ebony?”

“Who?”

“Nothing.” The blind black man was was Ivory’s ward after all. Did he then know of Ivory’s lifestyle? “Would you be able to get hold of her? Tonight.”

Candy looked Martin over. “Yeah,” a look descended on her face that Martin didn’t understand, as though she knew something he didn’t or that there was a joke he wasn’t aware of. “I think we can arrange it. Come on, honey.”

Martin followed her from the car to the alley. It was the alley that Ivory had run from only the night before. What had she been fleeing?

The mouth to the alley was dark, and was only lit further down by a dim outside light above a front door. The door was fully glazed with a heavily textured glass. Its wood surround was battered and looked soft with damp, its once lurid blue paint rotting and flaking away. From what he could see the whole building, with its blown rendering and graffiti, looked as neglected as the other houses in the area. Candy gave the doorbell a protracted ring and him a broad smile and a wink.

Martin stood and waited with the girl. ‘What am I doing?’ he screamed at himself inside. Yet that *need* to see Ivory kept his feet planted on the spot, and denied his instinct to run back to the car and screech away into the night, back to his neighbourhood and his wife. A

Ivory

large dark silhouette suddenly undulated across the rippled glass as someone came to the door.

The door was flung open, slamming it against the wall of the hall. A man in his late twenties, with thick and powerful limbs filled the doorway. Hard dark eyes, sunken into grey hollows beneath a thick brow, twitched furtively between Candy and Martin. His skin was pale and clammy looking, his hair, receding at his temples was cropped close to his head. Verging on being a skin-head, and with baggy hooded grey jogging suit hanging from his sturdy frame he was the picture of a chav thug.

A shadowy shape of a man flashed into Martin's mind from the accident and this man that stood before him filled in the details of the cookie cutter shadow in his memory. He was sure it was the man who had chased Ivory into the street.

"What the *fuck* do you want?" he spat.

Martin wondered if he would end up running for his life in the same way that Ivory had seemed to be.

"It's not what I want, it's what he wants." Candy tossed a thumb in Martin's direction and blew a slug of smoke over her shoulder in the opposite direction.

"Look mate, I don't have any blokes or kiddies for rent. So why don't you be content with Candy, use your imagination, fuck her then give her our money."

Candy's face darkened under King's dismissal. "He doesn't want that. He wants to speak to Ivory."

"Speak?" King's eyes glazed with suspicion before his thuggish face screwed up and his lips puckered around his prominent yellowing front teeth. "Why?" he gobbled.

Martin got a hold of his fear and cut in before Candy could talk for him. "I'm an artist I wanted to make her a proposition to sit for me."

Martin had been sure he would be turned away and threatened into not returning. King hung in the doorway, seemingly suspended in consideration. To Martin's surprise and sudden distress, King stepped aside and offered him entry. A narrow steep staircase of tattered carpet reached up into the dark landing of the first floor flat. For the second

Ivory

time in over a year Martin wanted the comfort of his home and family, but this time he was terrified that he would not be returning to it.

Stumbling up the stairs, shamed that his uncoordinated legs so quickly gave away his nerves, he found his way through the gloom of the landing to a door pointed at by King. The lounge was dominated by a worn brown couch and a large glass coffee table with a chrome tubular frame. The wallpaper was patterned by interconnected geometric shapes. The odd strip was hanging from the walls or completely missing and from its grubby nicotine discoloured appearance he guessed it had been up since the seventies. Ivory was not there.

Martin took the proffered space on the sofa. Its soft and exhausted seat forced him to slump into it and he shuffled forward, struggling to perch on the edge, concerned that he wouldn't be able to get up quickly should he need to. Candy sat next to him and relaxed into the sofa and made herself comfortable. He was sure his unease was palpable.

The only sources of light in the room came from an orange bulb in a lamp tucked beside the sofa that cast thick shadows up on to the ceiling, and a lava lamp on the mantelpiece that created a shifting red glow. King's reflection in the coffee table was a shadowy orange and red flamed Faustian devil trapped in the glass. King poured a dash of whiskey into a glass, clacked it heavily down on the table and slid the meagre measure over to Martin. Martin took it in his hand but didn't drink.

“Well?” King prompted.

“Is Ivory here?” Martin said carefully. This was a man he did not want to provoke.

King dropped onto an equally worn looking armchair. Martin was glad King was now seated and not towering over him and dominating the room. “I know what you want, but you haven't told me why yet.” Candy struggled up from the sofa and King shot a glance in her direction as if levelling a gun to halt her. “Where do you think *you* are going?”

Ivory

She ignored him and strode out to the hallway. “Powder my nose,” she called back with a dismissive don’t-take-that-tone-with-me caution.

“I don’t want to sleep with Ivory.” Martin suddenly found King’s cruel face glaring back at him.

“You don’t have to do anything conventional like that,” King cut in aggressively. “Ivory is talented. Or she can dress up for you, give you a show and watch you while you do a bit of D.I.Y. She can...”

“No, no, no.” Martin groaned abruptly, sickened by the disgusting man, silencing him with waves of his hand. Martin didn’t want to hear more. He didn’t want to think about the sordid world that Ivory’s beauty was a part of. He clenched his eyes shut and shook his head trying to shake himself free of that reality. “I’m a painter, I want to paint her,” he explained.

“Just to sit?”

“Yes.” The answer came quick.

King’s face blanked, seemingly unsure what emotion to express. He leaned forward and nodded knowingly. A euphemistic smile crept across King’s lips in a slow corruption. It disgusted Martin. The hidden thoughts that spawned it seemed black and poisonous.

“I know where you are coming from. She’s an unusual beauty isn’t she?”

It was all Martin could do but nod. Relieved his outburst hadn’t provoked King.

“I’m an artist myself.” King announced, the edge of his voice subsiding into an empty honesty. He reached up to a shelf behind him and pulled down a folder from the clutter. He gripped it in his hands and studied it for a moment, seemingly considering whether to share it with Martin. “I’m a photographer, really. *I’m like you*. I see the look in your eyes; mildly interested in life. Surrounded with mundane people, and...” King’s words trailed into whisper then his voice flared and startled Martin. “BANG!”

Martin recoiled, not just from King’s sudden rise in volume but from what he said. Martin was nothing like King.

King rounded the table and sat next to him. He handed Martin his portfolio. “She comes into your life. She *is* beauty. Nothing else like

Ivory

her. She gets under your skin. She's like a drug." King leaned close enough for Martin to feel his hot, whiskey-tainted breath. "We're artists. Beauty is our passion. We are the same, you and I..."

Martin tried to ignore the comparison and opened the portfolio. A moody black and white shot of Ivory greeted him. She was over lit, causing the details of her face to disappear under the glow, or distort with the strength of the light, but the dark eyes made her recognisable. Yet he found no salvation in seeing her again, her pose and the content of the image made him want to weep or be sick, but his reaction was so sudden and violent his body didn't know which.

Candy closed the bathroom door behind her but lingered on the landing. Something was niggling at her. Ivory. The sickening ball of twisted emotions that churned in her gut was a familiar sensation that festered within her whenever she thought of Ivory. There were three other doors on the landing. There was only the kitchen and the bedroom where Ivory could be. The compound knot of feelings loosened and resentment tangled with her insides. Ivory was not going to be in the kitchen.

How many nights had Ivory been up here while the other girls worked the street? He was a dog on heat around her. Candy had taken advantage of the rare invite, but she wouldn't have abused it, wouldn't have wanted to alienate the other girls. The jealousy writhed along the floor of her gut. It was hard for Candy to suppress it. It was a competitive business and Ivory always got work. Sometimes a punter would wait for Ivory to be finished with another punter. Sloppy seconds was something most blokes seemed to be squeamish about. It was rumoured that she charged three, sometimes four times the going rate *and* the punters paid. *Just how much money had Ivory earned?* Yet there was something about Ivory's beauty and her unusualness that was seductive. She shrugged off those thoughts as they threatened to completely unravel the ball of feelings within her regarding Ivory. She was frightened what might be in there, but whatever it was made her insecure and loathe herself.

Ivory was a freak, she resolved. Fifty years ago she would have been in an American carnival. A hundred years ago she would have

Ivory

been in John Merrick's company instead of being paid fortunes for fucks.

There was a presence in her mind, a small pressure like the mild claustrophobia she experienced when there was a storm coming. She had a sense that she wasn't alone. Candy turned and was startled to see Ivory standing sentinel in the doorway of the bedroom. Ivory stared blankly at Candy, her eyes like holes in her face leading into the blackness of the room behind her. Candy's bunched cheeks burned guiltily like red coals, as if she had been wearing her thoughts for Ivory to see. "Hi!" She blurted, searching for something to say. Her giggly bubbly 'one-of-the-girls' facades sprung up in defence. "I've got someone here who really wants to see you."

"I found the face the hardest aspect to capture. Motion blur or over exposure, I could never get the lighting right, her skin is so white the flash just ignites her or the lights just glare off her. I am working on it though."

Martin closed the folder after leafing through only a dozen images. He couldn't face anymore of the crude eroticism or perverse sex captured in the gritty angry stills. King had taken something beautiful and defiled it. Martin could taste the burning bile of his disgust while his companion beamed like a grotesque perverted gargoyle of a child proud of his work and searching for approval.

Martin was spared the discomfort of having to decide how to comment since King was distracted by Candy flouncing into the room. Her arm was draped around Ivory's shoulder. Martin did a second-take as he realised she was there. He was suddenly unprepared to see her. He was unsure of what to say to her and how she would respond to him reappearing in her life.

King's face twisted up and set that way. Seemingly angry that he and Martin had been disturbed from their talk of 'art' or that his power over access to Ivory had been frustrated by Candy. His face slackened abruptly as he snatched away whatever it was that he had been feeling like toys he didn't want anyone else to play with. "Hello, honey." The voice was soft and sensitive and uncharacteristic for this mostly angry man.

Ivory

Ivory looked at King with a dispassionate blank stare over a flicker of recognition as she scrutinized Martin. Martin offered her a warm, friendly smile in return and managed a soft but briefly stammering “Hello.”

She tilted her head to one side in what appeared to be a motion of curiosity, although a frown did not disturb her featureless skin. There was no blemish to her face, which was strange because he was sure there should be bruising and a scar of some description from the accident. He was quickly distracted from his realisation by her fragile smile warming her face. It was as ambiguous as it had been in the hospital. If then it had been one of pleasant surprise at him waiting to see how she was after the accident, then this time it could only be a further demonstration of her surprise. He dared to imagine that it was a smile of pleasant recognition.

King stood hastily, and jiggled briefly in space, unsure how to break Martin and Ivory’s shared moment. His sentences came in quick lunges. “Babe, this guy came to see you. He would like to paint you. He is like me, *an artist.*”

The smile had gone. It had been so faintly conceived that Martin studied her for a moment to check, but it had definitely melted from King’s explanation. Martin knew what had happened, he didn’t need to see the hesitant journeys her glittering black eyes made between King and Martin to understand her uncertainty. King’s folder was suddenly hot in his hands and he shoved it roughly onto the table. He jumped to his feet, desperate to snatch himself away from being associated and compared with King.

“No, actually. Not like that. Not like...” Martin didn’t need to say ‘King’, his distressed glance at him as he stumbled over phrasing his outburst gave him away. “I am an artist. I’m a lecturer at a university and an artist. I paint landscapes, portraits. I have had work in galleries. Had some successes. I’m professional. Legitimate. I... paint... I paint beauty... not...” Again he didn’t need to speak as his eyes met Ivory’s over King’s portfolio.

King turned a savage look on Martin. Mad dog eyes. Mouth taut with spite and curled back from teeth gnashed together. He hooked Ivory in one powerful arm and snatched her close. “What’s this?”

Ivory

Criticism?” King’s brow bunched into a hard ledge over the dark hollows of his eyes, while his face twisted around his nose in a sneer. “Funny, because, if you want to paint her, you paint *me* too. The two of us together. We come as a pair, see?” He turned to Ivory. “Isn’t that right?”

Ivory simply stared back into his wild face. No reaction. Martin didn’t understand how she did not react to the terrible anger in King’s face.

“Sorry? I didn’t hear that,” King mocked. “See. She doesn’t object. I guess we will see how much of an artist you are. You can try and turn *my* ‘ugliness’ into *your* ‘beauty’.”

Martin shook his head. “I don’t want that.” Martin felt his own anger take hold and he decided he didn’t have to talk to King. “Ivory, that’s not what I want at all. I will pay you for sitting for me, just sitting. Being painted. I will pay you the same as what you would earn on the street if you like.”

Suddenly Ivory was standing separately from King, a fluid movement that left King startled. She smiled and nodded at Martin’s offer.

“Hang on, I negotiate the deals here.” King lunged at her, his rough hand landed on her shoulder. Her arm circled and shrugged off his grip without any apparent effort, but seemingly with enough force to send him stumbling into a wall under his own momentum.

“No, fucking way! That did not just happen!” He peeled himself from the wall and burrowed a stare of pure hate into Martin’s flesh. “You want her? You can fucking ‘ave her.” His fingers snatched round the neck of the whiskey bottle and he slashed it through the air.

Martin and Candy yelped and ducked, covering their faces as the body of the bottle exploded against the chimney breast. Ivory held her ground only turning her face to avoid the flying shards. It didn’t seem the instinctual recoil that Martin and Candy had just shared, but a motion of calculated defence. King held the bottle out like a jagged bouquet and jerkily thrust the ragged remains of the bottle in Martin’s general direction.

Martin’s bowels loosened and his sphincter burned. He stammered around unformed objections and pleas, and staggered

Ivory

backwards as King closed in and the weapon became focussed on him as a target.

Candy jumped from one foot to another in terror and impotence, her only contribution was to thicken the air with curses at King to distract or stop him. It didn't work. He came around the glass table slashing and thrusting his blossom of jagged petals at him, forcing him into the bay window and cornered him.

"I am gonna make you so fucking ugly you won't even be able to pay someone to fuck you!"

King stood glaring at him over the weapon. The rage in those eyes being directed at him was enough for him to feel mortal fear, but consideration of the broken bottle and the taut arm ready to lunge it into him brought him close to blacking out. King held the pose, outwardly savouring his despair, as if it was charging up his power and ability to visit the cruelty of pain and disfigurement.

King roared. It was the most horrifying noise Martin had ever heard because he knew in that nanosecond that it was a primal venting of the rage that drove the jagged shards at his throat. It made contact with Martin's arm, snagging on the cuff and sleeve of his thick wax jacket. Somehow he had broken the paralysis that seized him and blocked the attack. The white-hot pain was instant and robbed him of all his strength, and the force behind the blow sent his arm away from defending his face. He clutched his arm to his body and sobbed over the blood welling and dripping from the fresh rents in his coat. He became light headed, his legs springy, causing him to stumble back. His heels scuffed against the skirting board of the bay window and his head struck against the glass. There was no retreat. No escape. King drew back his arm and struck his weapon out.

Chapter Six

The shards plunged, spliced and gouged flesh. A gruff yell strangled into an agonised scream. Martin stood paralysed with fear and confusion at what had just unfolded before him.

King clutched his thigh. Stunned. Only able to react to his pain. The arm that held the bottle hung limp at his side while the fingers of his other hand frantically danced and drummed at the wound in an attempt to staunch the flow of blood. Ivory stood close to King with a blank detached stare. No emotional reaction at having turned King's attack on himself with a lightning speed grab of his arm, followed by a graceful but powerful twist of his wrist so that his own force sent the bottle into his leg.

"Fuck Fuck, FUCK!" King whimpered and shouted through gritted teeth as he continued to try and staunch the bleeding, hopping on one leg and throwing his head back as if the pain was a beast on his back that he could shrug off. King slumped against the wall and sucked lungful's of air in against the pain. Martin took the moment to inspect his own injury, the cuff of his coat was punctured and bloodied in several areas, but his wrist had only shallow thin cuts. They were painful but they were scratches compared with King's injury. The leg of King's jogging bottom was almost completely dark red below the wound and clung to his upper thigh in its wetness.

Suddenly King launched himself from the wall, anger and hatred snarling his face up. He grabbed Ivory by the jaw, bloodying her face under his crimson grip. He laughed manically and triumphantly at having caught her, and tugged her head roughly to one side. It happened so quickly that Martin stood, stunned, yet there was no reaction in Ivory's face, as though she had no fear of him.

"Fucking turn on King would you? You girls all know that deserves punishment."

King brought the jagged end of the bottle up into Ivory's face. Instinctually Martin yelled in horror and crossed the room in two strides and shoved King as soon as he was in reach. Martin's blundering lunge jogged King's aim and the jagged glass overshot her face and snagged in her hair, but King's fist and the neck of the bottle struck her cheek.

Ivory

Ivory did not recoil from the blow, but seemed to toss her head away from it and arched herself backwards, staying ahead of the attack. Her move caused King's lunge to stretch further than he was prepared for, and he continued to stumble off balance from the momentum of Martin's shove. Ivory stepped gracefully around him as King fell.

The air whistled, the singular noise becoming a wheezing howl that shattered into multiple unearthly voices screaming out. King's stumble became an exaggerated tumble and the screams stopped dead as King fell, leaving only his cry of terror in their wake. He landed at the centre of the coffee table and passed straight through, the glass splintered into long blades catapulted inwards by his weight, turning the entire surface of the table into a giant man-trap. The glass sheared flesh, hacked through organs dug into bone. Blood dashed and sprayed in every direction as each blade of glass simultaneously cut and skewered him.

Candy, Ivory and Martin stood motionless at the sight before them. King lay in a twisted tortured position. Large triangles of glass stuck out of his chest. Another wider piece stood out from his abdomen, almost shearing him in two. All the peaks bloodied and gored in scarlet. A criss-cross of scratches transformed King's bared flesh into a map of agony. A piece of glass winked from his eye giving the impression of twitching life.

Candy was the first to react by launching a spray of vomit through fingers that had tried to seal her mouth against screaming. She fell to her knees and heaved until she could heave no more. Yet Ivory stood motionless, with her face sprayed and smeared with blood but free of reaction, her cold black eyes glittering with the orange and red light of the room. For the briefest moment Martin found himself frightened by her hellish vision, until the context of her appearance returned with King being the aggressor in attempting to kill Martin and nearly shredding Ivory's face.

Martin's eyes fell upon the bloody body again. His mind trying to understand the last seconds of King's life. He didn't understand how Ivory had managed to escape King's grip, how King had gone from the aggressor to the victim, how the table had done so much damage, and

Ivory

what had been the source of the scream that had haunted Martin once again.

His concentration was shattered when King flew to his feet as if pulled by wires. Glass tinkled and sparkled around him as it tumbled from his body. King's monstrous face twisted around a wordless roar, his mouth awash with blood. He threw himself at Martin and they both fell. Martin's eyes clenched as he struck the floor, the air forced from his lungs, whistling in the air. It felt different to being winded. He couldn't catch his breath to replace the supply that had been knocked from him. He could still hear his breath hissing out of him, but as he swallowed mouthfuls of air he realised he wasn't keeping it.

He opened his eyes and the twisted, scarred, hellish face of King stared into his, blood and saliva oozing from his inanely grinning mouth. King lay on top of him his embrace holding him still. Martin looked down his body for the hissing gurgling sound and saw that their bodies were joined by four glass shard that skewered them together like meat on a spit. Three of the jagged shards met his chest and nailed his lungs to the floor boards. He wheezed his last breaths as King's blood mingled with Martin's and King breathed his last insane words; "*My blood flows in your veins now. We are the same, you and I.*"

Chapter Seven

Martin convulsed in phantom pain and awoke. He found himself staring at the familiar wall of the bedroom he shared with Jenny. Sweat beaded on his forehead as big as rain drops. He panted for breath and found that he had no trouble taking. He looked down his body under the damp duvet. His hairs were matted to his flabby chest and stomach, but with sweat not blood. Of course there wouldn't be blood. He lowered himself back onto the pillow and glanced over at Jenny who was sleeping. She had become used to his night-time restlessness over the past year so he hadn't woken her. He was relieved. He didn't need her fawning over him to talk about what was wrong.

He rolled over and turned his back to her and stared at muslin drapes backlit with the pale orange light of night time in the city. His nightmare had brought back the events of the evening. As if the actual events hadn't been frightening enough to revisit, his mind had created an alternative ending to the horror. King had not risen from the dead. He had hoped for movement, some miracle that the glass had missed every vital organ so that he wouldn't have a man's death on his conscience, but King's ruined body had laid weeping blood across the floor for the corrupted soul that had festered within.

He was dead.

Martin had been involved in a man's death.

Ivory had seemed unaffected by it. There was no look of disbelief, no torment of guilt at playing a part in his death, only a brief cock of her head in a gesture of curiosity at the novelty of such a death. Candy's reactions were of a contrasting extreme as she screamed, howled and sobbed and attempted to drag Ivory from the scene. However, Ivory resisted her frantic encouragement to leave as her curiosity seemingly extended to observing Martin's paralysis from the disbelief and guilt at being involved in the killing of another man. Finally, as Martin's troubled mind accepted what had happened and the urge to escape took hold, and he began the frantic calculation of any evidence of his presence, Ivory smiled at him. *That* smile. It made even less sense to him on this occasion. Was she that unaffected by what had

Ivory

occurred? She gave into Candy's insistence and disappeared out the door.

She was gone again.

In Ivory's absence he found clarity defined from being alone with a dead body. He took the glass he had held earlier and pocketed it, then snatched up the folder King had given him to look through. Both items would hold Martin's fingerprints. He searched the sparsely furnished flat and couldn't find any other portfolios that might link Ivory to the scene. He couldn't do much for any hairs or DNA that Ivory may have left in the bedroom. He didn't want to think about King and Ivory in there, not that he needed to as those moments were already preserved in the photographs in the folder. Candy's vomit was also something he couldn't remove, which was worrying as it could lead the police to her. Martin was not going to the police and Ivory seemingly couldn't communicate, so Candy was their only vulnerability. He prayed that her presence at King's death would dissuade her from wanting to be associated with it.

Martin had returned to Jenny and explained that he had sustained his injury slipping on petrol at the petrol station, and cut himself on broken glass that had been on the forecourt. He had refused to go to hospital to get it looked at so Jenny had tended to his wounds and bandaged them. As the evening had closed in and he had lain quietly in bed, desperate for sleep, the worry had crowded in on him. He had seen so many detective and forensic shows on TV that he knew there would be leads that could implicate all three of them being at the scene. Martin's blood was one he had forgotten. There must have been blood on the carpet from his wounds. Although Martin didn't have connections with the area, Candy and Ivory did and they would be leads to him.

Then there was Richard Hadleigh. He was sure this boy was meant to be the weapon for his destruction. As he had made his erratic escape through the back streets, he broke out onto York Way with its mix of shabby Victorian and 20th century industrial buildings, and narrowly missed a cat and had been forced to swerve to one side. His headlights lit up the pavement and the long brick wall that ran the length of the railway track to King's Cross station, plucking several loitering

Ivory

pedestrians out from the shadow of the night. They were spaced out down the street. All male. The only face he saw was the one immediately framed by his lights. Richard's. It had been so shocking to see someone that he had recognised that Martin's reaction had been to yank the steering wheel to one side and slam his foot on the accelerator and tear away from the moment.

A witness. He knew the guilt was making him jump to conclusions, but if any of the faculty had said about Martin's accident then when the story of King's death broke Richard might, *might*, put two and two together. Maybe he wouldn't. The York Way road Richard was on was as infamous as Arven Road, but for a clientele whose interests swung the 'other way'. Richard – a prostitute? 'Mummy and Daddy' Hadleigh were well off. City man, professional housewife, country clubs and weekend golfing, active Conservatives. Maybe that would be a secret that Richard would want to keep. It could dissuade him from disclosing any suspicions. So, Richard Hadleigh was a queer renter. There was little victory in this knowledge, only sympathy for the boy's situation and worry that Richard was one other lead that could connect Martin to a murder.

King's final words in his nightmare had been a corruption of his father's parting words to him, when Martin had confronted him with knowledge of his father's affair with his old Sunday school teacher. He had criticised his father for his hypocrisy of being a 'godly' man preaching to Martin and his mother an adherence to Catholic beliefs and morals, when all the while he had been fucking Mrs Harcourt behind their backs. His father, with tears in his eyes, apparently tears of genuine grief and self-loathing, had stated with a defeated air; *"You can judge me, but you will be a man one day, with the same blood flowing in your veins, and you will know that we are the same, you and I."*

These thoughts and memories were followed by a vivid image of King's twisted mutilated body. Martin's stomach lurched. He made the bathroom in seconds and gagged up more bile. It frothed and burned at his throat and he fell against the cool tiles, his face pressed hard against the icy wall. Utterly alone in his torment.

Ivory

The next day the *Independent* and *Metro* newspapers that he had picked up on the bus didn't shout 'PIMP MURDERED IN ARVEN' from their front pages as he had fantasised that they would. With a new day separating him from yesterdays events he was able to rationalise that King's body might not get discovered for a couple of days. It certainly wouldn't have made it into today's copy.

He had considered hiding at home, but had gone to work in the hope that the routine would distract him. It did for the most part but there were moments where a student's sketch of a prone body, the sight of vermilion paint squeezed from a tube or the mention of death or murder that caused his mind to leap like a needle jumping on a record to the scene of last night, and transported him to the moment of King's death and into hellish guilt. The twisted body. The glass. The blood. His actions would become hesitant, his words would trail and he could feel the class looking at him and then at one another in concern, anxious giggles would ride the waves of heads in his lecture. By the end of the day he was tired and he had switched off completely with the shaky bus ride home.

Martin scanned the dark evening streets and the coloured lights, illuminated windows and nameless figures and faces that blur past, the hustle and bustle of life that he was safely detached from on the creaking gloomily lit bus ploughing through traffic from stop to stop. The world fast forwarded past him while he sat detached. The bus came to rest at one stop while the driver ended his shift and another boarded and took over. Martin averted his eyes as the worlds play button was pressed and everything moved at normal speed. He stared at the cracked grey pavement. Rain began to make dark spots on its surface, building at speed until the whole pavement became varnished ebony. Ebony.

Before he would contemplate the mysteries of Ivory and Ebony, Martin sensed a passenger hesitating by the empty seat next to him. He became aware of words in the air but his trance lost their meaning and he broke his gaze as the bus pulled from the stop into the traffic. "Sorry?" He apologised.

A familiar voice reaffirmed itself. "Are you alright?"

Martin was startled to be looking up into Richard Hadleigh's youthful face. Richard dumped his masculine frame into the empty seat

Ivory

as the bus pitched from side to side on its journey. Martin's suspicions flared as he saw empty seats were dotted around the bus.

"I was queuing up with you back at the campus, and you didn't even see me. It's not like you to be on the bus and you looked so distracted I thought I would come over and see if you were okay. The word is that you weren't yourself today."

"You mean my lecture wasn't up to *standards*? Perhaps I should invite you in as a guest speaker – you could talk about scrap yards. It could be inspirational."

Presented with the same arguments that had dogged their relationship since Richard had shifted his medium, he gave up and stared toward the front of the bus.

"Fuck, you," he muttered

"Well, I don't know. I haven't won any grants lately so money is a bit short, just how much do you charge?"

Richard's cheeks bloomed red and a pained expression sharpened his features. "So you *did* see me. I wasn't sure if you had."

"So that's why you came over. To see if I was 'alright'," Martin stated incredulously. "You just want to check if your secret is safe."

"I was trying to be *friendly*," Richard spoke through gritted teeth before his face relaxed and his voice lowered guiltily. "Is it? Safe, I mean."

Martin nodded. Their feud didn't seem very important any more. The issues that fuelled Martin's dissatisfaction and anger seemed petty and insignificant after last night.

"Thank you." Richard sagged into his seat and visibly relaxed. "I did genuinely want to see if you were okay though. I guess I also hoped my concern might go some way to clearing the atmosphere between us."

"That's quite an agenda attached to asking after my well-being."

"Things haven't been the same between us since I stopped painting."

"It doesn't matter now."

"You have treated me like the enemy. It seemed to matter then."

"Well, it doesn't now." Martin stated despondently and kept his eyes on the traffic that competed with the speed of their bus.

"It matters to me."

Ivory

“I’m sorry.” Martin descended into self convictions. It had been Martin who had created the rift through his jealousy and fear of Richard’s success. An image of King’s body slashed through his concentration. He had enough guilt to not want to be carrying this around as well. “I am sorry I have treated you that way,” he stated with more conviction. “I have been a shit.”

“No arguments from me there.” Richard shrugged his thick shoulders. “So, what’s up?”

Martin gave Richard a second look, studied him and examined his motives for asking. Concern seemed the hardest reason to accept after Richard had witnessed his urgent getaway. “Everything,” he sighed.

“I guess we all have moments like that.”

Ordinarily the platitude would have naturalised his despair, but he was pretty sure that Richard hadn’t factored in the possibility of being accused of murder when offering that comfort. However, it did serve the effect of moving beyond the conversational dead end Martin had created and they began to talk, not as openly and passionately as they had when student and teacher, but casually and warmly discussing interests in life and art that were a great distraction from the guilt and thinking about the previous night. The points of tension in their relationship were reduced to moments easily sidestepped, or when the flow of conversation was quick and intense their problems were playfully mocked. Martin was actually pleased for Richard when he explained that the piece that had won the UDAC was going to be on display at the Gagosian Gallery as part of a showcase of up and coming London Talent. When Richard broke his sentence to declare Kingsland Road as his stop, Martin found it an unnatural end to their conversation and the distraction it offered, and he was grateful when Richard suggested a coffee in a café near the bus stop.

Martin sat his cup of tea down as they found a seat in the window. It was an independent café, probably a greasy spoon originally, but it was aspiring for the look of the larger chains of coffee shops with plush faux leather and suede seating, modern blocky dark wooden furniture and satin metal features and light fittings. It didn’t quite work

Ivory

as it had clearly been done on the cheap and he recognised most of the furnishings from *Argos* or the bargain end of *Ikea*.

“I live in the flat above. It’s quite handy, they do good coffee and a mean cooked breakfast, although they have tried to go a bit ponsey.”

“I didn’t realise you had moved out. I thought you would have commuted from your parents place?”

“I had to move out.” Richard averted his eyes to his drink. “Coming out at uni was easy. I had nothing to lose. When Mum and Dad found out I had everything to lose, and I did. Dad gave me a condition: I would only be his son if I decided to like girls. I explained that being gay was not a choice and that it was most likely biological, that it was no longer a deviance or related to witchcraft, and that aversion therapy or burning at the stake was not required these days.”

“Always a good time for humour, Richard.”

“Yeah, well, you know me. He didn’t like the biological bit. Thought it insinuated that *he* was gay and he doesn’t have a gay cell in his body. I called him a Tory wanker and a bigot. We exchanged every pent up frustration we had stored up and we basically talked ourselves out of being related to each other.”

“He kicked you out?”

“No, Mum would never have allowed it. I walked out.”

“Oh, Richard.”

“I know.” He held his hands up in surrender. “Dramatic, but Dad won’t have me home now, so I guess we are both as bad as each other.”

“I didn’t realise all this was going on.” A heat washed through Martin. He didn’t know because he had cut Richard out of his life.

“It happens. I have a job, but the money is rubbish. It costs money to make those pieces of scrap. Prize money from the uni has given me a well needed boost. Plus I have other ways of making money. Which isn’t as bad as you think, before you judge me.” Richard took a drag from his drink. “That’s my story. Now yours.”

Martin followed Richard’s example and stared into his cup as he gathered up the threads of his life of late and weaved them into an unincriminating tapestry that he could safely display. “There is a girl.”

“Do you love her?” Richard asked bluntly.

Ivory

Martin pushed his drink away. “Jesus, Richard! No!” Martin snapped. If he felt something for Ivory then it meant his motives for contact with her were questionable. He wanted to paint her that was all. “No.” He managed more calmly. A voice from unseen red rheumy lips whispered in Martin’s ear; “*We are the same, you and I.*”

Richard cut into the following fall of silence as Martin struggled to work the rest into words. “But, you are thinking of having an affair?”

“No.” Martin flagged Richard down. “Listen, don’t interrupt, let me get it all out.” The noise of the café filled in the silence that Richard offered. “I have met a girl and she’s...” He considered how to describe it. “Conjured up a storm inside me. For a while now I have been unhappy. I have been going through the motions. Finding life banal at best, suffocating at worst.”

“I used to feel bad when I would come around yours, our chats and our work would take you away from Jenny, Oscar and Fin for hours on end.”

“This is going to sound dreadful but I was grateful for it.”

“It’s not dreadful. I don’t think men ever stop being boys. The things they loved as kids stay with them, and usually they are not shared by their wives later on. My dad loves flying radio controlled aeroplanes. He’s always in a field somewhere at the weekends with his friends.”

“Well, family pressures don’t always allow for such indulgences, and at some point the spark went out of my work.”

“It was just before I switched classes. I remember you struggling a little then.”

Martin absently broke off a piece of his almond croissant and pushed it around the plate, mopping up the flakes of pastry. “I thought you had switched because of it.”

“No.” Richard shook his head solemnly.

“Well. I have been teaching my students how to paint and express themselves in oils and acrylics, and the truth is I can’t do it myself anymore. Yet I have found a subject that I am dying to paint because I am sure she could help me reignite my artistic fire.” He sat back and tossed the piece of pastry back on to the plate. “She is so beautiful. Ever since I have seen her I have wanted to paint her, to somehow capture her. I’m an artist: I have seen beautiful things before.

Ivory

Painted them. Recreated them perfectly. It's just that there's something alluring and mysterious in her beauty – something that I haven't been able to capture in my paints."

Richard studied Martin with a peculiar wariness, seemingly waiting for him to come to rest. When he did Richard appeared hesitant to speak and when he did speak his words were slow and measured. "What's her name?" As though he knew, or was fearful that he knew, how Martin would answer.

Martin swallowed and stared at Richard, unsure whether he could trust him. If Candy had gone to the police and implicated Ivory then Martin could be incriminating himself by mentioning her name. However, if Candy had gone to the police then she would have mentioned the car accident and they would have gained his details from that. He could be screwed anyway. "Ivory. She's called Ivory."

Richard fumbled with his mug, almost spilling it before he could replace it on the table. He slumped back in his chair and stared out at the red, amber and white lights of the traffic on the busy dark evening road. "I know her," he managed after some time. "I've seen her walk to and from Arven. That's when I first saw her."

Martin leaned forward trying to bridge the gap created by Richard's withdrawal. Every cell in his body called for information, wanting every word at once, a download of information straight into his brain. With caution fallen like a ruin and forgotten his words fell over themselves with excitement. "Tell me."

"I saw her around. She was so unusual looking. Like you say she has a beauty about her that is almost disturbing. I might be gay, but I could always appreciate what was attractive in a woman. Sexuality doesn't affect your recognition of whether things are beautiful or not. Ivory was different. I had feelings for her that I couldn't escape. They haunted me. I had wrestled with issues about my sexuality in my early teens, before even then. Yet she made me question things. Things that made me wonder about what my Dad had said about phases and confusion. But, deep down I knew it was her that created the confusion. It was just about her. Her alone.

"I moved my hustling plot nearer to her route. I followed her around, to and from her home. She started coming out in my art but

Ivory

whatever I created just did not live up to her likeness.” Richard turned his attention from the road and back to Martin, his dark eyes soulful and lost.

“I don’t remember ever seeing them,” Martin demonstrated incredulously.

“I kept them to myself. I was ashamed of what it said about me. How it made my overt confidence about my sexuality somehow hypocritical. Made me a sham.” Richard reached into his fitted jeans and drew out a packet of cigarettes. “Step out? I need a fag.”

Martin nodded somewhat reluctantly, and they moved to the tables and chairs outside, leaving their consumables behind them. It was bitterly cold and the four lane road was busy and noisy with rush-hour traffic.

“Did you ever... talk to her or...” A knot of dread tightened his stomach, at the possibility of Richard having any kind of relationship with Ivory.

Richard’s fingers trembled as he fingered the cigarette packet open. “No. I was always terrified of what would happen if I actually spoke to her. I thought that I would be lost if I did that. I would have no escape then.” His lips pursed around and a cigarette and he lit it and took a deep draw.

“What happened?”

Richard exhaled a steady stream of ghostly blue smoke. “I spoilt several relationships because of my doubts about myself and I lost some good friends clumsily trying to reaffirm my sexuality and prove something to myself. I thought I was losing it. So I made the decision to be free of her. I adapted my routine so it wouldn’t clash with hers. Avoided places where I had seen her. Found a new patch further away. Some days I didn’t leave the flat. Weeks if I am being honest.

“Beyond a counsellor you’re the first real person I have told about this. I was worried I would sound melodramatic, but I can see the same look in your eyes that haunted mine back then. So I am glad I have told you. Maybe it will spare you the same anguish.”

“Where are your pictures?”

“I destroyed them. Burnt the lot. It was the only way to cast her out of my life. I couldn’t trust myself to paint. That is why I changed to

Ivory

sculpture.” A little anger reinforced his voice as he finally explained the true reasons for his change of art, maybe bitterness for Martin’s rejection of him. “I did it to escape the subtlety of paint, I was afraid that the chance of creating beauty would possess my hand back to trying to recreate her on canvas. She destroyed my art.

“Whatever your interest in Ivory, I would suggest leaving it. Maybe it was just me she had this affect on. Maybe not. I saw the way other people looked at her. People would stop dead in the street to look at her. I think I was lucky to escape myself and my obsession. I am not going to lecture you, but you have a wife and kids. Don’t let this take over. Don’t let it destroy you.”

Chapter Eight

Ordinarily Martin would have considered Richard's warning to be dramatic, but taken in context with recent events it unnerved him. So much so that he had felt the need to divert his thoughts from Ivory and ground himself in normality by re-engaging with his life. When he had returned home from having coffee with Richard he replied to one of the many texts Donnie had been pestering him with, and accepted Donnie and Bea's invite to their dinner party. He arranged for their usual babysitter and made Jenny's month when he told her that he had arranged for them to go out for the evening that Saturday.

Martin grabbed Jenny's arm and steadied her as she stumbled through the door.

"Oops. How much wine did I have?"

Martin put a hand to his forehead. "I have had so much myself I don't think I can count."

"You do the standing and I will do the Maths." Jenny propped herself up on the newel post and balustrade and groaned.

The babysitter, Sally Jenkins the eldest daughter of a family down the road, emerged from the family room. Her abnormal height threw him in his drunken state, then he remembered her bulky boots and the six inch platform soles. Having been paid at the beginning of the evening she had her black patent floor length coat on already and was ready to leave. She tucked her bangs of starkly died black hair behind her ears and her heavily blacked up eyes sheepishly shifted from Martin and Jenny and the floor, explained that the boy's had gone to bed without any problems. She appeared to find it awkward being around their drunkenness and made a hasty exit. Martin closed the door behind the pale Goth and struggled to get the key in the lock in a pin the tail on the donkey style.

"I'm sure the last time she babysat she was blonde and pink and fluffy." Martin slurred.

"Show's how often we go out." Jenny clapped her hands to her face. "We have turned into hermits."

"Should we check that she hasn't summoned a Demon in the family room?"

Ivory

“Or sacrificed the children.”

“I think the boys could handle her. They would just kick her platform boots from under her. The fall would kill her.”

Jenny did a twirl and brandished her sequin and diamante shoulder wrap in the air like a scarf at a football match, scattering spots of reflected light over the gloomy hallway. She looked nice all made-up and dressed in something other than her slouch clothes, the transformation had been something of a surprise it had been such a long-time since he had seen her like that. She hadn't taken much pride in her appearance since Fin had been born.

“Did I out glam Donnie's Beard?”

Martin reached around Jenny and deposited his keys on the newel post. He spoke into her neck, could smell the Kenzo Flower perfume he had bought her for tonight. She smelt good. “That's impossible.” He kissed her behind the ear and pulled away. Bea's vast frame had been draped in a voluminous dress of aqua blue sequins. “She was a veritable glitter ball this evening. There must be a shortage of sequins in the world after making that dress.”

“I wonder how many little Indian boys went blind sewing them on.”

“Three at the least.”

Jenny fingered her wrap absently and leaned against Martin as they headed towards the kitchen. “Did you have a nice time?”

It had been a good evening. Donnie and Bea had invited two couples that were regulars at their parties Clive and Gillian and Toby and Shirley. Such a combination always guaranteed intelligent witty conversation and bawdy and mischievous drunkenness. “It was good. Apart from the American's.”

Jenny stopped in the doorway to the kitchen and patted Martin on the arm as she scolded him. “They were nice.”

“Janice, who you spent much of the evening talking with, was nice. She's a card-carrying member of the NRA and has more guns than you have handbags. I heard you asking her about guns for the majority of the evening.” Martin attempted to tap Jenny playfully on the nose, but the drink caused him to miss and he poked her in the eye.

Ivory

“Ow!” She blinked against the sting. “She’s the first fellow female gun fan I have ever spoken to.”

“Thankfully there were no guns present when I was stuck with her husband. George was an arrogant bore.” Martin headed into the kitchen and started to crash about making a cup of tea for them both. George was in his fifties, but attempted to obscure it with Grecian 2000, and by being ‘fashionable’ through every item of clothing or accessory being branded with a designer label. He could have sought sponsorship going out like that. George had chipped into every conversation or talked over it until he held court at the dining table talking about his success as a business entrepreneur and boasting grossly about his wealth. Donnie and Bea had met their match in the talking department, and Martin had noticed that the hosts were throwing as much alcohol in his direction as they could in the hope it might sedate him a little.

It had only served to loosen his tongue and lower his inhibitions, most noticeably when Donnie mentioned his two daughters, and George had responded with dramatic incredulity; “You *have* children?”

If the first brick wall your assumptions ran into when you were getting to know Donnie was that he was married to a *woman*, the second was that he had fathered children. Bea wasn’t just a trophy wife. It usually evoked a hesitation as the brain reappraised, but George’s reaction had been embarrassing for everyone, although Donnie and Bea only demonstrated the smallest flinch.

“Yes, we do that over here too,” Martin had leapt in to defend his friend.

“And for quite a while longer too.” Donnie added before swigging back the rest of his wine. A little more than he had seen Donnie knock back in one go.

“Where are they now?” Janice had asked, trying to cover for her husband.

“They have flown the coup,” Bea announced with a theatrical flutter of her hand in the air. Her other hand squeezed Donnie’s wrist as if it was a subject she knew Donnie would need comforting over. “It was a wrench to have them leave, but it’s lovely to see them happy. Jen-Jen is married and Janey is living in Edinburgh. She’s frantically making her designs into clothes for a show that she has coming up.”

Ivory

“I guess we have that to come, honey.” George had nodded to Janice, wrenching the spotlight from Bea and turning it back on himself. Quite a feat in itself. “Did you see our darling?”

“You have seen the American prodigal already, Martin,” Donnie poured more wine into Martin’s glass at this point, so that as he explained Martin would be the only one able to see him arch an eyebrow. “George and Janice’s daughter played the lead in my recent production.”

The girl with the acute nose. “Her performance stood out from all the others.” Martin raised his glass in a toast. “Donnie has a nose for talent.”

Bea and Donnie had raised a glass to him and disguised the congratulatory gesture as a toast. Jenny had stifled a smirk and kicked him under the table but she needn’t have worried as George was so ignorant he wouldn’t have been able to recognise a flaw in his perfect world if Martin had just said, “Oh yes, the girl with the memorable nose.”

“Talented she is, but her choice to take her studies in Europe was difficult for me when I had managed to secure her a place at Yale.”

In Martin’s line of sight Donnie had rubbed his thumb and forefingers together. George had bought his daughter a place.

“...but I figure if I pump enough money into this university of yours I can make it fit for my princess.”

Bea had raised both her drawn on eyebrows at this, exaggerating her usual appearance of sustained surprise, and had begun to clear the table. Her signal to Donnie that she had had enough of George.

Donnie kept Martin and George connected as the party broke away from the table and the couples moved to lounge on the sofas and chairs, freeing the others to talk more independently and take much needed breaks from George. “Martin has two lovely children, much younger than ours but just as talented. His oldest is following in his father’s footsteps.”

Martin had spent all day with the children. He had taken them to a midday showing of the latest Pixar animated Movie at the Renoir Cinema at the hideously Modernist Brunswick, then worked with them on drawings and paintings in his loft studio, teaching them and

Ivory

encouraging them and having fun with them. Throwing himself into family life for the first time in months. Being the dad his father had never been. Being the dad Martin had always promised himself that he would be. Oscar did have a burgeoning talent.

Cornered with George he had received a text on his mobile phone and had been surprised to see it was from Donnie across the room with Jenny. "HE LIKE'S YOUR PAINTING. THAT'S WHY I ARRANGED THIS HORROR SHOW OF A DINNER PARTY. HE'S GOING TO OFFER YOU £2000 FOR YOU'RE WORK. CHARGE HIM £2,500 AND MAKE THIS NIGHT WORTH-BLOODY-WHILE."

"He did give you £2,500," Jenny stated in George's defence.

"He did." Martin finished making the tea. "I thought writing the cheque in front of everyone was a nice touch. I felt like a tradesman."

"You are an artist, and George paid you the compliment of demonstrating that your work is appreciated and how much your talent is worth."

Martin rolled his eyes and rummaged through the breadbin. It actually did feel good to sell a piece of work. He really should think about putting a collection back into a gallery and regain some of the recognition he used to have. He had some work in the studio, if he could do a couple more pieces that bridged his individual works it could be done. "So what will the money do for us? Replacement car, the new kitchen we have been talking about for the past five years, or repair that leak in the roof to replace the bucket that has been sitting in the loft for eighteen months?" There were no cakes behind the bread. He opened the tea-towel drawer and peered into the back. No cakes there either.

"Car. No question."

Martin nodded in agreement.

"You won't find them. With the three of you sniffing out cakes and sweets all day I have to get inventive from time-time. But you deserve a treat. Try the washing machine. One of the few places no one in this house but me goes to."

Martin threw her a lopsided smile then opened the glass door. At seeing that there was indeed a Tupperware container stored in the washing machine he shook his head in disbelief. He pried the tub open

Ivory

to find cupcakes piled high with pink butter-cream icing. “Not just *any* cupcakes... Marks and Spencer cupcakes.”

“Only the best for you. I live to please my husband-the-artist.”

Martin took a hearty bite and groaned with pleasure at the rich sweetness that poured itself over his tongue. “That’s so good.”

Jenny sashayed over to him, a sparkle in her eye. She fingered icing off the cake, touched it to his lips, then to her own and slipped it into her mouth and sucked at it seductively. He kissed her lips, could taste the sweetness. She pressed herself against him and their kiss turned from a lip kiss to a deep mouth kiss.

“I can feel something... Is that because of the cake or me?”

“Both. The cake and because you bought it for me.”

“You got the cake, now what do I get?”

He dropped the cake on the work top and pawed at her dress, pulled it down over her shoulders, exposing her bra and chest as he kissed her neck roughly. “Thank you Marks and Spencer’s.” She whispered breathlessly into his ear.

He hitched her dress up to her waist, clutched at handfuls of her upper thigh and buttocks then lifted her up onto the worktop. She fumbled with his belt and the button of his trousers, his trousers fell to the floor and she pulled his boxers down and took him in her hand. She worked her firm grip on his hardness until he could take it no more. He pulled her underwear to one-side and entered her. Within a few minutes they were into ardent throws and both were grunting, groaning and biting their lips. She ignored knocking the remnants of his cupcake on the floor and he ignored stepping on it. In moments it was over and they were both sitting opposite each other against the kitchen units on the cold tile floor, the clothes pulled back up to cover themselves in case the children should be drawn down by their noise and commotion.

After some time, Martin spoke from a sensation of feeling good about himself. “Did you enjoy it.”

“Are you asking me to rate your performance?”

Martin laughed, as he reached up for another cupcake. “Kind of, but not about that. Today, the evening?” He bit into it and Jenny smiled wistfully without answering. The mouthful of cupcake lost some of its taste. He swallowed. “Does that mean you didn’t?”

Ivory

Jenny shook her head and the smile broadened but was tinged with sadness. She took the cupcake out of his hand for herself. “It’s been a great day. You have been fantastic with the kids, we actually left the house to go and do something other than run down to my parents or go shopping. We had fun.” She broke a piece of the cake off and chewed it thoughtfully, as if stalling for time. “I guess I worry just how long this will last.”

Part Two

“Art is a revolt against fate”

Andre Malraux

Chapter Nine

Martin only wanted to paint her. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel of the Focus parked in a Victorian street lined with leafless trees in Islington. He sat hunched down in his seat and watched the house that he was parked opposite. Like many of the houses in the surrounding area it was a house of blackened yellow bricks with sash cord windows. Unlike the surrounding streets of three-story terraced houses with basement rooms, this street held two story detached properties with front gardens. This house was one of the only detached houses he had seen in the street and was larger than any of the other houses, it stood out from its neighbours by appearing as if it had been lifted out of the street, turned 45 degrees and then replaced, being the only house with its main door at the side of the property. It struck Martin that the house had been alone at one point and the rest of the street had grown up around it as the city had expanded. Its design becoming a prototype for the cloned houses that now ran uniformly down both sides of the street. It was somewhat neglected with its windows clouded with dust, their deep green paint bubbled cracked and flaking away.

Martin's vantage point was obscured from being hunched down in his seat and the screen of a box hedge that ran the length of the garden wall. Martin had kept his vigil for two hours. What had started as a Saturday morning drive had led him to the address Richard had reluctantly given him the day before. Richard had followed Ivory here several times. It was Ivory's home.

Martin ducked further down in his seat as a woman turned down the path and closed the gate behind her. His heart throbbed into his mouth at the sight of her. Ivory was wearing a close fitting black dress. Her pale hair was down and strands of it sailed in her wake as she walked. He leaned forward against the steering wheel to follow her route down the alley at the side of the house to the main door.

He froze as she stared in his direction. To move whilst caught in a casual stare would reveal himself to her. She stared through him and he wondered if he was obscured by a reflection in the glass of his window. She made several more furtive glances, and although her face gave no flicker of emotion, her actions seemed suspicious.

Ivory

Ivory leant forward, almost doubling over. She snaked a white arm through the letterbox and pushed herself up against the door, her arm working in right up to the shoulder as if she planned on squeezing herself through that entry instead of using the door itself. After several jerks of her body that suggested her arm moving, Ivory pulled swiftly out of the letter box, not stopping to manoeuvre her elbow or wrist from its sharp metal jaw. A swift action that produced a key. She opened the door and disappeared within the house.

Martin relaxed in his seat now that she was gone, but his heart wallowed in a dirty pit of self-disgust at his voyeurism. He wondered if that was how Richard had felt. Martin checked himself in the mirror. He looked nervous, pasty and grey. The result of more nightmares. King's bloodied corpse came to life every time he fell asleep. As if King hid in the darkness behind his eyelids. A Lovecraft demon possessing him, ready to prey on his sanity the moment he tried to rest.

King's death had made the *Independent* so at least one worry had been settled. It hadn't splashed the front page but was buried deep within. The title of the two inch article read 'Pimp killed.' The rest of the story was almost as short and informative. It explained how 'Terrence King' had been found dead in the lounge of his first floor flat in Arven Road. His death seemed to be the result of a struggle. The article said that any further information had been hard to come by as a 'veil of silence' had fallen on the occupants of Arven Road. The article claimed that the police had declared that the list of people with possible motives for killing King grew longer as their investigation proceeded. The article claimed he was a disliked man, who was a pimp and an amateur hard core pornographer as well as being involved in dealing drugs. However much Martin had managed to relax since reading the article the guilt had still remained.

Martin stepped from the car and locked it behind him. He crossed the street and dodged the odd puddle that dotted the drying streets. Martin tried to walk as casually as he could down the path. Careful not to look at the windows should Ivory appear at them. It would be all he needed for him to lose his nerve.

Martin stood at the large green door. The doors brass coloured letter box, knocker and numbers were mottled with reddish brown

Ivory

corrosion and spotted with drops of rain. Martin rapped the knocker with fingers that tingled with electricity but felt weighted with lead rings. He cleared his dry throat and swallowed hard at the feeling of ash in his mouth.

He waited. He stepped off the step and then back on it. He stepped back on the path again and looked around anxiously. He wondered if Ivory had seen him and wasn't going to answer. She gets knocked down by a car, and then the driver won't leave her alone, creating a scene with her pimp that ends in a horrific death, and then turns up at her home. He swore at himself under his breath, finding it incredible and ridiculous that he was there.

With a sense of pressure, should his knock be answered, he turned for the path to make his escape. He glanced casually to the door and was startled to find that where the door had been, a large man stood in its place. Ebony stood before him, without the large smothering coat he had seen him in last, in well pressed black trousers and a leather waistcoat zipped up over a cream Nehru shirt buttoned to the neck. He still seemed a giant immovable man. His white eyes spread wide as if they had forgotten they couldn't see.

Ebony's ears caught Martin as his feet scuffed the gravel. "Who is it?"

"H-Hello, I wondered if I may speak to Ivory." His voice emerged in fluctuating tone like a radio being tuned in. Martin surprised himself that all his words had managed to fall out in the right order. He coughed to clear his throat and then repeated himself with a more even tone.

"I know you," the man muttered. His eyes narrowed as his concentration sharpened. "I never forget a face." He smirked broadly. "I know your voice." He explained dryly and impatiently.

Although the comment was playful enough there was something in the gravitas of his words that suggested his blindness might be a ruse. Martin recalled how easily Ebony had navigated himself through the presumably foreign environment of the hospital. Martin introduced himself again.

"I know why you are here," he growled. "But I am sure that *you* do not understand why." There was pity in his face. Ebony stepped

Ivory

away from the door and retreated to the end of the hallway cluttered with stacks of books and papers and called out Ivory's name in his curious German dialect.

Martin was stunned as Ivory trotted down the wooden stairs, her smooth pale legs picking their way through steps crammed with similar stacks of books. She wore a full-towelling bathrobe and her hair was wet and plastered to her head like the night of the accident. Ivory stared at him with her curious eyes. He wondered if they were capable of anything but staring. Her head cocked to one side as he had seen it do before when it appeared she was trying to understand something. Maybe as she was mute it was her way of gesturing to know what he wanted.

"Hello. Are you okay?"

"After what happened the other night.

"With King.

"After..." Martin struggled to find words to describe the events. "... the accident."

Martin stood for some time waiting for an answer. "Are you okay?" She might be mute but she could at least nod and put him out of his misery. Elated relief surged within him as she nodded in reply. "I was worried. I – I didn't know what to do. It was awful. A dreadful thing that happened. I – I am sorry I came to King's flat. I'm sorry if my presence set off what happened. None of us should have had to experience that. I thought the car accident was the most terrifying moment of my life – then that happened."

A smile flickered through her face. Was it to reassure him? He dared not allow himself to dwell on his consideration that it was relief at seeing him again. He was certainly relieved to see her, to be with someone that had shared that horrific moment. "Have the police talked to you?" He prayed she wouldn't take too much time to respond. She didn't. She shook her head once to each side. A weight lifted from him. Every answer he received relieved his worry. It was euphoric and strangely ethereal, as though asking a spirit for insight and receiving knocks for a 'yes' or a 'no'. He couldn't resist asking her if she was okay again and received another affirmative. He was sure the broad smile he wore could have folded in on itself it felt so stretched.

Ivory

“My request... about asking you to model for a portrait...” It seemed wrong to bring it up, but that was why he was there after all. “Please remember it’s not like the modelling King asked you to do. You will be clothed. Not... not nude.” Although Ebony was out of sight he experienced the need to justify his motives and intentions. “I just want you to sit for a portrait.”

She stood where she did. Unmoving. Unblinking. Suddenly she smiled that half-smile and gave a single emphasised nod.

Martin’s excitement felt as though it were lifting him on wings and his cheeks ached against his smile. However his lips faltered as Ebony stepped back into the hall and folded strong arms across a broad chest, with his face set and stern in a carving of seriousness and grim distaste, as though he saw something in this moment that escaped Martin. The light caught his blank eyes and flickered like far away lightning suggesting the promise of a storm.

Chapter Ten

Martin stared at the painting. His brush poised but hesitant: lacking the direction of inspired creativity. The sweeps and strokes within the paint filled his field of vision as he poured his attention over the details. He had been painting Ivory for two days and her face and his painting of it saturated his mind. Beyond the sittings she was with him whenever he closed his eyes, as if his concentration had left a physical impression of her upon the lens of his eyes.

He had composed the portrait using Fibonacci's golden ratio of balance between asymmetry and symmetry within the angle of Ivory's face and in her relation to her surroundings. She sat before him in his loft studio, melting into the light from the muslin shrouded window of his loft studio: an angel descended.

He liked the ethereal imagery that had come from her wearing the simple white robe he had sourced from Donnie and Bea in the drama department stores. It was a fine sheer material that hung from her shoulders and clung to her curves on its way to the floor. It was thin enough to melt in the light and show the ghost of her shape and form, but its weave was sufficiently dense to obscure the crudeness of nudity beneath.

When Ivory had arrived on that first day, her facial expression was inscrutable of any emotion. Climbing the stairs to the studio they had passed through the first floor where the bedrooms were, and it was Martin that had experienced a discomforting need to remind her that their destination was the studio in the loft. In the studio they were greeted by the open sofa bed. Oscar had been up here and opened it so he could lay and watch Martin paint. Martin had hastily folded the bed away and stumbled over explaining that he wanted her seated in the chair by the window. It had struck him that even if he had an ulterior motive in asking her to pose for him she would not have complained, she was as available to him sexually as she would be to any man who was willing to pay.

At least the functional appearance of the room, with its unpainted plaster walls dotted with unfinished projects, bare floorboards, mishmash of tired furniture, and shelves and cupboards

Ivory

cluttered with art materials, suggested that this was a place where the focus was art. He had directed her to a bi-fold changing screen that she could use to preserve her dignity, and in a further gesture of respect he had left her to change while he prepared a tray of tea and biscuits. Despite trying to reinforce his intentions there was a sordidness about the act of having her at his home. He wanted her to trust him, needed her to see him differently to her customers. It was crucial for Martin's conscience that this act was genuine and innocent. Yet he hadn't told Jenny about tracking Ivory down, and that it was Ivory that was sitting for him.

He hadn't had to ask Ivory to pose. Just invited her to take a seat and get comfortable. Martin had been so startled by the speed of which she settled that he had to ask her if she was ready, she had answered with a nod. There had not been any shifting in preparation of long hours of stillness, no search for a comfortable pose or a need to place her limbs in positions that might attribute attractiveness, innocence, confidence, sultriness, peace or any other kind of quality that other sitters might try and communicate in a pose. She simply sat and was still.

It had been odd having a sitter who could not communicate. Usually such sessions started with small talk that eased both the painter and subject away from the unnatural situation of being virtual strangers engaged in intense scrutiny. It rarely sustained itself but when it did subside the silence that followed was bearable. Without it the awkwardness had lingered and distracted his hand and pencil into false starts. Martin had found the need to speak, to say anything to detract from the awkwardness. When he did it only made things worse as he had to remember to say things that only needed nods or shakes of the head in answer. Martin cringed at the stupid pointless things he had said to fill the void. Constantly circling around the haunting memory of the night in King's flat.

Gradually the gentle lines that had escaped his putty eraser had begun to take form, and it had aroused his creative inspiration and drive, which in turn distracted him from the discomfort. His creation went from skeletal sketches of form to being fleshed with opaque base colours like some Frankenstein's creation taking shape.

Ivory

Ordinarily when he was paying a sitter he would focus on the face, head and bust, anything else could be filled in from the imagination afterwards to save on money. He took some photographs as reference for the same reasons, but each time he depressed the shutter button he recalled the photographs King had taken, he was glad he had been finishing a film and had only had six exposures left.

He had applied the base layers of paint for the head hair and bust and they awaited the overlay of fine detail that would finish them, yet although he had all the colours mixed and ready for the different grades of light and shadow he delayed their application. Instead he found himself working on the details of her clothes, her hands and the divine light behind and around her. He had already failed to create one likeness and he wanted to ensure he did her justice this time. That's what he told himself, but he couldn't escape the fact that the longer he held off the detail of her face the more time he would have to spend in her company.

He looked up from the painting and her face ignited the spark he needed to start. He leaned over the painting and cast his eyes back and forth between Ivory and the canvas and applied the brush with the concentration of a surgeon and the passion of an orchestra conductor. Ivory was in exactly the same position she had adopted for the previous two sessions.

“How are you, today?”

She looked over and smiled a nod.

He took it that she would ask him the same if she could. “I've been busy today. One of the students has decided that he wants to mix his art forms. He usually does sculpture, but now he wants to sculpt and then photograph it in a way that will accentuate the sculpture but still keep it in a two dimensional world. Quite clever. However, I think modern art is overtaking me. I remember when I was in class myself, painting bowls of fruit for my exams. If you paint a bowl of fruit now, the idea seems to be to make it look like anything but a bowl of fruit.”

She smiled. He considered how ironic it was that he had just spoken of Richard. She had no way of knowing that Richard knew where Ivory lived and that he had followed her, photographed her, painted and drawn her, obsessed about (*loved?*) her from afar.

Ivory

The silence reasserted itself. He knew he could turn to questions he had used on the previous sittings, but the subject he avoided, the subject that seemed taboo frustrated him with its continuing pressure of presence. The flame of inspiration guttered and his brush hesitated again. He steadied his hand against the edge of the canvass like a drunk hiding delirium tremens. “Your inability to talk. That must be frustrating.”

The corners of her mouth turned down for a few moments and she shrugged.

“I imagine you have grown used to it then, because it’s damn frustrating for me.”

She cocked her head in her gesture of curiosity.

“I want to ask you things that I know you can’t answer with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’.”

She nodded. He was unsure whether she agreed with his recognition of the limits of her communication, or whether she was encouraging him to elaborate. She never seemed concerned with his moments of soliloquy, but then they had previously been about art.

“I have asked you before, but I have the need to ask you again about whether you are okay after what happened at King’s flat.” He spoke to the picture rather than Ivory, then looked at her when he had needed to rest for a moment.

Her gaze wouldn’t meet his. It seemed unsure of how to express her answer. It was beyond a ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Martin walked over to the desk set into one of the dormers and handed a sheet of paper and a pencil to her. She looked at them and frowned. She held the items in her hand and looked at them and Martin questioningly. She didn’t know how to communicate at all, yet she could understand those around her.

He took the paper and pencil away and returned to his easel. “It doesn’t matter.” He lied. She had appeared disassociated from the scene. Perhaps she was. He tried to imagine how someone so devoid of communication, a skill taken for granted by those who had it, would feel after witnessing such a horrific scene like King’s death. Trapped with it, with no way of expressing what she had seen and how it affected her. Imagination wasn’t enough he wanted to share the experience.

Ivory

He wanted to disclose the terror he had experienced at being cornered. His fear of King. The agonising regret at going to that area. The thrusting shattered bottle. The vicious white-hot pain in his arm. The chaos of the struggle. King's sudden shift from angry lunatic to whimpering victim. The blood. The coffee table. The slicing glass. The blood. The gurgling. The death. Each element battered him in overpowering attacks as his memory raped his consciousness.

Martin gripped the edge of the canvass against the impact of the flashbacks, scattering his brush to the floor. His stomach muscles went into aching spasm around a withheld sob. Every muscle pulled against his control, dragging him into fits of sorrow stretching him across the chasm between sanity and unbridled despair. He sucked in a deep sobering breath and palmed the tears from his face and rubbed them from his beard.

Ivory moved close to him and rested on her haunches before him. Her sudden proximity was discomfoting. Her cold deep eyes fixed upon him. Her eyes seemed to have taken in all that Martin could remember of that night and all the emotions he had experienced and there was pain and sympathy in her face.

"I'm sorry," Martin croaked, feeling pathetic. His emotional vulnerability created a possibility for intimacy that frightened him. A heat rushed through him at the realisation and he looked away to the unfinished portrait guiltily. "Now, we should get back to work, or I will never get this finished." His voice was strong and emotionless despite the fear of the moment he now did his best to distance himself from.

Chapter Eleven

Jenny awoke to the mattress depress from Martin's weight as he attempted to angle himself under the covers. She could tell by the deliberation of his movements that he was trying his best not to disturb her. She allowed him to think he hadn't and rolled herself to the edge of the bed. A brooding resentment caused her heart to flutter with the growing tension in her chest. It only began to subside when he settled into a playing dead rest.

When had they *both* started hiding from each other?

Things hadn't been right between them since he had lost his inspiration for art. Being an art critic and working weekends in an art gallery she understood how important art was to an artist, and imagined that for someone with the creative fire, losing inspiration and living with only the cooling embers of a talent would be like being trapped in purgatory. Yet as much as she empathised, she had hoped that she and the children would have balanced out that loss in some way, that although part of his life had deteriorated he would take solace in his family, in Jenny. However, the domestic routine and Martin's time consuming art itself had already fostered a distance between them. It left Jenny with an unspoken dissatisfaction that she had tried to overcome by being the perfect wife, the perfect lover, the perfect friend. Yet the effort only worked when the object of that enthusiasm actually wanted those things. The effort was not reciprocated except on birthdays or anniversaries. Not enough to satisfy and sustain her and their relationship. Jenny understood that they both needed very different things from life: Martin's needs had taken him away from her, and her needs therefore remained unfulfilled.

There had been pain with the confusion, and there was pain with clarity. Their relationship had been in a slow decay since they had met fourteen years ago. She had so admired his talent, his ability to find beauty in the world, and his passion for creation and aesthetic, yet somehow she had overlooked his detachment to the world and to people.

Aside from his mother of course, his saintly Mother. For many years his mother had been the only woman in his life, and he had been

Ivory

fiercely loving and protective of her, probably ever since his father had the affair and left them both. His mother had idolised him in return, and although she had been desperate for Martin to get married, no woman was good enough. Jenny had survived his mother's sly disapproving looks and the covert criticism of everything Jenny did and didn't do. When she had died two years after they had met it had cemented Jenny and Martin's relationship and accelerated them into marriage.

They had met through art and their mutual passion for art had sustained them, and at times she now wondered if they had mistaken that for a love of each other. No. She hadn't mistaken it, but she was almost sure Martin had done. Back when they had first met she had been at the peak of her career, writing articles for *Art Monthly*, *Art on Paper*, *London Aesthetic*, *Time-out*, *Art Review* and a few magazines she couldn't even recall or find in the biggest WH Smith's stores now. Since she had bumped into Gloria Denza in Tesco the other day she had really been taking stock of her life and couldn't believe how much she had let her personal life slide away after getting married and having Oscar and Fin. She didn't regret marriage or children, but regretted not pushing herself to keep up with the latest artists and collections, or even maintaining her magazine subscriptions. She may have only existed in the art realm from an academic standpoint, an observer, but she had been pure bohemian in her passion for self-expression and love. She missed it.

Chatting with Gloria Jenny had learnt that she now had three children. She had scaled her career back to start with but had kept a firm grip on what she could do around raising her children. Then the editor's position had come up at *Fringe*, a new and hip showcase magazine for fresh talent in the capital, and she had grabbed at it with both hands and refused to let go. It sounded tough but Gloria seemed happy. She was doing the things that Jenny had once wanted for herself.

It had been so good to see Gloria again, their paths had crossed so many times back when Jenny had been on the scene, sharing many slightly sozzled drunken trawls around galleries, and in the light of day they had swapped opinions and copy to help each other out. They had even teamed up on a few articles and their ideas and talents had complemented each other well. Gloria had suggested Jenny getting back

Ivory

onto the circuit and writing from the perspective of someone with commitments, highlighting the not-to-be-missed new talent exhibitions and shows for the reader with limited time. Jenny had gone out on a limb and come back with the idea of writing from a family perspective, finding Art that would be family friendly and encourage the young into Art, possibly including Oscar and Fin's opinions. Gloria had loved the idea. The invite along to Gloria's office had seemed casual, but Jenny's excitement at the prospect of returning to writing and critiquing made it now seem daunting, frightening even as it was the opportunity to get more out of life. Something just for her.

Jenny felt a great distance from her old self, but she took some responsibility in that, for although Martin had neglected her she had neglected herself in response. She hadn't bothered to keep up with the latest dress trends, and had only dressed for practicality. It was going to Donnie and Bea's at the weekend that she had realised it had been some time since she had treated herself to a makeover and styled her hair. She had withered in the shadow. The only time she felt truly alive was when she joined her father at the Ham and Petersham range, or they fired off his illegal handguns on the farm, and pumped a target full of holes. The slam of the striker, the split second pressure of expanding cordite and the kick of a weapon. It shook her back into life. Reset her soul.

Something much more powerful than the recoil of a gun had awakened her to this clarity. Ivory. Martin had been quieter since the accident. Absorbed. Scared at times. It had settled into distraction. He was working again though. Slaving over a painting in the loft studio. She had slipped up into the studio to see it. The pale face and black eyes of the Goth student still haunted her. There was an unnaturalness about the construction of that face, something she had criticised in his first painting of her. However she had seen Ivory as she had gone up to Martin's studio, and found her appearance breathtaking. As if the vision of her had somehow permeated her eyes and mind with a lingering presence.

She wondered if Martin could be having an affair. He hated his father for cheating on his mother. Martin had had very few relationships before he had met Jenny since his interest was too focussed on art. She had an idea that for Martin marriage was an expectation to be met. She

Ivory

guessed it was his mother's expectation, and he would do anything to please his mother after his father's betrayal. It was an achievement but not one he seemed to cherish. With the planned arrival of their first son, Oscar, a spark flared in Martin and he became a loving partner again. Having a child was possibly another expectation his mother had for him even though she had died by the time she had gotten pregnant. Everything had changed with their second, and unexpected, son. Maybe it tipped the balance of their lives too much towards being family orientated. Creativity and art had to be reprioritised. For a moment she felt sympathy for him, she understood what it was like to lose something of yourself, but these thoughts were just conjecture, and she had to guess because Martin didn't talk about these things. He ignored them and covered them with statements on how nothing was wrong, and with weekly and predictable love making and occasional romancing with flowers takeaways and cakes.

Ivory's strange features haunted her. Jenny was sure the girl couldn't be seen as attractive in the conventional sense, yet she couldn't shake the ghostly face from her mind, and even as she drifted into sleep the image of Ivory remained as a phantom companion waiting to share her journey into dreams. The presence of her worrying thoughts subsided. Half-sleeping, the edge of her concern dulled. The sorrow dispersed into an intoxicating fog that seemed to dissolve her body around a warmth deep in her abdomen. The heat was welcome and caused her heart to quiver, her breathing to slow, and her ghostly feeling limbs to ache for sensations. She was being touched. Martin had reached for her.

Martin floated, suspended in a cloying murky void that pressed against every part of his body and held him weightless. His outstretched arm disappeared into the gloom, creating sounds of muffled pleasure in someone beyond his depth of vision. Understanding the physics of his surreal environment he wriggled in the warm viscous fluid atmosphere that surrounded him and propelled himself forward. The pollution that clouded his surroundings broke into swirls around his motions but refused to dissolve or disperse, and he didn't get any closer to the soft warmth he could feel around his fingers.

Ivory

He could just discern a pale shape in the murk as an undefined female form. The clarity disturbed by ripples that drifted away from the movement of his arm. She was suspended above the surface of the bottomless depths where he swam, and his arm reached out and into her. His face came close to the surface of the thick fluid and her skin caught the light like polished marble in moonlight. The thought of her awakened every cell in his body with desire. He knew who she was and he wanted her.

He brought his knees to his chest, knowing that it would cause him to rise upwards. The surface broke over his face and the air hit him in a cold icy blast that numbed his flesh and shocked the breath from him. The thick fluid of the surface clung to his face and plugged his eye sockets, blotting his vision into a distorted mess. He frantically swiped at his eyes to see her.

Two black eyes stared down at him like pools of thick crude oil as deep and captivating as the slime that held him. Below the eyes the face was warmed by *that* smile. A hand broke the surface on either side of him in a spray of slimy muck. They gripped his shoulders and the surface rushed over his head as he was dragged down. He thrashed and struggled in the depths. He didn't recall needing to breathe when he had been under the surface before, but now his lungs clung to the single retained breath and ached with a desperation to draw in more. With all his strength he kicked his legs around, twisting himself on the spot and wrenching free of his attacker's grip.

A vicious face twisted into a snarl stared through murk stained red. A face with another face carved into it by cuts and scratches, blood drifting from them in threads that dissolved into the surroundings. A gargoyle of a face shrouded in red cobwebs. It opened its mouth and laughed with throaty demonic satisfaction before biting its yellow teeth together and growling in agony and knowledge "*We are the same, you and I!*"

Martin's scream destroyed the dream and he awoke above Jenny. He snatched his hand from inside her, oblivious to her yelp from the rough action, and scrambled off her and onto his side of the bed. Sweat cold on his back, her slickness cooling on his fingers. Jenny stumbled out from beneath the covers, clutched her groin through her

Ivory

nightdress and swore at him for hurting her. All Martin could do in his shocked state was stare at his hand as if it was stained with the sin of his lust while Jenny sobbed. “It wasn’t me, was it? It wasn’t me you were touching? It was her!”

Chapter Twelve

Martin was startled from sleep by the drone of the radio alarm clock sounding mid-song. He fumbled with the buttons and silenced it before rolling back. The quiet of the house filled the air with white noise. The world was holding its breath with him as he waited for Jenny to storm in and engulf him in one of her tempers.

She didn't come.

Martin lay motionless for some time until he was convinced Jenny was not going to come and confront him about the night before. He got out of bed and quietly tucked himself into his oversized towelling dressing gown. He crept to the top of the stairs and waited. The gentle hiss of silence in his ears was not disturbed by any sounds from downstairs. This was out of character for Jenny as she liked to deal with incidents between them at the earliest convenience. He had to find her and explain as much as he could and apologise for his actions, and lie about everything else. He shook his head ashamed at himself.

He reluctantly trudged from room to room and reset his slow mental countdown to confrontation with every door that he passed through and found that she was not there. First downstairs, then upstairs and finally into his studio. The house was empty. The black RAV4 they had bought to replace the written off Volvo was gone from across the road. There wasn't even a note in the kitchen. She always left him notes. Even after an argument the status quo would be maintained by a couple of sentences scribbled down somewhere as 'hello's', messages, reminders, instructions for chores. This time there was nothing.

It didn't feel the same as the usual aftermath of an argument. There was emptiness and a presence of finality in the atmosphere of the house. Jenny hadn't been her usual self since she had bumped into her old critic friend. She was taking pride in herself, making an effort with her appearance, wearing make-up. She had reverted back to the Jenny he had met when she had been working the art scene. He suddenly thought that he might never see Jenny come through the front door again, that in some way she had recently been preparing for this. A chilling relief washed through him. After struggling for so long with knowing that he was killing their relationship and being unable to know

Ivory

how or why, or being able to understand how he could maintain and save what they had, the end offered release from all the confusion. Yet he knew that the end of his family had somehow been due to him. The problems had been there all along, Ivory had just been a catalyst for the end. His father and King had been right about him after all.

Martin distracted himself from this conclusion by showering and dressing. He couldn't face breakfast though, and with his morning routine finished he dropped himself onto the sofa in the family room with nothing to do. His portrait of their family life stood before him above the mantelpiece. A view of the family room from the portraits perspective, looking out on children playing together on the floor, Jenny sitting in her chair with her legs tucked under her, a book in one hand and a glass of wine in the other, half-reading and half-observing the children. Martin on the sofa where he sat now, a glass of wine before him on the glass coffee table, a sketch pad propped up on his lap with some cushions, his face angled away from the scene in concentration on his work. It was a snap-shot of family life and a reminder of life before the black dog was at his back. It was a family scene that, despite the perfect likeness he had captured in every figure, was almost unrecognisable to him. He felt far removed from that life.

He couldn't find the motivation to move so he sat. Lost in numbness he passed the time watching the sunlight migrate down the wine coloured wall and onto the cream carpet. He considered watching it travel to the other wall and to wait for it to follow the same path the next day.

The doorbell rang a single blast that startled him into life. Electricity danced in his stomach and his breathing quickened. He swallowed and rushed to unlock and open the door. Ivory offered him a fleeting smile as a greeting and then stood expectantly in the rain, sheltering under a broad black umbrella slick with wet and running with the fall. Her appearance, although arranged on their previous appointment, took him by surprise. He broke free of his hesitation and hastened her in from the elements.

She shook the diamond drops from her umbrella onto the path then abruptly she looked up into his face with her deep vortex eyes, eyes that were all seeing. Feeling suddenly naked before her he rejected any

Ivory

consideration of his motives towards her and any ideas that he had lost Jenny and the kids. He was unsure if Ivory could sense his angst but he couldn't look into her eyes, not after the dream he had had. Eyes that trusted him. Eyes, that he hoped, saw him as someone different to her other punters. He couldn't bare the thought of her knowing about his dream and what he had been doing to her in it. He justified that it was just a dream. He couldn't think of such things in the conscious world, his mind was defiant of the temptation and had maintained the innocence of his motives and intentions, yet in his dream world his desires ruled. He couldn't be held accountable for dreams, their existence unexplained, and their inspiration, foundations and construction mysterious and anonymous. No one could judge him. She held him in the same intense stare that she had bored into him the night before when he had poured out his guilt over King.

“Terrible day isn't it?” he breezed taking her coat. Ignoring his vulnerability before her and the way her top clung to her body. “No need to get changed into that white robe-thing today, I just want to work on your face. Finishing touches.” She declined the offer of a drink and they went straight up to the loft room.

Martin stared at the almost finished painting, the fine details of the face were the last task. It had been a pleasure and a challenge he had wanted to savour and give a whole session over to. The light was completely different today due to the grey overcast sky, so he improvised with a daylight bulb from his desk lamp. He settled before the painting and conducted his ritual of looking between the subject and the canvas, but today, focussing so much time and attention on the face seemed like a torturous intimacy after his subconscious betrayal of her and himself. He didn't know how to act as those eyes seemed to tear away at his composure. He didn't know if he could cope with the session and was both relieved and pained that it would be their last session together. The painting would be finished and there would be no reason to see her again.

“I hope you don't mind, but I am going to take a few photographs again just in case I need to come back to work on the likeness in your absence. The pictures of you from my 35mm camera

Ivory

came out distorted. It must have been the light or bad film, so I thought I would use a digital camera.” Without using the LCD view finder he framed her and took a series of shots, trying to ignore the memory of King as he did so. He turned the screen on intending a cursory check that the pictures had been stored but his attention was caught by the poor quality of the images. It was subtle, but there was some minor pixilation in places and a few areas of distorted focus. He shook his head dismissively.

“Sorry I think this is playing up now. I must be jinxed. Just one more try.” Martin switched to the LCD view finder and scanned it around the room. Despite the motion blur from his movement it didn’t suffer any other distortions. He levelled the camera in Ivory’s direction and the small screen pixelated into visible squares and then blurred and distorted with the rainbow of colours the screen used to provide the image. “Odd.” He caught himself saying aloud with a little embarrassment. A quick glance at Ivory showed she hadn’t reacted, nor had her head become a collection of little squares, an indefinite blur, or developed a rainbow aura. He trained the camera away from Ivory’s face and the screen’s crisp image returned, but flickered and broke up as he once more aimed it at Ivory. He went cold. Absently he switched the camera off and set it down, almost missing the easel shelf in his distraction.

King had explained the distortions on his photographs as bad lighting. Richard had complained that he had been unable to capture Ivory’s likeness. Martin had also experienced the same difficulties. He recalled overhearing one of his Goth students state that the vampire myth and folk tales of Eastern Europe described how vampires did not have a reflection in mirrors, nor could their image be drawn or photographed. Vampires! He dismissed it. He had seen her reflection in the mirror on the landing AND most obviously Vampires didn’t exist. He stifled a laugh at the ridiculous connection his mind had made but the uneasy strangeness of the situation refused to leave him.

After three hours and several layers of pain the face had gained accurate shades, texture and detail. He hesitated over her vacuous black eyes, his brush wetted with brilliant white oil poised over one of the twin black holes he had painted on the canvas. He stared intently into

Ivory

her real eyes and studied the play of light. He swallowed, uneasy with the intimate engagement with eyes that stripped him down to his base fears and needs. A few stabs of the brush into the blackness on his canvas and her eyes took on their obsidian sparkle.

Ivory was no vampire! Martin had captured her likeness.

He beamed to himself. He had succeeded where King and Richard had failed. The joy of success suddenly reduced everything into insignificance. The strangeness of Ivory, her thrall over him, the problems in his marriage all dissolved before the perfect image of her beauty captured like a butterfly in ice.

“It’s finished,” he announced.

Ivory kept her gaze on Martin as she crossed the room and walked around the easel until she stood face to face with herself. She angled her head and stared for what seemed like an age. She raised her hand and her gaze passed between the real and painted appendage. She stroked her face, as if exploring its shape and texture for the first time. She reached out to her painted self’s face.

“Don’t!” Martin blurted, then added more calmly, “It will be months before the paint is touch dry and even then it shouldn’t really be touched until it is sealed.” There was a feathery quiver in his throat and stomach as he wondered if she like the portrait.

He had his sense of achievement at having captured her likeness and rediscovered his talent, but his interest in her had refused to lift. He had exorcised the urge to paint her from his mind yet he was no closer to understanding her appearance, the relationship she had with Ebony or why she sold herself. He wanted to know what she was like, what her life was like beyond the few things he knew about her, what she thought of what she did, what she thought of Ebony, of the world... of Martin. Although the question that troubled him the most was what did *he* want?

Martin heard the key grit against the lock and felt a draft from the front door as it opened. He acted as casually as he could at hearing Jenny return, but he felt like laughing at his ridiculous and irrational fears that she had left him. The whole time he had been preparing the apology meal he had been wondering if she might never return. He shuddered

Ivory

against a chill. She was still standing in the open door with the rain teeming down behind her.

“Close the door, it’s cold.” Jenny obeyed but still stood at the end of the hall. Face passive. Martin offered a weak smile from the kitchen door and dried his hands on a tea-towel. “Kids with friends? Why don’t you run upstairs and get changed and we can sit down and eat together. I am going to make us spaghetti Bolognese and I have a bottle of wine ready to go.”

Jenny smiled weakly but there was clearly no feeling behind it. “Sounds nice. But I’m not really feeling up to eating or drinking.” Her hair was plastered to her head and the sides of her face, the fringe sharpened into thorns by the rain. The water dripped audibly onto the floor. She held her position until Martin lost his smile and set down the tea-towel to one side.

Martin sagged and he couldn’t look her in the eye. “It’s about last night isn’t it? I’m so sorry. I was asleep when I started what I did, and I had a nightmare. When I woke up I was startled...”

“Disorientated. Yes, I know, you said already.” Jenny walked down the hallway and Martin found himself retreat into the middle of the kitchen. “I’m not sure I believe you, but I accept your apology.”

He experienced a mix of panic and indignation. “You don’t believe me?”

“I think when you looked at me and recoiled last night you did so because you thought I was someone else.”

“Who?” He threw his hands in the air in a gesture of incredulity.

Jenny clenched her eyes and pressed the thumb and forefinger of one hand against them. “It doesn’t matter. You have explained yourself, and I can’t really argue any differently.” She opened her eyes again and there was a hardness in them. She spoke as if she had rehearsed the moment. “I said to you last week that I wondered how long it would take for you to neglect me and Oscar and Fin again, and we didn’t have to wait long did we? You have spent so much time with your student, that girl. I called Bea and asked after her, I described the girl to her and she said she didn’t know of any such student, nor did Donnie. I was so embarrassed.”

“It’s a big university.”

Ivory

“And the guilt that you have on your face now?” Jenny shrugged. “I have seen flashes of it when she arrives and leaves, and you do your damndest not to talk about her. I don’t know what that means, whether you’re having an affair...” he objected but she closed her eyes against him and talked over his bluster. “or this is an affair in the making, or this is all in my head, it doesn’t matter because it’s not just about this. We aren’t a married couple, we aren’t a family. You can only be those things if everyone plays their part.”

“I play my part,” he was surprised by his anger when he knew she was right.

“Yes, you do. Poor choice of words on my part but an accurate description for you to use; you ‘play your part’. To be married and to make a family you need to give yourself over to it, and you only give a 110 percent to your work – your art.”

He bowed his head. “I’m sorry.”

“I know. I genuinely believe you are, but it’s too late. I have been holding the marriage and the family together myself and I am fed up with it.”

“What are you saying?”

“I haven’t been at work today and the children aren’t at friends. I ran them down to Surrey to my parents. I came back to tell you that I don’t want to do this anymore.”

He was starting to give over to panic. “No, don’t do this to me. We can do this. I will give up my private work, just focus on university work. I can change my ways.”

Jenny clapped her hands to her face and ran them down under her chin until she held her own throat. “You aren’t listening to me. Even if you could change, I don’t want to do this.”

Martin was crushed. He had feared this happening but not really expected it. It was all so unreal. “Do the kids know?”

Jenny’s hands dropped away from her neck and she picked at her nails. Now she couldn’t look him in the eye. “I’m going to tell them tomorrow. I didn’t want a scene.”

“How can you do this to them.” He meant ‘me’.

Ivory

“Yes, there will be tears. But there have been tears already because of the arguments and your absence. The irony is I think they have become used to you only being in the background already.”

A sensation ran-through him but he didn’t know how to feel it. “They need to be here, they have school on Monday.” All he could do was offer practicalities that might cause her to rethink the decision.

“I will let the school know what’s going on. I will get some work from them, mum can get back into teacher mode at the drop of a hat so she can keep them ticking over until we sort something out.”

“You don’t mean it.” He grabbed desperately.

“I do Martin. It’s over. Done. Finished.”

Suddenly Martin was frightened, his fate seemed sealed, as though the moral vows of his marriage had been all that stood between him and the danger that Richard had warned him about, between the side of him that his father and King had recognised. He found himself collapse and he struggled to catch his breath around sobs that wracked his body and caused his eyes and nose to stream. He reached out for her and begged. “Please. Stay!”

Jenny pulled away, her eyes running, but her face passive as she shook her head. She turned away from him then froze. He knew what she had seen and only in that moment realised how insensitive and reckless he had been. Jenny strode into the lounge and pointed at the completed portrait of Ivory that he had hung on the chimney breast in place of the family portrait.

“What’s this?”

“No, no, no. It’s not how it looks. I had just finished it, I was so pleased with it I hung it there so I could see it in a better light.”

Jenny planted her hands on her hips, bowed her head and shook it to herself.

“It’s not how it looks.” His hands pulled desperately at his hair and he trembled with his wracking tears. “I LOVE YOU!” he roared. The outburst startled Jenny, and she seemed shocked at his disintegration, but she still shook her head in denial. “*I do, I do, I do,*” he chanted continually, swaying on legs buckling under him.

Jenny charged over to the teak roll-top bureau in the nearest alcove, probed through the mess of papers within and pulled something

Ivory

out, she returned to the painting. “You might care Martin, you just might. But it needs to be demonstrated from time to time. You just don’t show it. You have let our relationship, our family slide in priority.” She held a paper knife to Ivory’s painted face as if she was holding her hostage. “Choose then. Choose me, your kids or this girl, and your art. Give us everything that you try and channel into them!”

“What?” Martin asked, shocked out of his breakdown. “Get away from that painting.” Martin’s voice was calm but edged with a menace that frightened him in its conception. “That is unfair! It has taken every ounce of my being to create that! I have finally got my art back.”

“An interest and passion you should have been using on me and the kids, and at what cost?” Jenny kept the blade level with Ivory’s face. “CHOOSE.”

Martin trembled, he needed Jenny, he needed the painting, he was confused and suddenly unsure which choice would lead to saving the painting. Jenny needed to be away from the canvas. With the work out of danger he could think things through more clearly and then he could decide. Martin stepped towards the painting to get between the blade and the canvas, but he suddenly realised she had read his action as a move to save the portrait. Jenny drew her arm with the blade back, ready to slash at Ivory’s face. He had seconds to save his work.

Jenny flew to one side before he realised he had actually knocked her in that direction with the back of his hand. There was pain in his upper thigh and he pressed his hand against it. The paperknife had caught him as her arms had flailed out to save herself. He pulled his hand away briefly and found his palm smeared with blood. Jenny was seated on the floor between the sofa and the bureau with her back against the wall. She sat, stunned for a few moments, before she clambered awkwardly to her feet. Speckles of blood marked the crest of her cheek bone from where his strike had broken her skin.

“I’m so sorry. I panicked. I didn’t know what to do.”

Jenny snatched at her hand and threw something at him. Her wedding band hit him hard in the face under his eye and clacked off the coffee table onto the floor. She shoved Martin aside and disturbed his wound, the fresh shock of pain buckled his leg and he stumbled, his calf

Ivory

muscle hit the sharp corner of the coffee table and he fell backwards. For a fleeting second the images of his leg wound and the glass coffee table competed in dominating his mind. King's injury. King's fate. Martin fell backward clutching desperately at the air in terror.

Martin landed heavily on the carpet. The coffee table beside him. Winded from the impact he lay there, unable to move and listened to Jenny slam the front door closed behind her as she left him. His eyes fixated on the portrait of Ivory that towered above him like a deity in judgement. He wanted to hate Ivory, but the only hate he had was for himself.

He needed to be free of her. Destroying the picture was out of the question. It had resurrected his talent. It was finished though, and there was no excuse to see her again. They had hardly developed a relationship during their time together. Not enough validation to ingratiate himself in her life any further, or her in his. Ivory was gone and out of his life, as he surely knew she would be, yet he had allowed his time with her to come between his marriage and his family.

He wondered if looking at the portrait of Ivory be a substitute for Ivory herself, or whether he could bring himself to buy Ivory's time as a companion. Considering all the things she would have had to have done in her past, companionship would be innocent. She may even grow to like the time with him, appreciate the money and not having to degrade herself. What would he do with that hour? Sixty minutes of time, three thousand, six hundred seconds of gaping emptiness and an unrelenting call he still wanted to deny.

Without Jenny and the kids he had a sense of freedom that terrified him, like a caged thing released into the great outdoors. Had he been freed to become his father? To become King? No. He had to stay away from Ivory. He had let his obsession end his marriage, his family. He would stay away from her. Get a counsellor. Pursue Jenny again. Be a husband. Be a lover. Be a father.

The phone rang and startled him, scattering his strengthening resolve. He struggled up from the floor and slumped onto the sofa and snatched the phone up from the side-table. A familiar but unexpected male voice greeted him. Martin's hope that it would be Jenny plummeted. It was Richard. There was stress in his voice.

“Ivory is in trouble.”

Ivory

Chapter Thirteen

Martin relaxed into the driver's seat of the Focus and surveyed the boarded houses of Arven Road and the grey rusting railway bridge that crossed it. The few street lights that actually worked burned with a brilliant futility against the night that draped the fronts of the houses and swamped the overgrown gardens. The orange light that puddled beneath the lamps illuminated those small areas but made the surrounding shadows thicker and impenetrable. Occasionally a girl or a lone man would cross the islands of light or could be picked out of the dirty orange gloom by a movement in an alley or doorway. King's flat, blackened with soot that stretched up from broken windows, was a husk filled with destruction that stared back at him accusingly. Martin knew King was dead but Martin had an unnerving sense that the danger and vice lurked beneath the paving slabs and in the cracked facades of the buildings as a malevolent presence.

"King's flat was torched. Might have been the girls celebrating King being out of their life, might have been pimps from rival patches. Whoever King fought with that night did something a lot of people had only dreamt about. He was only one man, but by all accounts he was a mad bastard with connections that he could call on if he had trouble."

Martin listened as Richard explained that it had long been expected that King had paid thugs to rough up the girls in the area, kind of a racket so that they would welcome his protection and pay the necessary price. Some of the same thugs were sent by King when the girls played him up.

With King out of the way the girls had found they could earn more and work less without King's increasing protection money and threats of violence if they failed to pay up. However, King's protection had also gone and several girls near the area had gone missing, suspected to have been swiped by an eastern European sex gang who kept their girls as prisoners in underground brothels pocketing all the money for themselves. The girl's no more than slaves. Richard had learned from a transvestite lad who sometimes worked Arven that other pimps were reputed to be fighting over the territory and the girls were being drawn into the ensuing fights. Richard's source had warned that

Ivory

the European gang were planning on taking King's best girls in a swoop that night. Ivory would be at the top of the list.

Martin had agreed that they should warn Ivory, but doubted there was any urgency as he had paid her for three hours of her time that day and thought that would have made her all the money she would need that day, especially now that King would not be taking a cut of it. Despite this rationalisation Martin had dressed his wounded leg and driven here, picking Richard up on the way. He had to be sure of Ivory's safety. Martin had suggested driving to her house to warn her, but Richard had insisted they drive to Arven as any wasted time was time where Ivory could be vulnerable if she was on the street. They had waited for an hour, and they had agreed that if she didn't arrive soon then Richard would wait for her at Arven and Martin would drive around to her home, just to ensure that they found her.

"You know, some people think Ivory killed King?"

Martin couldn't look at Richard. "I doubt that!"

"Who knows, under the right circumstances we are all capable of things we would never ordinarily consider."

Martin certainly had been.

A blue Ford Transit van crawled down the road and parked in the shadow of the bridge leaving only the rear clearly visible. The doors were battered and scraped and the dirty windows were plastered with carrier bags from within.

"Trouble?"

Richard shrugged and they both watched the van. The engine idled but it didn't go anywhere. The darkness made it difficult to tell if anyone got out or in through the cab doors.

Ten minutes later a battered red Nissan Bluebird T12 cruised up behind the van. Ivory stepped out of the car straightened her dress and coat down around her legs and pocketed a roll of money into her coat pocket. She offered the driver a warm smile through the window but when she straightened, it withered and her bland blank face returned. She had a face for punters.

Martin turned to Richard and told him that he would go and warn Ivory. He returned his attention to Ivory's position and the rakish driver of the Nissan leapt out of the car, rounded the front and threw his

Ivory

arms around Ivory. He gripped his hands together at her chest and pinned her arms to her side and shouted something, the rear doors of the Transit were thrown open a bald barrel of a man jumped down from the back to receive their captive.

“Come on!” Richard growled as he leapt from the car and hit the road running. His large feet clobbering the street.

Martin fumbled with the door and clumsily lurched out after him, but was stopped dead by his seat belt. The momentum of Richard’s rally was lost and he unceremoniously dropped back into his seat side-saddle fashion. He stubbed the button frantically and flailed his way out of the belt and jogged awkwardly after Richard, his injured leg protesting and his heart jack-hammering in his chest as he sped, terrified, into uncertainty.

Richard startled him by suddenly roaring out; “Police – STOP!” as a battle cry. It worked to startle panic and caution the pair that had Ivory. Without adjusting his speed Richard entangled with the gangly attacker, his momentum carrying the three of them scuffling up against a wall, the attacker and Ivory forced to steady themselves from tumbling over into the garden.

The large man launched himself with surprising speed and hooked a meaty arm round Richard’s neck. Martin could only watch from his distance as Richard’s attacker twisted sharply around and peeled Richard from the lanky man and bent him over into a headlock. Richard recovered his wits quickly and stamped a boot down on the man’s trainer. It had little effect but Richard was not deterred and rained down a series of snappy stamps on the man’s foot. The fat man eventually snatched his foot away and Richard took immediate advantage of his imbalance and lurched forward. The man was immediately overbalanced and forced to loose his grip as he steadied himself again the doorframe of the van. In that split second of weakness Richard tugged himself free and planted three jabs into the man’s face sending him tumbling backwards onto the floor of the van.

Although the tall man still held Ivory from behind, Ivory had leant her body against him and used her legs to push her into him and pin his lower half against the wall. His struggle against her and to keep his balance afforded her a chance to break from his grip. Martin ran

Ivory

towards them but before he could reach them Ivory retaliated against her attacker. With an unnaturally agility she abruptly doubled over, her hair flicking forward, then snapped back as if her waist was a spring-loaded hinge. Her hair whipped the air and the back of her skull destroyed the man's nose and lips. Clutching the bloody pulp he reeled back, arching over the wall and offering his fleshy groin up to a blow that she delivered from her elbow. He doubled up and tumbled over the wall and out of sight.

Ivory stepped away from the struggle as the image of calmness. Richard froze before her, transfixed by her like a deer caught in headlights. The large man leapt out of the van behind Richard with a length of brutal metal pipe brandished in his thick fingers.

Martin slammed into the van door and carried it closed with his momentum against the man's knees. A garbled scream echoed from within the van, followed by a loud thud as he crashed down onto his back.

"I think. We should. Get. Out of. Here." Martin panted, breaking the moment of standoff between Ivory and Richard as she suddenly associated Richard with Martin. "We heard. Something was going. To happen tonight. And that you might. Be in danger," Martin answered her frown. Richard seemed incapable of speech and was just staring at Ivory. Possibly in shock from the skirmish, but with his unblinking stare at Ivory Martin was unsure.

The bushes of the garden trembled and a clumsy and noisy clambering from the back of the van signalled that their attackers were stirring. Martin panicked and beckoned for Ivory to follow. She looked unconcerned at first, but then she appeared to recognise that Martin had his car waiting and decided to follow. Richard matched her pace and kept beside her the way he had seen bodyguards do on TV. Ivory accepted the door Martin opened for the back seat, but he left her to shut it behind her as he scrambled back into the drivers seat to make their getaway. Martin turned the keys and the car coughed into life while the man clambered over the garden wall and was joined by the staggering fat man. Martin waggled the gear stick into reverse, turned in his seat so he could see out the rear window and pumped the accelerator. The Focus responded, whining backwards down the road as the two

Ivory

attackers ran to the front of the van. Martin yanked the wheel of his car around as they emerged from Arven, shifted gear and sped into the night, knowing that the van would be in pursuit.

Chapter Fourteen

The rain drummed against the roof, the traction of the tyres on the waterlogged roads hushed, thrashed puddles hissed, and the windscreen wipers whispered and squealed, whispered and squealed back and forth. Neither Martin or Richard had spoken since their escape with Ivory. They sat in the gloom of the orange and white streetlights that passed overhead and were continually vigilant for any pursuers. The quiet and the dark was a comforting temporal sanctuary where Martin could avoid talking about the plans they didn't have. His body still protested against the stress of their escape with an uncomfortable heat and urgency in his bowels and a sickly sweat on his body. He was content to put as much distance between them and Ivory's attackers, even if it meant criss-crossing the city from one outskirt to another.

He gripped the wheel tightly, giving him a firm control over the car should he need to make a sudden diversion and lose anyone suspicious in his rear-view mirror. His eyes flicked from the road to the mirror as a peak in the sound of traffic caught his attention. A car had pulled sharply out of a road about five cars back. He squinted against the scintillant headlights in the glass, desperate to make out the detail of the large boxy vehicle, his stomach fluttered. It was a dark Cortina mark V not the Nissan Bluebird. He realised how hunched he had become and relaxed back into his seat.

He was relieved Richard had been with him back at Arven as his strength and courage to fight had driven Martin into action. Conflict was not something that had ever been part of his life and was not in his nature. Martin knew the limitations of his physique and temperament, although when he had seen Ivory in trouble he had an unsettling sense that he would have done anything to protect her.

Ivory sat in the middle of the back seat, her dark eyes ploughing the road ahead with a fixed stare. Richard had withdrawn into thoughts he was keeping to himself and sat with his head rested against the passenger window. Martin chanced another look at Ivory in the mirror and was startled to catch her all consuming eyes staring back at him.

He focussed on the road then back to Ivory in the mirror. "Are you okay?"

Ivory

She snapped out a nod. She seemed to decide the gesture needed warming, maybe because of the risk Martin and Richard had taken in rescuing her, and gave her smudge of a smile. It held such innocence despite the life of vice and danger that she led.

Headlights burned a path through the car and blazed out of the rear-view mirror. He squinted against the stinging phantom of the light from his eyes and glanced at his side mirror. A dark transit van had cut into their road right behind them and drew in close to their rear. The brute of a vehicle pulled out into the other line of traffic as soon as it got the opportunity and sped up to level with them. Martin checked his speed. He was doing the speed limit for this area. The van's cab was level with his door but he couldn't see into the gloom beyond the windows. Martin lifted his foot gingerly off of the accelerator and the van pulled across them. The vehicle was dark dirty and battered but there were no shopping bags at the doors windows. It wasn't their attackers. He sighed. He had to relax. They had been driving around the area for forty-minutes now and he had taken enough twists and turns to ensure their safety.

Richard seemed to read his thoughts when he spoke; "What now?"

Martin glanced at Richard and then back at the road, he shifted his grip on the wheel uncomfortably. "Got any ideas?"

"Take her home?"

There was a strange look in Richard's face, a hesitant expression looking to test Martin's response. Martin looked to Ivory who had leant forward in her seat at the suggestion. "You want to go home?" Ivory answered him with a nod. "Then we take her home." Martin flicked his indicators and steered the vehicle into a turning that would take them in the direction of Islington. Richard rested his head back against the window and his curious look had gone.

Martin and Richard discussed the possibility of their being a trap as a welcoming. They decided that Martin would pull the car into a space at the top of Ivory's road and keep the engine idling while Richard got out and checked further down the road near Ivory's home for anything or anyone suspicious.

Ivory

Richard stared cautiously about him and crossed to the pavement opposite Ivory's side of the street and stalked off in the direction of her house. He kept close to the walls and casually looked about the gloomy street. The lighting was adequate but the lines of parked cars on each side of the road, and the privets and box bushes in the majority of the gardens obscured the pavement with thick murky shadows. Recognising the rambling bushes that topped the wall of Ivory's house he stepped into the concealing fall of shadow beneath the dense branches of an ornamental cherry tree and studied the rows of cars nearby.

The transit obviously wasn't parked and waiting, but the Nissan would be harder to spot from a distance, especially with the spotted light and shadow. There weren't any visible lights on in Ivory's house. He couldn't help but wonder what it looked like inside. Despite the worrying obsession he had had with Ivory he had never had the courage to call at her door as such an action would have committed him in a direction that frightened him.

Richard's jacket and tee shirt suddenly tightened around him and he was yanked backwards and then pitched forward with force. He stumbled over his own feet and fell. He glimpsed the large box bush that spilled over the wall of a garden in front of him, and he clutched his eyes closed as he tumbled face first into the dense mass of sharply pointed twigs. The bush stabbed and clawed at the bare skin of his face and neck, and mauled his hands as they paddled the bush for something solid to steady himself against.

He was kicked in the back of the knee and his legs buckled under him. The scratching foliage hissed and crackled noisily around him as his weight pushed his head and shoulders further into the bush. His hands found the gritty paving slabs and he quickly backed out of the bush on his hands and knees, the knee that had been struck felt heavy and throbbed sickeningly, but his face and hands burnt with a fiery pain that overwhelmed his aching knee. He emerged from the bush but before he could get his bearings he glimpsed a boot swung in his direction. The kick made contact with his stomach and sent him crashing onto his side and left him winded.

The mouth and chin of the man that attacked him was a messy smudge of dried blood run with fresh tracks. It was the lanky man that

Ivory

had grabbed Ivory. The boot returned to Richard's prone torso with an impact that sent him scuffing several inches across the pavement. He rolled onto his back, his abdomen painfully bruised, his breaths catching in his chest. Before he could recover, Richard's head ricocheted off the pavement and his world went black as pain exploded across his face from a jab from the man's fist. He clutched his face and balled himself up on his side waiting for the next hit.

It didn't come.

He blinked through the tears that welled in his eyes and squinted through his fingers. The man was standing over him with a mobile phone held to his ear. He snapped something in a tongue Richard didn't understand and ended the call. Undoubtedly calling for the thug in the van. The man dropped to his haunches over Richard.

"Where is the bitch that did this to my face?"

Richard struggled to orientate himself, unsure if his body would support him in escaping, let alone hitting back. Richard decided to test it. The man fell backwards clutching his face in a howl of agony. Well, his arm worked. It hadn't been capable of a punch, but a drunken slap against the man's pulverised nose had been all that was needed. Richard scrambled along the ground, dropping to his knees with each attempt at placing a foot on the ground to support himself. His aching leg was pulled away from him and he found himself sprawled on his front with the man clinging onto his ankle from his own prone position. Richard kicked awkwardly at the man's head with his other foot, surprisingly it made contact and Richard threw more vigour into his efforts and delivered a rain of kicks until the grip loosened and he was able to break free.

He hobbled down the road, cursing having arranged for Martin to park so far down the street, not daring to falter his pace and look back to see if the man had recovered his pursuit. Richard started at hearing his name called out and looked to the source. Martin had left the parking space and driven down to Richard. With a wash of relief he hastened over to the purring car that trembled, as if held back on a leash, and slipped through the door that was open and waiting for him. He barely had time to shut it behind him before the car accelerated to escape.

Ivory

Martin spared a slumped and battered looking Richard a glance to make sure he was settled then returned his attention to the road and a determined escape. He had seen the dark hulking van draw into the street and knew they couldn't leave Ivory there. The van would now undoubtedly be picking up the lanky thug before giving chase, giving them precious seconds to gain a lead in their escape.

Martin kept driving, his heart in his throat and his arms and legs tense at the wheel and pedals, the transit van haunted his rear-view mirror. He kept to the busier main roads, they didn't allow for speed but they had late opening shops and he hoped that the presence of other traffic and people would deter the men from making a move. After an hour of this the transit van pulled away seemingly losing interest.

"Now what?" Martin asked.

"I guess we have to take her somewhere else." The strange expectation had returned to Richard's face, as if he considered Martin's question rhetorical. "Yours?" There was a challenging edge to his voice.

"Or yours." Martin countered with his own challenge.

"No." Richard snapped in quick reaction. His tone softened as he continued. "Will Jenny mind?"

"Okay. Mine it is then." Martin stated, then shifted his attention to Ivory. "Are you okay with that? It might be too dangerous to return you home, they could be waiting again. Maybe take you home tomorrow when it is light?" Ivory nodded. Richard asked to be taken home to his flat with an expression of distaste that Martin puzzled at.

Checking they hadn't been followed they pulled up on Kingsland Road and Martin helped the limping Richard to his door next to the café they had sat and chatted in. Martin followed Richard's glance up to the illuminated window in his flat.

"You have someone at home?"

"Shaun. The blonde you caught me with." Richard didn't seem very happy about him.

"That's good. He can give you a hand cleaning those wounds up. I would imagine you will be glad of the company tonight."

Richard nodded, but there was doubt on his face, and he was seemingly staring off into nothingness. Martin followed his gaze and found that he was actually staring at Ivory.

Ivory

“Are you going to be okay?”

Richard waved away any concern. “I will be fine.”

Martin was sure that in a couple of days he would be healing nicely, many of his wounds were superficial scratches and grazes, he was more concerned what affect his latest involvement with Ivory had had on him.

Richard broke away from staring at Ivory and fumbled with his keys, then hesitated and before Martin could leave he caught his arm. “You didn’t answer my question back in the car.” Richard stated with a firm tone. “Will Jenny mind?”

Martin knew he could lie but he decided that honesty that appeared innocent would be settle more comfortably between them, better to appear naïve than show an understanding of where Richard was trying to lead him. “Jenny left me today.”

Richard visibly deflated and stared at Martin for some time obviously concerned and trying to read his face for answers. “Martin... What are you doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. Why are you allowing yourself to be drawn into her life?”

“You called me!” Martin echoed Richard’s despair.

“I know I did,” he conceded softly. “But I didn’t realise you had allowed her to come between you and your family.”

“That’s assuming that Ivory is the cause,” Martin retorted indignantly.

Richard groaned and shrugged in a gesture of surrender. “Kid yourself if you like, but remember I know what it’s like to feel what you are feeling. I stopped myself just in time.”

“You take Ivory in then.” Martin suggested, knowing what Richard’s reaction would be.

“No. I can’t – and I won’t.” Richard snapped.

“You are scared!” Martin scoffed incredulously.

“Yes.” Richard admitted gravely. “And now I am scared for you.”

Chapter Fifteen

Martin turned the Focus's engine off after allowing it to idle for sometime, ready to pull away should he need to. He kept his hand on the key in the ignition and surveyed the street again. The cooling engine ticked and became a metronome for his breathing, the slow pace became uncomfortable and he broke the pattern by taking some deep breaths against his anxiety. The daylight helped steady his nerves, and he hadn't seen either vehicles that the Eastern European's had used the previous night, but returning to Ivory's Road still held an element of risk that he couldn't ignore. Martin slid the key from the engine and bunched them into his fist, but he still sat for a moment and had a quick look around. There was no apparent trap.

He got out of the car and cautiously checked both directions of the pavement. There was only an elderly woman walking an excitable Bichon Frise in his direction. Martin opened the gate to Ivory's house and stalked purposefully up the gravel path to the door. There was no anxiety about calling on Ebony this time. He wasn't calling in the hope of speaking to Ivory, he didn't have to worry about getting past Ebony or seeking his permission to speak to her. The sky was clear, the sun was bright and the air was alive with a crisp cool clarity that complimented his elation. Martin was here to tell Ebony that Ivory was at his and that she was safe. He had the upper hand and there had been a buoyancy in his heart and his step since he had woken up beside Ivory that morning.

He rapped the tarnished knocker sharply. After a long wait the door opened and Ebony filled the doorway, his club-like staff brandished in one hand and the door held firm in the other, it was a strangely commanding and defensive position, but the confidence in his stern face was betrayed by the vacant stare of his blind eyes that settled over Martin's shoulder.

"Who is there?"

"Martin... Martin Roberts. Ivory has been sitting for me. Remember?"

"I am not infirm of mind. Of course I remember. The man of virtuous intentions." Ebony smirked on the tail of his drawl. Martin

Ivory

recognised his knowing look and tone now, and in previous encounters, as the same suspicion and doubt that had lingered behind Richard's questions about Martin's involvement with Ivory. They had both seen that Martin hadn't been innocent in his pursuit of Ivory.

"Where is she?" Ebony asked bluntly, but with an edge of uncertainty beneath his demand.

Ebony and Richard had both been wrong. Yes, there had been lust last night, a passion he hadn't known before, not even in his very first experiences. Perhaps Jenny had been a mistake, maybe that hadn't been love, and that was why he had had to work at being a husband. "Ivory is with me. There was some trouble at Arven Road, and although I intervened we were followed back here and it wasn't safe for her to return to you."

"Trouble?"

"It would appear some people are trying to take over the area where Ivory works, and they saw her as somewhat of a prize."

"As most men do." The muscles of Ebony's face flickered in consideration of something unseen, then his eyes narrowed. "So she *told* you she did not feel safe to return?"

"No, of course not," Martin defended in an irritated bluster. "But, it was dangerous, she was attacked and then we were followed."

"I prefer her to return to me," there was a purring tone, but the pronunciation was precise and made his desire a demand.

"We did try, but as I said, we were followed by the men that attacked her at Arven Road."

"Attacked by how many?"

"Two."

"And she was overpowered by them?" Ebony asked with a curious disbelief that Martin didn't understand. As if two was a trifling number for her to be attacked by.

Martin's face burned and his breathing became humid and stifled, unsure of the direction of Ebony's questioning. "Well, no. She fought off one of them, and I was helped by someone else to fend off the other one. I'm not sure that I know what you are getting at..."

"Ivory is quite capable of caring for herself, Mr Roberts."

"I couldn't just stand by and let her be endangered could I?"

Ivory

“No,” he paused in consideration of Martin’s involvement and then spoke. “Of course you couldn’t,” he agreed softly but his blind eyes narrowed, then widened and his expression warmed and softened, Ebony stepped aside and took the door with him. “Please come in. How rude of me to interrogate you on the doorstep when you have shown such virtuous actions towards my ward, and consideration of my feelings in coming to assure me of her well-being.”

Martin hesitated, surprised by the sudden turn in his reception and deterred by the uninviting gloom of the hallway, made claustrophobic through the walls being used to prop towering piles of old and mouldering books and yellowing papers. Ebony closed the door behind him.

“Please, follow the hallway round to the door at the back. I believe I left it open. You can tell me how Ivory is and what time I can expect her to return.”

There was a presence in his tone, the ghost of mockery and insincerity. Martin picked his way through the hallway nonetheless, intrigued to see more of the house where Ivory lived, hoping to gain more insight into her life. He scanned the papers pages and covers of books that faced him from the top of the piles around him. The papers held meticulous sketch-work studies similar to those in the *Gray’s Anatomy* he encouraged his students to study for life work. Most of the books were all leather bound and their titles engraved or embossed or worn away, he didn’t recognise any of them as English, several of Latin and German. The hallway was musty with old paper and dust.

In the space at the bottom of the stairs an old arcade machine stood incongruously among the books and papers. It was a large wooden box with glass windows in the front and sides, a life-size wooden torso dressed as a sultan sat within. The ventriloquist dummy head was topped with a faded gold turban and a stack of Tarot Cards sat face down next to its upturned wooden paddle hand. Engraved on the cabinet in an excited font, with peeling gold paint filling the letters, were the words; “The GREAT MEPHISTO!”

Martin noticed that the light switch in the hall was a black bakelite toggle switch fixed on a mahogany mounting block, the wiring ran up the surface of the wall into the ceiling, suggesting that electricity

Ivory

had been added to the house as an afterthought, reinforcing his initial impression that this house was much older than the others in the street. Maybe the neighbourhood had grown up around this one house. Islington was relatively new, before 1830 the area had been commons, fields and market gardens.

The wallpaper of the lounge was as tired and faded as that in the hall, and in some places it was unable to keep on reaching to the ceiling and folded over on itself revealing bare plaster. Despite the rooms worn appearance a crisp light flooded through the French doors of the far wall and gave the room a freshness and sense of space that the seemingly subterranean dusty atmosphere of the hallway had lacked. Martin made his way to one of the two leather sofas, their stuffing punished from repeated use.

“Please, take a seat. Can I get you a drink? A smoke?” Martin accepted the seat but declined the other offers.

“How is my Ivory?” Ebony sat, lit a cigarillo and took a long draw on it.

“She is well. She didn’t seem shaken by the experiences.” There were more books stacked around the room, but less of them and in a neater fashion, and appeared to be more modern publications with paper laminated covers in a variety of vibrant colours.

“How is your painting going?”

“It’s finished.”

Ebony paused and held a draw of breath, allowing blue tendrils of smoke to drift out of his mouth like the probing tentacles of a brooding octopus. He exhaled, shattering the illusion and ended the consideration that was behind his pause. “I am a keen artist also.”

“What medium?”

“Sketch, painting, sculpture – I like to create. I am limited to sculpture since my blindness.”

“Yes. Losing your sight must be difficult.”

“Small sacrifice.”

“Your sight?” Martin frowned at his flippancy.

Ebony fixed him in a sightless stare and shifted in his seat, a brief look of uncertainty poised on his face as if Ebony had said too much, the thought didn’t settle long and he dismissed it and settled back

Ivory

down. “I mean the loss of being able to draw and paint – I find sculpture satisfying enough. Keeps me in cigarello’s, brandy and books.” He waved his hand in the air, his cigarillo leaving a circular trail of smoke in the air. “Much of what you see around you, here and in the hall, is my work.”

“All the papers?”

“Much of it, yes.”

“It must be difficult with your blindness.”

“Art lives in the soul, not the eyes. A soul can guide hands if it is strong enough. The portrait is mine also. It is of my late wife.”

Martin glanced up to the chimney breast and the portrait of a woman in 18th century dress, the period costume and style of painting lent itself to being an antique. Martin amused himself with the idea that Ebony’s blindness had caused him to mistakenly hang the wrong portrait as his wife’s. “It’s beautiful.”

“Thank you.” Martin was surprised to see Ebony’s hard face softened by a smile. “I met her in Germany. We loved each other very much, however my colour offended her family and they attempted to drive us apart. She left the comfort of her wealth to marry me and to start a family together.” His face began to set again. “She died in childbirth, along with my daughter. I lost them both. They were all that I held dear and all that I lived for. They were my life.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Ebony gave a curt nod of gratitude. “I’m sure your portrait of Ivory must also be beautiful.”

Martin felt his face flush. “I think so.”

“Yes.” Ebony sat within great animated art nouveau drifts of smoke that reduced him to a silhouette; a dragon brooding in its own smouldering power and knowledge. “I’m sure you will be glad to no longer have the expense of her sitting for you. Tell, me what is your next project now that your work with Ivory is finished?”

Martin searched the pattern of the threadbare Indian carpet for an answer, surprised by the question and frustrated by it. “I hadn’t given it much thought,” he admitted, as much to himself as to Ebony.

“Do you mean the next project? Or that you had finished with Ivory?” Ebony rested his hand on his knee, the tip of the cigarillo

Ivory

burning in Martin's direction through the mist with the scrutiny of a demonic red eye.

"You have doubted my intentions towards her from the beginning haven't you?" Martin growled angrily when he couldn't find an adequate response.

Ebony threw his hands momentarily outwards in an open handed gesture of surrender. "Yes. But do not take that as a personal slur on your character, it is not intended as such. Many men have fallen for Ivory over the years."

"Years? She must only be nineteen!" Martin snorted.

Ebony smirked cryptically. "Of course. My error, but my point remains the same."

"I am not one of her... *customers*." Martin snarled around the statement as if the taste was vile and the suggestion insulting.

"Anyone who pays for her presence has a choice of what to do with that time, but I respect that your purpose has been different to others that have paid for her services. Your relationship remains sitter and artist?" Ebony enquired, but Martin couldn't answer him, knowing he was caught. "No. I sense from you that this is not so."

"I didn't pay for her attention." Except this morning when Ivory had gestured a goodbye, and through a series of questions met with nods and shakes of her head, Martin had determined that Ivory had wanted to return to Ebony with her money from the previous night, that she wanted to return to Arven Road to earn more and was unconcerned with the danger she might be in. Martin had paid her the money she had wanted to earn on the street so she didn't have to leave, paid her so that he could keep her safe. "I haven't paid her for anything like that."

"Such relationships have a different value and meaning to Ivory. Remember her lifestyle; passion and lust is part of her daily life."

"That's different."

"You may believe so, but she will not stay with you, she will always come back to me."

Martin considered what Ebony said, and remembered guiltily that he had deadlocked the front door that morning, as was his habit when he left the house, he realised instantly that he had locked Ivory into the house and there had been a moment of indecision, but the

Ivory

anguish had not been strong enough for him to walk back down the path to unlock it. "Why does she always come back to you?"

"She is my ward. I gave her everything she has and she has been a good companion to me. We care deeply for each other."

"But the work that she does?"

"Pains me deeply, but she has a choice in all that she does. She has a future through me, Mr Roberts."

"But, what kind of future does she have?"

"It is very noble of you to believe that you can be her saviour, but you can not rescue someone that does not need to be saved. It is however, insulting that you believe she needs to be saved from a lifestyle that is her choice."

Martin bowed his head he had no reason to assume she was enslaved to prostitution, and he had seen how Ivory could handle herself with King and in the attack the previous night, part of him doubted she would have needed Richard or himself. "My intention is not *Pygmalion*."

"When she no longer needs to do what she does, she will leave that life behind her, I have a second home in the countryside that she has always enjoyed staying in, and she will live there with a companion. Someone that is her missing half, someone that will complete her and give her everything she needs."

"It sounds fancifully perfect." Ebony did not elaborate. "She already has someone?" Martin asked soberly.

"Not yet, but she will."

"Plans change. She can't live her life in waiting. How do you know that she won't find happiness with me? She might not need the dream you are offering her."

"It is her future Mr Roberts. She has a destiny, something your love will not stop. Even God's tremble in the wake of fate."

"I don't much believe in destiny."

"I sense as much, for you have a dark future that you do not seem aware of."

"Is that a threat?"

"A warning: the passion Ivory awakens in men leads to lust. Corruption. Death."

Ivory

“Pathetic! You sound like a Victorian moralist. I can admit that I have let my marital relationship fall apart because of my interest in Ivory. Call that corruption if you like, but Ivory was a catalyst for a general dissatisfaction that I had with my wife and the life I was leading. Meeting Ivory has simply spurred on changes that have been inevitable.”

“Inevitable? Is that not another word for fate?” Sensing Martin’s flare of anger, and hearing him rise to his feet, Ebony left his seat and flagged the air before him to placate him. “I bear you no malice Mr Roberts. The warning is intended as just that. Your actions will determine the consequence. I do not know where you live, so I am not in the position to bring Ivory back to me, but you are not in the position to stop Ivory returning. Let us watch what unfolds.”

“Like you say, it is Ivory’s choice. I am just trying to keep her safe.” Martin nodded curtly, not considering or caring that the gesture was wasted on Ebony, and announced he was leaving as he had to get to work. He stalked out of the lounge and down the hall and then hesitated at the front door. The Great Mephisto’s flat hand, which Martin was sure had been empty on the way in, had one of the Tarot cards laid on top of it. The card slid from the hand into a shoot and appeared in a tarnished scoop screwed to the front of the machine. Bewildered by the action of the dead machine, Martin briefly studied the glossy angular face of the wooden magician, half expecting one of its bulbous cartoon eyes to wink at him. Glancing around to ensure that Ebony was unaware of what had just happened, he snatched the card from the scoop and hurried out, with a sense that the balance of power had somehow shifted back to Ebony.

Chapter Sixteen

The Tarot card was labelled *The Tower*. Martin didn't know what it meant but the colourful image was of a lightning bolt shearing down through a tower, causing half of it to crumble into the outline of a man decaying into rubble. It seemed to resonate with King's, Ebony's, Richard's, and his father's stark warnings that still haunted his consciousness. He would have moments where their voices and prophecies would draw him away from whatever he was doing and he would find himself trembling, sick to his stomach at what he had done. However, Ivory was a contradiction to their warnings and an antidote to the way he felt. Her siren smile, her touch, and her passion fuelled the desires he no longer had to hide or restrain, and their relationship satisfied him wholesomely and fully, soothing his worries and fears around his descent. He knew that he had been naïve in his excuses for his pursuit of Ivory, rediscovering his art was simply an unexpected result. His pursuit of her had ended his marriage and turned his world upside down, he had lost everything that should have been most important to him, but her presence and the fact that she was still with him gave him justification in following the path he had taken. He had found love and passion and lust, and it was real and it made him feel alive again.

Over the last three days Martin had returned from work and Ivory had been waiting dutifully for him in his house, she hadn't left him as Ebony had expected, although realistically she couldn't have left if she had wanted to as the only window that remained unlocked (because Martin couldn't find the key for it), was the one in the kitchen and that was a tall narrow opener that wasn't big enough to climb through. If she had attempted to leave she would have surely appeared distressed or defensive upon his return, but she appeared content, sitting in exactly the same place on the sofa in the lounge as when he left her in the mornings. It had, however, not stopped him from repeating what had originally been a mistake, and deadlocked the front door when he left in the mornings.

For the first evening and morning Ivory headed to the door and waited to be allowed out, and through a few questions he understood

Ivory

that she wanted to return to Arven road, again he reminded her of the potential danger, stressed that he cared for her and offered her the money she would miss by not going, she accepted and stayed. Stayed safe. Martin had begun leaving her payment on the kitchen table and it would be gone when he returned. She no longer waited to be let out, but accepted that he was keeping her safe. He knew Ebony would say that he was paying her like any other customer she might have encountered, but he decided that although he was in effect buying her time, he was not paying for her body or her passion, that, Martin had decided, she gave him willingly. He was paying for her time so that she could experience something other than the brief encounters in undignified places, a change of environment and lifestyle that could make her realise there were other ways of living her life. Ivory had saved him from King and he had saved her from the scavenging pimps. Those kinds of acts drew people closer to each other and created bonds. On the simplest level they owed each other something deeper than love; their lives.

He was a little uncomfortable with the sex. Over the years he had grown used to Jenny's body and her to his and they had matured together, both accepting the unflattering changes to their figures and features that age and contentment had brought. With Ivory possibly twenty years his junior he was conscious of himself, his face was slack with years of expression and he was flabby and out of shape from comfortable living and his taste for cakes. He usually maintained a stubby beard due to a lack of interest in his appearance and hardly ever feeling the motivation to shave. He had shaved it off this morning though. Worried it would give Ivory rashes, and in the hope it might make him look younger.

He and Jenny had found their routine between the sheets and they hadn't strayed from it in years, with Ivory sex was an adventure again and her eagerness was infectious. When he had been inside her it had felt fantastic, taking him back to when he had first discovered sex, but he had experienced a moment where he was sickened by how his podgy clammy stomach pressed against her tight hot flat abdomen. The sensations of their passion had soon distracted him from dwelling on such details, but afterwards he had reasoned that he was no nineteen-

Ivory

year old lad, and he shouldn't try to aspire to be what he wasn't as Ivory obviously liked him the way he was.

Martin had grown used to Ivory's limited range of responses in conversation, and had grown comfortable within the shared monologues he had with her. Her inability to initiate conversation or to contribute to any significant degree meant that the conversation never strayed from topics that Martin liked to talk about, and this nurtured within him the sense that Ivory shared many of Martin's interests and added to their connection. However, that had not distracted from Martin's frustration at knowing he wouldn't have any satisfying answers to the questions he had since Ebony had spoken mysteriously of Ivory's future.

There was something else that puzzled Martin, Ivory had been in exactly the same seat and position when he returned home and nothing in the house had the appearance of being disturbed. As far as he could tell she hadn't been to the cupboards or fridge for food. In fact she hadn't accepted any offer of food or drink since he had brought her back to his house. He hadn't actually seen her eat or drink anything since he had met her. He guessed it was possible that she had made herself something to eat and washed up after herself and he hadn't noticed the missing food. He was a little concerned about her mental capacity, maybe Ebony took far more care of her than Martin had appreciated, and perhaps Ivory needed prompting to eat and drink. He had made a note to keep an eye on the food in the house and see if she was eating while he was out. He didn't want her to become malnourished. Although he was sure she couldn't go without food or drink of some sort for three days.

The idea that she appeared to have not moved from where he had last seen her, as if she had switched off like a machine in his absence, aroused a suspicion within him. He often remembered the boys getting up to mischief when he was out of the room and he had developed a sense for this over time. Whenever he returned he would find one or both of his children sitting back where he had left them, but looking decidedly guilty. Although there hadn't been any flicker of emotion in Ivory's face that betrayed her, only the dawning of a smile at his return, he couldn't shake the connection in his head and the feeling of misgiving that came with it. A dread anxiety hunched down low in

Ivory

the cover of his everyday thoughts and feelings of comfort, ready to pounce and overpower him.

Martin shook his keys from the lock and struggled through the door with his large art folder under his arm and his bag in his hand. He had not seen Richard since the skirmish at Arven Road. A quick check of the computer register had showed that he had not attended any lectures or studio sessions. Martin had tracked down Richard's blonde lover, Shaun, in the corridors between lectures but the boy bluntly explained that Richard had ended their relationship by text that morning after several days of cooling him off. The boy's mood softened after his disclosure and he had reassured Martin that despite some cuts and bruises Richard was okay. It was obvious that the boy didn't know the real cause of Richard's injuries, but he added that the last time he had seen Richard was two days previous, when he had seen him buying a large batch of sketching and painting materials. This was curious in itself, but Richard had not answered Martin's phone calls or texts. Despite Martin's wariness of Richards's judgement he planned on persisting in trying to contact him to ensure that he was indeed okay.

He called into the hallway and announced his surprise return. He had decided to take his planning period as sick leave and had come home during lunch time. He allowed his folder to drop to the floor against the wall and propped his bag against it, locked the door and deposited his keys on the stump of the newel post. He started talking to Ivory from the hallway as he made his way to the lounge shrugging his coat off as he walked.

"I was thinking we could get takeout or something special for tonight..." he would make sure she ate something. "I don't want to risk going out..." His sweater bunched up in the sleeves of his coat turning it into a form of straight jacket. Distracted by a strange tingling sense that he was alone, he nudged the door to the lounge open with his foot. "I know you probably think I am being over cautious..."

He was talking to himself.

The seat was depressed from where he had left Ivory that morning but she was not in it. The room was empty except for her twin that haunted him from the wall, like a memory of her presence. He stood, his expression frozen, his mouth caught on the hook of his last

Ivory

word, his arms still pinned to his side by his coat sleeves, a picture of dumbfounded stupidity. His stomach descended into a sickening free-fall. He wandered into the kitchen, back into the hall and up the stairs and checked each bedroom in turn until he reached the loft studio. He returned to the hallway and realised he was still in his straight jacket and frantically thrashed his arms in a tantrum until he was free of his coat. Panting for breath he stared at his keys on the newel post. All the doors and windows were locked and there was no way out of the house, it just didn't make sense. His mind had been clinging onto hope as he had searched the house, but it now slipped and tumbled after his gut and he descended into panic.

He had the suspicion that she would be safe from any danger the pimps might have posed, he was more concerned with what her absence meant for him personally. Had she left him? Would she return to the house before the time she would be expecting Martin to be home from work? Did she do this every day? A black fog smothered him. He had paid her to stay off the streets and she had abused the gesture. He shook his head and cleared the fog. He had to work with facts. She was gone. He knew she could only be at her home with Ebony or at Arven Road. He couldn't go to Ebony to find out, it would confirm everything Ebony told him and Martin was too proud for that. He fought his way back into his coat, locked the house up, rushed to his car and aimed it in the direction of Arven Road and ploughed his way through the lunchtime traffic. If she was at Arven Martin could approach her, try and get her to return with him. Get her out of danger.

He drew the car into Arven Road and a panic seized him and shook him, his blood became tumbling beads in his veins and his shallow breaths became feathers that tickled and irritated his lungs. He was unable to recall any of his journey, and he broke out in a cold sweat as he wondered how many speed camera's he had tripped and traffic lights he had missed, but this was not the source of his anxiety for he was terrified that he would see Ivory in Arven Road. He wanted her to have gone to the shops, gone out to spend the money he gave her, gone to see a friend, even to have been enticed out of the house like a little piggy by the bad wolf pimps, anything but Ivory leaving him to go and

Ivory

sell herself after she had agreed to stay at his. That could mean she saw through his motive of wanting her with him to protect her.

Martin could just about cope with King, Jenny, Ebony and Richard seeing through his motive for wanting to paint Ivory, he had even managed to admit it to himself, but if Ivory also knew... Knew and continued to take his money. Shame and foolishness washed through him in a hot wave that flushed his face red, the colour percolating into his thoughts at the idea of Ivory and Ebony taking advantage of his ideas, finances and feelings. He sat brooding in his car where he had originally parked on his first visit to Arven and waited for a glimpse of Ivory.

An hour passed but the silent time spent waiting didn't ease the uncomfortable throbbing of his heart that seemed to draw on all the muscles of his chest with every beat as it rode his tumultuous dread and simmering humiliation and anger. The small road held a mixture of feelings for Martin, the embarrassment of being in the road itself and being associated with the types of men that frequented such places, discomfort created by the blackened shell of King's home and the memory of his violent death, fear of the pimps van appearing again, dread that he would see Ivory working the streets when he had hoped he might be able to persuade her to leave that life behind, all those thoughts and feelings wrestled with each other to dominate him completely, and mired him in a sweaty grime he knew he would not be able to shower off.

The road was quiet and barely populated and only occasionally a girl would appear in an alleyway or walk the pavement. He didn't know whether it was the exposure to the daylight that made the girls more cautious or whether it was the cold and the threat of rain. Heavy charcoal clouds smothered the sun and created an eerie twilight. It was a depressing abandoned place and Martin doubted that the road would lose its shadows even on the brightest days. There was a pressure in the atmosphere and a charge to the air that matched his brooding emotions. There was a storm brewing.

The silence scattered from a sudden rapping against his window. Startled, he found Candy peering in at him and he saw that she recognised him and was equally startled. Her face blanked and she

Ivory

exhaled a curse, she straightened up and hugged her arms around herself, appearing caught and unsure what to do. Martin recovered his wits and quickly lowered the window.

“Don’t go,” he yelped, flailing a hand out of the window to catch her.

She easily avoided his grip. “I thought you were business.”

“No. Sorry.”

“I’m not sorry. You equal trouble. Don’t you get enough trouble up your way or something?” She was trying not to look at him, her face fixed in a distracted sulk.

“I don’t look for it,” he mumbled dismally, sagging in his seat.

She faced him, both hands on her hips. “Really?” A dark preened eyebrow arched. “And just what *are* you looking for?” She tutted before he could answer. “You don’t have to tell me; Ivory?” A breeze suddenly blew through the street sweeping litter and the last of the loose orange leaves around her feet. A darker cloud drew across the sky and pressed its shadow down upon them.

He nodded apprehensively in answer to her prediction, smothered by the exposure he felt from someone else being able to predict his motives.

She tilted her head back in reaction, but left her eyes on him, like a doll with tilt-movement eyes. “It didn’t end well last time you came looking for her.”

“Have you seen her?” He pushed, dismissing her concern.

The first rain for the day began to sparsely spot the pavement and his windscreen and distracted Candy into looking about her, cursing at the sudden change in weather.

“Have you seen her?” He urged, trying to compete with her study of the sky and stop her from dashing for cover. She danced on her heels, caught between finishing her conversation and finding somewhere to keep dry as the rain began to fall harder. “Please.” The word snatched her attention back to him. Candy held her flat handbag over her head and squinted against the rain, hesitating around her answer as if it were an obstacle she was unsure weather to scale. The sky grumbled with a low thunder that reverberated through the ground. “She went off with a punter about ten minutes ago.”

Part Three

**“If you gaze for long into the abyss,
the abyss also gazes into you.”**

Friedrich Nietzsche

Chapter Seventeen

Martin fixed his gaze on Ebony's distorted reflection in the glass of the train's window. It was a ghost against the rushing black face of the underground tunnel. Ebony's blank eyes stared back but were oblivious to Martin's presence. With the knowledge that Ebony couldn't see him, Martin felt like a ghost himself, haunting Ebony's journey. Even when the tube train carriage lurched or shook and they were jostled against each other Martin was just another anonymous passenger. It was just how he imagined being invisible would feel. Occasionally he would glance aside and study Ebony up close, his face was a mask of authority and a warning of power and strength worked in iron, contradicted and undermined by his blanched eyes that continually squirmed in their sockets like vulnerable shell rooted molluscs.

Although Ebony couldn't see him Martin still travelled with his heart in his throat, and could not shake the idea that he was going to get caught, that Ebony would suddenly turn to him and address him, revealing that he knew he was there all along. Ebony's confidence with his environment and the manner in which he faced the world and challenged its mastery of him unnerved him, and left him questioning the limitations of this giant man's sight. Despite any advantage Martin might have over Ebony through his extra sense Ebony still held all the answers.

Martin's head boiled with questions after his discussion with Candy. After learning that Ivory continued to sell herself he needed to understand why Ivory did what she did. Needed to know whether her return to prostitution was a betrayal, or simply an automaton action through learned behaviour.

The fact that Ivory had at that moment of talking with Candy, been working with another man, gutted him and left him as lost as Candy had appeared as the rain began to rush down in drops as thick as bullets. She had frantically looked around her for cover.

"Get in." She had frozen, unsure of the offer. "Just for shelter."

She had raced around the car, hunched against the downpour, dived into the passenger seat and yanked the door closed with both

Ivory

hands as if against an oncoming wall of water. She had frowned at him. “Just for shelter?” She had repeated. “Thanks.”

The rain thundered on the roof and distorted the glass through spots the size of fifty-pence pieces.

“Can I ask you something? And I don’t mean this as a judgement.”

She had rolled her eyes as she checked her make-up in a compact mirror. “That means there’s a judgement coming.”

The judgement had already arrived – for Martin anyway. “No, really it’s just a question.” She nodded permission to continue, scattering raindrops from her hair and spotting the mirror. “Why do you do what you do?”

The drumming rain filled her thinking space and she hesitated before the mirror, as if she was telepathically asking the question of her reflection. “Because.”

“Because?”

She shoved her mirror deep into her pockets, cutting the introspective connection and flashed a grin. “Well, it’s obvious I didn’t sit around as a kid with my crayons and Barbie thinking I want to grow up to be a prostitute.” She stared at the windscreen, watching the world distort into shifting ripples through the rain. “A one night stand gave me money once.” Her face had become blank, her tone flat. “Turned out he was married. Maybe making it a business deal eased his conscience, I don’t know, but it came at a time when I needed money. It’s just something I fell into. It’s easy and the money’s good.”

“And you have stayed with it?”

“Does the need for money ever go away?”

Martin could only nod at her cause and effect justification, and accept its simplicity, but Candy didn’t do it every day like Ivory did, just enough to set her up for the week. Questions squirmed like fat grubs in his head. Just how much money did Ivory and Ebony need? And what did they use it for?

“Have you got a boyfriend?” She nodded. “So you love him?”

“Jeez – you training up to be one of them counsellors at the outreach project?”

“Sorry, if that’s intrusive.”

Ivory

She shrugged and tilted an open hand in his direction. “It’s just that I’m used to going along with whatever I think will turn the punter on.”

“I just wanted to understand if... if you can love someone and do what you do.”

“Course I can. I’m no freak you know. Business is business. Sex can be sex just like if you have a one night stand. There’s no love there. If a punter is good at what he is doing it’s gonna feel good for me physically, and I can enjoy what I am doing but I don’t care for them or anything. If I cared for them I would be telling them to go find a girlfriend or go back to their girlfriend or wife and make things work out. It’s different with Brendan, my boyfriend, because I love him.”

It hadn’t answered his question. But the question of what Ivory felt could only be answered by Ivory. A car arrived in the street that Candy recognised as a regular customer and she had thanked him for the shelter, checked her make up again and braved the torrent for a dash to the car.

Martin withdrew within himself. He had driven from Arven road to a road that neighboured Ivory’s. There had been a sense of inevitability attached to this next move, as if he had been moving within a world of *déjà vu*, but he had to see if his prediction of Ivory’s next stop was right. He had walked to the point in this street that was roughly level with Ivory and Ebony’s house in the next street over and entered the nearest alley that divided the terraced houses, he picked his way through the wild weeds and dumped rubbish until he had found a turning that lead into Ivory’s road. He found an alley that was parallel to the path that lead down the side of Ivory’s house to the main door. There was plenty of cover from bushy weeds breaking from the ground and falling foliage from a willow tree lamenting over a battered garden fence, and he was able to linger there without being spotted by the surrounding houses. He had been right to wait. Ivory had returned to the house from Arven road, looked about her cautiously and then headed to her front door. She reached into the letterbox with a well-practiced snaking arm and when it withdrew he saw a glint of gold that was her door key. She used it and disappeared into the house.

Ivory

She had returned to Ebony with her earnings. The money Martin had given her to make up for lost earnings through staying at his house, and her actual earnings for the day. It confirmed his prediction and realised his fears. A while later she reappeared, gave the street the same wary respect she had given it upon her arrival and headed back the way she had come. She would be back at Martin's before his expected return, as she undoubtedly had been doing everyday. It explained why Ivory left no appearance of activity in Martin's house, and why it seemed that she didn't eat anything at his place during the day. However, these answers gave little comfort.

Ebony appeared at the side of the house, his staff brandished before him like a totem. His sudden appearance broke Martin from his resigned stupor and Martin stalked through the scrub and rubble of the alley in a determined course to intercept Ebony.

Martin stepped into Ebony's path outside the gate to the house. "You say you care about Ivory?" Martin had exclaimed as an announcement of his presence, attempting to keep his voice even and calm despite the fury that gripped his chest. "You say it pains you to know that Ivory does what she does, but I don't understand how you can let her do it!"

"Mr Roberts, I do not believe I asked for your understanding." If the ambush confrontation shook him he hid it well behind his stone like mask.

"No, you didn't, but *I* need to understand."

Ebony shook his head vigorously. "I can not and will not discuss this with you." He unhooked the gate and swept his club-like staff through the opening, feeling for obstacles, but with a stern grip and a determined swipe that would have cracked Martin's shins had he not jumped backwards. "I have errands to run. Out of my way."

Martin stepped back into the space the staff had swept through, blocking the direction Ebony wanted to travel in and not giving Ebony the space for a second sweep with his staff. "Financially, how much money do you require? I have given Ivory nearly," he leaned closer to Ebony's ear and hushed through gritted teeth, "*three thousand pounds.*" The shame made him feel sick. "All to sit for me and to keep her off the street, to cover the money she would have made, to keep her at mine

Ivory

and keep her safe, but she is still going back onto the street to earn money. For you. You don't appear to have the lifestyle that reflects that income."

"The money is for my work. I am just on my way to make some purchases at this very moment."

To Martin's surprise Ebony sidestepped gracefully out of the check position Martin had placed him in, and Martin had had to run round him to block his changed direction. "Your work? Your art?" He eyed Ebony with disgust, forgetting in his rage that the gesture was lost on him. "Tell me; are you able to see the beauty in your art when you know the acts that have occurred to make its creation possible?" Martin jerked back and forth in front of Ebony blocking each direction that he seemed to be going to take. Ebony stopped dead in his attempts to get round Martin and rested both hands atop his timber staff.

"It is not the money that is the issue here, Mr Roberts. It is the continuation of Ivory's work that upsets you." His blind eyes fixed on Martin's face and twitched furtively, as if they were fingers feeling brail on his face. "You have great feeling for her and you want her to remain with you, but she continues to sell herself. That is the issue." His sympathy darkened with the tone of his voice. "I warned you that she will always return to me."

"Until your work is done? So, can I see some of this work?"

"You already have."

Martin was unnerved by Ebony's skewed smirk. "The portrait of your wife? Even my students can afford canvas and oils. But you work in sculpture now don't you? Do you work in marble? Granite? Is that where the expense comes from?"

"Many mediums."

"May I see an example of your work?" He snapped, insistent on Ebony justifying his need for so much money.

"The only example I have is my current creation and I never allow anyone to see my work until it is finished."

"You part with all your work?" Martin's brow steeped in a furrow of surprise. "Then don't your sales support the purchase of new materials?"

Ivory

“I do not sell my work. It is free.” Martin’s face tensed against his swollen frustration at another cryptic response. “As I said before, it is not my work that is the issue here, nor is it the loss of the money.” Ebony spoke, seemingly in response to perceiving Martin’s dissatisfaction. “It is your disappointment that she continues in her work and that she has betrayed your trust and lust. I warned you she would return to me...” He peered over his staff and into Martin’s face, his white eyes solidified into marbles, his voice a low taunting growl, “and if you doubt this then withdraw your funds.”

Ebony was right. It was the way to find out if there was any incentive beyond money for Ivory to be with him, but Martin also knew that she would leave him if he stopped paying her.

Martin had decided he would follow Ebony to where he was heading to purchase his art materials and ascertain if this was true and see for himself what his money was used for. He followed Ebony to Angel tube station and onto a train. At first he had watched Ebony from the next carriage, but when Ebony changed from the Northern Line at Moorgate for the Hammersmith & City Line he had nearly lost him amongst the travellers crowding the platforms, and had decided to travel with him after that. He had dared himself to take up his position next to Ebony.

The train slowed as it pulled into the Aldgate East stop and Ebony alighted. Hanging back a couple of metres, Martin followed him from the train car onto the quiet platform, and from there out of the station and onto the streets. He shadowed him, occasionally walking abreast of him on the opposite side of the street as he stalked through streets that Martin was unfamiliar with. Martin knew that Whitechapel was Jack the Ripper territory and could see large portions of grey bricked terraced houses tucked away in side streets that appeared as they did back in that period. Other buildings of that era were hidden behind gaudily colourful shop frontages with signs branded with Chinese symbols, or Urdu, Hindi, and Arabic scrawls. Ethnic shops markets and restaurants of the foreign cultures that dominated the area today. He was sure Brick Lane with its curry houses wasn’t far away. He was conscious that this was Tower Hamlets and an area associated

Ivory

with poverty and danger, and with nearly every face being a different colour to his he was aware of being an outsider.

They reached a rundown parade of shops in a nameless side street. Two shops were sealed up with corrugated iron and muldering plywood and the pavement before them was crammed with the wares of neighbouring shops; exotically coloured fragrant fruits and vegetables from a grocers on one side, and equally vibrant silks and patterned fabrics from the cloth merchant and haberdasher on the other. Between the two derelict shops and the overspill from its neighbours was a shop with glossy purple painted brickwork and woodwork painted in matt muted silver. The sign above the shop was carved into the wood with the letters picked out from the purple paintwork in silver; 'Agatha's Emporium Arcanum'. The windows concealed their wares behind a layer of dirt from the road and further browsing was discouraged by heavy mesh shutters padlocked over them, making the very fact that this was a shop easy to miss, especially between the shops that dominated the pavement with their eye-catching displays. The panelled door was equally uninviting, with only one panel of thick glass at head height.

Ebony strode into the shop without any tentative feel of direction or location with his staff, and Martin slipped through the door behind him before it could shut. The shop was crammed full of display cabinets lined with crystals, candles, incense, books and ornamental figurines, while the walls were adorned with exotic carved wooden and stone panels, intricately embroidered throws and shawls, and large chunks of driftwood and bundled branches. Four large island tables displayed jars and bags of herbs and dried goods. It appeared to be the usual paraphernalia of a new age or occult shop, but the colours were muted and not the normal gaudy display, while the figurines and books looked aged and antique rather than glossy or mass produced. Just above head height, and in some places directly at head height, were trinkets, charms, wind chimes and various other hanging decorations he was unsure of. The ceiling itself crawled with a foggy canopy of incense and the sweet musty smell infused the air.

Ebony approached the large service counter that ran the length of the shop to the right. He walked with a determined pace that again suggested he knew he was familiar with his location despite his

Ivory

blindness. Martin headed to the back of the shop pretending to browse, hoping not to attract the attentions of the dark and stoutly rectangular female shop assistant hunched over the counter, wreathed in swirls of incense that arose from burners and josticks on the counter.

“More?” The aging black woman howled incredulously, arching a dark and silvery brow on her irregular potato shaped head.

“Is that a problem?”

“Not for me.” She clucked. The woman’s voice, with its faint Jamaican accent, trailed into a higher pitch. “These kinds of purchases keep me going, honey.”

Ebony nodded, and she told him to go right through and measure out how much he needed of whatever he wanted. Ebony walked along the back of the shop and parted a curtain of purple plastic beads that hung over a narrow doorway. He disappeared within and Martin busied himself by looking at price tags with the physical presence of the black woman’s stare upon him. He was staggered by the expense of the items.

He spotted a book on Tarot cards and remembered the card that the Great Mephisto had given him. He surreptitiously rooted it out of his pocket and plucked the leather bound book from the shelf. He leafed back and forth through the tome to find the meaning of the card, but was distracted from the text by Ebony re-emerging with a brown paper bag rolled over at the top. The way the contents strained at the paper and filled out the bag it appeared to be full of a heavy powder or some other loose content.

“How are things?” Ebony asked curtly as he placed his item on the counter.

The woman set about weighing it on an antique balance scale set on a shelf on the wall behind the counter. “Things are good, Eban.” She paused in placing her counter-weights and looked up at him with a twinkle in her eye and a lop-sided grin that bunched up one of her cheeks. “Still alive.”

Ebony seemed to find some humour in what she said and smiled briefly. Ebony pointed to a second archway, its black velvet curtain drawn back from an alcove that contained a dark wood chair at a table that held a crystal ball. “Iris?”

Ivory

The woman stopped her routine in completing the sale. “If you are asking after her health then she burns just as radiantly as ever.” Her eyes and lips widened into smiles as if she was thinking of something glorious. She turned to an antique crank operated register and punched in the prices. “If you are asking to consult her then I am afraid the answer is ‘no’. I don’t know what Iris said to you, but Mercadian instructed me that she was clear in saying that she has said all she can to you.” Her voice became heavy with authority, and then softened again with a pitying fraction of a smile. “I’m sorry.” The tills ping for the cash drawer to be opened became a physical full stop to the topic.

“It is of no matter.” Yet Ebony’s voice betrayed a contrary opinion. “You are happy to continue serving me?” he passed her a thick roll of money.

She rolled it around in her fingers as if considering his point. “I thought about that.” She unrolled them and placed them in the register. “But I figure that you will only find your supplies elsewhere. It’s better that you fund the cause of light, and I get to keep a close eye on you and what you are doing in the dark.”

He nodded curtly and smiled. “I wish you well, Agatha.”

Agatha closed her eyes and nodded the same wish in return, but with a pained expression on her face, a gesture Ebony would not be able to share in. Ebony turned and left with his goods.

“You!” Martin was startled by the woman’s sudden call across the shop from behind her extended arm and her twisted pointing finger. Her head was slightly bowed so she could study him over the top of her horn-rimmed glasses. “Yeah you, boy. You find what you’re looking for?”

“Er, I’m just browsing,” Martin flustered shoving the book back on the shelf, and reinforced his excuse by surveying the nearest island display that offered an array of jars holding dried herbs and plants.

The woman raised an eyebrow and her eyes narrowed into a measuring expression and warning of ‘I take no crap.’ “Browsing, huh? That’s gonna pay my bills. Most folk that come in here tend to know what their coming in for. You sure I can’t help you find what you want to buy?”

Ivory

“No...no I think I’m okay.” Martin headed over to the beaded curtains.

“That way is not for you.” She instructed with a firm voice that reinforced the authority of her solid build.

He paused in the doorway holding the beads to one side. “Through there?” It was a room the same size as the shop area he was currently in, lined with shelves crammed full of objects. Much more stocked than the front of the shop. Just beyond the beads he noticed that the archway between the shop and the storage area had a heavy door pushed open and flat against the wall, it was studded with iron bolts and had several key holes. He was sure the goods couldn’t get any more expensive, although he had seen the roll of cash Ebony had handed over.

“Yes. Private area.”s

“I’m sorry I thought it was part of the shop.” He let go of the beads and they swished noisily amongst themselves and those nearest the door frame clattered loudly on the metal frame.

“If you’re referring to the fact that the man you were following went through there, then you are correct. But it’s open to him, private to you.” She sniffed, her head still cocked in a bow and her eyes fixed upon him. “Don’t mean any rudeness. Just how it is.” She followed the statement with a broad disarming smile.

Martin looked around him. “Okay. I think I am done looking around.”

The woman shrugged. “Suit yourself. Can’t tempt you with nuthin?”

“I’m not sure what half of it is to be honest.”

“Didn’t think so.”

“The things that man wanted. Can I ask what they were?”

She gave him a wide smile that showed almost all her pearly teeth. “Sure thing: you can ask.”

“But you’re not going to tell?”

“Aren’t you a bright boy! Top of the class for you.” Her smile stayed broad.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked. Guess you have to protect your customer’s privacy.”

Ivory

Her head wavered from side to side and she whined as she considered his explanation for her reluctance. “Sometimes, but I don’t have a policy. That’s not why I am not going to tell you. I don’t think I would keep a secret for him. It’s just that if I tell you what the things are, then you sure as Hell gonna then ask me what they are for. Then I gotta explain and look like a damn fool in front of you, not that I care much what you think, it’s just you have sceptic stamped on you like a hallmark and I’m sure it runs deep all the way, like rings of age in a tree. At my age I got myself lots of spare time, but don’t much care to be spending it talking in circles, if you don’t take offence at that.”

Martin nodded. Said goodbye and headed for the door, her sparkling eyes and fixed smile on him the whole while. He ducked under some hanging wind chimes and mobiles of beads and crystals, but he decided he must have knocked into what appeared to be something like a Native American dream catcher but more intricate than he had ever seen, as it had suddenly begun to swing and swirl above his head. He apologised over his shoulder to the woman, and quickly set about steadying the complex web of strings and precious looking hanging stones that hung over the door and disturbed the thick lazy atmosphere of incense above him into wildly snaking strands and tendrils.

“Wait...” The woman called. There was an insistence in her tone. “Come back here boy! Let me look at you.” Her voice was stern and urgent and he walked over to her ready to apologise again. The woman plucked up a jostick as thick as a cigar from the counter and stabbed and swirled it around his head leaving ghostly white trails around him. “Someone’s been putting some JuJu on you. You’re under a fluence.” She dispelled the trails she had created by shaking a small velvet draw string bag amongst them. The clicking and clacking noises that emanated from within revealed that there were stones being tossed about inside the bag. “You been losing control of life?” she whispered. “Yes I can see it. Your will is diminished. You been feeling lost, boy? I see it is so. Boy, you are so lost.” She tutted and replaced the jostick on the counter and slipped the bag back into the pocket of her chunky knit cardigan.

“What do you know about that?”

Ivory

“Sit here.” She pointed to a stool further down the counter, near to the archway with the table and crystal ball in it that Ebony had pointed to earlier. The woman moved down the counter so she would be in front of him. “Come, boy, sit. I aint gonna bite you. I know that something is influencing you. That’s what I know.” Martin sat in front of her, still unsure what was happening or what she was saying. “I can see it in the cards.” She pointed to hand-painted antique looking Tarot cards arranged before her. “I see you have found your own future.”

He glanced down to the Mephisto’s Tarot card that was still in his hand. “Oh that, I found that. Just wasn’t sure what it was.”

“Signs and portents. You know what it means?”

He shook his head and decided not to mention he was going to use one of her books to find out, suddenly frightened she would frown on him referencing her materials without a purchase. She took it. “The Tower. Your world has been turned on its head. Things are changing. The tower of order falls into chaos and despair.”

Agatha placed the card on the counter and tapped a card from her own cast deck. “I do the cards all day. To idle the time while I wait for customers willing to *pay* rather than *browse*. I do the cards on my customers while they shop, just for my own interest. Sometimes I choose who to read, sometimes the cards choose for me. My deck has been giving me cards all day I didn’t understand. Cards I now know are from your reading.” She pointed at a card she had played onto the counter earlier, it was another Tower card. “I did your cards when you came in see?” She cast both her hands over the cards before her as if she could read the air above them with her hands. “They knew you were coming. The JuJu on you is powerful, creating ripples...” She seemed to read his puzzlement as concern. She raised a quieting finger between them that asked for calm when there was no need, and suggested she had a solution. “What you need is tea.”

Martin neither wanted to socialise nor hear anymore. “That’s very kind of you...”

She shook her head and waved down his protestations like a grandmother well versed in ignoring grandchildren’s excuses about why they couldn’t stay longer, and started unscrewing jars and measuring out powders and dry herbs, none of which smelt like fresh loose tea. “Hush

Ivory

now. It's special tea. A JuJu tea against the fluence on you." There was a click from under the counter as a hidden kettle was switched on.

Martin had visions of being force-fed some herbalist tea with LSD qualities. "I'm sorry, you were right about me being a sceptic."

Her forehead crumbled into a frown and her eyes hardened. "I'm not gonna make a fool of you, if that's what your worried about. So who's gonna judge if you sit here with an old lady and listen and believe, and sup a little tea?" The toothy smile returned and her eyes brightened as she gathered her measured ingredients and began mixing them in a dish. "See; the cards already tell me you're starting to believe... Your eyes have been seeing things, things that you aren't dwelling on. You are being awakened to a world beyond your world." She emptied the powders in a small earthenware teapot and produced a steaming kettle from under the counter, its domesticity incongruous within the strange little shop of otherworldly goods.

The woman's act was good, and he could imagine that many a tourist or first-time visitor to her shop would be taken in by her theatrics and broad statements that served as 'insight'. With Martin she was even luckier because her broad generalisation was true: there were lots of things about Ivory he couldn't explain. "Without sounding rude *I am* in a new age shop, and it's *obviously* my first time. So to say that I am being awakened to new things '*beyond my world*' is not exactly going out on a limb."

"There is a catalyst in your life working its JuJu on you." Her finger travelled the lightning on the card again.

The hairs on his neck prickled. He had considered and described Ivory as a catalyst. "I don't believe in magic."

"You think that saves you? No, boy. Magic believes in you. That's all it takes." She cautioned with an air of revelation. "You were following Eban – THE GIRL!" She made the connection as if she had just uncovered a critical fact. "Yes I see her in the cards..." She tapped her version of the tower card and traced her finger through the shearing white light. She shook her head gravely, as if this had changed everything. "No tea for you, boy." She pronounced darkly, her eyes as black as coal. "You *are* lost."

Chapter Eighteen

Martin stubbed his finger onto Richard's doorbell for a third time and heard its muffled chime from outside. He stepped onto the pavement for a glance up at his window, sure that the thick muslin had been displaced since he had arrived. He stepped back onto the step to listen for any movement before prodding the doorbell again, this time he held it firm for a full minute in the hope of irritating Richard into answering. The door neighbouring Richard's flew open and a scruffy young man in sports clothing leaned out.

"Mate, if someone doesn't answer it means they aren't in."

"Sorry." Martin flushed.

"Yeah well, I'm sorry I have a flat with thin walls." He slammed the door behind him.

Martin looked about him consciously but none of the passers by on the busy street showed any interest. He pulled his coat close to him against a cool breeze and looked up to Richard's flat one last time. The sky was grey with dark clouds and the promise of rain, but an area of cloud over the apex of the flats roof was darker and shifted suddenly in the gust, and he realised it was smoke, a column of smoke anchored behind the flats. Probably burning refuse from one of the shops, but it led him to wonder if the back of the flats might be accessible. He could scale the fire escape to Richard's flat and that might force Richard from hiding and to let Martin in. Martin walked to the end of the block, rounded the corner and found a wide and well-maintained paved alleyway servicing the rear gardens of all the shops. From what he could see over low walls or through chain-link fences, most of them were concreted over or used to house extensions or storage. Counting the rear facings as he walked he soon found the back of Richard's flat behind a high wall with a full-size gate and a sign warning against trespass.

Through the gaps in the bars he could see the fire escape, but could only make out the beginnings of the windows of Richard's flat. Martin gripped the bars of the gate and sank against them. Richard was the only person in his world that he could talk to about what was happening. The wind picked up again and the smoke curled around the wall and into his face. He coughed and spluttered and winced against

Ivory

the smoke that tickled his throat and pricked at his eyes. He stood back until the smoke cleared from the gate and then looked back into the concrete courtyard. Orange flames sporadically licked at the air above a metal bin crammed with large sketch pads and canvases smashed to fit the receptacle. The new art materials the blonde boy had mentioned Richard buying. Martin staggered back from the smoke as it shifted back into his face again and studied Richard's unreachable flat from the far-side of the alley. Richard had spoken of his confusion and doubts that had come around from his first encounter with Ivory, he had warned Martin of its dangers and now Richard had fallen to them himself. Martin finally accepted that he also faced the same fate.

Alone with his situation and with no idea what to do next he found himself driving to the road next to Ivory's and watching from the alley as he had done before. He waited for Ivory to return to Ebony with the money he had left her that morning and any earnings she had made that day. He had been tempted to not leave the money. He had produced his wallet and replaced it in his pocket several times before plucking the wad of notes out and throwing them down on the kitchen table in self-loathing. He had left her without saying goodbye or the pretence of explaining that the money was to replace her missed earnings and not payment for her body, although if it had been to pay for sex she had earned it the night before.

Martin had thought that after knowing she had been with others in the day he wouldn't be able to touch her himself. Yet he had wanted to see her face in bed, to see if the face she wore with him was really just the mask she wore with all those that paid to satiate their lust for her. With each twitch of expression on her face in response to his efforts his ardour had become more vigorous, more aggressive in trying to make her face change, to ensure that her face was genuine passion and ecstasy. During his third and final effort he had ended up behind her, and although the room was dark the weak light from the street picked out the details of her face and the opaque glass of the wardrobe doors had reflected it. Despite the groans of pleasure he could hear from behind her, her face had been a blank canvas devoid of emotion.

His hope, or his delusion, of breaking her from her trade and luring her into loving him died with his passion in that moment. He

Ivory

couldn't bring himself to finish with her. Couldn't even touch her that morning. He didn't feel angry with her, only at himself for still wanting her.

There was still the chance that it was her work that had conditioned her into feeling nothing and acting in lovemaking. The resentment that knotted his intestines and twisted his gut was for Ebony for turning someone so ethereally beautiful into something so emotionally flawed. It was *Ebony's* work that forced Ivory into *her* work, and her duty to Ebony that would come between any chance of her falling in love with him.

Ivory arrived at her home after two hours of Martin waiting, and her return to her home was a wound reopened. With the same wariness of being followed she entered the gate and reached into the letterbox to retrieve the key. He thought it strange that she didn't keep her key with her, but then in working the streets she was vulnerable, and he supposed that if she was robbed of her earnings she and Ebony might have some comfort in knowing that their home was safe from uninvited guests.

She disappeared within the house and after half-an-hour she left in the direction that she had come, although today he doubted if he would find her at his house when he returned. Sure that Ebony would tell Ivory of his visit the day before and that Martin knew she still worked the streets. The duplicity would be over. For a moment Martin wished that he didn't know what she did when he wasn't with her. Ignorance would mean the charade could continue, but he knew that although fantasies could be infinite, his finances would not be. Tonight would be the last night he could pay for her to stay off of the streets and the last night he could pay for her to stay with him. After tonight Ivory would be gone. All he would have left would be questions. Questions that were impossible for Ivory to answer and that Ebony would refuse. The age-darkened house stood as a keeper of secrets.

Chapter Nineteen

Martin checked his rear-view mirror, seeing that there were no other cars behind him he eased his foot off the accelerator and rode slowly down his road. He was in no hurry to return home. He had called in sick at work but did not spend the day with Ivory as he might have done a few days earlier before he had realised the charade. He had driven around London, stretching his legs on Hampstead heath and sitting atop Parliament hill, looking out over the city spread below him. The grand view of the city's monuments and landmarks had always impressed him, but today the swathe of city appeared dwarfed by grey clouds that built from the horizon into black tumultuous ranges. The world was a different place now and inhabited by *things* that he couldn't comprehend. If Ebony were to be believed then he finally had answers, although they were answers he could never have imagined and would rather not have. It was knowledge that opened him up to a world beyond the one that he understood.

The mountainous clouds had spread across the city like a pyroclastic flow over the course of the day. Despite the evening darkness the broad stripe of sky visible from within the trench of the terraced houses in his street was a slowly churning flow of dark clouds. Martin glanced from the sky to the road and his eyes were caught by a face in the mirror: lacerated and grisly with beady black eyes and a mocking grin. He turned sharply to the shadowy back seat from where the smile came, but found nothing but the clutter of the parcel shelf and his coat propped up on the backseat. Back in the mirror he saw that the simulacra face had gone from the gloom, but for the voice in his mind; "*We are the same, you and I.*" He was struck with terror, not at the voice but that he knew that he was worse than his father and King.

He drew the car to a stop beneath the orange glow of a streetlight and sat for a moment staring up at his home. He had been surprised that Ivory had been waiting for him at his home the previous night. Ebony had told her that Martin knew she was continuing to sell herself, and Ebony had been right in stating that while Martin paid her she would stay. Why should she feel uncomfortable about her deceit being uncovered when Martin would actively provide for it to continue

Ivory

anyway? He had left her the money that morning as before. However, this had not been a payment to ensure that she would return but was pretence, because after yesterday things would be different.

He stepped out of the car and the static heat hit him as though stepping from a plane into a tropical climate. There was no breeze and seemingly no air. The warmth brought his blood closer to the surface of his skin and caused the wounds he had received yesterday on his ankle hand and ear to throb. He couldn't have hidden his wounds from Ivory and he had had no choice but to come home bloody from his ordeal. He had lied and explained that he had been set upon by the pimps. She had looked concerned, he had been unsure if it had been for him or for Ebony's safety as the pimps knew where she lived. Her worry that the pimps might set upon Ebony could prove useful later.

There was a brooding static energy emanating from everything, natural or man-made. No bird took to the treacherous sky and no sound filtered through the calm silence. Martin hesitated on the pavement and stared at his front door. He wanted to be out of the eerie weather, and any other day he would willingly take shelter within his home, but today his front door was a portal into an uncertain place and the potential for a storm far worse than the outside elements.

He prepared himself. This was the second evening he would have to face her and hide his anguish, fearful that she would see through his empty acting and see his deeds beneath. Except tonight was different, this time she would have been home, and he was sure that she would now suspect he was deceiving her. He had to be prepared for any reaction she might have. Tonight would be the test for his act. He couldn't have sex with her last night, he hoped she would think it was the shock of the attack that doused his lust and that he hadn't given himself away by not performing. He couldn't face being intimate with her now that he knew what he knew: she frightened him.

Maybe she wouldn't be waiting for him and what had happened at Ebony's house had brought everything to an end. He might never see Ivory again. As much as that pained him at least he would escape the fall that he had been warned would be his fate. Martin looked up at the house. Despite its size and familiarity his home seemed claustrophobic and menacing in the dark under the boiling grey sky. The rushing clouds

Ivory

hung as a low ceiling that appeared to threaten toppling the chimney pots, and flickered with yellow light. The storm was here.

The clouds sprayed its rain down in a hissing torrent that dissolved surfaces into a haze of surf and sent him running for cover, forcing him into the house. He closed and locked the front door against the deluge that had drenched him in the short distance he had had to cover. He stood in the silence and darkness of the house. He felt a presence mute him from calling for Ivory. He kept still and listened to the house. Listened for a tell tale sound of movement. Nothing. He deposited his keys carefully and quietly on the flat top of the newel post.

The hall was shadowy and cold but all appeared as it should be. He called out to Ivory and his insides nearly disgorged after his voice onto the floor. He calmed himself and called her again. The lounge was empty. He shuddered around the exhalation of a held breath. She was not on the sofa as he had always found her at this time. Yesterday, after Ebony had informed her that Martin knew about her continuing to leave his home and work the street, Martin had still found her waiting in her spot on the sofa; maybe she had been giving Martin the choice of continuing to delude himself. Today, however, she had gone. The relief was euphoric, but he knew that after the high, the fall into longing would be quick crushing and agonising. He needed to be sure that she wasn't there and went from room to room checking, wrestling with hopes for her absence and her presence, knowing he was playing into the fantasy that what had happened yesterday would lead to her coming to him, needing him.

The backroom was empty. The kitchen was empty. He stopped. The long narrow opener was open. His flesh chilled and his muscles tensed. It was the only window that could not be locked with the keys, but it was too narrow to allow anyone but the smallest of children to climb through, he ignored it and decided to check upstairs. He returned to the hall as a soft yellow light flickered through the windows and briefly lit the passage. The lightning and the grumble of thunder that followed shortly afterwards made him conscious of the dark. He flicked the light switch. The hair of his body bristled in a wave of scurrying insects. The light had not come on.

Ivory

He toggled the switch on and off. He laughed at how foolish it was to be scared, but then he thought of the ‘things’ at Ebony’s house the day before and the influence of reason was lost. He could leave. Yes. He could simply unlock the door and escape the feeling of unease. But where would he go? He would have to return at some point. He couldn’t just abandon his home. He stole himself against the fear that sat at his back and whispered dark imaginings in his ears. Step after step on the stairs he repeated a mantra in his mind that his mother had taught him to recite as a child against his fear of monsters under the bed and in the wardrobe; “This is my home. I am alone but I am safe.”

The landing was devoid of windows and darker still. Martin tossed open the bathroom door in the hope that light from streetlights might filter in, but it had been consumed by the storm clouds. He reached in and pulled the light pull but the lights didn’t work in there either. The bathroom was empty. He peered into the shadows of the third bedroom, the office was also empty. He flung open the door on the children’s room, its unfamiliarity was disorientating for him. He hadn’t visited it very often in the last year. He knew the room should be full of rainbow colours from drawings pinned to the wall, and suggestive of childish energy with its clutter of toys, but the shade drained the life from the colours and the playthings languished neglected for days, like grim reminders of a tragedy. Ivory was not there. “This is my home. I am alone but I am safe.”

Martin’s hand rested on the door handle to the master bedroom. If Ivory would be anywhere else she would be there. It was the only other room he equated her with. He turned the handle and opened the door. His ears were assaulted by the colossal sound of the ceiling being split open and the loft room being torn from the building. He hunched down in terror before understanding the sound was thunder. He laughed at himself but continued to pant the breaths he had lost in fright. None of the lights seemed to be working. Power cut, or cut power?

He snatched hold of an escaping breath and held onto it and stilled himself. On the tail of the rumbling sky there had been a sound. A mouse of a sound compared to the Titan sound of the thunder, but he had heard it nonetheless. “This is my home. I am alone but I am safe.” His studio was the last place he had to look. He soft footed to the stairs,

Ivory

ignoring a sudden urge from his bladder to empty itself. He listened. Nothing. He carefully mounted several steps and listened again. Nothing. The door at the top of the stairs was half-open. He always kept it closed to contain the pungent smell of oils and linseed. "This is my home. I am alone but I am safe." He climbed cautiously to half-way. The sound had not repeated itself. Three quarters of the way up the stairs his line of sight was level with the studio floor and he could see into the murky cluttered room. He hesitated and scanned the interior with his head cocked for noises. "This is my home. I am alone but I am safe." A sound of drumming fingers tumbled against his hearing, the sound of a cat trotting on the bare boards of the loft studio. Except he didn't have a cat.

From where Martin stood on the stairs he lunged onto the landing grabbed the handle of the door and yanked it shut and twisted the key in the lock. From behind the solid wooden door the closing drumming sound lessened then ceased, as if the thing that had made the noise had given up its sprint. He flopped onto the stairs, the key held firmly in his fist.

"This is my home. I am *not* alone and I am *not* safe."

How did it get here? In his search for Ivory he had left all the internal doors open. The realisation pitched through his mind like a warning sign carried in a gale. He stumbled down the stairs, dashed across the landing and slammed and locked door after door, each one seemed too little too late. How many of those 'things' were here and where were they?

Pain gripped his head and he stalled with its abruptness. He massaged his temples against the stress headache and resumed his direction towards the stairs. The image of the landing and the drop of the stairs that his eyes presented to his mind scattered into billions of component pixels that shifted and dissolved. Blots of white daylight bled through the disintegrating image, he thumbed and fingered his clenched eyes, but even behind the shielding of his eyelids the light continued to eat away his vision. The warmth drained from the house and it became cool. The light feel of his clothes became the heaviness he associated with wearing his coat. The silence of the house was replaced by the sound of a car passing close by him on the landing.

Ivory

The car passed and Martin crossed the road and carefully unlatched the gate and supported the weight of it as he eased it back on its hinges so it couldn't squeal his arrival to Ebony. The first stretch of the path was pea shingle until it reached the side of the house. Martin overcame this noisy approach by walking on the line of bricks that bordered the shabby flowerbeds and then walked on the grass until he could reach the side of the house and the start of a path of stepping stones in the gravel. He waited at the door and spent some time pressed against it listening to the insides of the house as a doctor might listen to a patient's chest for the sounds of life. He had considered just knocking on the door to see if Ebony was home, but he didn't want to have to talk to him again, and if he played knock-down- ginger on Ebony to see if he was home it might make Ebony jittery and more attentive to any noises that Martin might make in his trespass.

He knew it was a foolhardy plan born of desperation but he reasoned that he did not run the risk of being seen by Ebony, even if Martin did make a subtle noise that might alert him to his presence on the doorstep, all Martin would have to do was be as silent as he could until Ebony was reassured that there was no one there. Or if he was discovered, he would just need to get away without Ebony knowing who it was.

If he could reach Ivory's key he could let himself in. Although he had never considered anything of this nature before, his conscience was only mildly disturbed. He had retrieved a sketchpad and a coat hanger from the car, he presumed the key was kept hung on the back of the front door and he could use the coat hanger he had untwisted and straightened as much as he could, to knock the key from its home onto a leaf of his pad and drag the key under the door to his side. He doubted his plan would work, but if it didn't it saved him from the anguish of trespass.

Satisfied that he couldn't hear anything from within the house Martin put the sketch pad and coat hanger on the step and felt along the bottom of the door. There was the narrowest crack of a gap that became fractionally wider to the middle where the wooden step of the frame had been worn away with years of trampling. The letterbox was a standard size and there was no way Martin would be able to reach his thick arm

Ivory

into its metal maw as Ivory had done so effortlessly. He eased the letterbox open so that its spring wouldn't scrape or grind and he peered in at the familiar gloomy hallway. The landing and the end of the hall slumbered in shadow. All the internal doors appeared closed against any daylight the rooms might contain, but he reasoned they were also closed against any small noises Martin's crime might make. Even with the coat hanger to extend his reach his wrist was still going to get a mauling trying to get at Ivory's key.

Holding the letterbox open with one hand he eased his mobile phone into the gap with the other, it was difficult as holding something changed the shape of his hand beyond the size the narrow opening would allow, forcing him to hold the phone precariously by its sides between his thumb and forefinger while keeping his hand as flat as possible. With his hand and mobile the other side he took a better grip and felt for the button that would get his phone to take a picture. He pressed it several times, taking pictures of the rear of the door at different angles before repeating the delicate manoeuvres to extract it from the letterbox. He thumbed through his phone memory until he could see the images he had captured. He looked at all the pictures and pieced them together in his mind and found he had successfully managed to get dark rough and grainy images that captured the whole door and its surrounding frame, although he couldn't see any presence of a key.

He puffed out a sigh that deflated him. He thought he would feel glad at not being able to trespass but his findings stirred the bitter bog of resentment and frustration in the pit of his stomach. He peeped through the letterbox again and found the key straight away. It was hanging on the front of the newel post from a small nail. The excitement shivered within him in a rush of energy despite being met by a languorous internal inertia of equal force at the realisation that the key was out of arms reach. Ivory's arm was slender, but even at her full reach it would still be another forearm and hands length away from a teasing touch. The energy dissipated leaving behind a vacuous unease.

Abandoning his original plan Martin rooted around in the clutter of his coat pockets and searched the fistfuls of detritus, his fingers found what he wanted and he produced a battered looking

Ivory

money bag, he fingered it open and found it met his specifications. He set to work on the unravelled coat hanger, bending a four inch length at the end until it was in a right angle to itself and shaped it into a semi circle. He pierced the bag at one side of its opening and fed it along the wire to the beginning of the semi circle and pierced the other side of the bags opening with the end of the wire. He spread the bag open with his fingers and held his net out before him with some satisfaction.

The wire was bendy and unwieldy but after several wrong directions Martin teased the tip of the key, and gently nudged it to the head of the nail where a final jerk sent it dropping into his bag. With even more care Martin withdrew his makeshift tool, desperate to not let the key drop after doing so well. He tipped the prize into his hand and turned the gold key over in his palm with his thumb. He glanced repeatedly between the lock of the door and the key, as if he was mentally spelling out the connection between the two items to his reticent body to will it into action. This was it.

Hesitation anchored his feet to the ground. Self-anger welled beneath his conscience. He needed to see Ebony's work to understand what it was that cost so much money. He might even find his money and retrieve it so he could afford more of Ivory's company. If he could find evidence of drug dealing or evidence of Ebony trafficking other girls, then Martin would have something to report to the police. Ebony would be raided and if his crimes were great enough he would be imprisoned and his influence over Ivory would end.

That was all the persuasion he needed. He fed the key to the lock tooth by tooth and eased the lock round in his grip. The door came free from the jamb and he pushed it open, snaking his arm through before him to hold the handle from the other side in case it might suddenly click or sound his actions. Glancing up the path to check if he had been seen he opened the door enough to slip in and crossed the threshold.

Chapter Twenty

The sound of an exploding bomb detonated in the air around Martin, and his view of the door to Ivory's house disintegrated and was sharply replaced with the darkness of his own landing. The sound of thunder continued to tear through the house. His eyes took a few moments to adjust to the gloom again. The temperature returned to being warm and his clothes felt as they should. It was as though his mind had transported him from his home to Ivory's house and then back again. Martin steadied himself on the banister in the aftermath of the disorientating shift into vivid memory and back to the present. He had never known memories so clear and overpowering before. Sickening guilt sat as weighted bile in his gut. He didn't want to remember.

It had been a conscious effort to divert his thoughts and memory of yesterday into a dead end part of his mind, but the stress and trauma of the present created a shortcut to all that he repressed. He did not want to return to that house in reality or in memory. He ran down corridors of memories in his mind, twisting and turning, the rooms of his parent's home, the galleries and museums he spent so much time in, memories of his father and mother, the registration number of his first car, faces, places and times with his friends at university, college, school, primary school, infants until the repressed was replaced with the present and the 'things' that he feared were waiting for him in the dark of his house.

He raced down the stairs. He would unlock the front door and secure his escape route and then lock each internal door. He would then unlock one room at a time and check it for those 'things'. After he had searched a room he would lock it again so nothing could escape and hide to take him by surprise. He snatched at the keys he had left on the newel post and was at the front door before he registered that his hand had found the flat topped post to be clear. The keys were gone. He checked the door in case he had uncharacteristically left them in the lock. He hadn't. He began to doubt himself. He hadn't gone into any of the rooms to put the keys on another surface. He tried the light, forgetting it didn't work, and set about checking the floor in the gloom at the foot of the stairs in case he had swept the keys there in his haste.

Ivory

He searched his pockets, already knowing they were empty. No keys. The doors and windows were all locked.

He was trapped.

His hands quivered to his mouth then down to his sides and then to his forehead. The noise of the rain rattled against the house like a million bony fingers rapping against the glass and plastic of the door, tormenting him with the freedom of the outside world. He still had the keys for the internal doors. He would lock the doors downstairs and then smash the glass from one of the French doors in the back room. It was worth the expense to have an easy and ready escape route. He could then return to his plan of securing the house. He locked the lounge door. Pain undulated across his brain and the hallway dismantled itself into shifting shapes and colours and the invisible scene setters in his head rearranged his location to Ivory's hallway to the time where Martin slipped through the front door.

The point of Ebony's staff was level with Martin's face, Ebony stood behind it on the stairs holding it like a spear. He was a tower of strength with his feet on different steps as a firm foundation that would support him in channelling the power of his upper body into a punt of the solid shaft of wood. a blow that would most likely shatter Martin's nose or lose him an eye. Ebony's stern face broke around an authoritative roar: "Who dares trespass?"

Martin was paralysed; an insect suspended in amber. All he had to do was keep quiet. That was the plan. The blunted point that Martin was sure could break his skull, challenged that idea.

"I will not hesitate in the fury of my defence!"

Martin could escape. Yes, that was the other plan, a plan that was suddenly more favourable. If he got away without uttering a word or being caught Ebony could only guess at who his trespasser was. However the door was not fully open and Martin had his back to it and his footing was misplaced for a quick turnaround. Panic caught him between thought and action and he held his stance, holding his breath back from giving away his presence.

Ebony flinched, releasing his muscles into his strike. "No! It's me... Martin..." He relented and his breath shuddered out of him, distorting his words. His eyes clenched against the blow. It didn't come.

Ivory

Martin opened one eye and saw that Ebony's grip on his staff had tightened, staying the blow.

"You. You dare trespass!" His voice was a husky prolonged exhalation, as if the power from his aborted attack was being vented from his chest, ending in a guttural growl.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry." He pleaded, still facing the end of Ebony's staff. "I wanted answers."

"Your determination is proving to be an annoyance." Ebony lowered his staff.

"I knew there was a key here... I had seen Ivory reach in."

"I have told her to take care in not being observed," he said aside to himself, as if being followed was a regular threat for Ivory.

Remorse at being caught and despair at his actions skewered his conscience. "I have never done anything like this before. I don't know what came over me..." The tension relaxed from Ebony's jaw and his eyes softened while Martin felt a tightening of tension across his as he saw the phantom of pity in them. "But, you do though. Don't you? You know what's happened to me. What my obsession is. Your friend, the woman at the shop, I followed you there and she told me that I was cursed."

Ebony clasped the top of his staff in a grip that creaked with its tightness, either because he was being pressed for answers or with the revelation that he had been followed. "Lust and love are potent magic's we all find ourselves slaves to," he snapped.

"No. This is different. I think I would destroy myself to keep feeling this."

"Others have destroyed themselves to keep from feeling it," he cautioned. "Iris, an associate of mine, an oracle – a psychic in your words, she predicts that many will destroy each other for her beauty."

"Iris was the woman you asked after at the shop?"

Ebony cocked his head in surprise at just how much Martin had gleaned from following him. He gave Martin a measuring look as if wondering how far Martin would be prepared to follow Ebony. "She is more than a mere woman, but yes."

"And there are tensions between you and this Iris?"

Ivory

“Iris and her followers have dogmatic views concerning good and evil. They see them as diametrically opposed. Things are black or white, light or dark, they do not recognise the grey shadow that permeates my work. Iris gave me this staff: a work of beauty for a blind man who was given a vision of the darkness, but wouldn’t believe.” Ebony proffered the staff but retained a firm two handed grip that instructed Martin it was being offered for examination, not for taking. Now able to study it directly he could see that it was carved from bottom to top, the relief and detail greater nearer the thicker top end. The seemingly Celtic interlacing pattern was actually carved representations of men and women, not in orgiastic embrace as it might have appeared, but in a struggle, pushing, pulling and clawing one another away from an inlaid slither of bone-white ivory detailed as a woman. The grain of the wood was darker around her, tracing over the contours of the naked men and women in their fighting like blood.

“And you believe that Ivory has some hold over men?” Martin was unsure if he was challenging Ebony or his own eager clutch at the possibility of there being a spell that could erode his will and his responsibility for his actions.

“Men and women.” Ebony left the stairs and joined Martin in the hall. “Her influence knows no convention or boundaries. It is prophesised that man and woman will turn on each other to claim her, and from the bloody chaos darkness will come.”

Martin’s heart fluttered at the mention of the word ‘prophecy’, but ignored it, preferring the safer indignation at Ebony’s insulting explanation. “Do you belong to a cult? Is that it?” His lips snarled around the question as if it tasted foul. “You have brought Ivory up and turned her to prostitution to try and fulfil some insane religious predictions?”

“Ignorance still! On the brink of enlightenment the fool fails to see the path to truth,”

“Fool?” There would be no arguing with a religious zealot. Disputing faith was a circular argument.

“The journey of the fool in the Tarot.”

“I want to understand... but I don’t want to be made a fool of.” Ebony could keep his faith if Martin was given some answers that

Ivory

satisfied him. "Let me see some of your work, let me understand why all that money is needed."

Ebony's brow shrugged in evaluation of the request and he moved towards the first door in the hallway, turned the handle and swung the door wide open.

Martin silently questioned the gesture at first, but stepped into the room being offered to him. The sitting room was larger than the one he had been in before with Ebony, the dainty flower patterned paper on the walls looked as old as the house itself but was in better condition than the hall, the wrought iron fire place and wooden surround with integral age-glazed mirror were also original. "What is this?" Every surface of the walnut furniture, from the large table that dominated the space between the two antique queen Anne sofas, to the low level cabinets against each wall were covered with curiosities.

"Things that I have crafted."

Martin heard Ebony's words as clear as when he had first heard them, but the mention of 'things' conjured a fear within him that brought down the curtain on the stage in his mind and grounded him in the present. Finding himself suddenly transported from the spacious room in Ivory's house to the narrow hallway of his home was more disorientating than the last flashback. His memory had proved so powerful that he could taste the dusty air of Ebony's house on his tongue even now. The pain in his head had subsided into dull aching throbs and he took careful steps down the hall towards the kitchen, keeping his head steady as if his brain might spill out. He locked the kitchen door and peered into the back room.

Satisfied that nothing was waiting for him in the open and that everything seemed in its natural order he entered, he didn't bother pulling the door away from the wall to trip the light switch and check if the room had power, he had given up on that hope. He crossed from the door, passed by the glass coffee table to the large French doors between Jenny's armchair and the PC desk in the alcove. The sky was still, the clouds now fixed in place as a simmering ceiling flickering with coruscating yellow energy at its depths. The bushes and shrubs that separated the patio from the lawn trembled and swayed under the relentless torrential downpour giving the impression of things disturbing

Ivory

the branches and leaves. The outside world appeared just as frightening as the confines of his home. He reasoned that at least the outside had infinite opportunities of escape and would ground him in sanity.

He knew that the weak point of the double glazed doors was the corner of the glass, but it had to be struck by something with a point. Martin scoured the room for something weighty and pointed, wary of what else he might find lurking in the gloom of his surroundings he stayed in the middle of the room. After several grunts of exertion and several swings at the glass, a table lamp, wooden sculpture and a heavy pot plant sat demolished at his feet and the glass remained unbroken. The portrait of Ivory stared down at him mockingly with its black eyes following his despair. Had she sent the ‘things’ to get him? Or had they tracked him down somehow? Was she even aware of them?

Martin’s panicky fumbling fingers unlocked the kitchen door. An icy draught from the open window curled around him. He had been right in thinking that it was only wide enough for a child to get through, but it *was* wide enough for those ‘things’ to get in. He crossed the kitchen, pulled it closed and turned the handle down to lock it. A single long white hair trailed from where it had been snagged on the insulated join. A strand of Ivory’s hair. He shivered against cold fingers tracing down his spine.

Impossible. He dismissed the suggestion that somehow she had managed to squeeze through, yet he had seen her get her arm into the letterbox at her house to retrieve her front door key, and he knew how impossible that was. It gnawed at his rationale. He returned to the task at hand and rifled through one of the drawers. He clumsily snatched through the clutter and drew a hard wood rolling pin out from the tangle of utensils. He scattered spatulas, spoons and a whisk to the floor as yesterday smashed into his consciousness once again.

The room that Ebony showed him within his and Ivory’s house was cluttered with wooden and brass music boxes, flowers, and birds in cages, busts of children or scaled down adults, dolls dressed in rich fabric clothes, their faces and hands made in delicate porcelain their heads loaded with locks of real hair. “The work is so intricate...”

“For a blind man?”

Ivory

“Yes.” Martin walked into the room and examined one of the larger pieces on a cabinet nearest the door. It was the top half of a child dressed in renaissance clothing of plush browns and reds, mounted at its waist upon a dark stained wooden box, the front of which formed a small desk-like ledge. On the desk was a blank piece of white parchment, one of the child’s hands steadied the paper in place while the other held an antique fountain pen poised to write. Its face was porcelain and its eyes were glass, but the paint of the skin had the glow of youth and the iridescent iris caught the light with a sparkle of life.

“The work is merely created from patterns of movement well rehearsed over time and remembered after my sight left me.”

Martin circled around the room, admiring the neatly knitted feathers layered over the body of the caged mechanical bird. The petals of the flowers were paper thin shavings of wood with colours so softly applied and graduated across the spectrum, it was as though the colours were breathed upon them. “It’s amazing.” He crouched to admire a Harlequin doll on the centre table, the figure was a little over a foot in height and clad in a suit of burnt orange and charcoal diamonds with a hook-nosed mask of red and black, one of many variations spaced around the room amongst other creations, but this one sat at a perfectly scaled down pianola.

“You admire the Hellequin? The Hellequins are base creations, but her favoured works.”

“This room...”

“It is a room for her.”

“Ivory?” The room suddenly ignited with a life of its own. The carved petals of the flowers unfurled to reveal silken stamen and brilliant colours, the music boxes clicked and whirred before chiming into life, the torso ticked and tocked as hidden cogs began to turn and gears began to creak, the iridium nib of its pen scratched at the page in fluid movements. The bird fluttered its wings and its head cocked and jerked in Martin’s direction while it chirped a sweet song. The harlequin played at the pianola in small jerky moves and its companions, although without instruments were just as animated. “What happened?”

Ivory

“The machines are hers, gifts of sentiment from me, she loves them and they love her. They are connected and come to life at her name or her presence.”

Martin took his explanation as meaning they were sound and motion activated. He could see how the magic of this room and the dedication of love within the gifts would be of comfort to Ivory. “Beautiful. But it’s quite a leap of medium from oil painting to mechanics.”

“Paintings were not enough to provide for my wife and I. My father was a watchmaker and I turned our family skill to toys and trinkets such as these. Those toys earned me a reputation as well as a comfortable living.”

“They are quite amazing – surely in this day they are electronic?”

“Clockwork. Self-winding.” Ebony announced, seeming to stand taller with his shoulders squared and his chest broad as he talked of his creations.

“I find it difficult to believe.”

“Classical legend has it that Herron made the first automaton, Da Vinci had his own designs for one. In the 18th century De Vaucanson created mechanical life in a mechanical man that could play the flute. In the same century Pierre Jaquet-Droz and his son made automaton men and women that could write, draw and play music. Works that inspired your Babbage into working on his calculating machines. Advances are made in every field in time, it’s not so unbelievable that almost three hundred years later their creation would evolve and their movement and ability would be increased, especially as Babbage’s work was the basis for the concept of the computer.”

No matter how fantastic Ebony’s creations were Martin could not reconcile what he saw as being worth Ivory’s sacrifice. “And these are all funded by all that money? I would expect there to be more.”

“This is just a sample of my work – shown to you now to satisfy your curiosity. The rest, as I told you before, is not kept by me. I only have my current work of creation, and I am sure you understand an artists desire to keep his relationship with his work sacrosanct until completion.”

Ivory

“Yes... of course. I came here to understand... and you have tried to explain... Yet I still don't understand how the end justifies the means.” Ebony was still expecting Ivory to sell herself to fund his art.

“Explanations yes, but justifications, no. I think I have been gracious enough at this point.” His hard voice turned his proud standing into a postured warning display of strength.

Martin shuffled uneasily, he had pushed too far and he had expedited the end of the time that he had been granted. “I just find it all so difficult to comprehend. I apologise.” He had been so distracted by Ebony's mechanical creations he had failed to pay any attention to the portraits. Each one featured the woman he recognised as Ebony's wife from the portrait he had seen previously. Once again they were painted in an 18th century style that riled Martin's sensibilities regarding taste. “The paintings are beautiful. Are they your work?”

“Yes, as before they are of my wife.” Ebony's eyes did not move from their fixed blind stare but Martin knew Ebony was seeing the past. “It was painted while she carried my child. We were so happy then.”

Martin studied each in a display of interest that he forgot was lost on Ebony. “It must have been awful to lose them.” Martin clutched at empathy to stay the execution of his presence.

“It was. After their deaths I was half the man I was.”

“Your art is what kept you going?”

“In a way. I sold my house and travelled Europe, moving from village to village making toys to earn my keep and for the children that gave me their precious time and interest. Seeing the pleasure in their faces was a glimpse of the joy I could have had with Emily. It was enough to keep me sane and alive.”

In the largest of the paintings, the woman was seated but accompanied by a young black man with a soft slender face and a thin but solid framed body, standing proud behind and beside her. Ebony's conspicuous chocolate eyes were surreally intense, but their stare was forgotten when he found a carved scrawl in the paint; ‘My darling M. Love, your Ebony.’ “I think you are mistaken though. These can't be you and your wife – the date on them...” ‘1768.’

Ebony stood like a statue for some time, leading Martin to question whether he had heard him. “There is no mistake.”

Ivory

Martin laughed spontaneously to avoid expressing the emotion that swelled urgently in his chest into his neck and swelling through veins into his temples. "You are expecting me to believe that you are over three-hundred years old?"

"I expect nothing."

Martin clenched his fists to stop them from trembling and paced from foot to foot, his face burning. "This is ridiculous," he exclaimed as evenly as he could manage. "You are living in a fantasy world!"

"Your judgement is not asked for and your understanding is not my burden. You are a trespasser and I demand that you leave my home this moment," he growled clutching up his staff before him like a brandished weapon.

"Oh, don't worry – Ivory has made a joke out of me and now you do the same, so I am going." Martin stalked towards the door, his sudden movement and direction startled Ebony and he flattened himself against the door to allow Martin to pass. Martin denied a spontaneous urge to sweep Ebony's creations from the cabinet that ran beside him as he went. It would achieve nothing, except destroy things Ivory cherished. His instinctive concern for her frustrated him further.

The sudden change from carpet within Ebony's house to the hard flooring of his own kitchen caused Martin to be unsure about his footing and stagger momentarily across the room, absently punch drunk from his memory's assault on him. The drawer that was still in his grip came free of the kitchen unit and the weight forced it out of his hand. It cracked the tiles on impact and spilled its contents in a cacophony of noise. He had fought his own way free this time. His memory was playing out yesterday's events in a linear path that he did not want to follow to its conclusion. The frustration from his encounter with Ebony was swollen within his chest as though he had relived the experience. In the corner of his eye he glimpsed something low to the ground move past the door. In the second it took him to react and look up, there was nothing to be seen. He clutched the rolling pin firmly in his hand and drew the biggest knife from the selection in the block and cautiously headed back into the hall. He was sure the moving shape that he had seen had headed into the back room where he needed to be.

Chapter Twenty One

Martin peered into the shadowy room. Once again, apart from the mess he had made in his desperate attempt to break the glass, the room looked as unassuming and without threat as it always had. He gingerly stepped into the room and his attention was snatched by the sound of a fit of scampering from behind the sofa. Martin navigated to the French doors by going around the outskirts of the room and gave the sofa a wide berth.

Checking around him to ensure that he was immediately safe, he planted the point of the knife against the window and drew the rolling pin behind him to strike. White fire tore through his mind causing his aim to shift. He smashed the solid pin against his own hand, but the pain in his head anaesthetised him against the blow. He knew the head pain meant remembrance but he did not want to remember. He rushed through the tapestry of memories he had used before, took dizzying turns in the corridors of his mind. Childhood. Family. Adulthood. Adolescence. Work. Friends. The pain lashed whip-like across the tender tissue of his brain, forcing him to his knees. All corridors seemed to lead to the same place, but he persevered. Family holidays. Dusty Sunday school song books. Giving lectures...

Following Ebony's command to leave, Martin reached the front door. He realised he had now been in both reception rooms on the ground floor of Ebony and Ivory's home and he couldn't recall seeing a workshop in the garden from the rooms he had visited. Ebony's workspace had to be upstairs. With little thought Martin ran up the staircase, narrowed from its use as shelves to support books and papers, while Ebony bellowed for him to stop over the cacophony of Martin's feet against the bare wood of the stairs. He lanced his staff through the banisters to trip him. His reflex had been quick, but Martin was three steps ahead and climbing two at a time. "Curse you!"

Martin threw open the first door that he found on the gloomy drab landing, but guessed from the layout that it would be the bathroom and although he was glad of the cleansing daylight that spilled out from within, he didn't hesitate to study it. He threw open the second door and plunged into the room. The soft yellow light that filled the room fled

Ivory

from him and circled around him chasing the shadows. He knew in that disorientating moment, that although this room was not what he had expected, he had found what he had been searching for. He caught his breath from the sudden climb, and the nerves of the candles that were scattered throughout the room settled from Martin's explosive entrance and returned to a steady soft glow.

The room was gloomy and had no window, like the hall and landing it held books and parchment filled with sketches and notes, except these were not stacked one on top of the other but laid out for easier access on shelves of bookcases, among jars of powder and liquids, or were in use and spread out on the large work bench that ran across the far wall. The bench held intricate mechanical pieces in various stages of construction and scattered tools suited for detailed works. A bubbling sound undulated in the air from earthenware cauldrons that stood on the desk or were held in wrought iron stands, their milky contents boiled – strangely without any source of heat, and filled the air with mists and curious earthy odours.

The floor was bared uneven boards, while the walls looked to be in bad shape with the plaster blown or missing and baring the bricks beneath. Much of the walls were covered by book cases that ran to the ceiling or were patchily papered with large anatomical sketches of skeletons and musculature, of a similar nature to Grey's anatomy or Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. The ceiling held racks of stored jars and scrolls that could be winched down on pulleys, and were hung with tools and larger more complete mechanical structures.

From the middle of the ceiling, muslin or mosquito netting hung down to the floor and surrounded the dark shape of a raised bed. Ebony's heavy footfalls pounded up the stairs and a sense of urgency conspired with Martin's sense of discomfort that had settled its weight upon him from the claustrophobia of the cluttered room. Martin reached forward to a gap in the drapes with a hand that trembled, not for fear of Ebony's impending arrival but at what he might see beyond the veil. He pulled it aside and peered within.

Ebony bundled through the door as Martin recoiled from the gauze curtains, acid burning at the back of his throat as his stomach as

Ivory

reflexed at what he had seen. "What is this? What the fuck is this!" he wretched.

"The truth," Ebony announced with dark solemnity.

"Murderer!" Martin cast his eyes back to the shroud, illuminated from within by candles that were set into the earth that filled the raised wooden bed as though it were a makeshift shrine.

"I understand what you think you are witness to... but this is not the work of Mort this is the work of beginnings – Genesis." Ebony was impassioned. He moved into the room, still a powerful obstacle against any escape attempt, and moved a panel of the shroud aside with the tip of his staff.

The body lay before them on the bed of dusty soil that crawled with insects, yet the flesh appeared healthy and unspoilt by their appetite. The naked skin was aglow with the candlelight and held the allure of nude life and not the obscenity of nakedness and death. Yet the face...

"It looks so alive..." Martin made himself look upon its face again, and prayed that it was not alive with the face it had. "Yet it is dead. It couldn't live like – like that."

Martin was briefly aware of being on his knees in the back room of his home – the horror of the face in his memory causing him to recoil and not wanting to relive the events that would follow. The whip of pain lashed across his mind, punishing his resistance. A reedy whisper, barely a voice, accompanied the whip. "reeemeeemberrr..."

"Not dead. Simply awaiting life." Ebony's passion jumped emotion and became a low growl that caused the briefest of snarls on his face. "My toys and gifts became highly sought after. The ones I had used to barter for shelter and comfort were being tracked down and bought for high prices. Soon I was no longer making toys for the children I encountered. They were being commissioned by wealthy land owners for their already privileged children, and for the entertainment of nobles and royalty."

Martin doubled over with a griping wretch from the abhorrent ghost-image in his memory of that things face, and stabbed a finger in the direction of the body. "What has your story got to do with that!"

Ivory

Ebony approached the bed and ran a hand over the arm of the corpse and the athletic muscles appeared strangely firm but supple for a dead body. Martin was disturbed to his core by the pride in Ebony's face for the body stripped of its face.

"The money was great, affording me the chance to build bigger and greater machines: life-size mechanical men and women who could play simple instruments and imitate life in small ways. They, however, attracted the attention of others."

"Others?" Cold sweat drenched Martin's body while his bowels burned with the heat of urgent fear; he was engaging with the ramblings of a murderer. A man who believed he was over three-hundred years old. A blind man who believed he was an artist. A man who had twisted a young girl into his will. A man who had taken the face off a young male and displayed him like a relic in a shrine.

"Yes, others. The ones that brought this art to compliment my own."

"I don't understand."

"Then understand you will. The success I made was not satisfying. The circles I was moving within led me to lose my connection with the people and villages I was used to – the life I would have had with Emily. I missed the children. Wealth and renown was not what I sought. I decided that my journey was at an end. I tried to take my life." Ebony stretched his arms out before him and his sleeves slid up to reveal a broad but thin ochre scar across each wrist. "I lay on the floor of my workshop in Prussia, my life draining from me. Then they came as a single pillar of black smoke. Four of them; each distinct in appearance and chilling personality, but taking their turn in possessing just one body within the smoke. Shifting in and out of existence within one silhouette, their skin as white as a burial shroud, their eyes as black as a starless night."

"These people you saw, what did they want with you?" Martin asked tentatively, energy that had writhed around his heart during Ebony's explanation washed over him, running up the hairs of his neck into his hairline causing his jaw to quiver. He wanted to think it was the unnerving experience of talking to a lunatic and engaging in his world,

Ivory

and not a fear born from the consideration that what Ebony spoke of as being real.

“They offered me a deal. They wanted me to live and they would see to it that I did not die from my wounds. They would give me life extended. Free from natural death. I did not want it, but they needed it. For their work to be fulfilled it would take longer than mortal man’s time. They admired my work and they wanted me to continue it for them. However, there was a price for anyone who undertook their work, and for me it was my sight. They took my sight... Only when I worked would my vision return to aid me in my tasks.

“They commissioned larger dolls, but instructed me of strange new substances and materials, either unknown or forgotten to man. The others would provide the missing element that would give my creations life; souls. My creations would become vessels for souls who had been taken before their time was due. In return, when my work for them is over, I am to make one last figure in the form of my wife and they will bring my Emily back to me. I had a purpose again. My sight was a price that I gave gladly if it meant my wife to be reborn.”

“You mean that you made this? This is one of the creations that you mentioned?” Descartes the philosopher compared the workings of the body with machinery, but Martin was sure that even a great mind like Descartes had not been thinking of this. “Impossible...”

“The face is yet to be completed. Look closely at it.”

Hesitantly, as if he feared the body would spring to life, Martin leaned in closer. There was no definite line between flesh and muscle where the face had been, suggesting that the face had not been flayed or cut and peeled from the head. Where epidermis and corium became muscle the layers were wet and milky in appearance, as if the skin of the face had dissolved, or following Ebony’s explanation, had yet to be applied. Copper thread traced the fibres of the cheek muscle and ran beneath the dermis suggesting that the rest of the muscle beneath was of a similar inorganic and organic composite. “Impossible...”

“I can tell by your voice that your conviction wanes.”

“And when it has a... soul... it will live? and that is why you don’t keep your work?” Ebony’s words had been incongruous before, but now Martin understood. “You set it free...”

Ivory

“They are born to finish their lives. Each has a curious thirst for knowledge and a will to travel. Few have returned to me. Some have sought each other out and have banded together. They call themselves the ‘Vitruvian Sons’, as like Ivory they are made with a formula of aesthetic and of perfect proportion.”

The copper wire that threaded the muscle was undeniable. “This... and Ivory are like those clock-work toys of yours?”

“Much more complex, thousands of working components... A completely anatomically correct and improved body, capable of full automata animation.”

“And this is why Ivory works the streets? This is where the money goes?” The puzzle had been solved, yet Martin wanted to dismantle it and rearrange the pieces into a pattern that was more satisfying.

Ebony rested his hands on the head of his staff. “The work is lengthy and costly, the personal fortune I have amassed has been depleted for a decade or more now. She is here to fund my work for them. Her memories of any depravity will be exorcised and she will live her own life with any one of my other creations.”

Ebony had been right in his certainty that Ivory had a companion in her destined future, and how could she not fall for one of Ebony’s creations? A being with an athletic aesthetic of Michelangelo’s David and a soul that was deemed worthy of completing its journey by otherworldly beings with the powers of Gods. “And that was her future that you spoke of before?”

“Yes.” The certainty in his answer dissolved from his face. “They are my hopes... Iris believes me naïve and blinded by my longing for reunion, she believes the others have a dark purpose for Ivory.”

Although the ‘thing’ was behind him, its presence was palpable and acted as an anchor keeping him within the reality that Ebony had created. “The ‘prophecy’ that you mentioned earlier?” The sarcasm came defensively to his quavering voice in an instinctive rejection of its possibility, although engaging with Ebony and using a word and an ideology that was not his own no longer jarred his belief system. Ebony nodded an affirmative in answer to Martin’s question. “This is ridiculous.” Another wave of cold energy coursed through him as he

Ivory

realised his panicked denial would be read as disbelief. He studied any flinch in Ebony that would indicate he had antagonised him.

“You go to such lengths to find answers yet when you are given them you can not bring yourself to believe.” Ebony stated without visibly moving a muscle that wasn’t required for speaking. “Has there not been any moment since you encountered Ivory that you suspected something ‘unnatural’ at work?”

Ebony’s eyes narrowed at Martin’s silence in an expression remembered from when he had sight, as if Ebony could see Martin reflecting upon how Ivory had miraculously survived being hit by his car, how the wounds she had sustained healed quickly, the strange howl he had heard when he had driven into her, and again during the violence of King’s flat and the pimps ambush, how her image was difficult to reproduce on paper and could not be captured by camera, and how she managed to get in and out of his locked house. Ebony nodded. “I see that it is so.”

Martin had nothing to say. His sane world, that for so long had had no place for superstition, souls or immortality, crumbled around him. He had been awakened to a new world and he desperately leafed through the fragments of his mind to find pieces that would enable him to escape and clutch at sanity.

“On one of your little visits here, you mentioned Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion, how close you were to the truth of your situation. You are the Pygmalion of ancient myth who has fallen in love with the statue of Galatea. Only it is now, after you have fallen in love with, her that you find that she was a crafted object of man before she lived.”

Martin snatched up his wits and balled his fists against a tremor that ran from his feet to his jaw. “I don’t – I will not – believe your lies! You are insane. You have brought that girl up within a house of lies, indoctrinated her within your fantasy world, and forced her to sell herself. At best you are a pimp, at worst you are an abuser of an adolescent.” Denial felt safe. Without what Ebony described as the ‘truth’ behind the facts Martin found leverage and calm. He now had an edge against him. “...Things that the authorities frown on; especially with a body on the premises.”

Ivory

Martin wrestled with the memory of this moment but the reedy voice whispered to him. "remember!" The voice came as a distant breeze but hit him with the power of a gale slamming him back into his memory. "REMEMBER!"

Ebony extended his staff before him lance-like against Martin's threat, and his voice became an unnatural grumble of thundering cannon balls rolling across the ceiling around Martin's head. The candles guttered as if Ebony's words disturbed the air and forced the candlelight to tremble against the menace of the surrounding shadows. "Leave this place. Speak of nothing. Do not return."

Martin's resolve gave way to a chilled sweat, although the conviction he had in the power and palpable persuasion of Martin's threat was unshaken there was a tangible dramatic shift of power, and his defiance that had united his resolve abandoned him. His feet burned with a yearning to walk, a sudden compulsion to leave the house. The threat would still be effective, yet strangely he did no longer wanted to play his hand – did not want to talk to anyone about this house and everything connected to it. He never wanted to have to return to this house that challenged his sanity. "I'm going." Martin wrestled with his courage enough to pause in his newfound urge to leave. "Have you told her that I know that she continues to sell herself?"

"Yes."

"So it's over then. Now that she knows that I have found out about her continuing to sell herself she won't be at mine when I get home." Despite everything, this was the most disturbing thought.

"She will be there as I instructed her to be. The truth has not stopped you wanting her, and the discovery of her deception will not stop you paying for her to return to you." His voice became commanding again. "Now follow me."

The memory vision collapsed as Martin dug the tip of the knife into the palm of his hand. With the memory gone he instantly regretted the pain he had caused himself and he clutched the bleeding wound. He rocked back and forth on his knees, close to sobbing for the pain and the memory. He picked the knife up with the hand he was sure was broken from the rolling pin and took hold of the pin in his other hand, he stood up and prepared to make another attempt.

Ivory

The rain shifted direction and angled against the glass of the French doors in a torrent that turned the outside world into a shifting distortion, as if the very elements would attempt to beat back his escape. He became aware of a creaking noise, lower than the sound of the rain, but in the room with him. Martin backed against the glass doors, and his focus darted from place to place trying to identify the noise, when he saw that the surface of the portrait of Ivory was squirming. The prized image was blurring. The crisp edges of her white skin were becoming fractal, migrating into the dark background. The black of her eyes grew larger and dark veins emanated from them as the paints tracked into one another. Swallowing his fear back into his throat he shuffled himself closer and peered through the gloom at the shifting portrait. The very edges of the canvas appeared to mirror the blurring of the painting as the fibres of the canvas drew themselves apart into a frayed mess. Martin watched powerless as the portrait he had sacrificed his family and morals for was reduced to a molten slag against the wall.

There was no noise, no shadow, no half-caught movement in the corner of his eye, but his attention was drawn to the door by a palpable gravitas. Ivory stood in the hall. Her eyes fixed upon him. He had checked all the rooms in his initial search but realised he had not checked the large walk-in storage area under the stairs, and he could see that the door was wide open behind her. Martin knew that this was not the Ivory he had fallen in love with. Not the Ivory that he had lusted after. This was the Ivory that he had been warned of. This was the Ivory of prophecy.

She was terror.

Chapter Twenty Two

The storm, the power failure, being trapped with the creeping things in the shadows, they all seemed there to build the terror, the terror she wanted him to experience before she struck. Her head dipped and her glare narrowed. A force tore through the atmosphere of the room, passed intangibly through his body but jarred his mind within an agonisingly white hot aura.

"remember!" The voice was not in his ears, but in his thoughts. "show me what you did." Ivory's lips did not move, but he knew the voice emanated from her. "REMEMBER!"

Martin dutifully obeyed Ebony's order to follow him and leave the house, but in his curiously automaton state Martin failed to take adequate care in his navigation of the stacks on the landing. His leg toppled papers and crudely bound books, and they slid from one another and spilled around Ebony's feet into a skidding tumble down the stairs. The remaining stack leaned into Ebony's legs, and thinking Martin was attacking him he spun and brought the head of his staff into what would have been a brutal uppercut had Martin been where Ebony thought him to be. In changing his stance Ebony allowed the angular flow of papers and books to replace his flat purchase of the steps, causing his feet to skate on books and slip on loose leaves.

Martin found his reflexes were his own again and he clutched at the front of Ebony's shirt to save him from the fall. Pain flashed up his spine with the urgent report that he was supporting all of Ebony's weight. The decision to let go was instinctive, but it was still a choice. He let go. He knew that the sickening realisation of what he had done would be infinitely replayed and re-experienced in his psyche.

Martin clenched his eyes shut and thrashed his arms about his head trying to swat away the mental control Ivory seemed to have over him. "REMEMBER!"

Martin watched passively as Ebony twisted in an attempt to kick his feet into footings on the steps but toppled headfirst. This time Ebony did find a step. With a resounding thud the impact of his face upon the edge of a step obliterated his nose and shattered his cheek bones. Ebony's legs cart-wheeled high over his body and sent him tumbling

Ivory

down the stairs, scattering books and papers as he went. He grunted with each impact before his head hit the hall floor and his body catapulted past his head and smashed into the Great Mephisto with a force that rocked the amusement on its feet. Ebony slid off the magician's casing at a right angle to the stairs but his head remained where it was and with the sudden wrench of his bodyweight the fibrous neck muscles ruptured with the sound of thick dry rope being twisted. The body flopped to the floor in an excruciatingly painful looking pose. Death's numbness wrestled with life's intolerance of discomfort but the body settle and there was then no movement.

Martin stood at the top of the stairs staring down at Ebony, his head was now at an impossible angle to his body. Books continued to thud down the stairs after him and papers fluttered gently onto steps or rested upon Ebony's person. The house was still and Martin was now alone. He reached down and picked up the staff that Ebony had dropped. The staff with its prophecy of men and women in throws of violence and clambering over corpses for their love and lust of Ivory. Martin stumbled from the top of the stairs and slammed the door of Ebony's work room against his own fulfilled place within prophecy.

He swung the staff wildly about him in a blind rage at the room. His swipes were followed by thuds that he assumed were books batted from bookcases, the smash of jars and the hollow pop of clay gourds, as he destroyed the fantasy Ebony had built. The room swirled about him in a blur of motion with items exploding. The stumpy head of the staff struck from surface to surface, again and again until there was one impact that he couldn't ascribe an identity to and he came to a halt, panting and sweating from his exertion yet the red mist continued to veil his vision. Martin staggered from his dizzying dervish and he realised the red rage was not an internal state but the muslin drape before his face lashed with blood. He relaxed his posture and loosened his grip on the staff but found it resisted him. It was lodged in a cavity that the impact had created within the face of the body.

Martin's grip leapt from the staff as if it had become scalding hot and the staff pulled itself free under its own weight and drummed to the floor. Tentacles of blood scaled the muslin from the face that was now completely caved in to the head in a dark mess of blood, tissue,

Ivory

brass threads, cables and cogs. Martin fell onto his rear with a thud that rocked the furniture and rattled the jars and gourds and scrabbled away from the scene. He sobbed as the blood followed him from where it had sprayed onto his clothing and his face.

The room was darkening, the fluttering shadows at the corners of the workshop grew thicker and details of objects became obscure as the light began to weaken. Seeing that the candles still burned, he wondered if the darkness was his own weakening consciousness, yet the shadows were not descending over the whole scene but creeping in from the corners, stretching across the walls and reaching out into the room, consuming features and furniture in an increasingly imperceptible blackness. There was a rumbling noise, at first he thought it thunder but it didn't undulate and was constant, except that the sound was building. He could feel a vibration through the bare dusty floor boards, and then he saw that the shadow was at the middle of the room. Yet it wasn't shadow, there were tendrils of black smoke filtering through gaps in the boards over an area of around a metre in diameter, coiling into each other, reaching for the ceiling but tumbling back down upon itself before it could make it, forming an eddying hunched figure of smoke. A fire in the room below? Then Martin remembered Ebony's story of the Demons that had offered Ebony his deal. They had arrived in smoke.

He raced across the floor on his hands and knees, his pace broken by his frantic swipes at the tears and crimson wetness on his face, he tumbled through the door and onto the landing and staggered to his feet in a clumsy descent of the stairs.

Despite the urgency in his panicked escape and avoiding looking at Ebony's body, there was something different about the hallway beyond the change of landscape caused by the books that had fallen. Things were moving. He froze on the stairs and the sound of his heavy footsteps was replaced by the Great Mephisto slapping his paddle hand against the glass of his case. The Hellequin that had been at the pianola now crouched at Ebony's side stroking his arm in jerky movements of affection and mourning. The mechanical boy poet stabbed the sharp nib of its pen into the floor using it to anchor a grip and drag its torso and wooden base into the hall, its face shattered from its drop from the cabinet. Martin's attention was snatched back and forth in the hall as

Ivory

movement gave away the presence of more dolls and moving creations that had migrated from the room dedicated to Ivory to reach Ebony's body.

White hot pain soaked into his ankle, dropping him onto the steps. He could feel the thing at his leg and saw it as a rat in his mind and kicked instinctively backwards at the creature. Instead of hearing a squeal and feeling a soft body pinned to the riser, he heard the crunch of something harder. He swiped at his ankle and knocked a broken Hellequin tumbling down the stairs. He studied his fingers and found them slick with blood from his wound. The hand that rested on the step beside him flared into his awareness as it rode a surge of pain. A second Hellequin crouched, its head attached to the back of his hand by its mouth, Martin prized at its small hard head as its bite closed more. Waves of pain battered his consciousness with dazzling light, followed by an instant numb headiness as he pulled the thing off him.

He studied the squirming doll, its masked head unhinged in a maw that spread from ear to ear to reveal a ragged trap of angled blades soaked with his blood. He threw it onto the landing behind him. His ear roared with pain as another Hellequin fell upon him from the top of a stack and clamped onto his flesh, he pulled it free and felt that part of his ear go with it. He dropped the doll, scrambled to his feet and tumbled and stumbled down the stairs.

The Great Mephisto sat in his box, his head turning from Ebony to Martin, his shuttered glass eyes wide and his hinged mouth agape within its limited expression of shock and grief, its paddle hand slamming the spidery cracked glass as if in protest at Ebony's death. Martin leapt over Ebony's body and picked his way through the spilled books and moving things that closed in upon him and fumbled with the door, he pulled it open and floundered through then slammed it closed against the nightmare.

“Oh god! Oh fucking Christ!” Martin was shaken to find that he was back in the present. Before an Ivory who had seen into his thoughts. Seen what he had done. He wanted the sanctuary of memory, to return to his flight from the house so that he could avoid the present situation, the horror of yesterday was nothing compared with the terror he felt now. He slammed the door of the family room shut, sure that she would

Ivory

stop him, but it struck the jamb with a resounding crash. He jammed the key in the lock, his heart pounding, knowing that he wouldn't get time to turn the key before she would turn the handle and force the door open. He locked the door, and he leapt away from it in surprise that he had succeeded in shutting her out.

"Oh FUCK. Fuck. fuck." He trailed. The warnings were true. He feared the prophecy, and feared for himself. He realised he was wasting time, that she could find something to break open the hard wood door. He fumbled with the knife and the rolling pin again and returned to the glass of the French doors.

Martin dropped his tools, startled by a top panel of the door exploding into the room in a spray of splinters as Ivory's fist punched through. Her arm snaked after it and reached for the handle. She pushed it down, but made no attempt to force it open; instead she appeared to be steadying herself on it. Suddenly a foot came gracefully through the hole in the door. Martin knew that this was his moment, as the gap would be too small and she would wedge herself in the door if she tried to climb in. He could attack her there and then and finish this, yet to pick up the knife and to stab it into her... He couldn't do it.

Her face appeared in the hole, her features passive and emotionless, her eyes cold and impossible to read. Her head and body jerked into an angle that looked unnatural, as though her spine had abruptly broken, and then impossibly she leaned in through the narrow gap. The arm and leg that were the other side of the door followed her through and impossibly, but undeniably, she was standing in the room with him. Her head disjointed from her body at an awkward and painful looking angle, her right shoulder unfeasibly higher than her left, her body appearing broader and her chest flattened. She jerked again, three times, and her head set back into place, her shoulders realigned and her body narrowed and her chest expanded back to its original shape and size. All through this transformation Ivory's glistening obsidian eyes were fixed, unblinking, on Martin.

"you wanted answers." A sound permeated the air in the wake of her words. *"you wanted to understand me. you wanted to experience me. you wanted to know me completely."* His mind swelled with a sudden swarm of

Ivory

moving images merging in and out of each other; Ivory sitting on the floor of the lounge of her home reading arcane literature, Ebony stroking her hair absently whilst listening to crackling 78's on a gramophone. Ivory guiding the blind Ebony through unfamiliar places so he could learn the route. Ebony's voice, soft low and reassuring; "You will have someone that loves you innocently, and not through your hold over man and woman." Ebony and Ivory practicing Tai Chi together in their garden. *"his was the only mind that I could hear."* The pair of them bent over mechanical creations in his workshop, Ebony teaching her his skills. Her arm reaching through the letter box and disjointing unnaturally to reach the key, finding it wasn't there – looking through and seeing Ebony's body. The images vanished, the montage of her life snatched away from him. The collective whispering sound in the air was faint and illusive in its direction and source. *"you took the person that cared for me without sin."* The ululation built in pitch and volume and became sympathetic to Ivory's lament. *"you have destroyed all that I have. destroyed all that I stood to gain."* The sound built to a multitude of distant howls. *"you think you did it out of love."* The howling drew closer. *"you did it to force me to love you."* The howling spiked his ears and was all around him. *"you will know retribution."*

Martin recognised the sound, the sound that he had first heard when his car had careened towards her, the sound he had heard again when King had been killed and again when Ivory fought off the pimps. His hands were seized by a life of their own. His nails clawed at his flesh, and despite the pain his hands continued in scoring the lines that would draw his guilt. The blood washed over his pale skin and ran up his fingers until they were gloved in scarlet. His possessed fingers raked his nails at his eyes and dug at his lids until they were tatters. He snatched up the knife with a certainty that was not his own and held the tip poised. His eyes twitched in their sockets, seemingly the only parts of his body within his control. He screamed out against his hands. Pleaded with himself, with Ivory, with a God he now found himself

Ivory

praying existed and would aid him against this unnatural creature that was assaulting him.

Without any hesitation that suggested his own will, he smoothly and slowly moved the knife tip towards his right eye. Even when he felt the sting of the metal as it pierced the sclera and vitreous jelly spewed out onto his cheeks he did not stop. Half the world vanished and he vomited over himself.

At a moment when he thought the experience could become no worse and be no more painful, he moved the knife to his remaining eye. The clear fluid mingled with his blood creating a cascade of pinks and red. The world was gone, all he had was darkness. Blinded, he felt himself discard the knife and his stubby fingers continued to work as they delved and rooted his burst eyes from his head in explosions of pain that pounded against the back of his skull. Yet whatever force possessed him it would not let him pass out.

Blind to everything but himself he felt his fingers find the hardness of his keys and they wrapped around them. He heard the loudness of movement at his ears as he forced the keys to follow the spiral of the flesh into his head, pushing further, churning painfully in the canal of his ear until his efforts were met with a thunder equal to that of the storm outside. He repeated the torture on his remaining ear and an explosion was the last thing he heard as the world became silent and he descended into a world of only physical sensations, smell and taste. Martin jumped up with a muted awareness of his lungs exhaling a scream he could not hear.

He could feel the blood of his work running from his face down his neck, wetting his clothes to his chest. He staggered about in his own silent Hell. His leg hit something hard and he fell forward. His hands rushed out ahead of him in an instinct to break his fall and for a moment he felt the cold glass of the coffee table. Then solidness disintegrated, and there was pain again as he dropped the remaining distance to the floor. The shattered glass of the tabletop splintered around his outstretched hands, tearing them to ribbons, shearing tendons and scraping the bones with vibrations that ground in his mind.

Rolling around on the floor he could feel the thick pile of the carpet, and the sting of the broken glass. Grateful for every millisecond

Ivory

of sensation from the soothing softness of the carpet, before the onslaught of pain forced the feelings out. He could feel his arms moving but could not guess at the actions his own hands made. Then his lips were stinging in the middle of a scream. He tried to close his mouth but his thick slick fingers forced their way in. The glass shards filled his mouth gluttonously. Martin bit down on his own fingers, as he did so he realised he was force-feeding himself shards of glass, cramming them into the sensitive interior of his mouth. Martin rolled onto his side and spat out the glass, blood, and the lining of his throat with ribbons of his tongue.

Martin did not see Ivory step over his cowering form and take the keys, or hear the front door shut and lock behind her as she disappeared into the storm. Tortured by his own hand and now sealed entirely in his own dark void, with no eyes to see, no ears to hear, no hands to write and no tongue to speak. Silenced in a torture he could not share. Without senses he was trapped in his inner world. The blackness summoned his deeds like phantoms in the night. One by one they came; King, Jenny, his sons, Ebony, the faceless male, all there to haunt him. The people he had sacrificed in his lust for Ivory.

Epilogue

Candy stood at the mouth of the alley that led down to the front door of what had been King's flat. She looked up at the dark husk of the building. The ground floor windows were crudely boarded with planks that left gaps wide enough for the blackness within to be seen, but not wide enough to allow for any light to pick out the details of whatever was within. The windows of King's first floor flat were vacant, the wooden frames cracked and blackened into charcoal. Through these she could see the bared rafters of the loft from where the roof had collapsed, and the night sky coloured a dusky orange by the street lights, giving the appearance of the fires ghost haunting the charred flesh and ribs of the building.

For all Candy's attitude she had often experienced some anxiety when approaching King's flat, but even though he was long dead there was a feeling breathing a chill down the back of her neck. King was gone, but the building had taken on a life of its own. There were stories circulating that it was haunted and that King's tortured soul remained in Arven road watching the girls he had once ruled, unable to take his cut or a free touch, but possibly responsible for keeping other pimps off his old turf and keeping the girls safe. Over the last few months several rough punters had received beatings severe enough to make would-be pimps consider that whoever was running Arven road now was not worth messing with. Yet if someone had taken over then they had not stated their claim or approached the girls for their cut.

The whisper that the King was protecting Arven road had been quietly respected. Many of the superstitious European girls decided a cut of their own, attached it to a rock and tossed it deep within the shattered flats. She was not superstitious, she had laughed at the idea, but Candy was pregnant now, and things were different. She needed to feel safe and this magical rite was an act of desperation rather than one of faith. It didn't stop the rock and its attached roll of notes from becoming damp in her clammy hand. Candy walked hesitantly down the alley.

Selling herself had come easily to her and it hadn't messed with her head. She had never been ashamed of what she did, although she

Ivory

didn't like seeing other young girls coming into it. She had been called out of order for her harsh treatment of the new girls, but in her opinion the harder she could make it for them the bigger the favour she was doing them as selling yourself took a special way of thinking and not many people had that. However, she was a different person now and although in her mind the game had been fine as a student and the way she had led her life, it was irreconcilable with being a mother.

She was going to be a mother.

It felt weird to think it, but the realisation had changed everything. She wouldn't be Candy then, she would be Candace again and crazily she found herself longing to be that person. It would be like being reborn and starting over.

She had lied and told Brendan that she didn't know who the father was. She knew that would drive him away. Having a funny, cute and attractive drugged up loser for a boyfriend had been okay when it was just her living her life day to day, but she was planning for a future now, maybe the next twenty years of her life, and he couldn't stick to anything for twenty minutes. He wasn't fit to be a dad. If he had known it was his he would have tried to be a dad out of some kind of duty to do the right thing, but she didn't want to wait for him to fuck it up. Best to avoid kidding herself with 'he will be different when the baby comes' like so many girls did and be let down. It would also save the kid the grief of losing a dad. Unfortunately he had left with her stash of money, so as uncomfortable as she felt about it she would carry on selling herself until she had enough money for a deposit on a flat and to take a course in something. She had already started seeing Evelyn, a counsellor involved in an outreach scheme in the area, and she was getting her head sorted.

Her baby was the size of a pea at the moment, and that somehow made it easier to let other men get their pleasure from her body. She usually only took a few punters and gave herself a couple of nights off as it was all she needed to make a pretty good living, but she had decided to work every night and go with any man that came along if the money was right. She gave herself the deadline of one month to make another stash because the baby would be bigger by then and that seemed wrong. It was a lot of work to take on, but it would be worth it if she

Ivory

could give herself the new beginning and the start her child would need. That would mean a month at risk. A month of being exposed to punters who could refuse payment, could try and get out of using a rubber, could get rough. She needed the protection of a pimp that Arven no longer had.

The boarding that had been nailed across the doorway had been pried off and Candy stepped through and stood in the blackened hall of the building. The carpet that had been soaked by the fire fighters was now mouldering and had the feel of moss underfoot. The stink of burnt wood was still strong in the cool night air. It was so dark it was hard to tell what was soot and what was shadow as she climbed the remains of the staircase that had led up into King's flat. The stairs ended abruptly half-way up and became a tumble of shattered timber framework with scorched, withered and broken steps, but even at this height she was at the right level for the first floor as it had partly collapsed into the flat below. It had created a chaotic and seemingly unstable network of corridors, crawlspaces and clearings out of the fallen floorboards and joist timbers, places only for the most fearless and dextrous trespasser. It was an uninviting death trap and the perfect place for stories to fester and for things to hide.

She came this far into the building and put herself at risk as her own contribution to the ritual. She had never been content with talking to King on the doorstep and had always blagged her way in for a free drink or a chance to warm up, if she acted as she always had with King maybe it would bring extra magic to the moment. She tossed the stone and it tumbled down the sloping floor of the first floor and clattered to a rest in the doorway to one of the rooms of the ground floor. She waited, she didn't know what for, but holding her ground in that nightmarish place showed her balls to King and that had always earned his respect in life, no reason it wouldn't in death.

She stood in the dark. Her eyes adjusting to the gloom as her fear adjusted to her composure. She could feel the fine hairs of her neck tingle, the perspiration under her arms and breasts chilling as the building revealed more of its blackened self to her; the grain of the broken grey timbers, the scab like wounds of the black scorched wood, all with their silhouettes and shadows of splinters and jutting nails like

Ivory

vicious brambles, the orange streetlights filtered through with a volcanic Hellish presence. The empty doorway of the hall where her offering lay, in the mouth of a passage that lead to rooms and ruins out of sight, spaces where there could be someone obscured by shadow watching her in the lava light of the streets.

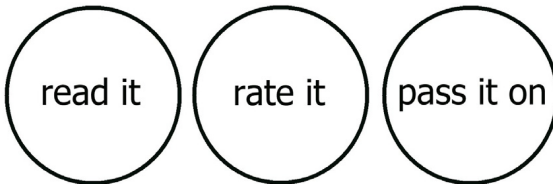
Candy placed a hand on her tummy, suddenly feeling protective of her pea. She spun on her heels for the doorway. Her escape faltered as the edge of her field of vision registered a lightning quick movement. She turned sharply, but saw nothing in the doorway. She was sure there had been a slender arm as white as moonlight. She laughed at her nerves but made a hurried exit from the building. Whatever it was it had gone. Candy made it to the door to the alley, beyond the point where she could have overruled her ragged nerves and turned back to see for sure, but her laughter died in her throat as she realised that her offering was *also* gone from the doorway.

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