

## FOREWORD

Hi there and thanks for buying my book. I hope you like it! Before you begin I just wanted to tell you a little bit about what to expect and why I wrote *The Final Winter*.

I guess the idea came to me at Christmas time. Britain was suffering under another record snowfall and people were acting crazy. Cars lay crumpled against lampposts and each other, whilst businesses closed all over. The country was completely unprepared, which led to me wondering how Britain would cope if we had the type of snowfall that some countries have, like Canada or Switzerland. From there I got to thinking what would happen if it snowed heavily all over the world simultaneously. The idea excited me and I had to write it.

So here you have it, my prediction of the events that would occur in the event of a worldwide snowstorm of supernatural origins. Oh yeah, and I set it in a working class pub just for some added fun!

Really hope you enjoy reading *The Final Winter* as much as I enjoyed writing it, and as an added bonus, I have included the short story, *The Peeling of Samuel Lloyd Collins*, for you at the end of this book. Hope to see you again soon.

Iain Rob Wright

## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Iain Rob Wright was born in 1984 and lives in the West Midlands with his dog, Daisy, his cat, Jess, his tropical fish, and the love of his life, Sally. Writing is the passion that fills his life during the small periods of time where he isn't cleaning up after his pets. You can speak to him at [iain.robert.wright@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:iain.robert.wright@hotmail.co.uk)

His next project will be a regular short story collection called 'Thrillobytes'. Check it out soon!

For Sally, because she means everything.

Thanks to all the folks at ReviewFuse for keeping my bad habits in check!

**THE FINAL WINTER**

BY

IAIN ROB WRIGHT

## CHAPTER ONE

Harry sipped his latest beer as the tenth news update of the night came on the pub's television. A female reporter appeared on screen, enveloped by an over-sized pink ski-jacket and covered in snow. "Good evening," she said. "I'm Jane Hamilton with Midland-UK News, and as you can clearly see, the nineteen inches of snow Britain has seen in the last 24-hours has left the nation's transportation network in disarray." The camera panned to overlook a deserted motorway. A sky-blue transit van lay overturned and abandoned at its centre, its mystery cargo strewn across the snow. "Major roads are now being closed off and rail links have been terminated until further notice. Schools are shut, along with nonessential businesses, while hospitals are doing their best to remain open. The current death toll of weather related fatalities is now at twenty-seven and expected to rise. Emergency services have set up a helpline in order to assist anyone in serious need and to offer advice on how best to survive the current freezing temperatures. That number is being displayed at the bottom of the screen right now."

Harry shook his head. *How long are they going to keep this up? We get it, the weather's bad! No need to come on and tell us every ten minutes. Life's depressing enough!*

“Even more concerning,” the television reporter continued, much to Harry’s displeasure, “is the fact that it is currently snowing throughout every nation of the world.” A multi-coloured map of the earth superimposed itself at the top right of the screen, then slowly turned white to represent the recent snowfall. “From barren deserts to areas of dense rainforest, all have been subjected to unprecedented snowfall, some for the first time in centuries. Never before in recorded history has such an event been known to occur. Certain religious leaders are calling this-”

“Don’t they just love a panic!” Old Graham, an elderly regular of The Trumpet pub and lounge, threw his hands up in disgust and shouted over to Harry. “Bloody fear mongers, that’s what they are. A little snow and the country trembles at the knees.”

Harry lifted his head away from his half-finished pint and looked at the man. Old Graham was pointing to the ancient, dust-covered television mounted against the back wall by a pair of rusted brackets. Harry shrugged. “Sorry, what?”

The old man huffed. “More nonsense about a few snowflakes bringing the country to a standstill. Your generation can’t cope with anything unless there’s a video on that *youtube* or *myface* to tell you about it!”

Harry glanced at the television again. The weather was affecting the signal and the picture flickered constantly. The endless news updates showed locations from around the globe, half-buried by blankets of slush and snow: The Pyramids of Giza ice-capped like Himalayan Mountains, the canals of Venice frozen over like elaborate ice rinks, and Big Ben rising above a snow-covered Westminster like a giant stalagmite. Harry switched his gaze back to the old man. “I agree that it’s a bit much, but the fact it’s snowing everywhere is at least a little odd, don’t you think?”

Old Graham huffed again, the sound wet and wheezy. “You think Canada or Switzerland is panicking about the weather? This is a heat wave to an Eskimo! All this climate-change, ozone-layer hogwash they’re harping on about is just to scare us, you mark my words.”

Harry thought about it for a moment. According to the news segments throughout the day it had been categorically denied that climate-change could cause such unprecedented weather. Whatever was causing the snow was something else entirely, said the scientists, if only a random occurrence. Whatever the cause, Harry wasn’t about to let himself get caught up in the media frenzy and speculation. The freakish weather didn’t concern him – *nothing concerns me anymore* – and he knew that if he got into a conversation with Old Graham about it he’d be stuck having to listen to the wrinkled coot’s piss-n-vinegar all night. It had happened enough times previously for Harry to learn that lesson.

He swallowed another mouthful of lager and kept his attention on the flickering television screen, but when he looked over again Old Graham was still gawping at him. Harry sighed and decided to give in. “Bet everything will be back to normal this time next week, huh, Graham?”

“You bet your balls it will.” The old man sidled along the bar towards Harry, arthritic knees clicking with every step. “I’ve lived through worse times than this, lad!”

Harry rolled his tired eyes. “Really?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I used to be married.” With that, the old codger howled with laughter, until his worn vocal cords seized up in complaint, causing him to cough and hack yellow-green phlegm bubbles across the bar. “Best go shift the crap off me chest, lad,” were Old Graham’s parting words before tottering off toward the pub’s toilets.

Harry shook his head and turned to face the opposite side of the bar. Steph, the pub's only barmaid, was smiling at him, while clutching a cardboard box full of MALT 'N' SALT crisps against her chest. She placed it down on the bar and pulled an old dishrag from the waistband of her jeans. She wiped down the area where Old Graham had coughed. "He bothering you again, Harry?"

Harry ran a hand through his hair, trying to neaten the scruffiness, and sighed. "He's okay. Just had too much to drink."

Steph snorted. "You're one to talk. What time did you get here today?"

"Noon."

"Exactly, and it's now..." She glanced at her watch. "Nine in the evening."

Harry smirked. "Yeah, but at least I have the decency to pass out when I'm drunk, instead of talking people's heads off like Old Graham."

"I'll give you that. Although, I'd like to remind you that you puked on my knee-highs last Sunday. I had to throw them out, and they were my favourite pair!"

Harry stared down at the foamy liquid hissing away in his glass and, for a split-second, felt embarrassed enough that he contemplated not drinking it and going home instead. He quickly let the guilt go and downed the last of the beer, dregs and all. He had enough regret in his life without adding to it. "I must have been a pathetic sight," he admitted.

Steph frowned. "You're not pathetic, Harry, just unlucky. Things will look up for you one day. You only turned thirty a couple months ago, right? Plenty of time to get back



on your feet.” She stopped and looked out of the far window across the room. “As long as this dreadful snow doesn’t freeze us all to death first, you’ll be fine. Time heals all wounds.”

Harry sighed. Steph knew about his problems and sometimes it made him uncomfortable. “You really think so?”

“You better hope so, matey, because I’m not putting up with you puking on me every week. Doesn’t matter how handsome you are!”

They both chuckled and Harry felt his mood lighten. It wasn’t often that he heard such things from a woman. Not when he looked about ten years older than his actual age (he hadn’t been able to face a mirror in months so maybe now he looked even worse).

He pushed his empty pint towards Steph and she refilled it diligently. The overflow from the glass slid down over the black heart tattoo on her wrist and made her pale skin wet and glistening. Suddenly, an unprompted desire to lick the beer from her young flesh found its way, unwelcomed, into his head.

Harry chased away the urge with thoughts of his wife. Julie had been gone a long time now, but he never stopped considering himself married. Never forgot his vow to love her forever. *Until Death Do Us Part...*

He took his fresh beer, slid off his seat, and moved away from the bar. *Away from Steph.* The worn and tattered padding of the bar stool he’d occupied for the last three hours had sent his backside numb and he now craved the relief of a cushion. He headed towards a bench below the pub’s large window and, at the same time, saw Old Graham returning from the toilets. There was a small urine stain on the crotch of the old man’s grimy, grey cotton trousers and Harry was relieved to see the pensioner return to the bar instead of coming over to join him.

*Thank God for small mercies.*

Harry eased down onto the faded bench cushion and sighed as the blood rushed back to his ass cheeks. He placed his pint down on the chipped wooden table in front of him and picked up the nearest beer mat. There was a picture of a crown on it, along with the slogan: CROWN ALES, FIT FOR A KING. Without pause, Harry began to peel the printed face away from the cardboard. It was a habit Steph was always scolding him for, but for some reason it seemed to halt his thoughts temporarily, keeping back the demons that haunted him. The brief respite allowed him to breathe freely again, if only for a while.

Relaxing further into the creaking backrest, Harry observed the room. The lounge area of The Trumpet was long and slender, with a grimy pair of piss-soaked toilets stinking up an exit corridor at one end and a stone fireplace crisping the air at the other. In the middle of the pub was a dilapidated oak-wood bar that was older than he was, along with several rickety tables and faded patterned chairs. In a backroom was a small, seldom-used dance floor that Harry had only seen once at New Year. It was a quiet, rundown pub in a quiet, rundown housing estate – both welcoming and threatening at the same time. Much like the people that drank there.

Tonight the pub was low on drinkers. It usually was on Tuesdays and Harry preferred it that way. He wasn't a big fan of company. Of course it helped that the snowfall had stranded most people to within a hundred yards of their homes and blocked up the main roads with deserted, snowbound vehicles. With the weather as bad as it was, getting to the pub, for most people at least, was not worth the risk. For Harry it was, because the alternative was being alone. And that was something he hadn't been able to face in a long time. He wondered if it was something he'd *ever* be able to face again. So he had braved the snow and made it to the pub in one piece, surrounding himself with people he barely knew.

*But at least I'm not alone.*

Somehow Steph had made it in tonight as well, holding down the fort as she did most evenings. Harry often wondered why she needed all the overtime. She seemed to enjoy it, but that could just be the barmaid's code, to be bubbly and polite at all times. But maybe, deep down, she counted each seconds until she could kick everyone out and go home. Even if that was true, Steph was still a good barmaid and kept good control of the place.

Even Damien Banks behaved under her watch. Weekdays were usually free of his presence, but tonight was an unfortunate exception. The local thug was sat with his Rockports up on the armrest of a sofa beside the fire, a flashy phone fastened to his ear.

*No doubt controlling his illicit little empire, Harry thought. Probably refers to himself as 'the Don'.*

From what Harry had heard, the degenerate scumbag pushed his gear on the local estate like a wannabe drug lord. No one in the pub liked him, not even his so called friends (or *entourage* as Old Graham would often call them in secret). There were rumours that the shaven-headed bully had once stomped a rival dealer into a coma, then taunted the family afterwards, revelling in the grief he'd caused.

Harry shook his head. *He's the one who deserves to be in a coma, instead of lounging around like he owns the place.*

There was one other person in the bar tonight. A greasy-haired, oily-skinned hulk named Nigel. Harry had not spoken to the over-sized man much, but spotted him in the pub at least a couple of nights each month. A lorry driver, from what Harry gathered, and spent a lot of time on the road. *Poor guy will probably have to sleep in his cab tonight.*

After Nigel, there was just Old Graham and Harry. Just the five of them, the full set. Tuesday was a lonely night.

Harry swivelled round on the bench, pulled his right knee sideways onto the cushion, and peered out the pub's main window. The Trumpet sat upon a hill overlooking a small row of dingy shops and a decrepit mini-supermarket that had steel shutters instead of windows. Steph once told him that the pub was barely surviving on the wafer-thin profits brought in by the lunchtime traffic of the nearby factories and, if it were to rely on its evening drinkers alone, the place would have closed its doors long ago – even before the public smoking ban came in and ruined pubs across the land.

Usually Harry could see the shops and supermarket from the window but tonight his vision faltered after only a few feet, swallowed up by the swirling snow and impeded by the thick condensation that hugged at the glass window. For all he knew, the darkness outside could have stretched on for eternity, engulfing the world in its clammy embrace and leaving the pub a floating limbo of light in an endless abyss. The image was unsettling.

*Like something out of the Twilight Zone.*

Snow continued to fall, as it had nonstop for the past day and night. Fat sparkling wisps that passed through the velvet background of the night, making the gloom itself seem alive with movement. Harry shivered, the pub's archaic heating inadequate in defeating the chill. Even the warmth of the fireplace was losing its battle against the encroaching freeze.

*God only knows how I'll manage the journey home tonight without any taxis running. Maybe Steph will let me bed down till morning? I hope so.*

Harry reached for his pint and pulled it close, resting it on his thigh as he remained sideways on the bench. He traced a finger over his grubby wedding ring and thought about

the day he had first put it on. He smiled, but then looked at the thick, jagged scar that ran across the back of the same hand, and the smile went away. The old wound was shaped like a star and brought back memories far darker than his wedding day. It was something he dared not think about. He drank his beer.

*God bless booze and the oblivion it brings.*

Harry chuckled about how once he had not cared for the taste of lager – white wine had been his tonic of choice – but The Trumpet wasn't really the type of place where a thirty-year old man could order a nice bottle of Chardonnay without being called a *poofter*.

*Funny how a person changes, Harry considered. Just wish I'd changed for the better.*

He took another sip of his beer and almost spat it out again. In only two minutes since he'd last tasted it, the beer had gone completely and utterly flat, as if something had literally drained the life from it. But before Harry could consider what would cause such a thing, a stranger entered the pub.

A second later, the lights went out.

## CHAPTER TWO

“Bugger it!” Kath cursed aloud, slapping her palms down on the supermarket’s checkout desk. She’d been two minutes away from finishing the 9pm cash-up and the building’s power had blinked out.

*Working at the dump ten hours a day is miserable enough without having to do it in the dark. I must have the words, SHIT HAPPENS, stamped across my forehead.*

“Peter!” She hollered into the sudden darkness. “Check the fuse box back there?”

A muffled voice from the supermarket’s nearby stockroom led her to believe her order had been received. She sighed and waited as her sight adjusted to the dark, wondering where she could find a torch or some candles (*Doesn’t Aisle 6 have some?*). The *Fire Exit* sign over the supermarket’s entrance gave off a small degree of illumination, but not enough to see her acrylic fingernails in front of her face. Kath had other senses though and her ears were picking up the sound of footsteps, echoing from the Bread & Pastries aisle. “Who’s there?” she called out.

The person stood close enough that the unexpected volume of their voice made Kath flinch. “It’s *me*,” the voice said. “Jess.”

“Jessica, you stupid girl! You gave me a fright.”

“Sorry, Kathleen, didn’t mean to. You know why the lights are out?”

“No, I don’t, but I’ve told Peter to check the fuse box.”

“Good idea. You reckon it’s just us, or the whole area?”

“How should *I* know? Walk out the front and see for yourself.”

“Okay,” said Jess, wandering off in one of her gleeful dazes that Kath hated so much. Sometimes she was sure the girl was out to annoy her on purpose – like the way she always called her *Kathleen*. If it wasn’t so ridiculously hard to fire people these days, the girl would have already received her marching orders.

Kath listened to Jess’s footsteps pad off in what sounded like a happy skipping motion. *Stupid girl! What does she think this is? Mickey Mouse Club?*

When Jess reached the store’s main entrance, the glow of the Fire Exit sign illuminated her in its pulsing green hue, giving her a ghostly complexion.

Kath cleared her throat. “Well, what are you waiting for?”

Jess didn’t respond. She pushed open the door leading out into the stark white night and poked her head through. Immediately a chill entered the building, rushing quickly to all corners like a horde of fleeing rats. Kath waited impatiently as the girl looked left then right then left again, before turning back inside and pulling the door closed.

When Jess turned back to face Kath, her company-supplied fleece was peppered with snow. “The weather out there is craaaaaazeee!” she said. “With a capitol zee”

Kath sighed. “What about the lights? Are anybody else’s on? What about The Trumpet across the road?”

“No,” Jess replied. “I can’t even see the pub! It’s too dark. I can’t make out Blue Rays Video Rentals or any of the other shops either.”

“Wonderful!” Kath shook her head and felt a migraine coming on. If the whole area was out then she would be forced to sit and wait for the electricity company to get off their overpaid be-hinds and do something about it.

*...and God only knows how long that will take. Two minutes? Two hours?*

Either way, until she could cash up, Kath couldn’t set the alarms and go home. Not that she had plans other than catching up on the episodes of *Desperate Housewives* that she’d recorded over the weekend, but staying at a dingy council-estate mini-mart on the coldest night of the year wasn’t anyone’s idea of fun.

*How did my life turn out so wrong? To think I spent four years at university... I make one little mistake and I’m condemned to a life of pointless mediocrity.*

Kath breathed in deeply then let the cold air out through her nostrils. *What a wretched waste!*

“It’ll be back on in a jiffy,” said Jess from over by the exit. “It never takes long, Kathleen. I’ll take a little walk over to the pub and see if anyone knows anything.”

Without pause, Jess left through the fire exit and was immediately swallowed by the shifting snow and darkness outside. Kath sighed, leaned back into the torn-padding of the



cashier-desk stool, and rubbed at her aching forehead. Shivers ran up her spine and made her think about the store's heating. With the power off, the store's electric fan heaters would be too. It was Britain's worst winter in history and she was stuck in a building with no warmth.

*Just gets better! Probably why the power went off in the first place. All those lazy slobs, cosy at home in front of their fan-heaters, are over-taxing the grid while people like me, who have shown some commitment to work, suffer.*

*Well screw this*, Kath decided. She'd give her manager, Mr Savini, a call, and see if there was any chance he would allow her to cash up in the morning. She slid her fingertips along the cold surface of the shop's counter, searching for the phone but finding only biros and a stapler. Eventually, the side of Kath's hand found what it was looking for, knocking the receiver from its cradle and off of the desk. It swung on its coiled cord, jerking up and down like a bungee. After a couple of swipes at knee-level, Kath caught the handset and pulled it up to her ear. She tapped at the buttons on the phone's cradle, waited, and then tapped them some more. No dial tone. Perturbed, she placed the handset back down onto its cradle, before picking it up and trying to ring out once more.

Nothing.

"Oh please, for the love of God!" Kath patted down the pockets of her work shirt. When she found her mobile phone she plucked it out and slid up the illuminated screen to expose the keypad. From memory, she entered Mr Savini's number and pressed the green CALL button, before putting the phone to her ear and waiting.

After ten seconds, Kath pulled the phone away from her head and looked at the display. She could barely contain her frustration when she saw NO NETWORK COVERAGE scrolled across the top of the screen.

*What the hell is going on?*

Before she could put her thoughts in order, Kath was interrupted by a voice in the darkness. It was male. “Ms Hollister?”

The voice had a Polish twang and there was only one person at the supermarket that ever called her by surname. “Peter,” she said, calmer than she felt. “Have you checked the fuses?”

“Yes, Ms Hollister. This is what I want talk about. I have something to show you. Come.”

*Speak properly for God’s sake. If you’re going to come here then at least learn the language. And show me what exactly? Bah, I’m never going to get home at this rate!*

Reluctantly Kath followed the boy down to the back of the store, ducking through the strips of clear plastic that led to the cramped warehouse. “So, what is it that’s so important, Peter?”

“One moment, Ms Hollister. I will show to you.”

Peter turned a corner in the cramped warehouse and Kath stayed close behind, lighting the way with their mobile phones. It didn’t work particularly well but at least illuminated the piles of over-stacked boxes they would otherwise bump into.

Kath was getting impatient. “Come on now, I’ve got to find a way to call Mr Savini so we can all go home tonight. Unless you want to spend the night sleeping in the staff room?”

Peter stopped at the far wall and pointed upwards, just above the height of his shoulder. Kath glanced at the area a few inches away from the boy’s outstretched finger.

She didn't understand and felt her patience thin even more. "What exactly am I supposed to be looking at?"

Peter rolled his eyes in the faint glow of his phone display and then moved the light source toward the area he was trying to highlight.

Kath sighed. "The fuse box? Yes, very impressive."

Peter rolled his eyes again and she was about to scold him for his insubordinate attitude when she realised what he wanted her to see. It was the fuse box alright – at least it had been in a former life. Now it was a black, melted decay of wires and bubbling plastic. The green metal box that housed the circuits was untouched, but the area within looked as though it had been subjected to a hellish blaze. The smell of burning rubber lingered in the cold crisp air, but not as strong as might be expected after an electrical fire.

"I don't understand," said Kath. "What could cause this?"

Peter shrugged at her. "I am not sure. Fire maybe?"

"Well obviously not, Peter. There hasn't been a fire because the alarms would have gone off. Not to mention it would have spread. This place is full of cardboard and paper."

"Blowtorch?"

Kath considered the boy's wild suggestion, her thoughts wandering off into the dark, insidious alleyways of her mind. Could someone have really taken a welder's torch to the fuses? Was someone lurking in the darkness intending to have their way with her in the dark? Had some hairy beast of a man been watching her for months, planning something like this? It was certainly an opportune time with all the snowfall. The police would never make it in time, even if she managed to call them. It seemed ridiculous, but for a moment so

plausible in her anxious state of mind that she actually started to believe that someone was intending to murder her. It was like something straight out of a Richard Laymon novel she had once read by mistake, thinking it was something else. *Horrible, disgusting book.*

It wasn't until Kath's next thought that she considered herself ridiculous for letting her overactive imagination run away from her. "Well," she finally said, "if it *was* someone with a blowtorch then how on earth did they manage to do it to the pub's fuse box at the exact same time? They have no power across the street either. Same with Blue Rays on the corner."

Pete shrugged and walked off.

*Nothing ever seems to concern that boy, just another lazy foreigner. Someone ought to use a blowtorch on his backside! Maybe then he'd show some enthusiasm.*

Alone, Kath tried to make sense of the situation. Was some deranged madman really stalking the neighbourhood, cutting off everyone's electricity? Or was her biggest threat merely freezing to death on the coldest night of the year? Neither outcome was appealing. All Kath knew for sure was that the fuse box didn't destroy itself and that the real cause had yet to make itself known.

She shivered, the chill in the air thickening suddenly, like a crushing, physical thing that squeezed at the gristle on her bones. There was no way she could stay there any longer. Not without power. Not in the dark. She made a decision. "Right, Peter, where are you?"

A scuffling sound from the far corner of the warehouse drew closer. "I'm here by the beer crates."

"Well make sure you're careful. You break anything and you'll have a record of discussion before the week is out."

Peter didn't respond but Kath was certain she heard the boy sigh. She enjoyed getting under people's skin and let loose a smile as crude as the oil-slick darkness that surrounded her. Suddenly she felt more in charge, more like her usual self. "Peter," she shouted. "Place some pallets against the back shutter. We're going to call it a night but we need to secure the building as best we can before we leave."

"Okay, I will do this, but where is Jess? She can help."

"She's wandered off somewhere," Kath snorted. "Least of my worries right now so go do as I've said – and make sure you're careful."

Peter scurried away, mumbling something in Polish. At least Kath imagined it was Polish. Could be Russian or Hungarian, or whatever it is they all seemed to speak – ugly, primitive language that hurt her ears to listen to. How had Britain gotten so weak? There was a time when it had invaded third-rate nations, but now the once-great empire seemed to be more interested in letting them all in and keeping them fed and warm. It made her stomach turn to think her Government cared more about benefit-seeking immigrants than educated citizens like her.

Kath left the warehouse and re-entered the supermarket, happily listening to the loud scraping noises of Peter struggling in the warehouse as he attempted to shift pallets. The thought of him blindly bumping around on his own made her chuckle as she walked over towards the supermarket's exit. She leaned against the glass fire door and looked outside. There wasn't much she could do to secure the building without being able to bring the electric shutter down from the awning, but she could at least lock up with her keys. It would have to be enough. She didn't expect many people would be desperate enough to brave the cold just to steal some groceries anyway. There wouldn't be anyone unscrupulous walking around in snow this deep. At least she hoped so...

Yet deep down in Kath's gut, a dull throbbing that was not her stomach ulcer, told her that tonight could well turn out to be a very long night.

### CHAPTER THREE

“Well B’jaysus, it’s nice to finally be in the warm. Cold as a nun’s pussy out there so it is.”

Harry looked in the direction of the stranger’s voice over by the pub’s entrance and found himself at a loss. The cheery Irish accent was not what he had expected. In fact, when Harry first realised the stranger’s presence, he had felt something...ominous. But that seemed silly now.

“Hey, who is that?” asked Steph from behind the bar. “Anyone we know?”

A hearty chuckle floated over from the doorway as the stranger spoke once more.

“No Lass, I do not believe we’ve had the pleasure. The name’s Lucas Fergus and I am on a vital quest to get some beer down me neck.”

Steph laughed and Harry found himself amused too. It wasn’t often the pub was graced with such colour beyond old men and their tall tales of the past. “Well,” Harry heard Steph say, “I can only offer you bottles and shots at the moment. As you can see the power is off and that means the pumps are dry. Cash only too, if that’s alright?”

“Cash is the only way an honourable man pays for anything in my mind so there be no worries there, and I don’t care whether the beer comes from bottle or tap either. It all ends up in the same place.”

“No argument there,” said a voice Harry recognised as Old Graham’s.

Over by the fireplace the flickering silhouette of Damien shifted and stirred at the presence of the stranger. Harry had learned from past occasions that Damien didn’t like people he didn’t know. People he didn’t know were usually unaware of his reputation and he did not like that at all. Once, Harry had witnessed Damien carve his initials into some poor lad’s forehead with a nasty-looking blade, just so people would know he was to be respected. The young man had screamed the entire time. The police never came.

And Harry knew that police would not come tonight either. No matter what happened.

Thankfully, Damien had been uncharacteristically quiet all night, and Harry couldn’t help but assume that meant something bad. When a venomous snake stopped acting like a snake, what did it mean?

*Does it mean they’re more dangerous?*

“Can we bear some light in here, you reckon?” Lucas asked them all, flicking open a glinting Zippo lighter and illuminating his face in flame. He looked about Harry’s age – early-thirties – boyishly handsome with a cheeky grin to match. The man’s head was tangled with wild tussles of mousy brown hair that crept below his ears. Harry thought he looked like a handsome traveller from the front cover of one of the trashy Mills and Boon novels his wife used to collect.



“In weather like this I’m surprised you’re not all around that lovely fireplace.” Lucas moved toward the bar, his flame-lit face a disembodied ghost as it crossed the room. “Or does that wee bald fella on the sofa not play well with others?”

“The less said about that the better,” warned Steph in a hushed voice.

Harry cringed, worried about the response the newcomer’s comment could possibly elicit from Damien, and was thankful, if a little surprised, when the young thug merely turned away and returned to whatever he was doing. It really wasn’t like Damien to be so reserved.

*What’s he up to tonight?* Harry wondered. *He’s preoccupied with something.*

Confident that no trouble was going to occur – at least for the time-being – Harry decided he would join the newcomer at the bar. Sitting alone in the dark wasn’t awfully appealing and he needed a refill anyway. His current beer was still flat and smelt like bad eggs.

“So Lucas,” Harry said, arriving at the bar and propping his elbows against its gnarled surface. “Where have you come in from?”

Lucas turned to Harry, the zippo still lighting his face. His striking blue eyes were flickering in the shimmering glow of the flame. “I’ve come in from the bloody cold fella, but before that I came from down south.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “South?”

“That’s what I said now, isn’t it? Been here-there-and-everywhere in my time. Up and down, upside down. But originally I hail from the North. Been spending a lot of time in the South more recently though after a falling out with me father. Suits me just fine. Warmer climate, you know?”

Harry nodded; the gesture pointless in the dark. “I take it you’re talking about Northern and Southern Ireland, or do you mean since you’ve been in England?”

“Now where is that drink I heard a rumour about,” said Lucas, single-mindedly.  
“This is a pub is it not?”

Steph shouted from the backroom behind the bar. “Hold your horses! For a complete stranger you’re pretty demanding.”

“I’m a growing lad and if ye make me wait I may just fade away. Or worse than that, I may sober up.”

Harry wondered whether the man had just avoided his question or if he really was just dying of thirst. He couldn’t tell for sure.

Steph came back through to the bar holding a wooden tray full of mismatched candles. The flames danced around her breasts and Harry tried not to stare at them. Carefully, she placed the candles evenly along the bar and the heady smell of burning wax wafted into the air. The first candle was placed in front of Old Graham, whilst the last went in front of Nigel. In between, Harry and Lucas got candles too.

“That’s better,” said Steph. “Now, who wants a beer besides our new friend here?”

“I’m ready for one. This one has gone bad.” said Harry.

“Mine too,” Old Graham added, pushing forward his pint. “I’m gonna have to have a dozen more just to make up for it.”

Steph scrunched up her face. “Strange...Maybe there’s a problem with the taps. Not surprised the amount you lot drink. They probably couldn’t take the strain.”

Lucas chuckled. “Looks like I’ve come to the right place. You’re men after me own heart, and now that I can see a little bit better I can also admire what a fine young wench we have ourselves behind the bar.”

“Hey, less of the wench!” Steph objected. They all laughed as she went about handing them their bottled beers, all of them swigging deeply as though it was their first of the night. Maybe for Lucas it was.

The Irishman pointed a finger. “So who’s the beefy fella down the end of the bar that doesn’t talk?”

“My name is Nigel and I can hear you.”

“Well, Big Man, come and suck ale with the rest of us.”

“Maybe later.”

“What’s wrong with ya man? There a gal down there with ya?”

“Huh, I wish,” said Nigel.

“Get ya moody arse down here! A fella shouldn’t be lonesome on a night like this. The cold out there could kill a man stone dead.”

“Okay, okay!” Nigel conceded, disturbing the shadows as he raised his hands in front of his face. He moved down the bar to join them, dumping his heavy mass down onto a creaking stool beside Lucas. Harry nodded hello at the man and he nodded back.

Lucas certainly had a knack for bringing people together. *Magnetic personality* was the phrase that came to Harry’s mind.

Lucas spoke again. “You know something, fellas? I don’t think that snow is gonna let up tonight. No word of a lie but it’s like the feckin end of the world out there.”

“Oh, very nice,” said Steph. “You walk into my pub and start worrying everyone. We’ve all got to try and get home tonight.”

“What? Are ye drunk, lass? Ain’t no man getting anywhere in that winter blanket.”

Steph’s face dropped slightly, the dull candle-light making her expression seem grim. “Well,” she said, “how did you get here then?”

Lucas smiled knowingly. “I was nearby and realised things were bad, so I thought to meself, ‘where’s the best place to be stuck on a night like this?’ Well of course there was only one answer, wasn’t there?”

“The boozer!” Old Graham shouted gleefully, obviously delighted by the Irishman’s philosophy. “Anyway,” the pensioner added, “don’t you worry, young Stephanie. There’s always room upstairs at my place to keep warm.”

*Cheeky sod*, thought Harry, amused by the old man’s audacity. He wondered if Old Graham even had enough lead in his pencil to get it up these days. *If he does, fair play to the old bugger.*

Steph laughed defiantly, the air from her nostrils slanting the flames of the nearby candles. “The only way you’ll get me up there, old man, is if you’re sleeping on the roof.”

Everyone cackled and drank their beers. *Everyone except Damien*, Harry observed. The thug scowled at them from the shadows of the fireplace, watching their every move. No one else noticed though and the giggling chatter amongst the group at the bar continued.

Yet, despite the light-heartedness, Harry couldn't help but notice that outside the snow was continuing to fall...

And it seemed to be getting worse.

As did Damien's scowling.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“Dude, just sit the Hell down! If you break something my Dad will freak.” Ben didn’t need this from Jerry tonight. Not with the power going out and such shitty weather. It was like a dozen winters rolled into one and he was stuck in his father’s video store not knowing what to do.

“Chill out, B-Dog!” Jerry said, shining his key ring torch into his face and contorting his skeletal features into a ghoulish grimace. The DVD cases on the cluttered shelves behind him shone with each movement of the light. “You need to stop worrying about your tightass old man. It’s not like he ever does anything for *you!* Other than work you to death and make you come in on a day where everything else is closed. An *important meeting*, my arse! He just couldn’t be bothered to waste another goddawful day at the *Video Store of the Damned.*”

Ben sighed, though it was too dark in the store’s dusty back-office for his childish companion to see it. “Stop calling it that! The place is doing fine. He really did have a meeting, and it’s not every day he trusts me to look after Blue Rays on my own either, so the last thing I need is you making my life hard, okay? Just behave and don’t mess anything up.”

“Okay, okay,” Jerry conceded. “What would you like me to do with myself, oh wise Gandalf?”

Ben threw his head back and cursed. “I told you to stop calling me that!”

“Get rid of that gay beard and I will. Either that, or I’m gonna get some hairy-assed Hobbits in here so you can feel more at home.”

“Just...” Ben took a deep breath. “Sit down will you, while I try to get the power back on.”

Thankfully, Jerry complied, hoisting his stick-like figure up onto the service desk and remaining quiet. Ben could still hear him fidgeting away for anything to get his spindly fingers on, but at least for now he was rooted in one place; his area of recklessness limited.

Sometimes, Ben didn’t know why he put up with Jerry. They’d known each other since they were peeing in pre-school sandpits, but for some reason his friend had never seemed to mature mentally like he had. Ben had gone to College, whilst Jerry sponged off his mom and stepdad. Ben started dating girls, whilst Jerry brought an Xbox – and then later an Xbox 360. Finally, Ben had started to shoulder some of his dad’s business responsibilities, ready to one day take them on as his own, and Jerry? Well now Jerry spent most his days hanging around Blue Rays Rentals bothering him and making fun of his beard or ‘jelly-belly’. Still, they were best friends, and Ben knew that if it ever came down to it, Jerry would do anything for him. There was something comforting about another person caring that much about him. *Not like anybody else does.* Besides, deep down, he liked having Jerry around. Despite the odd annoyances, they had a lot of fun together. Even the *Ben and Jerry* jokes didn’t really bother him anymore. But tonight Jerry was stretching his patience paper-thin.

“When you gonna get the lights on again?” Jerry asked. “It’s like *Saturday Night Fever* in here.” He swept his penlight around the room, strobing the low-hung, suspended ceiling like a disco hall. Movie posters of a disgruntled-looking Deniro and an uncomfortable-looking Ben Stiller lit up and disappeared as the light passed over them.

“Well if it *is*, you’re no John Travolta!” Ben walked across to the far side of the office, behind the IKEA computer desk and towards the fuse box. He didn’t know anything about electrics so he was hoping to flick a switch and be done with it. Likely, it would be more complicated than that.

Before the power had gone off he’d been watching the news with Jerry (well, to be more honest, Jerry was waiting for a re-run of *The Matrix* to come on). The reports had said that the country’s infrastructure was expected to be affected by the snow for several more days and that blackouts were likely as people’s heating usages rose to monumental amounts. It didn’t bother Ben too much, so long as nothing happened to his father’s store whilst he was in charge of it; that was the main thing. The way he saw it, people just loved an excuse to panic and the snow was their most recent fixation. You wouldn’t catch him freaking out though. Ben’s father had taught him better than that. Taught him about *being a man*, and about how business came first.

*Before anything else.*

*Before silly little friendships with that idiot, Jerry.*

Ben shook his father’s words out of his head and pulled out his keys from his pocket, sifting through them one by one.

*There must be twenty keys here! I don’t even know what Dad uses them all for. I’m sure one of them is for the fuse box though. It’s a little silver one if I remember correctly...*



Earlier he and Jerry had started to get concerned by the amount of snow that had been falling throughout the day – especially as it seemed to be worldwide (*was that even possible?*) – and, when it had started to pile up above knee height, the two of them had gone across to the supermarket down the lane – which was also, surprisingly, open – to stock up on snacks and beers in case they got stuck there. They were willing to wait it out if they had to, but Ben hoped Jerry could keep his exuberance under control during that time. His best friend had a knack for breaking things. Ben called it the *Jerry-effect*.

Ben swung open the fuse cabinet and flicked open his monogrammed lighter. He'd stopped smoking months ago but it had been a present from his father – and they were too few to just go discarding them. His eyes glazed for a second as they adjusted to the light and, when his vision finally compensated, he blinked, unsure of what he was seeing. From the look of things, the entire fuse box had burnt out and melted in a flash of intense heat. It was a mess and smelt like singed rubber, an acrid odour. It made no sense at all. Wasn't the whole point of having fuses to prevent things like this, power surges and whatnot? There wasn't anything he could think of that could cause such severe heat damage, especially without burning anything outside of the fuse box. It was entirely localised to the area within the metal frame and not a speck of paint was damaged beyond that. It was strange, for sure. Ben plucked at his scruffy brown beard rhythmically as he tried to find a thought that fit, a thought that didn't worry him. A thought that wasn't insane. But all he could think was...

*Dad's gonna blow a fuse of his own when he finds out.*

Jerry shouted from the shop floor. “What’s happening, Gandalf? You squeezing one out in there or what?”

Ben shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Dude, I swear, not now, okay!”

“Okay, okay,” Jerry said. “Don’t get your beard in a twist. It’s not like it’s the end of the world...although we *are* missing *The Matrix*.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

Kath wasn't prepared to stay here all night in the dark. She tried her mobile phone again and hissed when it still refused to dial out.

*Knew I should have stayed at home this morning.*

Everyone else in the country had been skiving off and calling in sickies due to the unprecedented snowfall, so why hadn't she? *Because I have integrity; something most other people sadly lack in this day and age.* Luckily, Peter and Jess lived within walking distance of the store and had had no excuses not to come in. They knew she wouldn't stand for any absence. *If I can make it in then so can they.* Most people who drove could have gotten to work if they really wanted to, but they were lazy degenerates that worked only when they had no choice or social benefits available. Not many people would have come in for a ten hour shift like she had that day. *Where has it gotten me though? Nowhere!*

Kath looked toward the exit doors. They were closed but she could still see the drifting snow outside, piling up against the glass. Peter had cleared it away only two hours

before and it was already rising back again. She'd have to have the lad shovel it away again if they didn't get going soon. It was starting to feel more like the North Pole than the middle of England.

Shivering, Kath untucked her arms away from her sides and felt around the till area for the phone. The thought that someone may have been responsible for the power going off still worried her and all she wanted to do was talk to someone in authority. *Mr Savini. The power company. The police. Anyone.*

Peter stood nearby (she'd insisted on it) and the intermittent glow of his mobile phone made her feel a little safer, but it was only enough to take a slight edge off her nerves. She plucked the phone off its cradle and typed in a number.

Still there was no dial tone.

"Damn it!" She slammed the handset back down.

"Is okay?" Peter asked in his horrible broken English.

"Yes, everything is fine. I just dropped the phone. Do you know where Jessica is yet? I need to close up, but not before I've done a staff search. Its night's like tonight when things go missing."

Peter remained silent for a moment and Kath's heart rate rose slightly as the silence poked at her anxiety. A few seconds later the warehouse boy made himself known again. "I do not know where she is. Do you?"

"Would I have asked you if I did? Last I knew she was out front checking if anyone knew why the power was off. I don't think she's come back."

Peter started heading off towards the exit. "Should I go look for her?"

The thought of being alone made Kath shout out. “No! Stay here. The last thing I, uh, need is you both getting lost.”

Pete began walking back toward the counter. “You think she lost?”

Kath sniggered. “That girl would lose her head if it wasn’t screwed on. I’m sure whatever she’s doing out there, she’s managed to find her way into trouble. Just lea-”

Her body was suddenly wracked with shivers, cutting her words off mid-sentence. It was getting colder. It hadn’t seemed anywhere near as chilly just an hour ago when the power had first gone off. Maybe the temperature had dropped rapidly because the heating was out? It made sense, but for some reason didn’t seem right. It had gotten too cold too fast.

She looked out through the glass doors again. If the doors didn’t open inwards as well as out, Kath was certain they would have been jammed inside. She watched as the top layer of snow began to jitter, swirl and flow, lightly at first but then more intently. The wind was picking up and starting to howl.

Kath sighed. “For God sake, Peter, will you hurry up? We need to leave.”

*We really need to leave.*

#

Jess could barely see an inch in front of the freckles on her nose. The snow hit her face relentlessly, filling her nostrils and blurring her eyes. It felt like she was going to suffocate, yet she had no choice but to persevere and find her way back to the supermarket. It was

embarrassing that she'd managed to get herself so disorientated. It could have only been ten feet when she'd found herself turned around and lost. Every direction led to a white blossom background that seemed to creep on forever. She shivered, partly from anxiety but mostly from the fact she was freezing.

*Really smart, Jessica. A+ for common sense.*

She cried out for help and was not surprised when she was met with near silence – the only other sound being the shrill whistle of increasing wind. Despite the lack of reply, Jess called out again, lacking other ideas. When she was once again met with silence, Jess paused to gather her thoughts. The biting cold was worse when standing still.

*What did they teach us at school about being stranded in the snow? That's right – Nothing. People in England aren't supposed to get stranded in the snow. That's for places like Russia and Greenland. In this country all we're meant to face is a bad case of drizzle and maybe a hosepipe ban in the summer.*

The brightest thought Jess could come up with prompted her to reach into her trouser pocket. Fumbling amongst her loose change and clock-in swipe card, she pulled out her slim mobile phone. It was pink with silver sequins and her intention was to use it to call Peter at the supermarket; get him to shout out of the doorway so that she could track his voice. She'd be back in moments, no doubt feeling like a fool but as long as it was only Peter she wouldn't mind too much. He would keep things to himself and not tell the super-bitch, *Kathleen*. She trusted Peter.

The phone lit up at once when she pressed its keypad, but it became immediately apparent to Jess that something was wrong with it.

*This isn't supposed to happen. Not in England.*

But she didn't get upset. It was too weird to register in her brain yet. Her phone still had power, but its display was garbled – distorted by vertical lines and random squiggles. She tried making some calls but was unsuccessful. The phone lacked even a dial tone.

She cursed out loud and resumed her aimless wandering in the dark. The snow had been trampled down where she was heading and she assumed that it was the main path, so she followed it.

As a child, Jess had loved the winter and wished for snow every Christmas – her favourite time of year, when family was most important – but this worldwide extreme weather made her nervous. There was a sense of foreboding to the howling wind that made Jess wonder if it would ever stop snowing at all. She'd heard on the radio that people had already begun to perish from the crushing cold and it had only gotten worse since then. Now that her mobile phone wasn't working – something she'd never known to happen, except for one New Year when too many text messages were sent simultaneously – it left her feeling even more uncertain. Of course her phone may just have been faulty.

“Yeah, that's it,” she said to herself, hoping it would calm her nerves to hear a voice, even if it was just her own. “It's just faulty.”

Somehow, she didn't believe it.

When she spotted something in the snow up ahead, she knew for certain that something was very wrong.

It was almost thirty minutes before Peter was done. Kath heard the boy's footsteps coming from the booze and spirits aisle. "Is everything secure?" she asked him.

"Yes, Ms Hollister."

"Let's get going then."

"But we still not know where Jess is."

Kath grunted. "She's responsible for her own well-being. I can't afford to wait around for that silly girl any longer. If you're so concerned, go wondering around in the snow for her yourself."

"Thank you, Ms Hollister. I will go now."

Kath listened to the boy's footsteps retreating towards the supermarket's exit. He was about to leave her on her own. *In the dark.* "Wait!" she shouted. "You're right. We shouldn't just leave her to her own devices. We should find her then all get home together."

Peter's footsteps halted. "Okay, Ms Hollister. Hurry!"

The fact that she was being given orders by a staff member made Kath furious, but the increasing howls of the snowstorm made her feel uncharacteristically subdued. "Coming," she said.



## CHAPTER SIX

Harry shivered as he started his next beer. It was getting colder and the scar on the back of his hand started to ache in response, reminding him of things he'd rather forget. Things he drank to forget. He swigged deeply from the beer bottle.

“So, Father Time?” The Irishman, Lucas, turned his attention to Old Graham at the end of the bar. “You must have been around a fair few turns of the world? You ever see snow like this?”

“Well,” Old Graham said, visibly delighted at being the centre of attention. “There was a time in the fifties where things got a little chilly as I recall; and of course me old man told stories of winter in the Ardennes that sounded far more hellish than this.”

Nigel piped up from the opposite end of the bar. “Yeah, well that’s the Ardennes. It’s normal to have snow there. The amount we’ve had here the past couple days isn’t natural. Not to mention that it’s snowing everywhere. All over the world. In every country. Maybe it’s because of the ozone layer or something?”

Lucas chuckled. “Give over man! You think a couple of cow farts has the ability to change the weather?”

Harry joined the debate. “What do you put the snow down to then, Lucas? I mean I haven’t known it to ever snow half as much as this. It certainly seems like something made the weather mad.”

“The world is a gazillion years old,” said Lucas, putting his beer bottle down on the bar as if to make a point. “I bet there’s been weather like this before – just not in your lifetime. It’s a tad unusual, no doubt, but I don’t believe in all that ozone layer hogwash.”

Nigel seemed disgruntled in the light of his candle, maybe even angry. “That’s your opinion, isn’t it?” he said. “Don’t mean I’m not right. We’ve been abusing this planet for decades and it can’t go on forever.”

Lucas put up his hands. “Calm down there fella, no need to get your hackles up. It’s just the beer talking, you know? Makes me feel a thousand times older and wiser than I should ever admit to. You’re probably right though, humanity *has* been abusing God’s green earth for a fair few years now, and maybe it can’t go on forever. But right now, my only concern is having a good time with a wee tittle to keep me warm.” He looked at Steph and winked. “And maybe a good woman wouldn’t go amiss either.”

“You’re an alcoholic Lech,” said Nigel, a candle-lit half-smile on his face.

“As I said before, I’ve come to the right place then.” Lucas laughed out loud, hoisted his bottle up into the air and said “*cheers!*” The others joined him in the toast, although the word *alcoholic* being bandied around made Harry feel uncomfortable. It was such a dirty word that encompassed so many types of people. Not everyone drank for the same reasons. Not everyone had to deal with the same burdens.

*Sometimes a beer is just a beer.*

Harry took another swig from his bottle and sighed at the burning satisfaction it left in his chest. When he pulled it away from his lips it was two thirds empty.

For some reason, Lucas had begun staring at him inquisitively from inside the flickering cocoon of his candle-light. “So what’s *your* story, fella?” he asked Harry. “What’s the meaning of your life?”

Harry swigged the last of the beer then pushed the bottle toward Steph, who was already on the case with a replacement. “My life,” he said, “has no meaning. Not anymore.”

Lucas frowned. “Come now, everybody’s life has meaning. We all have a purpose.”

“Really? Then why don’t you tell me what *mine* is, because I sure as hell don’t know.”

“I can’t tell you that.” Lucas smiled. “Every man has to find his own path and his own destination. Who knows though, maybe you’ll find yours tonight.”

Harry started on his next beer with a hearty swig, gasping for breath afterwards. He looked Lucas square in the face. “Sorry, but I find that hard to believe.”

Lucas stared back, his face unflinching like a handsome slab of sculpted granite. He patted Harry on the back. “Well, Harry Boy, perhaps what you need is a little more faith.”

“Faith? You think I should believe that there’s some almighty being up there responsible for everything that happens?”

Lucas shook his head. “Like hell I do! Everything that happens down here is because of man and man alone. God’s not here to babysit us. We can only blame ourselves for the things that happen in our lives. Well, we can blame ourselves or other people.”

Harry felt his blood heat up, fighting back against the chill in his veins. He took offence to a stranger offering him 'life-advice'. No one could understand what he had been through. He looked down at the scar on his hand, shaped like a star, and thought about the events that led to it. Thought about Julie and Toby twisted and shattered in the remains of his bright-red Mercedes that he had been so proud to buy. *Only 8,000 miles on the clock. Good as new!* That night Harry had realised that material possessions meant nothing as the only truly important things in his life slowly bled away from him. There had been so much damage that he couldn't tell where his wife and child's broken bodies had ended and the crumpled metal of the car began. It looked like some abominable piece of modern art sculpture. Somehow, Harry had fallen from the car with nothing more than a bad headache and was free to watch his family gradually die. Where had the justice been in that?

"Whoever is to blame for my life," he told Lucas, "can go fuck themselves."

Lucas moved a half-step away from Harry. "Easy, fella, not looking for an argument. You just seem like a bit of a lost soul to me and I like to take an interest."

"An interest in lost souls?"

"Absolutely. The only wisdom left to be found is from the pain men feel, and you strike me as a man with a belly full of it."

Harry put down his beer. If he was honest he didn't really know what the man was trying to get at. "Sorry to let you down," he said, "but I don't feel anything anymore."

Lucas continued smiling, as though he had the wisdom of the world in his back pocket and was about to share it. "You can lie to *me*, Harry boy, but it would be a shame to lie to yourself. Men who say they feel nothing usually feel too much. And that always leads to trouble. That, my friend, I can promise you."

Harry moved away from Lucas. He wasn't in the mood for therapy.

#

The Trumpet was an old pub with an old history. A baby boy had once been born in its claustrophobic toilets, the England Cricket team had once rented the place out after a win in nearby Edgbaston, and someone had even been murdered there once (although that was a long time ago). It was a place with personality, history, and colour. A proud relic of working men's pubs. Full of 'proper blokes' clocking off from a hard day's graft for a fag and a pint. But, like all relics, its day had come and gone. Now, the fag smoking was ostracised to exist only outside the building, the beer was over-priced and watered down, and the colour had faded, literally. Things had not turned out the way Damien's father had led him to expect. The golden years of smoke-filled boozers, loose women, and high-grade drugs had been clamped down on. Drugs were getting harder and harder to push and women were getting harder and harder to fuck – stupid TV shows like *Sex And The City* making them think they had the right to self-respect. It had taken all the fun out of being a gangster.

*Screw it!* He'd been born in the wrong time. There was no tradition anymore.

Damien's father and Grandfather had drunk in The Trumpet and had pretty much run the place in their day. Now you had people like this fuckface Irishman waltzing in and acting like they owned the joint.

*Who the fuck does he think he is? He needs to be taught a lesson about who runs this place! In fact he needs a good smack.*

Damien stood from the sofa and turned towards the bar. He had enough to deal with tonight without loud-mouthed strangers giving him headache.

#

When Harry saw Damien rise up from the sofa and start making his way toward the bar, he cringed. “Shit!” he whispered in Steph’s direction, hopeful that her authority behind the bar would be enough to stem any bad behaviour. He’d seen Damien’s lack of hospitality towards strangers before and it was something he could go without seeing again.

Damien moved towards the middle of the bar, towards Lucas, and stopped half-a-foot away from the Irishman. He stared intensely like a sight-impaired person reading a menu. Lucas behaved as if he hadn’t noticed, facing forward and sipping from his bottle calmly. Damien continued to glare, his eyeballs bulging like squids only inches from Lucas’s face.

Lucas leant over the bar toward Steph and spoke in a clear and confident tone. “Darling, you wanna tell this young fella to wind his neck in before his peepers fall out on my shoes?”

Harry waited for combustion as the air in the room disappeared, everyone in the bar sucking in their lungs like a line of vacuum cleaners.

Lucas turned his head to Damien, who looked like he was about to go off like a firework. “Listen, laddy, I’m not a work of art so take your beady little eyes off of me and find something better to do.”

*That's it, Harry thought. The shit just hit the propeller.*

Damien's face contorted like a broken whiskey bottle, full of crags and sharp edges. His wiry arm drew back as his young body tensed up, ready to unleash a furious right hook.

In a move that seemed both casual and urgent at the same time, Lucas stepped back from the bar and slinked past his stool with leopard-like grace. At the precise moment Damien's punch began its arcing descent towards him, Lucas threw a punch of his own. It was quick. It was vicious. And it connected perfectly with Damien's incoming fist. There was a loud crack as the two men's knuckles collided at full force.

"Fuck!" Damien howled, clutching his withered hand against his abdomen. "Jesus goddamn Christ!"

Lucas – who was clutching his own injured hand – began to laugh in what seemed like genuine amusement. "Not quite. But I'll send you to go see him if you try that bollocks again, you little shithead."

Damien glared. "You're dead!"

"Wrong again, Sonny Jim. Unless you mean *dead bored*, which if I'm honest, I'm starting to get a wee bit. You're keeping a man from his drink."

Damien looked more furious than Harry had ever seen him. He was about to speak, no doubt to make another threat, but Steph cut him off – not with her voice but with the landlord's bell, pulled from under the bar. She began ringing it vigorously in the faces of the two arguing men. "Pack this shit in! I'm in no mood for child's play. Especially from you!" She scowled at Damien. "It's freezing cold, we're all stuck here, and we're in the goddamn dark. Do you two not think we have things bad enough without fisticuffs? Because you

know something? If one of you gets hurt, I doubt there's an ambulance in the world that can get here tonight."

*Or even this week,* Harry thought.

Damien allowed his glare to turn into a grimace, before finally settling on a look of irritation. Lucas got back on his stool and finished off his beer. He slid the empty toward Steph and said, "Two more, please. One for me and one for my new friend here with the broken hand."

Damien hissed. "It isn't broken and I'm not your pissing friend."

"Well," said Lucas, offering a bottle of beer to Damien. "Perhaps you should be. It would make life easier."

"Come on Damien," said Nigel from the far end of the bar. "If we're all stuck here, we may as well have a drink together. Could even be a laugh."

Damien turned his animalistic stare to the large sweaty man. "You think I want to waste a minute hanging around with losers like you lot?"

Harry took offence. Being called a loser by a piece of scum like Damien did not sit well with him at all. "We don't want to be stuck with you either, Damien, but shit happens."

Damien turned his glare to Harry, his body coiled and trembling like a pissed off panther. *A panther ready to attack,* thought Harry, regretting his comment already.

Before anything else was said, Lucas pushed the bottle of beer towards Damien. "How bouts I buy your beers all night if ya sit down and join in? Be an amicable chappy!"

Damien smirked. "I don't need you to buy my drinks. I have enough money to buy you're whole fucking family."



Lucas smiled his cheeky grin. “I very much doubt that, lad, but why don’t we say I’m doing it to show my respect. I’m the new boy here and I obviously don’t know how things work now, do I? So accept my offer as an apology.”

Harry watched in anticipation as Damien scrutinised the man’s suggestion, but it seemed obvious enough that it had settled down his need for bravado. Harry admired Lucas’s savvy. The man had swallowed his own sense of pride and manipulated Damien into behaving. The young thug thought he’d won, but it was apparent to everyone else at the bar that Lucas had just used a modicum of intelligence to control the situation.

*All those drugs rotting your brain. Making you oblivious.*

“Okay,” Damien finally said, snatching the bottle from Lucas. “Guess I can lower myself for one night and share a few beers with the peasants.”

Everyone was happy to ignore the insult, ready to play along with Lucas’s charade, if it meant having peace. They raised their beers in the air and mumbled agreement. Lucas put his hand on the bar; it was swollen and red in the candle light. “Don’t suppose you could get me some ice, luv?”

Steph frowned, but nodded. “Sure.”

Damien slammed down his own fist on the bar top and made the rest of them jump. Like Lucas, his hand was also swollen. “Yeah, I think I could do with some too.”

There was a brief silence before Damien began laughing. It was the least hostile Harry had ever seen the lad and before long the entire bar was sipping their drinks and laughing along with him. The tension seemed to float away.

But Harry had a feeling it wouldn’t last.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Dude, I’m starting to get totally frost-bitten. It’s like *The Day After Tomorrow* in here.”

Ben sighed. For some reason, Jerry had to speak almost entirely in film references. The fact that Ben’s father owned a video store didn’t help matters. Yet, despite his annoyance, he had to agree. It was getting uncomfortably cold.

“Can you hear me, B-dog?” Jerry shouted from the shop floor. “I said it’s like *The Day aft-*“

“Yeah, I heard you. Hopefully the power will come on soon, but there’s not a lot I can do about it right now.”

“What?” Jerry laughed. “You saw those fuses! The lights ain’t coming on any time soon. You should call your dad so we can get out of here.”

Ben fumbled his way from the office and back onto the shop floor, bumping into various shelving units along the way. “I tried already! My phone’s playing up. The display is all screwed up.”

“No shit? My phone is all like that too.”

Ben paused. What were the odds that both their phones would be playing up?

“Really?” he said. “You think it’s the weather or something?”

“I dunno,” Jerry said. “Can the weather do stuff like that?”

“Something’s responsible, not just for the phones but the power blowing out as well.”

Ben crossed the shop floor over to the thick glass door at the front of the shop. It was still snowing outside; heavy round flakes that seemed to sizzle as they hit the ground – or rather the top layer of snow two feet above the ground. He and Jerry had been clearing the entranceway throughout the day, keeping the place as accessible as possible. Of course, in such bad weather there had barely been a single customer all day, especially in the last few hours, but Ben’s father never closed if he had the choice to open (especially on a day where everyone was stuck at home with nothing to do but maybe watch a rented DVD). Ben hadn’t complained. He’d known his father long enough not to expect the day off – even on a day where all other businesses had closed – so he’d decided to do a stock count, which had been perfect except for two missing copies of *The Pianist* (and a copy of *Brain Dead* that Ben knew was currently stashed in Jerry’s bedroom courtesy of ‘a favour’).

It was dark outside, only the dim glint of the moonlight providing any chance to see. The street lights were out and had obviously died when the power failed. The two of them needed to get home soon, but that wasn’t going to be easy. Ben turned around to face the gloom of the shop floor and a thought crossed his mind. “Hey, Jerry, when did you go the supermarket last?”

A response came from over by the cash register. Ben hoped he wasn’t messing around with anything. “Couple hours ago, why?”

“Did they say what time they were closing?”

“Nah, that bitch was serving me. I just brought a magazine and left.”

“You mean the manageress? Yeah she’s really rude.”

“I hope she gets eaten alive by zombies. And not the slow kind – the crazy-ass running kind from *Dawn of the Dead 2004*.”

Ben sighed at yet another film reference. “Maybe we should go across and see how they’re getting home. Might be safer if we all go together.”

“Dude!” Jerry cried out triumphantly. “There’s this girl over there that’s totally hot. This could be the opening I’ve been waiting for.”

Ben laughed, just happy that his friend was for once being cooperative. “Well, I’m sure she’ll appreciate you getting her home safely. Just let me lock-”

Before he could finish his sentence something threw itself against the door.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

By 10pm everyone had moved over to the sofa by the fireplace. The temperature had swan-dived so low that Harry and the others shivered constantly. Steph's teeth had also begun to chatter, leading everyone to giggle at her. The atmosphere by the fire was just about comfortable, but Harry was certain it was still getting colder.

*How much colder can it get before we all freeze to death?*

"I'm starting to worry," Steph said, as if she'd read Harry's mind. She was sitting on a thread-bare footstool beside the fire and hugging herself tightly. "The snow really doesn't look like stopping anytime soon, and it's damn nippy."

Harry looked over at the pub's front window and found himself agreeing. The snow was falling heavily as ever and the large sheet of plate glass was starting to frost over with icy spider webs at the corners. He nestled into the sofa cushions to seek out their warmth, but found none.

“What’s your drama?” said Damien from his standing place at the right side of the fire’s mantelpiece. In his thick puffer jacket, he looked warmer than the rest of them. “A bit of a chill won’t kill you, woman.”

“Won’t it?” she asked.

“Course not, you dopey cow. The power will be on again soon and the heating will kick on with it, so stop fucking menstruating.”

Harry snapped, not quite sure why. He wasn’t usually quick-tempered. “Let’s have less of the bad language. Didn’t your father ever teach you to treat women with respect?”

Damien sneered. “You don’t talk about my father, you hear me? You’re beneath him. Anyway, what the fuck you gonna do? Teach me some manners?”

“Maybe I will,” Harry replied, still wondering what he was getting himself into and why.

*Have I got a death wish tonight or something?*

Damien stepped forwards but was halted by Steph who placed a hand on his chest. “Behave!” she said. “Harry’s right, you should treat women with respect – especially when they happen to be in charge of the only place with an open fire for miles. You’re welcome to go freeze somewhere else, but if not then I don’t expect another peep out of you.”

Damien sniggered. “Why don’t you two just fuck each other and get it over with.”

Harry blushed at the comment, turned it to anger, and went to get up out of his seat. But Lucas, beside him, placed a hand on his arm and stopped him. The man shook his head and eased him back into the sofa. Harry yielded, but couldn’t help but eyeball Damien. The

little prick had a smug grin on his face and obviously thought he had won some small victory over Harry.

*Probably thinks I'm chicken. Maybe I am? Or maybe I'm just frightened of what I'll do...*

“Anyway,” said Lucas, changing the subject. “Besides young Stephanie here – who I know is the world’s finest barmaid – what do the rest of you call an excuse for a living?”

Stephanie laughed. “You cheeky git! I’m more than a mere barmaid. I plan on starting up a pet grooming business when I’ve saved enough money. Say about another year and I’ll be there.”

Harry had known Steph since she’d started at the pub, but he’d never learned that about her. It seemed important and he wished he’d shown more interest in her life, instead of always relying upon her to show interest in him and his problems. An air-bubble of guilt rose up from his gullet.

Beside the fireplace, Damien was rubbing at his sore hand and laughing to himself, apparently lacking appreciation for Stephanie’s ambitions. Lucas however seemed more interested. “Pet grooming?” he said, stroking at his chin thoughtfully. “Now does that mean you’ll spend your time giving rats haircuts and squirrels baths?”

Steph giggled. “Well I was thinking more *dogs and cats*, but hey whatever. I love animals and they all smell better after a bath.”

Damien’s laughter erupted in a mean-spirited snicker that made Harry want to spit at him. “What you want to spend your time washing shit off Rottweilers for?” He winked at Stephanie. “I’ve got ways you can earn some *real* money.”

Harry's thuggish-little-prick-tolerance was met once again and if it wasn't for the fact that the comment seemed to roll off the Stephanie's back so easily he may have gotten into another verbal bout of sparring with Damien. He was beginning to lose patience.

*Stay calm, Harry. This kid would knife you so much as look at you. Don't let him bring you down to his level. You made that mistake once before...*

"So then," Lucas addressed Damien. "What is it that *you* do with yourself then, lad?"

"Don't ask," said Nigel from his space on the floor beside the fire.

"Because if he told you, he'd have to kill you," added Old Graham beside him.

"Is that true?" Lucas enquired, eyeing Damien up curiously. "Are you a man of mystery?"

Damien smirked. "Guess I am. I do a bit of this and a bit of that. Provide certain services to people that they may not find elsewhere."

"Interesting, so how did you get into that type of thing?"

"Family business. Learned from the best – me old man."

Lucas nodded agreeably. "Sounds like a generous chap to pass on so much to his boy. Best thing a man can do is see his young ones right in a profession."

Damien beamed. "Damn straight. Dad taught me everything I know."

"So where is this great man now?" Lucas had a knowing smile on his face, as though the answer was already plain to him. "I bet he's some great success? Sat back in Luxury, watching his boy carry on the family trade. Am I right?"



Damien's face turned sour – not angry, but defensive and dangerous, like a cornered feline. “Not exactly,” he said. “He's away at the moment.”

“Vacation?”

Harry watched with a disturbing amount of pleasure as he watched Damien squirm against the wall, trying to disappear into the peeling paintwork. He was rubbing his injured hand rapidly with rhythmic strokes. “Yeah, he's on a fuckin cruise. What's it gotta do with you?”

“Some cruise.” Old Graham piped up from his space by the fire but quickly turned his gaze to the floor when he was met by Damien's warning stare.

Harry wasn't sure if he wanted the Irishman to shut up or carry on. It was enjoyable to see the drug-dealing weasel so uncomfortable, but he didn't know himself what had happened to the boy's father and was unsure if it was a conversation the group of them should be having.

Lucas continued all the same. “A vacation, you say? Well, I hope he returns soon. Anyone for a beer?”

*Talk about taking it to the brink*, Harry thought, relieved that the conversation had altered course just as it had neared an emotional minefield. It left Harry wondering what exactly had happened to make Damien so defensive about his father. He had a feeling the old man knew, but when he looked over, Graham looked away.

*Yeah, he knows alright.*

Harry's thinking was interrupted by Steph's voice coming from behind the bar. He turned to find that she had moved away from the fireplace and into the flickering light of the

bar's neat line of candles. There was a phlegmy sound of concern in Steph's voice as she said, "I think we have a problem, guys."

"What?" They all asked in unison.

Steph walked back over to the group and re-entered the light of the fireplace. She had a bottle of beer in her right hand, the top already removed. She turned it upside down.

Nothing happened.

"Jesus, no!" cried Old Graham, throwing his hands up at the sky as he realised what he was seeing. "The bloody beer's frozen."

Harry eye's widened.

*Is it really that cold?*

## CHAPTER NINE

“Dude, what are you doing?”

Ben glanced over his shoulder – pointless as he couldn’t see Jerry in the dark anyway – and replied, “What you think I’m doing? I’m opening the door.”

“No way! It’s *Night of the Living Dead* out there. If someone starts hammering the door, trying to get in – you lock it, tight! Then you board it up with planks and nails.”

Ben didn’t have time for this. “George Romero doesn’t direct your life, Jerry. He made a couple of decent movie’s thirty years ago. Get over it. Besides, do you have any planks and nails, because I don’t! Movies aren’t real!” He heard Jerry wince in the dark – if a wince could in fact produce a sound – and smiled. It was as though his comment had managed to manifest physically and punch his friend on the nose.

The banging continued on the door and a slinking silhouette flittered against the pure white backdrop of the snow outside. Ben reached out for the door handle when something occurred to him. He paused. “Hey, who’s there? Stop your banging, okay?”

Sure enough the banging stopped at his command.

“I said who’s there?”

From behind Ben, Jerry said nervously, “Dude, I swear to God if you let the Lost Boys in here to eat us, I’ll never forgive you. Just remember if it’s a vampire, don’t invite them in.”

Ben shook his head again, certain that his friend had smoked one of his ‘funny fags’ at some point during the last few hours.

The person behind the door answered, “My name’s Jess. I work at the supermarket down the path. Please let me in. *Please.*”

Ben cried out as a hand suddenly grasped his shoulder, then realised it was just Jerry and calmed down. *What’s he so excited about?* Ben wondered, watching his friend leap about like a clown on speed.

“Dude! That’s the girl I was just talking about. The hottie! I swear it must be fate.”

Ben grinned. “Pity, we can’t let her in, in case she’s a zombie or a vampire?”

“Dude, stop fooling. Let her in!”

Ben couldn’t help but laugh as he turned to the door. The girl’s silhouette continued to dance frantically against the snow outside.

*What on earth has gotten her so worked up?*

“Jess,” he said through the glass, “you still there?”

“Yes, let me in.” She sounded frightened.

“The thing is, Jess. The door isn’t locked.”

There was silence, followed by: “Huh?”

“The door isn’t locked. But it opens *outwards*. You need to pull it towards yourself instead of banging on it.”

After a brief moment of silence, the door started to open and cold air flowed in through the slowly widening gap. Illuminated by the crisp moonlight reflecting off the snow, a delicately-featured face appeared in the doorway. It looked embarrassed.

#

It took almost fifteen minutes for Ben to calm Jess down sufficiently enough that she managed to introduce herself. Once Ben had let her in and locked the door (she’d insisted), the girl had started to catch her breath. The three of them now stood by the entranceway where they could just about make each other out under the moon’s shimmering glow and the green pulse of the fire exit sign.

“You’re lucky,” Ben told her, patting her on the back. Her entire body was trembling. Whether it was just the cold or something else, Ben did not know. “We were just thinking about getting out of here. You just caught us.”

The girl glanced over her shoulder at the door behind her, as though she expected something might burst in at any moment. The wind was picking up outside and flakes of snow were whirling up and settling against the glass.

Ben raised an eyebrow. “What exactly happened to you out there?”

“Yeah,” Jerry added. “Something give you the heebie jeebies, or what?”

Jess giggled, but it was a nervous sound. “I guess you could say something like that, but I’m probably just being silly. Least I hope so.”

“You got us a bit freaked out too,” Ben said. “Banging on the door like that!”

“Sorry, I was just in a panic.”

“Why though?” Ben wanted to get to the point, disconcertingly aware of the fact that they would all have to get out of there soon. It was getting far too cold to hang around any longer.

Finally, Jess spat it out and told them. “Well, I left the supermarket to see if anybody knew why the power had gone off – and also to get away from my cow of a manager. She drives me crazy sometimes, but I just act really happy around her because I know it makes her mad. I call her *Kathleen*. It drives her craaaaaazeee!”

Ben got the girl back on track. “Then what happened?”

“Oh right, well it’s the weirdest thing. I got lost!”

Ben and Jerry spoke in unison: “Lost?”

“Yeah, literally, like ten steps out of the doorway. I couldn’t find my way back at all, and every time I changed direction it felt like I was going round in circles. I couldn’t see *anything* other than snow all around me. That’s when I started to get, you know, a bit scared, so I got my phone out to call someone at the supermarket to come and get me. But my phone was all messed up. I totally freaked and started calling out for help. That’s when I saw it...”

Ben swallowed. He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear what it was the girl saw – especially the bit about how her phone was all messed up the same as his and Jerry’s. The

last thing Ben needed was to be freaked out too, but he asked the question anyway. It felt like he needed to. “What did you see?”

Jess shook her head, her bleached platinum hair glinting in the white light coming in from outside. “I...I really don’t know, but it had a face, you know? It was a man, I guess. A tall man.”

“Like *Phantasm*. Dude!” Jerry left it at that. Sometimes *Dude* was enough for him.

Ben wasn’t quite so impressed. “A face? You just bumped into someone in the dark! No big deal.”

Jess nodded. “Maybe, except for the only thing I could make out on this person’s face were his eyes – big, glowy white ones inside of a hood.”

“A hood?” Jerry asked, another one of his fantasies taking firm hold. “What kind of hood? Jedi and Sith? Wicker Man? Or one like that guy in *Assassin’s Creed*?”

Jess shook her head, a blank expression on her face. “I don’t know what any of that means, but it was like a priest’s robe or something. I didn’t see anything else – just the face – and I ran. Then I ended up at your door. Thank God!”

Jerry put an arm around the girl’s waist and squeezed tightly. “Amen to that!”

Ben’s common sense was telling him to dismiss the girl’s story as paranoid nonsense, but part of him couldn’t help but wonder...

*Was something out there in the snow?*

## CHAPTER TEN

Damien had separated himself from the group and was now standing by the window in his bulbous puffer jacket, staring intently at the world outside. Harry and the other drinkers had remained around the sofa, a row of beers at their feet thawing in front of the fire. A couple were cracked due to the change in temperature, but several more seemed to be returning to their more natural state of crisp, bubbly liquid.

Damien stared out into the night.

*What the fuck is with this weather? It just came out of nowhere...*

He had never known anything like it. The air was cold enough to freeze a person's eyelashes – not to mention the beer – and if he was honest (which he *never* was if he could help it) he was worried. If the power didn't come back on soon, would it continue to get even colder? Would he freeze to death? It seemed absurd in this day and age, but he wasn't so certain anymore. The ghost-white blanket swirling outside the window made him even less sure.



*How did I get stuck in this dump on a night like tonight? The one Tuesday where I have serious business to attend to and this happens – and that fuckface Jimmy hasn't even turned up. I should be sitting in my Jacuzzi right now, some bitch waiting on the bed to gobble my knob. But no, I'm stuck here with a bunch of deadbeats. Steph isn't so bad – in fact I wouldn't mind giving her one – but the others deserve a good old-fashioned beat down. Especially that fucking drunk, Harry. Thinks he's better than me when really he's the biggest degenerate here.*

Damien craned his neck towards the group by the fire. Harry was sitting on the sofa alone, whilst the others milled about nearby.

*Everyone probably moved away because of the stink of booze and vomit. Who the hell does that guy think he is?*

Damien had noticed plenty of times how Harry turned up his nose whenever him and his mates were in the pub. Damien would have done something about it before now but the guy wasn't worth the effort. Besides, despite his superior attitude, Harry pretty much kept to himself, and it was a bad move to pick fights with people that kept to themselves. It put you on the radar, and that was the last thing he needed right now

*Still, the guy better wind his neck in because I'll put him down if he gets in my face again. That thick mick will get his too if he's not careful. I'm sick of people treating me like a worthless thug. They think they know all about me, but they don't know shit.*

For some reason, when Damien had thought about Lucas, it caused him to have butterflies in his stomach. He wasn't quite sure why. Certainly wasn't because he was scared of the man (or any man for that matter), but for some reason Lucas made him feel uneasy. Especially after the guy had damn-near bust his hand.

Damien shuddered. *Time to get back in front of that fire. I'm freezing my nutsack off!*

He turned away from the window and discovered that Lucas was staring at him from across the room.

*Speak of the Devil!*

Damien wrinkled his brow at the man, who had now begun smiling as well as simply staring. Damien shrugged his shoulders and raised his eyebrows. Body language for: *What you looking at?*

Lucas nodded at him and held up a bottle of beer.

*Right!* Damien thought, relieved without knowing exactly why. *He's just letting me know that the beer has thawed out.*

Even though Damien relaxed a little, the butterflies in his stomach were still acting up.

In fact they were multiplying.

#

Harry watched while Damien took a lightly-frosted beer from Lucas and wondered if he saw nervousness in the boy's eyes. He took a swig of his own beer and cringed as the icy liquid passed over his teeth, making them ache a little.

Lucas exited the conversation he'd been having with Steph and then headed towards the toilets. Suddenly alone, Steph took up a seat beside Harry on the sofa. He could feel the warmth of her thigh against his as she settled in.

"You got anywhere you're supposed to be tonight, Harry?" she asked him.

He laughed. "You know me! When do I ever have any place to be other than here?"

"True," she said. "But I don't know why it is that you come here every night. It can't just be the alcohol? You could drink at home and pass out on your own floor if you wanted to."

Harry laughed again. "Yeah, but you wouldn't be there to pick me up."

"I'm serious! Why do you come here?"

He didn't have a definitive answer, but tried his best to explain anyway. "I guess it's because misery loves company. I think I come here to be among the living dead."

Steph raised one eyebrow. "I'm not following."

"How can I explain it? On the weekends you get the kids in having fun, but during the weekdays you have guys like Nigel who sit at the end of the bar without saying a word all night, or guys like Old Graham who live in the past because they don't know where they fit in during the present. They come to be around others that have ceased living in the here and now, people who instead live inside their own heads and exist on memories alone." Harry took a swig of his beer and then looked Steph in the eyes. They looked to him like glistening pearls and for a few seconds he stopped speaking and instead just stared into them.

Frightened that the pause might become awkward, Harry carried on with what he was saying.

"I come here because it reminds me that there are other people that have nothing left in their

lives except regret. If I stayed at home I'd lose sight of the fact that I'm not alone in misery – that I'm not the world's unluckiest man. Sometimes it's the only thing that keeps me going. Doesn't matter how much I hate my life, I'm not unique and my pain isn't special. I'm never alone because I'm part of a club. The Living Dead Club.”

Steph rubbed a hand against her forehead. The various rings on her fingers glinted in the fire's light. “God, you're depressing. Were you always like this?”

“No.” Harry didn't say anything else. Once he had been a positive upbeat person, but now he wasn't. The death of his wife, Julie, and his son, Toby, had left a charred, sucking wound where his soul had once been. He missed them and that was that. It was as much as he was willing to think about it. If he thought about it any more, he would end up thinking about what he did one year ago. And about how he got his scar.

Steph must have understood the feelings that her question provoked in him and changed the subject. She knew Harry had lost loved ones but possessed none of the details of when or how it had happened. Harry did not share that with anybody. It was locked up inside of him and the key was broken.

“Hey, Graham!” Steph shouted across the room.

The old man flinched then shouted back. “What?”

“Can you go upstairs to your flat and get some blankets and stuff.”

The old man nodded. “Good idea.”

Whilst Old Graham tottered over to the bar on his way to the stairs, Nigel shifted along the floor and filled his place closer to the fire. The man's greasy face turned in Steph and Harry's direction and spoke. “So, is it ok for me to bed down here tonight, Steph?”

Steph shrugged. “Can’t exactly see you out on the street now can I?”

Nigel’s face lit up. “Thanks Steph. Didn’t fancy going back and sleeping in the lorry on a night like tonight!”

Damien piped up from the opposite side of the fire. “You live in a lorry?”

Nigel nodded. “Sometimes, I do. Travel Europe most the time so what’s the point in paying rent? I book a hotel when I fancy a soft bed and a warm bath, but most nights the driver’s cabin suits me fine enough. Never did much like being tied down to one place.”

Harry wondered what that must be like. Such freedom to be able to lay your hat anyway in Europe and call it home for the night. Part of him yearned to disappear like that, to become a wandering nomad. A person with no emotional ties. Yet, for some reason, it just felt unnatural. A man without a home, without a family, wasn’t really a man, was he? It didn’t seem right not to yearn for those things. He wondered what had led Nigel to live such an isolated life.

Damien sniggered. “So, you’re basically one step up from a homeless person, huh, Nigel?”

Nigel shrugged. “Aside from the fact that I have a well-paid job and get to see most of the continent in any given year.”

Steph asked, “Where have you been recently?”

“Well, I was in France last, but that was on my way back from Amsterdam, and Copenhagen before that.”

“Am-ster-dam.” Damien said the word slowly as though he enjoyed the feel of it on his tongue. “I’ve been there, big man. Next time you go, say hello to Cindy Suckalump. She’ll give you a discount if you mention my name.”

“Don’t be so crude,” said Steph. “I’m sure Nigel doesn’t know what on earth you mean.” The attention of the group suddenly turned to Nigel who was looking away sheepishly. “Oh my!” said Steph finally, realising that Nigel was just a man like any other.

Damien let out a raucous laugh. “Oh, he knows. Look at his face.”

Nigel seemed embarrassed but was smiling nonetheless, like a ten-year old boy caught with his father’s porno magazines. Harry leant forward and was about to speak, but was interrupted by a voice behind him.

Old Graham was holding something in the air triumphantly. “Got the blankets, folks. Brought me something else too.”

“And what would that be?” asked Lucas, returning from the toilets and tucking his shirt back into his trousers.

“Well I think we need to know what the hell is going on,” Graham explained, “so I brought down my portable radio.”

Harry slapped his hands together and congratulated the old man. “Excellent,” he said. *Now maybe we can find out just what the hell is going on tonight.*

But Harry wasn’t so sure he wanted to know.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“What’s the plan?” asked Ben. His body had transitioned from shivering to full-blown quaking. “We need to get out of here soon.”

Jerry nodded agreement, his face now lit by one of the dusty candles that Ben had found in the bottom drawer of the backroom filing cabinet. His arm was still around Jess, who didn’t seem to mind currently, but Ben suspected that if she hadn’t had a fright earlier, her need for personal space may have been greater.

“Guess we should grab the beers from the office and try to make it back to yours,” Jerry said.

*Nice try!*

Ben was fully aware of his friend’s attempt to create a social situation in which he could get Jess drunk and wasn’t about to play along. “Leave the beers behind. They’ll only slow us down. Let’s get Jess home first then go back and crash at mine. I’ve got to be back here tomorrow morning so *no parties.*”

Jerry's face sagged and his lower lip drooped like a mackerel's. "Well it would only be polite to invite Jess back. She may want company after a night like tonight."

The two boys turned their attention to Jess and the girl began to fluster. "Well," she said. "I should...you know...really get back to my mom. She'll worry otherwise. Another time though, yeah?"

Ben smiled as Jerry did the opposite.

*Like I said, nice try.*

"Well I think that's sensible," Ben said. "Where is it you live, Jess?"

"Chester road. You know it?"

Ben nodded. "Yeah, it's on our way. I live just past it."

Jess pulled out of Jerry's grasping arm and clapped her hands together. "Great. We should probably get going then. I'm freezing."

In agreement, the three of them gathered their things and prepared to get going. Ben got the store's keys from the shelf below the counter and locked the rear fire exit. Then they made their way to the front entrance. Ben would be unable to set the store's alarm, but seeing as it was freezing, half-ten at night, and nobody's mobile phone worked, he was pretty sure his father would let him off.

*Pretty sure...*

"Wrap up warm," Ben advised as he ushered everyone out, closing the thick glass fire-door behind them. He inserted the key and turned it inside the lock, before pulling it out again and placing it back in his jean pocket. "Ready?" he asked.



Jess and Jerry nodded.

They began making their way forward into the snowfield that had yesterday been a public footpath. A footpath that now seemed more like arctic tundra than a paved urban area. The wind continued to pick up and plumes of snow had started to gather on the air in wispy spirals. Ben had no hood on his jacket and had to cover his face with a hand in order to keep the airborne snowflakes out of his nose and mouth. At the same time, his booted feet were getting numb as he kicked and heaved through the thick slush. "I can't believe how bad it's gotten," he commented.

Jess replied. "I know, it's scary! I remember the snow was quite bad last year, but *this* is like the end of the world."

Jerry's expression lit up. "Like *The Day after Tomorrow*. I totally said that earlier."

Jess sniffed and said, "I wasn't being literal, but, as I recall, humanity survived in that one, didn't they?"

Ben laughed. "She's got you there, Dude!"

Jerry thought for a few moments before saying, "Yeah, well, it was the end of the world for the two thirds of the population that didn't make it. Try telling *them* that humanity as a whole would make it."

"Maybe I would," said Ben. "If not for the fact they were all fictional characters."

"Dude, that movie was totally based on science. It could happen."

Ben wiped his face clean of snow and took a deep breath. Once his lungs were full, he replied, "*Jurassic Park* was based on science. Does that mean we could get attacked by dinosaurs any minute?"

Jerry jumped up and down in mock outrage (the only kind of outrage he was capable of in Ben's experience), the snow crunching and giving way beneath his feet. "Dude, don't even get me started on *Jurassic Park*. That shit is less than a decade away. I swear to you that when we're middle-aged we'll be taking our kids to ride T-Rex and big-assed Brontosauruses."

Jess began laughing. "Is this what you two are like all the time? You crack me up!"

The boys blushed. Ben hated when Jerry got him involved in one of his asinine nerd-fiction routines. It had been embarrassing him his whole life. It was his own fault though; sometimes he just couldn't resist winding Jerry up. It was one of life's few pleasures.

"You know what?" said Jess, still giggling. "If we stop by my house, I can leave a note for my parents. I'll crash at yours like you said. It could be fun."

Jerry's face lit up and, if Ben was honest, he too was pleased at the thought of having the girl back to his place. All they had to do now was make it home.

*Before we freeze to death.*

#

It was ten minutes later when Jerry had to stop. Jess wasn't thrilled about it because somewhere out here was the tall, hooded man she'd seen earlier. She was certain of it.

*Well, pretty sure, anyway. At least, I saw something...didn't I?*

“Dude, I can’t see shit!” Jerry bumped into the back of Ben, sending them both into a stagger, the deep snow making it hard to keep balance.

She laughed at them. “Come on, Laurel and Hardy. I’m freezing my tits off here.”

Jerry regained his balance, pushing against Ben’s shoulders to steady himself. Ben huffed, most likely irritated that he was being used as a steadying post.

Jerry grinned at her. “Hey, if you want me to warm them up for you, just let me know.”

“Nice try,” she said. “But I’m not as easy as that.”

Ben chuckled and pointed at his friend. “Wounded!”

Jerry argued, “Hey, she said she wasn’t easy – not impossible.”

“Well, I must admit that’s closer than you get with most girls.”

“You ain’t so hot yourself, Gandalf.”

Ben scowled. “I told you to stop calling me tha-“

“Children, children,” Jess interjected. “Put away the testosterone and try to remember I’m not a Star Wars figurine. I don’t like being fought over and my packaging stays on.”

“Worth more like that anyway,” Jerry muttered. “Besides, I thought most girls liked being fought over.”

Jess stopped walking and put her hands on her hips. “Well, I’m not most girls.”

The three of them shared a laugh and they continued struggling onwards, crunching their footprints into the twinkling snow. The increasing blizzard made it difficult to see, but they all saw clearly the shadowy silhouette standing before them.

Jess froze at the sight. Earlier she had been terrified when she'd pounded on the door of the video shop, begging to be let in, but during her time with Ben and Jerry she'd come to the conclusion that she had just been spooked. *Paranoid and possibly insane*. Now though, she was certain that what she had seen earlier was very much a reality and not just a figment of her imagination. The same hooded figure that she had seen before was now towering over her like a prison wall. Beneath its grey cowl, the same glowing white eyes were staring at her once more. The figure cleared seven feet, maybe eight, and was looking down at them all like children. A long, tattered cloak covered its entire body from head to snow (the feet weren't visible).

She screamed.

Jerry chipped in with what he probably felt was an apt expression for the situation. "Dude!"

Jess quickly quieted down however as she witnessed Ben step forward towards the stranger. Obviously the boy was stark mad.

"Sir? Are you trying to get home?" Ben spoke to the stranger without any sign of fear. "We are too. Perhaps we could help one another."

Jerry started backing away, clutching at Jess's arm and pulling her with him. She didn't resist – it was the right idea. Jerry shouted at his friend. "Ben, let's get the fuck out of here. People that make nice with bad guys end up on the end of meat hooks."

Ben seemed angry. "Jerry, do you always have to be so stupid? There is no such thing as monsters. This isn't one of your pathetic movies. I'm sick and tired of-."

Ben's speech was derailed by an explosion, not of sound but of light. Behind the tall hooded figure rose a towering palisade of flames, growing from the very snow itself and

blotting out the night sky as it drenched their freezing bodies with intense heat. The sudden change in temperature made Jess's skin pop and tingle, but her legs were still numb and buried by snow. They lacked feeling so much that she felt as if she were floating in place. The flames behind the tall man were mesmerizingly bright and for the first time Jess could make out the figure in clear detail. The robes were not the drab, weathered grey that she at first thought. Under the harsh light they became magnificent silver, sparkling in the flickering backdrop of liquid fire. Jess laughed as the inappropriate image of a Vegas magician presented itself in her head.

*I think I'm losing my mind.*

“Come on!” Jerry shouted from behind her, but still she could not move, her legs paralysed by fear. Her eyes remained on the tall man and the flames behind him. *Man? Could such a thing possibly be a man?* She didn't know how to describe what she was seeing in any other way, but she felt sure ‘man’ was not the right word.

The lurching figure started to move and from beneath the silver cloth came a talon-like hand, all bony fingers and bulbous knuckles, but otherwise human. Jess gawped, wide eyed, as the tall man begun to draw a long slither of grey from inside his flapping cloak.

*A sword!*

Finally, Jess found control of her legs, the sight of the sharp-edged blade helping her take charge. “Ben, I think you should back away and come over here with us.”

Ben seemed to snap awake, as if suddenly he had been released from a temporary lobotomy. Maybe he'd noticed the sword as well. He turned and stared at Jess, ballerinas of fear pirouetting through his eyes. “No shit!” he said before starting to run. Not a single second passed before Jess and Jerry were doing the same.

“Who the hell is that?” Jess managed to ask mid-run, the words coming out in huffs and puffs.

Jerry answered in the same out-of-breath way. “You mean *what* is that, don’t you?”

The conversation went no further as the three of them carried on their rapid retreat from the hooded figure. The snow slowed their running down to less than half its normal speed and Jess couldn’t help but worry that if they *were* being pursued each of them had slim hopes of getting away. “Is that thing following us?” she said, whilst trying to increase the speed of her clumsy snow-bound strides.

“I don’t know,” said Ben, looking back over his shoulder. “Let me see.”

While Jess tried to catch up with Jerry, who was a few yards in front, she waited anxiously for Ben to reply from behind her about whether or not they were being pursued. After several more, exhausting strides, Jess’s racing heart surged with so much panic that she could wait for Ben’s answer no longer. She skidded to a stop and looked back herself.

For some reason, Ben had stopped several yards behind. He was still following after Jess, but was making slow, almost laborious progress. Beyond him, she saw nothing but snow and darkness. The crisp, bright flames that held her mesmerised had disappeared, and so had the hooded figure.

“Ben,” she called. “What are you doing?”

It was a few moments before he replied. “I...I don’t feel right. I...” He fell down in the snow.

Jess panicked. She had to go back to help him, she knew that without even thinking about it, but going back to help him meant going back towards the tall man with the sword.

She had to go, she decided, but sure as hell wasn't going alone. Jess turned around and yelled.

Up ahead, Jerry stopped in his tracks, swaying and tottering like he couldn't gain control of his knees. When he came to a stop finally, he understood something was wrong and started running back. Not waiting for him to catch up, Jess started trudging her way towards Ben, who was still down on his hands and knees, face buried against the snow. Her feet found the tracks they had flattened when they had been running in the opposite direction and moving became a little easier.

Within a few moments she had reached Ben. "Hey, what's wrong," she asked, starting to get frantic. He looked up at her and the sight immediately made her stomach churn. His face had turned as white as the snow he lay in, except for his lips, which were bright red with blood. "Jesus, Ben! Are you ok? What's happened?"

Jerry came rushing up beside his friend and instantly dove to his knees. "Ben! Ben, what's wrong? Shit, man, you're bleeding."

Somehow, Ben managed to laugh meekly at his friend's arrival and scattered specks of blood flew from his mouth, covering the nearby snow in pinpricks of red.

Then Jess saw something that made her stomach churn even harder. "One of your fingers is missing!"

Ben stared down at his hand as though he didn't quite recognise it. Jess thought that he looked mildly stoned, and instead of looking at his dismembered digit, he was looking at a vase of multi-coloured flowers. The strangest thing of all, Jess noticed, was that the finger stump was not bleeding. It was capped by a glistening patch of red, but it wasn't moist as she would have expected. The wound seemed more like the surface of sandpaper.

Jerry put out a hand towards his friend. “Come on, B-Dog. Let’s get you out of here.”

Ben reached up to take his friend’s hand, but when he made contact something terrible happened. His arm crumbled away at the shoulder as though it were made from ragged clumps of brittle clay. The stump bled for a few seconds before seeming to glaze over before Jess’s eyes. Ben looked up at them with the same look she imagined soldiers had when they realised they were holding their own intestines: *Mortal panic*. Now she saw that Ben’s face had taken on the same sandpapery quality that his broken finger wound possessed. In fact, she noticed with increasing dread, he was dead.

It took several more moments for Jerry to understand this, the boy unwilling to believe that his best friend was no more, but when Ben’s entire body crumbled away to blood-coloured dust in his very arms, Jerry finally seemed to get it. When the scene was finally over, with only a fading pile of red sand against the white snow to suggest anything had ever existed of Ben, Jess allowed herself the luxury of screaming for help and didn’t stop until she was completely out of breath.

It went on for some time.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Harry's world felt much better from underneath the snug security of a plush blanket. It was still freezing but at least the thick quilt prevented the loss of what little body heat he had. Despite the fact he was now able to keep his temperature at a more tolerable level, Harry was still eagerly awaiting the power to click on. It had been almost two hours now.

“Come on then, old man,” Damien shouted. The lad had declined one of Old Graham's blankets – no doubt thinking it would ruin his hard man image – but he was closest to the fire and probably just as warm as the rest of them in his padded coat.

“Yeah,” Nigel joined in. “Haven't you picked anything up yet?”

Old Graham sat on the footstool by the fire, fiddling with his radio. It hissed and crackled, almost harmonising with the popping and spitting of the fireplace. “I'm trying,” he shouted. “Nought's happening.”

“When was the last time you even used that piece of shit?” Damien asked.

“It’s been a while, but I knows how to work a bloody radio. My generation grew up with the things.”

Lucas reached out his hand from his perch on the armrest of the two seat sofa (Harry and Steph still occupied the cushions and her thigh was still touching his). “Give it here, old timer. I know my way around a gadget or two.”

Old Graham obliged and handed over the crackling radio. Lucas set about twiddling its knobs and pressing its buttons. A frown filled his face gradually like liquid filling up a beaker. “The thing’s a dud old man.”

“Nonsense! I’ve used the thing a hundred times.”

“Well it’s gone on strike tonight.”

Harry struggled to accept that. “I’ve never known a radio to switch on and not pick anything up. They usually get something, even if it’s only faint.”

Lucas shook his head. “Not if the antenna’s faulty. That would cause you to get nothing but static. Let’s say you’re right though. Let’s assume the radio is working and still we’re getting nothing. What does that mean?”

Harry started to think about it and then wished he hadn’t. “Well, I guess it mean’s nobody is broadcasting or that the radio waves aren’t getting through.”

“Exactly,” Lucas said, as if he was revealing the most obvious fact in the universe. “So those are two options. The third and final is that the radio has popped its little electrical clogs. What’s the most likely, friend?”

Harry felt silly but was worried all the same. “Well I guess it *is* just the radio or the weather affecting things.”

Lucas smiled as if he'd successfully explained algebra to a monkey. "There you go now, no need to assume the wor-"

Old Graham cried out. "Got something!"

Harry and Lucas broke their discussion and turned to the old man; so did Steph, Nigel, and Damien. Old Graham waved his hand at them all and ushered them closer. His left ear was half an inch from the radio's speaker. At first, all Harry could make out was more hissing and crackling, but as he got closer...

"What is that?" Harry asked, finally hearing something.

"I don't know," said Old Graham without turning his attention away from the Radio. "I can't make it out, but something's definitely there."

Everyone gathered round to listen as the radio continued to pop, hiss, and crackle, but behind those noises was something else. At first it sounded like horns blowing – trumpets even – but then there was...

*Voices?* Garbled, disembodied speech that made sense to Harry for only mere seconds: ...*Pillars...Salt...Sin...*

Nigel straightened his back and stepped away from the radio. It had returned to giving out nothing but empty static. "Did anyone else make that out?"

Old Graham shook his head. "Not really. Something about salt?"

Nigel shook his head. "Pillars. It was pillars."

"Pillars of salt," Steph added helpfully.

Damien turned his back on the group, walked back over to the other side of the fire, and then turned back around to face them. “Pillars, Salt, Sin. That’s what it said.” He pulled at his earlobe. “Guess my hearing’s better than you old bastards.”

Harry felt like screaming ‘*shut up*’ at the top of his lungs, but refrained due to the fact that Damien had actually been helpful before his snide remark. “He’s right, it did say that. Pillars. Salt. Sin.”

Lucas sat back down on his perch on the armrest. “What in heaven does that mean then? Sounds downright biblical.”

Harry didn’t disagree and thought about it for a moment, before finally wondering: *Who’s broadcasting it?* “So does anybody know what Pillars of Salt and Sin actually means?” Harry asked the question earnestly because he had no idea himself.

Steph offered her opinion first: “Isn’t it from a Coldplay song?”

Harry thought she may have given them the answer. “You think we just caught part of a song playing?”

Steph shook her head. “It didn’t sound like singing, and the line in the song goes quite quickly. The words on the radio were drawn out and slow.”

“Plus that song doesn’t contain the word sin,” Damien added.

“No, it doesn’t.” Steph agreed.

“Okay,” Harry said. “Anybody else got ideas?” He looked around and raised his eyebrows. “What about you, Lucas?”

“Can’t help you there, fella. It’s probably nothing but Prayer Time with Father Bob for all I know. You can find all kinds of religious stations if you fiddle about enough –

especially at times like these. Either way, I needs to go and visit the latrine again, so I'll leave you folks to ponder." Lucas got up from the sofa's armrest and headed towards the toilets while the rest of them continued their conversation.

"I'm sure it's nothing," said Old Graham from underneath his tattered wool blanket. The old man pulled it tight around his shoulders as he spoke. His words fluttered slightly as the cold strangled his central nervous system. "No point worrying about it now. I'll put the radio on the bar if anyone wants to have another go, but my only concern right now is keeping me bones from turning to ice."

Nigel pulled his own blanket up around his shoulders. "Yeah, it's getting a little *too* nippy for my liking. Do we have any more wood for the fire?"

Steph nodded and headed off towards the bar, but before she got there the sound of screaming made her turn back around.

"What in the blue hell was that?" Nigel asked the group. Underneath his tightly wound blanket he looked like a floating head beside the fire.

Steph answered first. "Sounded like screaming."

"Yeah," agreed Harry, getting up quickly and placing his beer bottle down on one of the nearby tables. "That's exactly what it was."

Steph stepped away from the bar. "Harry, where are you going?"

"Outside. Someone may need help."

"I'd advise against that fella," said Lucas, returning from the toilets. "You go out in that weather and you might not come back."

"I have to go, and besides, what does that even mean?"

Lucas walked over to Harry who was now only a foot from the pub's exit door. He pointed to the frost-covered window. "Look out there, pal. You'll be blinded the second you step outside, and trying to make it in a straight line for ten steps will leave you a disorientated sot. You'd probably struggle to walk ten steps in a straight line on a normal night."

Harry scowled. "What the fuck that's supposed to mean."

Damien stood laughing by the fire. "He means you're a worthless drunk, Harry, and everybody knows it."

The hackles on Harry's neck shot up, tightening the skin at the back of his neck. "What did you just say to me, boy?"

Damien stepped towards Harry, but was still a good nine feet away. "I said that you're a no good fucking drunk and that if someone is hurt out there, screaming for help, the worst person that could turn up to help them would be you. Probably just puke on 'em and pass out. They'd end up having to get an ambulance for *your* sorry ass."

Harry wanted to use words to retaliate – he was a civilised man after all – but none came to mind. The only thing that entered his head was a blind, boiling rage. He leapt at Damien's smug, laughing face, crossing the nine feet before his heart could even beat once. His first punch landed square and no more blows were required. Damien's nose scrunched up, spreading across his cheeks, until both nostrils were gushing blood. The young thug didn't go down though and instead staggered backwards, holding his nose in stunned bewilderment.

After a few moments of confusion, Damien grabbed a hold of himself, dropping his hands out to his sides and straightening up his body. His nose continued to drip a viscous meld of blood and mucous that painted wavy patterns down his light-blue shirt inside his

puffer jacket. It didn't seem to bother the lad. "You just shot yourself in the head mate. If I were you, I'd go in those toilets, take off that cheap ass belt around your cock-less waist, tie it round your alcoholic neck and hang yourself. Cus I'm gonna kill you. I'm gonna slide a knife in your belly and laugh in your face while you die. I'll be the last person you see and I'll be laughing my fuckin ass off."

Harry's soul deflated as he realised the seriousness of his actions. What had made him act so violently? That wasn't him. *Was it?* Either way, he'd chosen a course of action and he would stick to it. Harry spat defiantly. "Try it, you little fuckweed!"

Damien nodded and started towards him, taking each step casually as if he had all the time in the world. Harry tried to swallow but found a lump of coal blocking his throat. He raised his fists and prepared for his first ever bar fight.

Lucas jumped between the two of them and placed a hand across Damien's chest. "Calm down there now, Laddy. Thought we had an agreement? We were all gonna play nice tonight, weren't we?"

Damien sneered. "Try telling that to your man here. Wrecked a perfectly good *Henley* shirt. He gonna pay for it though so don't worry."

"Come now. You two men can settle up another night. There's no time for it now. There's some lass screaming out there and our Harry here was about to do the noble thing and go and offer assistance. You should do the noble thing and let him."

Damien shook his head. "*You* were the one telling him *not* to go out there."

"Well," said Lucas. "That was before he was in as much danger in here as he will be out there. Besides, there's a chance he might freeze to death so you should be all for it."

Damien backed off slightly, waving an arm towards the door. “We’ll finish this later. That is if you don’t freeze your tiny balls off out there. Good luck!”

Harry was unsure what to do, not wanting to lower his fighting stance until he knew the situation was defused. He looked at Lucas who nodded reassuringly that everything was calm for now. Harry lowered his arms and moved back towards the pub’s exit.

“Harry.” It was Steph. She sounded worried. “Let me find you a torch or something first.”

“Yeah,” Old Graham agreed from under his blanket by the fire, “and take a blanket with you.”

Nigel added the final voice of concern. “Or maybe you should try calling out the door before you go trekking off first. See if anyone shouts back and gives you directions.”

Harry waved a hand dismissively. “I’m sure someone’s just slipped over. I’ll be back in five minutes.”

Damien laughed from the back of the room. “Yeah, then you and me will pick up where we left off.”

Harry felt his stomach churn nervously but also felt fury at the same time. He decided to put Damien out of his mind for the moment. Whatever was going to happen would happen. Life had taught him that a long time ago. Harry stepped towards the door...

...before falling to the ground clutching his head as it swung inwards, clubbing him in the face. The room was cast into darkness as the wind from outside swept across the bar and extinguished all the candles. Harry moaned in pain.

“Shit! Are you okay?” asked Steph from somewhere in the candle-lit room.



“What the heck’s going on?” asked Nigel’s disembodied voice from over by the fire, which flickered and fought against the darkness but failed to light more than a small semi-circle at its base.

Still lying on the floor, Harry ceased his moaning and tried to get up. He could feel the pressure building on his skull as a swelling began to form above his left eye. Reaching forward onto his hands, he planted his knees on the floor. It was then that he realised someone standing in front of him in the darkness. “Who’s there?” he called out.

For a few moments everyone stood still and listened for an answer to Harry’s question. Eventually one came. “My name’s Kath. I’m the manager of the supermarket across the road.”

A collective sigh of relief filled the room, more so from Harry than anyone else. “Try knocking next time. You almost had my head off.”

Kath laughed nervously, “I’m so sorry. I guess the weather has put me in a bit of a panic.”

“Were you the one screaming?” Steph asked as she started relighting candles on the bar.

Kath moved away from the doorway and towards the light of the bar. “Oh, that’s better. I was starting to forget what it was like to be able to see properly.” She offered her hand to Steph.

Steph shook it. “Pleased to meet you, I’m Steph. So, *was* it you that was screaming?”

“Huh? Screaming? No, that wasn’t me. It would no doubt be that silly girl.”

“Silly girl?” Harry asked, moving over to the bar to join the women. The others in the bar started moving too.

“Jessica. She’s just some ditsy teenager that works for me. She went wondering off into the snow when the power went off.”

“We should go look for her then,” Harry insisted.

Kath sighed. “Don’t bother wasting your time. Peter Pole went after her so she’ll be fine. I’m sure they bumped into each other out there and that’s what startled her.”

“You sure she’ll be okay,” Steph asked. “We should check to make sure.”

Kath responded abruptly, “If she needed help there would have been more than one scream, wouldn’t there?”

“Guess that makes sense,” said Lucas, taking the top off a newly defrosted beer with his teeth. “I say we top that fire up and get ourselves warm under the blankets. It’s cold enough to freeze beer in here after all.”

“Good idea,” said Old Graham, already making his way back to the fire. The rest of them took suit and gathered around him. They spread their blankets into a line and got under them side by side, tucked in like sardines.

Steph brought over a crate of bottled beer and placed it by the fire to keep it from freezing. Harry passed a recently thawed one to their new arrival, Kath, and she took it gladly. “My saviour,” she said, sipping the beer. “After the day I’ve had I could see myself becoming an alcoholic just to cope.” The comment brought a stiff silence and Harry wondered if it was because of the comments that Damien had made about him ten minutes before. “Did I say something wrong?” Kath asked. “It was just a joke.”

Despite Harry being certain that Damien would have used the opportunity to revisit their earlier animosity, nobody said anything. For some reason the lad stayed quiet and drank his beer.

“So what exactly *have* you been through tonight then, Kath?” Steph asked.

“God, if only you knew. The whole world has gone crazy tonight. The electricity went out, my phone stopped working, and at one point I was worried I was going to freeze to death. Thank heavens you’re still open, because I don’t know how on earth I would have gotten home.”

“Your phone isn’t working?” said Damien.

Kath shook her head. “No, it doesn’t work at all. The landline either.”

“Mine stopped working too. Weird.”

“Guess the power affects the masts or whatever,” said Old Graham.

“Maybe,” said Nigel, “but don’t the landlines work even when the powers out?”

Harry nodded in the dark and rubbed at the smooth lump growing on his forehead.

“You’re right. Don’t they work off static signals or something?”

Lucas laughed. “Any Telephone Technicians in the house? Anybody?”

“What’s your point,” said Harry.

“My point is that none of us really know how the phone lines work and maybe they *do* rely on power the same way everything else does.”

“That’s right,” said Nigel. “Didn’t they go digital or something a time back?”

From the middle of the group, Steph cracked open another beer. Her words were beginning to slur slightly as she spoke. “Don’t suppose it matters. Stuck here not knowing all the same. This is the worst weather I think this country’s ever had, so it don’t surprise me that everything’s gone down the shitter. Not like we have a Government that actually knows its arse from its earlobe, is it?”

Kath chuckled. “Tell me about it!”

“Now, now, Ladies,” Lucas butted in. “A pub is no place for politics. You can go to a poncey wine bar for the likes of that. A good old-fashioned place like this is meant for people to forget their troubles in the world, inept Governments included.”

Steph laughed. “Aha! So *you* think the government is inept as well.”

“Sweetheart,” he said. “I think they’re all inept, and trust me I’ve seen a few. I always say that Religion and Politics are just clever ways to make un-content people content with their un-contentedness.”

Old Graham snorted. “Good one.”

Kath turned to Lucas, disapproval on her face. “I take it you’re a none-believer of God then, erm...”

“*Lucas*, my dear woman. You can call me Lucas. To answer your question, *yes*, absolutely I believe in the Almighty Father. I never condemned him now did I? I condemned the eejits that try to run things in his name.”

After a moment’s thought, Kath seemed to accept this. “Well, perhaps I can agree with you there.”

“Well,” Harry joined in. “What’s your Almighty Father’s plan for tonight? Besides freezing us all to death that is.”

“Do I detect a heathen,” asked Lucas sarcastically.

Harry drunk his beer. “That would be your opinion. I’d just say I’m realistic.”

“Why don’t you believe,” Steph asked him. She sounded genuinely interested.

“Because if I believed that there was someone responsible for all the things that have happened in my life then I would be so consumed with rage that I don’t think I’d be able to go on living.”

Damien laughed. “Is that because you’re a gay alcoholic?”

Harry wanted to get angry and shut Damien’s smart mouth altogether, but he suddenly felt very tired. Maybe it was the beer or maybe it was something deeper inside of him that was just giving up.

“You’ve lost someone haven’t you?” said Lucas.

Harry turned in the Irishman’s direction. “What?”

“The only time a man gives up hope like you have is when they’ve lost a lover...or a child.” Lucas started nodding as if he’d found the answer to his own question. “Was it a boy or a girl?”

“*It*,” Harry spat, “was a boy, Toby.”

There was silence, thick enough that a snow plough would have blunted against it. Harry had never let anyone in The Trumpet know about Toby. It was his place to escape from all the pity and well-wishing that his once-friends and family had become consumed

with since the accident. This was his place to come and be alone with his pain. And to remember his son the way he wanted to.

“I’m sorry,” said Damien, before swigging his beer bottle to the end. No one else spoke.

Harry didn’t say anything either. He felt a deep sadness. Not just for Toby, or his wife, Julie, who was also gone – he always felt sadness for them – but sadness because he knew that he could never come here again.

“Okay,” said Lucas, raising a beer in the dim light of the fire. “We’ll change the subject, but first: Here’s to Toby, may his soul be somewhere safe and pleasant.”

The group raised their bottles together and said Toby’s name. Harry said nothing. He just stared into the fire.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Peter hadn't seen Jess, or anybody else, in almost an hour now, not since he'd parted ways with Kath. Earlier, the two of them had heard screaming and he was certain it was Jess. His selfish boss-lady, however, had chosen to head for the nearby pub, caring only about herself, but he had decided to do the right thing and go and find Jess. It hadn't gone as well as he'd hoped.

Peter wasn't one to lose his cool easily. No one in Poland was after what their grandparents had lived through. It gave them a unique perspective on what really mattered in life. Yet, Peter had to admit to himself that he was starting to get anxious. He concentrated on keeping his breathing steady and emptied his mind of all thoughts. If a person did not think, they could not become afraid. And, if he continued walking, he would find someone soon. Or at least reach some houses. One thing was for certain: It could not go on like this much longer – pure white nothingness all around and in every direction. If it did...then he would certainly freeze to death. It was an absurd thought, but very real at that moment as the cold swelled the pads on his fingertips so much that he could no longer form a fist.

Peter was quite used to the chill. It was regularly freezing in his hometown outside of Warsaw, but since his two year stay in England had begun, he had not known conditions like this. It reminded him more of the Arctic Circle than Great Britain – the place he had come to follow his dreams and earn the money he could only dream of in Poland. He enjoyed being here to study also, and, despite the odd pockets of racism (*you're taking our jobs!*), the local population had been very welcoming. England had become as much a home to him as his own country.

But today he would do anything to be back home with Momma and Pappa.

“Jess,” he called out. “Jess are you ok? It is Peter.”

There was no response, as there had not been for the last twenty minutes since he'd split ways from Kath. He'd almost given up hope of finding Jess now, but that didn't stop him worrying about why she had screamed. Jess was a nice girl, attractive and funny. Most of the Polish people in the town stuck to their own and socialised together – especially when it came to dating. It was easier that way and provoked less xenophobia than if the Polish men went around sleeping with the English women, but, if Peter was honest, he yearned to spend time with Jess and thought almost every day about kissing her.

*I hope you are okay, my beautiful flower.*

“Peter!”

He stopped in his tracks, the snow crunching beneath his polished work shoes. “Jess, is that you?”

“Yes, Peter, I'm over here. I need help. Come quick.”



Peter turned a full circle, unable to pinpoint where Jess's voice was coming from.

“Jess, I hear you, but I not see you. Jess?”

The voice came again, closer. “Peter, I'm here, help.”

Peter turned another circle, and stopped half way around. He stepped forward. “Jess, I see you.”

In the near distance, Peter could make out a grey shape against the darkness. A sigh of relief whistled from his cold, blue lips and he began to make his way toward it.

#

Jess and Jerry had fled in terror after witnessing Ben's destruction, too much in shock to yet comprehend what had actually happened.

“I don't have...a goddamn clue what...just happened,” said Jerry, out of breath from all the running.

Jess was beginning to slow down. They hadn't gone far, but in the deep, sucking snow, running any length at all was an endurance test. “I need...to stop,” she said.

Jerry halted and looked at her, then grabbed her arm and pulled hard. “Are you loco! That thing will get us. You never stop when there's a demon on your ass. Have you never seen *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*?”

Jess pulled back, her chest rising and falling in great heaves. “There's...no such thing as...demons.”

“There *is* too. *Exorcist* was based on true events and so was *The Entity*.”

Jess shook her head. “They just say that so idiots like you believe it. The man in the cloak wasn’t chasing us when we ran, so we can stop.”

“You saw what it did to Ben!” Jerry seemed to struggle with something internally, before going on. Maybe he was realising that his childhood friend was gone for real. That it wasn’t all a movie. “It killed him,” he said, “and if we don’t get moving it’ll get us too.”

Jess nodded. “Okay, but where the hell are we going? I can’t see anything and I’ve already gotten lost in this snow once tonight.”

Jerry pulled on her arm again and the two of them started moving. “We need to find the pub or see if your boss is still at the supermarket.”

Jess laughed. “God, I think I’d rather let that thing get me than ask that cow for help.”

“The pub it is then,” said Jerry.

#

Twenty minutes later, the two of them came to a stop at the bottom of the hill that led up to The Trumpet. It had taken the last of their energy wandering around in the white darkness of the growing blizzard to find it and if it wasn’t for the fear and adrenaline in her system, Jess was sure she would have keeled over by now. “Thank God we found it,” she said. “I don’t think I can get much colder. My nipples could cut cake.”

Jerry stared at her chest.

Jess growled. “Jerry, that wasn’t an invitation to ogle my tits. Just take my word for it that they’re cold.”

Jerry shook himself as if escaping a hypnotic trance. “Sorry! Well, it’s one thing finding the pub, but let’s hope somebody’s in there. Else, I don’t know what we’re gonna do. With the Siberian weather and Flame Boy on our tail I don’t know what’ll kill us first.”

Jess shuddered.

“Sorry,” he said. “I know you’re scared.”

Jess didn’t admit it, but it was true. They were both fighting back the pangs of panic as their bodies continued to get colder. Jerry’s cheeks had gone clammy and looked like they were burning. She knew that if they didn’t get under cover soon they would be in real danger of frostbite.

Jess started taking slow steps up the hill, sticking to where she imagined the path lay beneath the snow. “I think I see light.”

Jerry squinted. “Yeah, I think I do too. There must be people inside.”

The two of them hurried, taking steps as quickly as possible in knee-high snow that sloped upwards. As Jess got nearer, she became more and more certain that there was light. Not electrical light but a flickering, glowing light from a torch or—

“I think they have a fire in there,” said Jess, giddy at the thought of warmth.

“*Jurassic Park!*” exclaimed Jerry triumphantly. “Let’s get our black asses in there.”

Jess’s brow wrinkled. “We’re not black.”

“Will be if we get frost bite, now come on!” He grabbed Jess by the arm and started helping her up the hill, but a noise from behind made them stop.

Jess heard it too. “Was that...growling?” She turned slowly as the low grumbling sound started again. It did indeed sound like growling but, when she looked back, there was nothing other than the drifting, windswept snow. She turned to Jerry. “Let’s just get to the pub.”

They hurried, still hampered by the chilling embrace around their ankles and shins. When the growling started again, it seemed to be coming from all directions, vibrating through the air all around them. Jerry put his hand on Jess’s back and pushed. “I don’t like the sound of whatever’s making that.”

Jess was about to agree when she found herself off balance, her toe stubbing up against some hidden brickwork or stone beneath the snow. As she crumpled, her leg twisted and folded beneath her, leaving her facing back the way they had come from. She shrieked at what she saw.

And so did Jerry.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Harry snapped out of his wallowing and leapt up in front of the fire. “The fuck was that? More screaming?” He started immediately for the pub’s exit. “What the hell is going on tonight?”

The others in front of the fire began emerging from under their blankets and duvets. Steph hurried up beside Harry and put a hand on his back. “That scream sounded really close,” she said. “You think it was the same person as earlier?”

“I hope so, otherwise that means there’s something even more fucked up going on out there.”

The screaming continued, closer and more urgent.

“Come on, Harry,” Steph urged. “It sounds like they’re right outside.”

Harry nodded and made for the door. Before he managed to get there, it sprung open. Luckily, his forehead was nowhere near this time and he avoided a second blow from the door’s thick wood. Two flailing bodies – a boy and a girl – tumbled through the

entranceway, ending up in a crumpled heap on the floorboards. Harry saw that they were just a couple of teenagers. He offered them his hand. "Come in why don't you."

The girl ignored the offer and sprang to her feet unassisted. She ran over to the still-open door and slammed it shut, heaving her weight against it and sliding her arm up to the dead bolt, pulling it across with a forceful *Clack!*

Damien entered the scene and came up beside Harry and Steph. He looked down at the teenage boy on the floor and then across at the panting girl slumped against the door. He laughed. "What the fuck are you two spazzing about?"

The girl looked back at Damien, her chest heaving in and out beneath her work fleece. Her eyes were wide like a rabbit on a motorway. She said nothing.

Damien looked down at the boy on the floor. "What about you, sunshine? You got anything to say, or shall I just kick your arse back outside? You've interrupted a private party and its bad manners to crash."

"No," the girl said urgently. "Please, let us stay!"

Damien went to speak but Harry cut him off, confident that he would take a more appropriate line of questioning. "You can stay. Of course you can, but what on Earth has gotten you so freaked out?"

"There's something out there," said the boy on the floor, still trembling on his back, but now propped up by his spindly elbows. "There's something out there. Like a big fucking dog or something. It was like...like...*Jaws* with legs and fur."

There was silence in the room as Harry and the others studied the newcomers and considered their wild suggestions. The girl was nodding in agreement at what the boy had

said and they both seemed startled half to death by something, but what they were claiming seemed like pure...

“Bullshit,” said Damien. “You’ve just shit yourself at a dog.”

Harry nodded, actually agreeing with Damien and finding the sensation strange. “It was probably just a stray, stressed out by the weather. I’m sure it’s unpleasant out there for anyone, dogs included.”

Harry watched patiently as the teenagers seemed to calm slightly, although both kept glancing back at the door, presumably to make sure nothing was trying to get in. After a couple minutes, the boy got himself up off the floor and put an arm around the girl, pulling her away from the door. They spoke between themselves but were too quiet for Harry to make anything out. *Boyfriend and girlfriend*, he supposed, before asking, “Beer?”

This seemed to be just the ticket as the two youngsters started smiling and seemed to calm down. But despite everyone relaxing, Harry still had an uncomfortable feeling rising in his throat, rising with the bile from his stomach.

It tasted very much like dread.

#

Jess watched the elderly man come from behind the bar with more blankets. Beside him, a huge, greasy-skinned man had a shopping bag filled with food – sausage rolls, chicken, ham, and bread. The faint smell of meat made Jess’s mouth water as the blankets and snacks were handed out amongst the group.

“You say it was halfway between a Great Dane and a bull?” Kath asked her, mouth full of porkpie.

Jess couldn't believe it when she'd found her boss at the pub. A spiteful part of her had hoped the ill-tempered shrew had gotten lost in the snow. Jess made a mental note to find out where Peter had gone when she had an opportunity to ask. It wouldn't have surprised her if Kath had left him in the supermarket to guard it overnight in the freezing cold. Kath had it in for the poor boy more than she did for Jess.

Kath cackled at her. “Well, bull is exactly what it is, young lady.”

“Yeah, as in *bull-shite!*” said a voice from somewhere else.

Jess sneered at the person that had spoken. “You're Damien aren't you?”

Damien's face lit up. “You've heard of me. Well I guess you'd be a fool not to have.”

“Yeah, I've heard of you. You're the dickhead that gets high on smack and then tries to buy beer from the supermarket after licensed hours. Then, when you get refused, you start causing trouble – knocking stuff over and threatening staff. Basically acting like an immature little boy. Same as you are now.”

Damien's smug expression dissolved into anger. The flesh in his cheeks changed from primrose to burgundy. “You better watch that mouth sweetheart. This is my pub and—”

“Actually,” said the barmaid lady (Jess thought she'd heard her name was Steph). “It's my pub tonight, Damien, and we've all agreed to get along. That includes you too, sweetheart, I'm afraid. Don't poke the natives!”

Jess nodded. “You're right, I'm sorry. It's just been a bit of a head-fuck tonight.”



Damien smiled and held up his beer. “I forgive you, but only cus you’ve got a cute ass.”

“She’s like sixteen, dude! How old are you?” Jerry had obviously taken exception to the comment. He was eyeballing Damien with suspicion.

Damien sneered. “You want to call your dog off, honey? I was only being polite. Besides, I’m twenty-one, what’s the issue?”

Jess turned to Jerry, hoping to show as much disapproval on her face as a young woman her age could muster. “I don’t need you to fight my battles, and for everyone’s information I’m seventeen - almost eighteen, in fact.”

Jerry stepped closer and spoke in a hushed voice. “Sorry, it’s just that I’m aware of this fuckface and he’s bad news; a right wannabe Tony Montana.”

“I know,” she whispered back. “Everyone is aware of him, which is why you should just stay out of his way. He’s dangerous enough on a normal day, let alone on a night where everything’s gone to hell. Let’s just finish our beers and try to stay out of his way till the morning when we can try and get hold of help.”

Jerry nodded and they joined back with the group who were resuming their position in front of the fire. Despite being covered by several layers of blankets, duvets, and coats, there was no doubt in Jess’s mind that it was getting colder. As she sat down, an Irish guy spoke to her. “So, with a somewhat calmer mind, lass, do you want to give us your yarn about the furry beast you say you saw outside.”

Jess didn’t answer and instead looked quizzically at the other man, the one who’d offered to help her up off the floor when she’d first arrived.

“Oh, don’t worry,” he said to her and smiled. “Lucas always speaks like that. You’ll get used to it.”

Jess laughed. “Oh, well I guess it was like you all said: Just a dog or something.”

Lucas frowned. Somehow the expression was visible to her despite the lack of light. “Come now, if that was what you thought at the time then you wouldn’t have burst in here screaming like a blind banshee. At the time, you thought you saw something. What?”

Jess was hesitant, nervous at the thought of bringing it all up again after she’d just managed to calm down. “I er...I really don’t know. It was all so confusing.”

“It wasn’t a dog,” Jerry spoke up. “I’ve seen a hundred different breeds of dog and there’s nothing even close to what we saw tonight.”

The others switched their focus from Jess and listened to Jerry as he continued. *Don’t tell them, Jess was thinking. They’ll think we’re both bonkers.*

“We had just started to climb the pub’s hill,” Jerry said, “when we heard growling. It started off just like a dog’s and that may have been what it was...but then it got louder. A dog can’t make your bones rattle like this did. We started to get our asses out of there but Jess slipped over.”

“I tripped on something under the snow,” Jess explained, embarrassed. “That’s when we saw it.”

“Saw what,” the elderly man asked eagerly. “What did you see?”

There was silence for a few moments and it became unclear who would be the one to answer first. Jess decided it would have to be her. “It was big, bigger than anything wandering around a council estate should be. It had thick, oily fur that was totally clear of

snow, as if any flakes that tried to settle on it just melted away. In a way, it *did* look like a dog, but it was just way too big...plus its face was all wrong.”

Jerry supported her as her voice began to weaken. She appreciated it and had already started to consider him a friend. Relationships forged easily at times like these, she realised. “Yeah, I remember,” Jerry said. “Its face was much flatter and rounded – more like an ape than a dog, except its mouth took up half its face. It was full of teeth. Rows and rows of them like those chomp-monsters in *The Langoliers*. You ever see that flick?”

Damien scoffed. “How could you make out all that detail in a blizzard?”

Jerry shook his head. “I don’t know. It was as though there was a glow around it. A sphere of light.”

Damien shook his head, obviously not buying any of it, but saying nothing. Jess saw a similarly incredulous expression on Kath’s face as well. *Screw you both*, she thought.

The others stayed quiet too until Jess finally said. “And we haven’t even told you about the evil monk that turned our friend to dust.”

#

When the teenagers, Jess and Jerry, had finished telling their story, about the ‘evil monk’ turning their friend to dust, Harry was speechless. Of course he didn’t believe such a ridiculous tale, such a thing was impossible. But the story had still managed to unsettle him. Harry swigged his beer as he stared into the fire, listening to the conversations of the group

rather than participating. He tuned in to the sound of Kath who was busy berating Jess about what the girl had just told them.

“You silly, attention-seeking, twit,” she said. “You’re just trying to frighten everybody. I’ve never heard such codswallop in my life.”

Jess slapped her palms against her forehead in dismay. “I watched Jerry’s best friend die. If you hadn’t been too busy abandoning me then you may have been there to see it too.”

“How dare you! I did nothing of the sort. I shouted and looked everywhere for you, but you’d wandered off carelessly.”

Jess sneered. “Bollocks!”

“That is *it*, young lady!” Kath’s voice quivered. “Don’t you bother coming in to work tomorrow because you are fired!”

Jess laughed. “We’re in a pub, *Kathleen*, not at work. I can say what the hell I like to you, but don’t worry though because I quit anyway.”

“Music to my ears. Now I can employ someone with half a brain.”

“Actually, you need to hire someone without a brain, then they won’t mind working for a pathetic bully like you. I understand though, Kathleen, it must be difficult being a spinster.”

“You spiteful little bitch! You know nothing about me.”

Harry watched as Kath threw off her duvet and leapt to her feet. For a second, it seemed as though the older woman was going to go for Jess, but instead she turned away from the group and departed towards the toilet.

“You two don’t get on then?” Lucas quipped from the edge of the group.

“No shit,” Jess replied. “Got to tell you though, it felt really good saying that.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” said Harry. “Maybe you should just let things lie for now though. Who knows how long we’ll be stuck in this situation together.”

“I know. I’ll leave her alone as long as she doesn’t get in my face. I need to ask her where the warehouse guy went first though. She treats Peter like dirt and I need to make sure he’s alright.”

Jess shoved herself up onto her feet and started after Kath. Once she’d taken half-a-dozen steps, a body crashed through the window.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jess screamed. “Peter!”

Oblivious to the biting wind now rushing in through the demolished window, Harry watched the girl drop to her knees, scrambling over to the body now splayed across the pub’s wooden floor. The boy was barely conscious, and covered in blood, murmuring deliriously in a foreign language.

Harry clambered across the room, skidding onto his knees and coming to a stop beside Jess and the injured boy. *Did she say his name was Peter?*

Jess looked at Harry, a hollow stare consuming her delicate features. Tears dripped from her grief-stricken blue eyes and stained her cheeks. “Help him, please.”

Harry choked on his words. “I...I...What’s...What’s happened to him?”

“I don’t know,” cried Jess. “But please make him alright.”

“I’ll tell you what happened,” Jerry said, rushing over to join them. The others in the pub – minus Kath who was still in the toilet – stood on the periphery, watching. Jerry continued. “It’s those demon-fuckers outside, the evil monks and their pet dogs.”

Harry blinked. “You’re speaking gibberish!”

“You reckon?” Jerry contested. “Then why don’t you tell me what can chuck a guy through a pub window like a ragdoll, huh?”

Harry had no answer and that worried him, but before he could send himself deeper into anxious musings, Jess shoved him hard on the arm. “You’re not helping,” she chastised him, beating her fists against his arm. “You need to help him.”

“Okay,” said Harry, shaking himself into action. “Let’s get him someplace comfortable. I need someone to bring me blankets, bandages, anything like that. Is there a first aid kit here?”

Steph stepped forward and nodded. “There’s one in the back. I’ll get it now.”

Harry smiled, glad to have her help. When Steph rushed off, he turned to address the others. “Jess and I are going to carry Jerry over to the couch by the fire. While I’m doing that I need the rest of you to get that window covered up before we all freeze to death.”

No one said anything, but a mumbling of agreement told Harry that his directions had been received. He slid his right arm underneath the injured boy’s shoulders and instructed Jess to get his legs. She did so without argument. “We need to move slowly,” he said. “We don’t know what kind of damage has been done, so easy does it.”

Jess nodded agreement and the two of them shuffled their way across the bar, being careful to avoid twisting or jerking their patient. Harry became aware that the others over by

the window were upending a table and pushing it up against the broken glass and was surprised to see that Damien was also amongst the group. The lad even seemed to be taking charge.

*Maybe he's not as selfish as he tries to show people he is.*

“Okay,” Harry said, stopping gradually. “Jess, you lower Peter’s legs slowly onto the sofa and at the same time I’ll lower his body.”

The two of them lowered Peter down an inch at a time until he was finally resting securely on the sofa. Under the glow of the fire, the severity of the boy’s wounds became more evident. Shards of glass protruded from deep gashes all over his body, poking through his torn clothing like alligator teeth. Harry also noticed that one of the boy’s eyes had been mangled beyond repair. It looked like a squished cherry tomato and dripped blackish-red gunge down his cheek. Harry felt his stomach tighten.

*Who the hell did this?*

“Peter, everything is going to be fine now.” Jess spoke soothingly, stroking a hand across Peter’s forehead. “You’re safe and I’m going to look after you.”

Peter muttered something but it made no sense, more a gurgle than discernable speech.

Harry continued to examine the boy’s body and was shocked to discover yet more wounds, more cuts, and more blood. Not to mention a broken ankle that seemed like it had been attached to the shinbone back to front, sticking out at a gruesome angle.

Harry placed a hand against Peter’s clammy cheek and shook his head. “Who did this to you?”



Peter opened his remaining good eye and seemed to concentrate. He tried focusing on Harry but his eyeball kept flicking left and right as if it had a mind of its own. His mouth formed the words, “*Skrzdlaty Diabel.*”

Harry frowned. “Peter, can you tell me in English?”

The boy took a wheezing breath. It seemed to take every ounce of strength for him to form another sentence, but he managed to say, “Winged...”

“Winged what?” Jess urged, tears streaking her cheeks.

Peter gazed at her and almost managed a smile, like he had only just realised she was there. “Winged...Demon.”

Peter lost consciousness.

Jess went to put her hands on him, perhaps to shake him back awake, but Harry prevented her. “Let him rest.”

Jess leaned up against Harry. He could feel her shaking as she looked at him. “What do you think he meant?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said honestly. “Probably just shock.”

Jess shook her head. “If it wasn’t for all the other things that have happened tonight I may have believed you.”

Harry hated to admit it, but he was inclined to agree with the girl. Something most definitely was wrong tonight. The thing that worried him most however was when he tried to imagine *what* and *why*?

“Hey!”

Harry spun around to find Steph holding a green plastic box. *A first aid kit.* He took it and thanked her but she didn't hear, too busy looking down at their bleeding casualty on the sofa. Eventually she looked up at Harry. "Is he going to be okay?"

Harry glanced down at his shoes, then stood up and took Steph to one side. He didn't want Jess to hear what he was going to say. "I don't think so. He's been ripped to shreds and I think he's been blinded in one eye. I honestly don't know what could do this to a person....or why."

Steph's expression grew dim, her skin becoming ashen even in the orange glow of the fire. "Are we in trouble here, Harry?"

"I really don't know. But I can tell you one thing: I've never wanted out of this pub so bad."

Steph nodded. "I'll go check on the others. Just do what you can for him, yeah?"

Harry nodded and turned back to the sofa. Jess was perched on the end, looking sick to her stomach. He wondered how close she was to Peter. Obviously they were co-workers, but were they more than that?

*Isn't Jerry her boyfriend?*

"How's he doing?" Harry asked her.

Jess shook her head and didn't speak.

Harry knelt down beside Peter, the heat of the fire pinching at the flesh of his back, making it itch. He placed the first aid box down on the ground and popped open the lid. Inside were the things one would expect to find: Gauze, bandages, tape, alcohol wipes, and plasters. He also found an eye dressing which he plucked out of the contents first.

After applying the dressing to Peter's damaged, oozing eye and securing it around the back of the boy's head, Harry moved on to the other wounds. He unbuttoned Peter's supermarket work shirt to get a clearer look.

Jess slapped a hand across her mouth. "No way!"

At first Harry wasn't sure what had upset the girl, but moments later he saw. He unclasped the final button on Peter's shirt and pulled the fabric away. A film of glistening blood covered the boy's chest and stomach, flowing from deep channels scored into his flesh. As Harry took it all in he realised that the gashes weren't just random injuries. "Someone's carved words into him."

Jess looked like she could throw up at any moment. "What does it say?"

"Hold on." Harry pulled a couple of alcohol wipes from the first aid kit and ripped them from their packets, then started rubbing at Peter's wounds, clearing away as much of the blood as he could. As he did so the words became clearer.

*SEnD...*

*Out...*

*ThE...*

*S...*

*I...*

*n...*

*n...*

*E...*

*r.*

“Send out the sinner?” Harry said the words out loud, hoping his brain would come up with some interpretation that made sense.

“What does it mean?” Jess asked.

“I have no idea,” he said, and he didn’t. In fact Harry had no understanding whatsoever about the kind of monster it would take to carve words into someone’s chest. He took a deep breath and let it out. “Maybe we should go get the others.”

Jess agreed.

They dressed as many of Peter’s wounds as they could and left him sleeping on the sofa, before joining up with the others who were still attending to the shattered window. Harry discovered they had managed to stack two tables up against the broken glass and reinforce them with chairs. The long curtains had been pulled around the whole thing and the billowing gust had been reduced to a whistling breeze.

“Good job,” said Harry, genuinely impressed.

Those at the window turned around. Each of them looked shaken and out of breath, even Damien. Kath was the only one that didn’t appear to be helping out. Harry watched the woman, sat on a nearby chair, pick at her nails as though she had not a care in the world.

Lucas suddenly appeared in front of him. “Harry Boy, how’s the nipper?”

Harry sighed heavily. “Not good. Someone’s made a real mess of him, blinded him and cut words into his chest.”

Damien overheard this and stepped away from the window. “What the fuck you say? Someone carved words into him? That’s sick, man. What did it say?”

Harry shrugged. "Something about sin."

Steph slid another chair up against the barricade, reinforcing it further, then turned back to face Harry. "Sin? I don't understand. What exactly did it say?"

"God knows," Harry said. "Just the words of a psychopath."

"It said," Jess spoke up, "send out the sinner."

"The fuck that mean?" Damien demanded. "Does someone in here know what's going on out there?"

Harry pointed his finger. "Calm down. It probably doesn't mean anything. We just need to stick together and everything will be fine. No one needs to panic."

Damien snarled. "Don't point your finger at me or I'll break it off. And I ain't panicking, I'm pissed off. It's obvious that this is personal. Whoever's running around out there, like Freddie-Krueger-on-acid, has a grudge against someone in here."

"Nonsense," Harry said.

"Maybe not," Lucas chimed in. "You don't use a human being as a meat-memo-pad and then hurl them through a window unless you're trying to send a wee message. Maybe what's going down tonight is all down to one person."

A silence fell over the group as they scanned one another suspiciously, trying to work out who was 'the sinner'.

Harry wondered if it was him.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Nigel Keene had sat and watched the unfolding situation for the last half hour. He had retreated to the outskirts of the group in order to try and gain some insight into what was happening. Things had started out strangely enough that night, if only for the unnatural weather, but, when the lights blinked out, things got even more bizarre (culminating with a body flying through the window like an extra in a Bruce Lee movie). None of that particularly bothered him though. What bothered Nigel was all this talk about the ‘sinner’.

He sat, shivering, on a stool over at the bar, listening and watching as the others argued incessantly about what the injured boy’s bleeding chest-note meant. Who was the sinner, they demanded, and who was it outside? Nigel decided it was a conversation he was better off avoiding because he knew that he indeed was very much a sinner. In fact sometimes he felt as though he was *born* a sinner.

But was he *the* sinner?

Maybe it was worry over nothing. Nigel didn't care what happened to his immortal soul. All that mattered to him was how much pleasure he could find while he was alive. The skinny bitch he'd fucked and murdered in Amsterdam last week had been a particular highlight. God how she'd screamed. *Especially when I went in the back door.* He smiled at the thought.

His reminiscing was interrupted by the arrival of Steph at the bar beside him. She handed him a beer and said, "It just about defrosted in front of the fire."

Nigel thanked her. "Just what I needed. Things are a little crazy around here right now, huh?"

"Tell me about it!" Steph swigged from her own bottle. "I feel like I'm in a horror film. Still haven't decided on an emotion yet, but I'm stuck somewhere between dazed and terrified."

Nigel put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed, his pinkie ring sliding over the fabric of her delicate blouse and stirring his emotions. The gold ring featured a dolphin insignia at its centre and was his most prized possession. A memento of his first victim, a twelve-year-old blonde, pretty with chubby cheeks, like a prepubescent Drew Barrymore. He'd bitten it off her finger as she wailed and squirmed in the back of his lorry. He'd worn the dolphin ring ever since, enjoying the way it felt on his cock when he masturbated over his dying victims.

"I'm sure there's nothing to worry about," he reassured Steph. "I think whatever's going on tonight is personal."

"Personal? You mean 'the sinner'?"

The word made Nigel swallow a lump in his throat. “Yeah, whoever’s out there causing trouble obviously has it in for one of us, but you know what I think?”

Steph shook her head.

Nigel pulled his hand away from her shoulder, already missing the warm throb of her flesh. He picked up his beer and took a deep gulp before placing the near empty bottle down on the bar. “What I think is that this is a tiff over drugs. The only people I know sick enough to smash a kid to pieces and lob him through a window are smack heads...and guess what? We just happen to have our very own aspiring drug lord right here with us.”

Steph looked across the room at the others then looked back at Nigel. “You think this is all about Damien?”

Nigel shrugged. “He’s the biggest sinner I know. Beat some kid into a coma last year, didn’t he?”

“I don’t know,” Steph admitted. “I heard that too, but whether or not it’s true...”

“Well it’s certainly within his nature from what I’ve seen tonight. He’s been glaring at Harry all night, plus he threw a punch at the Irish fella.”

Steph looked over at Lucas. “What do you make of him?”

“Lucas? Well, it’s strange how he turns up for the first time on a night like this. Maybe he’s the eyes and ears for whoever’s outside. Could be a drug lord looking to come into the area and put Damien out of business. Maybe they’re making their move tonight because they’re hoping the snow will keep the police away.”

“You’re really sure it’s about drugs aren’t you?”



Nigel shrugged. “I don’t know anything for sure. But one thing I do know is that if whoever’s out there is looking for a sinner, it isn’t me. I’m a decent God-fearing man.”

Steph laughed. “Good for you. Well I don’t believe that anyone’s innocent one hundred per cent. No one’s perfect. It’s where people’s hearts are that matters.”

“That’s a lovely way of seeing the world and it’s no doubt why you’re such a lovely girl.”

“Nigel, you’ll make me blush, you charmer.” She gave him a quick hug around the waist. “Well, I best go check on the others. There are more beers to hand out.”

Nigel laughed. “Vital work, you best get started.”

Steph walked away, leaving Nigel to enjoy the sight of her slim female figure fading into the darkness as she left the candle-light of the bar. He kept his eye on her rump as it wiggled and shifted in her jeans. Nigel felt himself get hard.

*Is tonight the night?*

Nigel knew how lucky he was to be in the pub tonight. If he was on the road right now he would be fighting hypothermia in the cramped confines of his lorry’s sleeper cabin. He felt even luckier for the opportunity he found before him tonight. The only reason he continued to come to *The Trumpet* during his days off was to see Steph...or, more truthfully, to stalk her. From the first time he’d seen her alluring presence behind the bar Nigel had decided he was going to fuck her, and the more he watched her sexy little ass saunter around the bar, the more certain he became that he needed to do it soon. He had just been waiting for the right opportunity.

*And I finally found it.*

Tonight was the night. It had to be. The lights were off, the roads were closed, and a group of psychopaths roamed the streets outside. If he did Steph tonight, he could make it look like somebody else's doing with the slightest of ease, and if the others were to find out...well then he would just have to deal with them as well. Even if he turned the pub into a blood bath, he could get in his lorry come morning and be a hundred miles away by the time anybody noticed.

Nigel put his hand in his trouser pocket and rubbed at the flick knife that pushed against his throbbing erection. He smiled. *Yes, Steph my little prize, tonight is most definitely the night.*

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“What the hell do we do?”

Harry heard Jess, but had no answer. Peter’s condition was bad, that much was plain to see. He had remained unconscious since they’d patched him up earlier and his condition seemed critical. His one eye was almost certainly lost. Medical attention was needed, but when everyone at the bar tried their mobiles they were met only with static. Steph had found the same thing coming from the pub’s landline too. With the snow outside, along with the boy’s attackers, they were all stranded and alone.

“I think we need to just do the best we can for him,” said Harry. “Then in the morning maybe we can go get help. There’s a main road nearby where we can wait for someone to drive past.” Harry could see the anguish in Jess’s eyes but was powerless to do anything about it. He wasn’t a doctor and could do nothing about the snow. All the same, he felt like he was letting the poor girl down. Harry just hoped

she didn't see the flaw in his plan...that the main roads were closed and that nobody would be driving by tomorrow.

"He'll be okay," said Jerry, coming over and placing an arm around her. "We just need to keep him warm."

Harry watched the two of them walk back to where Peter lay when it dawned on him that his entire body was numb from the cold. The only place in the pub left with any warmth was by the fireplace, but that was now taken up by their causality. Harry decided to move over to the bar and joined the others that had gathered there on the stools. Steph was busy handing out fresh beers. "Got one for me?" he asked her.

Steph smiled. "Sure, Harry, here you go."

"Thanks." He took a stool beside Nigel, who himself was sat next to Lucas. "Say, is anybody else wondering what we're going to do for warmth now that Peter is taking up the fire?"

Steph winked at him. "Already on it. Damien and Old Graham are down in the cellar looking for anything we could start a fire with. I'm pretty sure I saw a steel barrel down there once so I was thinking we could stab some holes in it and use it as a furnace."

Lucas laughed. "This gal is something else, don't ya reckon?"

Harry looked at Steph for a moment and their eyes met. "Yes, Lucas, she most definitely is."

"You think the kids gonna snuff it?"

The comment came from Nigel and Harry was taken aback for a moment by the man's harsh wording. He raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"I overheard you talking to the girl," Nigel said. "I could tell by your voice that you don't hold out much hope."

The negativity irritated Harry, but he assumed it was only natural in the situation they were all in. "I can't say for sure. I'm not a doctor. But I know enough to see that the poor lad's suffered more than anyone ever should."

"You ever seen anyone in such a state before?" Lucas asked.

Harry began thinking back but quickly stopped himself and decided to lie. "No, Lucas. I've never seen injuries like it before, which is why I'm not sure if he'll last the night."

"Well then," Lucas replied. "Maybe we should be worrying more about whom – or what – did this to the lad. There's someone out there looking to do us all harm and we already have enough on our hands with the cold."

"I agree," said Steph from the other side of the bar, still assuming her job role was valid. In a way it was. "I don't like any of this. I feel like we're cut off from civilisation. The phones are dead, the electric's off, we're freezing our tits off, and we can't go outside because some madman is knifing people up."

"We don't know that," said Harry. "Perhaps Peter made an enemy and they've got what they wanted by hurting him. They could be long gone now."

Nigel posed a question that made Harry's logic falter. "Why throw him through the window?"

“Yeah,” said Steph. “If they wanted to kill Peter, they would have been better leaving him to freeze outside in the snow. Throwing him through the window makes it pretty obvious they were trying to frighten everyone in the pub.”

Lucas put his beer down on the bar with a *clink!* “Maybe it was a message for the sinner,” he said.

“More talk about this bloody sinner,” Nigel said, banging down his beer on the bar. Harry had never seen the big guy so animated. “Why are we buying into this bullshit? If someone is crazy enough to carve words into someone’s chest then I think it’s fair to say they’ve lost a certain amount of marbles.”

Harry nodded. “You’re probably right. How would we know who was a sinner and who wasn’t, anyway?”

“Exactly,” said Nigel, seemingly satisfied.

Steph pushed another recently-thawed beer over to Lucas, who was about to finish his current one. “We already spoke about that,” she said. “Nigel seems to think that it’s all about drugs, and that Damien is the one they want.”

“Well, well, well. Is that right, now?” Damien entered the bar area from a room in the back. Old Graham was stood behind him and seemed to be cringing. Harry cringed too when he realised that Damien had just heard the accusation. Damien stepped through the hatch at the side of the bar and ambled over to Nigel. “So you think I caused all this, do you?”

Nigel shifted on his stool. “I didn’t say that. I...I was just talking to Steph about who could be out there and...and-”

“And you thought you’d blame everything on me? Why’s that then? Is it because you think you’re better than me? That I’m just some fuckin’ mug?”

“No, I just thought...”

“You thought shit!” Damien snarled, tensing up like a wild animal. “You’re a dead man.”

Nigel got off his stool and backed away. Lucas leapt up too and stood between the two. “I had your word,” he said to Damien.

Damien stopped his pursuit of Nigel and looked at Lucas. “What are you talking about you stupid fucking mick?”

Lucas put a hand on Damien’s neck and pulled him in close. “I had your word that you’d behave. At least for tonight. The only reason Nigel is looking to blame people is because he’s afraid.”

“Hey,” Nigel protested.

Lucas continued. “We’re all afraid. If you’re not then my hat is off to you, but the rest of us *are*. And when people are scared they run their mouth. It’s nothing personal, just what people do to try and make sense of things. Stops their minds floating away with them.”

“Yeah,” said Nigel. “I don’t know what’s going on tonight. I was just talking shit. I thought that because you’re a tough guy, you’d have some tough enemies.”

Lucas released Damien from his grip and stepped away. Harry wondered if Lucas had done so to allow a fight to happen, but all seemed okay when Damien remained in place. The young lad seemed to be thinking something over. “You better

keep your accusations to yourself from now on,” Damien told Nigel. “Because I’ll tell you something...I’m bloody cold tonight and kicking your ass would be a nice way to warm up!”

Harry was glad that, yet again, Damien had been reigned in. In fact he began to wonder whether the thug was as unreasonable and bloodthirsty as people made out. He considered giving the lad the benefit of the doubt.

*At least for now.*

“Can we get a beer for Damien?” Harry said.

Damien shook his head. “I’m good. I found an old drum in the basement and I need help dragging it through. We should be able to start a decent fire and get some goddamn heat in here.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Really? That’s great. I’ll come and help you.”

Damien nodded and walked back through the hatch, disappearing through the door behind the bar. Harry followed him into the rear corridor and then down the stairs into the cellar.

At the bottom, he found Damien and Old Graham waiting next to a rusty old drum that appeared to have been dragged out of a cluttered corner (if the trail of debris was anything to go by). The cellar was a mess, with mounds of rotting wood and cardboard marketing materials for various beer companies making up several piles around the small square space.

“You gonna help or not,” said Damien, tipping the drum onto its edge.



Harry hurried over and grabbed the rim on the other side, while Old Graham kicked away any obstructions that covered their route to the stairs. Turned out the old man was quite spry for his age.

“After three,” said Harry. “One...two...three...” The two men heaved and began rolling the drum along on its edge, heading for the bottom of the stairs. The container was empty but still substantial in weight and Harry felt his hands chafing under the pressure. “How are we going lift it up the stairs?” he asked as they neared the bottom step.

Damien laughed. “Back giving out on you? We’ll just lift it, step by step. Piece of piss.”

The two of them stopped at the stairway and righted the drum back onto its base, dropping it down with a *Wong!* “Okay,” said Harry. “You ready?”

“Ready for what? A bit of lifting?”

Harry shook his head, unwilling to get into a pissing contest. He turned his head back to face Old Graham. “Maybe you could gather up some of this cardboard so we can use it for the fire.”

Old Graham nodded and got to work.

Harry signalled to Damien and the two began to lift. They hoisted the drum onto the first step with little effort, and then again onto the second and third. By the fourth, Harry was starting to lose his breath. “Can we stop a sec,” he said.

Damien shook his head. “Can we fuck! Come on, I’m freezing. Maybe if you didn’t drink so much, you’d have more stamina.”

Harry felt his pulse quicken as he fought the urge to slap some respect into the cretinous little shit, but decided to let his actions argue for him. “Right, come on then!” He tried to sound full of vigour. “Last thing I want is for your delicate little body to get cold.”

Damien snickered but didn't rebuke. The two of them continued hoisting the steel drum upwards. They scaled the fifth step and then the sixth. The seventh and eight were hard work but they managed to shift the deadweight up using their feet underneath to kick it upwards. With two more steps left, Harry looked forward to finally releasing the drum at the top. His shoulders burned with fire and his lungs had started to cramp. Damien was right; a year of constant drinking had left Harry in the physical state of a man twice his age. He felt ashamed.

*Just two more steps. You can make it.*

They hoisted the drum once more, jarring it upwards with their arms. The barrel rose and Damien began to slide it up onto the next step. As he did so, the bottom edge of the barrel struck against the lip of the step. Harry pushed his side up, trying to clear the two centre-metres needed to get the drum up onto the platform, but found his arms unable to move. He strained harder and willed his arms to move, but instead they lowered against his control. Harry's strength diminished and his grip gave out completely.

Damien cursed as the weight in his hands doubled. Harry watched helplessly as the lad tried to keep the drum under control, attempting to trap it with his leg. Somehow, despite his best efforts, it twisted sideways and rolled away.

Harry tripped backwards onto the step above as the drum fell past him and began a spiralling journey back down the stairs. His spirits plummeted further as he realised the effort his weakness had wasted and all the time it would take to try and get the drum back up the stairs again; time the people freezing in the other room did not have.

But Harry felt a hundred times worse when he realised that Old Graham was bent over at the bottom of the stairs, gathering cardboard, oblivious to the danger hurtling towards him.

The barrel picked up speed.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jess couldn't stop worrying about Peter. She also worried about her mom and dad, who would be in turn worrying about her. They were usually up now, finishing a bottle of wine, but she hoped that maybe they were too drunk to notice she wasn't home yet. Jess was sure they would be fine, but still worried about them all the same. Mostly, however, she was worried about Peter.

She looked down at her sleeping friend and was surprised to find that his injuries still continued to shock her. His left eye was caked in a thick layer of canary-yellow custardy puss. It wasn't what disturbed her most however. It was the deep carvings sliced into his clammy flesh. *Send out the sinner.*

Whatever it meant, it was the work of sickos, for sure. Peter never did anything to hurt anyone. He was sweet and gentle, probably the nicest boy she'd ever known. Not like the usual football-obsessed, bad mouthed dickheads she usually met online. She looked down at Peter's gore-crusted face and saw that, despite the blood, she could still make out his

gentle features and soft lips. Before tonight, she had sometimes thought about what it would be like to kiss them. She wondered if he'd ever thought about kissing her too.

*Bloody Hell, Jess! Peter's lying here, dying, and you're thinking about making out.*

*Jeez!*

At that moment, Peter opened his eye. Jess didn't notice at first, but when he started to moan it startled her. He continued moaning until the strangled noises eventually began to form words. "Jess...ica."

Jess nodded and smiled, tears gushing down her cheeks. "Yes, yes, it's me. I was so worried about you, Peter. What happened?"

Her friend focused intensely on her for a moment, lips puckering as if preparing for some great speech. She hoped it wasn't going to be a final one. "Jessica!" He grimaced. "Listen...to me."

She put a hand against his cheek. It throbbed out heat like a radiator. "I am, Peter. I'm here."

"Get away," he said, "out of here."

Jess blinked. "What do you mean?"

A hiss of air whistled in Peter's nostrils as though forcing its way past a blockage. He repeated himself, but more weakly Jess noticed, as though he were about to lose consciousness again at any moment. "Get away. They are...coming."

Peter's good eye rolled back in his head and then disappeared behind his drooping eyelid. He was gone again. *Maybe forever*, Jess wondered sadly. Before she had time to consider any further what Peter's words had meant, she was alerted by a crash.

Followed by cries of pain.

*What is happening now? I don't think I can take any more.*

Jess felt numb and moved sluggishly. Making her way over to the bar area, she could see that a commotion had already begun to take place. Harry, Damien, and the old man were missing, but Lucas, Steph, and Nigel were milling around the bar looking concerned. She searched for Jerry and found him on his own, sitting at a table in the corner. He was shivering and didn't seem to be paying much attention to anything that was going on. She made a mental note to check up on him later when she could. Kath sat nearby, also seemingly uninterested in anything that was going on. When Jess reached the bar she found herself face to face with Lucas, who was making his way through the bar hatch to the staff side. He stopped when he saw her.

“What's going on?” she asked him.

“Dunno, lass. The menfolk went downstairs to get us something for a fire. Next thing we know there's a load of caterwauling.” Lucas moved into the doorway behind the serving area that led into the back of the pub, leaving the candlelight of the bar and fading into the shadows. Before completely disappearing, he turned back to her. “Well, you coming or not, lass?”

Jess stood for a moment then nodded. She followed after Lucas into the unlit corridor, groping against the wall to keep herself steady. Further on down, the sounds of someone in pain became clearer, and so did other sounds...people bickering. It sounded like Harry and Damien. She hoped everyone was alright, but wondered whether Damien had finally lashed out and hurt somebody. Broken Harry's nose or worse?

Lucas sparked his lighter and the corridor lit up in a flood around them. He reached out to stop her before she bumped into him. "I think they're down there," he said.

To their left was an open doorway leading to stairs. A breeze seemed to float up from it and tickle Jess's cheeks and the inside of her nostrils.

"You fellas okay down there?" Lucas placed his hands either side of his mouth and shouted down the stairs. "We heard hollering."

After a few seconds a voice that Jess recognised as Harry floated up the stairs. "We need help. Graham is hurt. It was my fau-"

"Just get some light down here and some blankets." The new voice was Damien's, cutting off Harry mid-sentence. "We've had an accident but everything is gonna be cool."

Jess couldn't help feeling that things were most definitely *not* going to be 'cool'. Peter was on death's door and now the old man was injured.

*Two down... How many more to go?*

Jess had a feeling they were all in for a long night and their troubles were not yet over.

*Not by a long shot.*

#

Kath almost felt bad.

Almost.

It had, after all, been Peter's decision to run off to look for that stupid girl. She hadn't made him do it. Ironically, Kath was the one who ended up finding Jess anyway and that had just proved even more how stupid the boy was for not listening to her. Still, she couldn't help but ruminate about what had happened.

*Someone messed him up real good. Probably pissed off the wrong people. Polish Mafia or something.* Kath suddenly had another thought: *Or there really is a psychopath stalking us all?*

If there *was* a sadistic madman running amok out there, was she going to be safe here in the pub? It didn't feel like it. The Trumpet was full of degenerates from what she'd seen so far.

You had Lucas prancing around like a drunken leprechaun; Nigel, an ugly man that lacked any personality she could discern of; Steph, a low-class tramp; and that insufferable girl, Jess. Of all the people Kath could be trapped with, Jess would have been last on her handwritten list. Her little buddy from the video shop was no less irritating, backing up her absurd stories just so he could get into her filthy knickers – *if the slut even wears any*. Next was Damien, a walking billboard for dysfunctional youth and petty crime. Finally, you had the pensioner stinking of piss and beer, and the alcoholic loser, Harry. She could tell Harry was a drunk because he had that same weathered look on his face that her father used to have. A slow, draining sickness that killed a man one pint at a time and made him neglect everything important.

Maybe if Kath's father hadn't been such a deadbeat she would have finished her History degree and actually done something with her life. Instead she ended up supporting *him* until she hit twenty-eight. The day she found her father lying on the floor, fading from a heart attack had been a turning point for her. The thought of him pleading with her to call for



help, while she stood there shaking her head and watching him die, was significant to her. It was the day she decided she would no longer let anyone take advantage of her. She would look out only for herself from then on. Selfish, lazy drunks like Harry could go right to Hell.

All around Kath the degenerates scuttled around like displaced ants, clutching blankets and bottles of water, carrying them in a line. Something was happening in one of the back rooms of the pub, but Kath couldn't say she really cared. She was only with these people for safety, and the last thing she wanted was to be involved with them beyond that.

*Maybe the thug has finally thrown a punch at the drunk,* she thought.

*Punch drunk!*

She laughed out loud, but hoped that simple bickering was all that was happening in the back. When she once again thought about who had thrown Peter through the window and why, she started to worry that there was far more danger lurking in the air that night than a simple punch up.

“Well,” she said out loud. “I’d best go see what those idiots have gotten themselves into now.”

Kath stood up and headed for the darkness of the corridor.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

“I’m so sorry Graham.” Harry looked down at the old man’s twisted leg and felt the urge to punch himself in the face. How could he be so stupid, getting caught in a testosterone contest with a kid ten years his junior? He was pathetic and for the first time was finally realising it. He put his hand on Old Graham’s shallow chest and could feel the man’s ribs through tissue-paper skin. The scar below Harry’s knuckles reminded him that he had a habit of hurting people.

“Harry,” Old Graham whispered, not to be quiet but because the old man was obviously winded by his sudden ordeal. The pain from his damaged leg was probably sapping the breath from his aged lungs too. “Harry, don’t worry. I’m okay, it’s just me leg. Get it fixed up in the morning good as new.”

Harry didn’t want to lie to him. “I don’t think tomorrow’s going to be any better. I’m not sure if we can get you help.”

Old Graham snorted. “Then just put me in a bath full of whiskey. By the time I drink meself dry, the snow will have gone and the ambulances will be back on the road.”

Harry smiled. “I’m really so-“

“If you say you’re sorry one more time, son, I’ll break my other leg just to shut you up.”

For reasons he couldn’t quite understand Harry felt like crying, breaking down right there and giving up. All the times that he had labelled Old Graham a nuisance, he’d never taken the time to see what a kind, forgiving man he was. Harry had stopped taking the time to find out anything about anyone after the car crash. But now he was realising that maybe that had been a mistake.

“Can I do anything?” he asked Old Graham.

“No, just get me a beer, and Steph to make out with me, and we’ll call it quits.

Harry laughed. “Well I’ll do my best, but I’m thinking I’ll only be able to manage one of those.”

Old Graham opened his eyes wide like a startled rabbit. “What? You mean we’re out of beer!”

Harry stood up, wanting to laugh his ass off at the old man’s fighting spirit, but somehow finding it impossible. Laughter was a luxury he’d run out of.

In the hallway above, a sphere of light began an ethereal descent down the dark-shrouded staircase. By the time it got down to the last few steps, it revealed itself. Steph was carrying a bar tray full of candles and nodded at him as soon as she saw him.

“Hey,” Harry said quietly, taking her to one side. “I think he’s going to be okay for now. He’s tough as old boots.”

“Old Graham? Yeah, I could have told you that. Took a bullet in the Falklands and didn’t even realise till he was back on base a day later.”

Harry frowned. “He tell you that?”

“Yeah,” said Steph, keeping her voice down. “That’s one of his stories I like to believe; makes me think of him as a hero.”

Harry thought for a moment then nodded. “Yeah, I think it’s one I’d like to believe too.”

Steph stroked a hand against his shoulder and rubbed all the way from his elbow to his neck. The feeling made his stomach flutter and filled him with a mixture of excitement and remorse.

“How you holding up, Harry?” she asked him.

He didn’t know what to say and felt sick as he tried to comprehend an answer to the question. After a while, he said, “I really don’t know. But with all that’s happened tonight, I’m starting to think that I’m losing my mind.”

“Me too. I feel like we’re the only people left in the world and we can’t go outside because we’ll either freeze to death or have some obsessed Clive Barker fan carve words into our chests.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Clive Barker? You read a lot?”

*Another thing you never bothered to find out about her, Harry.*

She nodded, the tray of candles bobbing in time with her head. “Yeah, I love to read. Everything from Stephen King to John Grisham to lesser known guys like J A Konrath. Anything I can get my hands on, really.”

“You don’t find that enough nowadays,” Harry said. “People treat reading like a taboo. Television’s uncool relation.”

“I totally agree,” she said happily. “I take it you’re a big reader too then?”

Harry shook his head. “No, not really.”

Steph stared at him for a moment looking confused, but then broke out in hysterical laughter. After a moment, Harry was surprised to find that he was joining her. Maybe laughter wasn’t a luxury he was completely out of just yet.

*Or maybe Steph is just a master of getting blood out of a stone.*

*Or feelings out of a torn heart.*

“Oh Harry,” Steph patted him on the shoulder. “You do make me laugh! I’m really gonna have to get to know you better when this is all over.”

Harry considered this and decided that he would like to do the same. It was time to start living again, forgetting about the things he could not change.

“Anyway,” he said, “got a plan on what to do next?”

Steph nodded. “Damien said the barrel is just too heavy to get up the stairs so we should all come down here to start a fire. He said a small windowless room like this would be easier to heat anyway. We just need to leave the door at the top of the stairs open so we can breathe.”

“Good idea,” Harry concluded, immediately wondering why Damien hadn’t cried bloody murder over his earlier mistake. The lad knew it was Harry’s fault, and that when the drum had been only one step away from the top he had dropped it. Yet, for some reason, Damien made out as though it had been an impossible task to begin with and nobody’s fault. Tonight had confused Harry’s entire opinion of the lad. He wasn’t ready to trust Damien yet, but had at least started to consider it.

“Everyone is upstairs gathering stuff to burn” Steph told him. “We’re gonna leave Peter in front of the fire. Jess said she would stay with him.”

Harry nodded. “We’ll have to keep an eye on them both. It may not be safe for her to be alone. I’ll go see if she needs anything and then go help the others.”

“Okay, Harry. I’m gonna get Old Graham nice and comfy then get this place lit up. See you in a bit. Mind yourself in the dark.”

Harry moved aside to let Steph past with her candles and then he started to climb the stairs. He was taken back to earlier when he’d tried to climb up with the barrel. He had a lot of making up to do to Old Graham that was for sure, but at least Damien had turned the disaster into a sustainable plan B. It would indeed be warmer in the cellar once they got the fire going and Harry started to feel far more hopeful about their situation just thinking about it. Prior to now, he had been scared that they would all freeze to death. It seemed silly now.

The corridor at the top of the stairs was pitch-black, but Harry could make out a dim, flickering light coming from the bar’s candles at the far end of the hallway. He felt his way towards them and found Lucas at the bar. The Irishman was busy gathering beers and a big bottle of Famous Grouse whiskey into an empty crisp carton. “Getting essentials, I see?” said Harry as he entered the bar.

Lucas held up an uncapped beer and swigged from it, letting out a lip smacking sigh at the end. “Don’t ya know it! I asked the old guy what he needed and all he said was beer and plenty of it. Can’t deny an injured pensioner now, can I? What kind of man would that make me?”

“Never thought of it like that.” Harry fired off a mock salute. “Keep up the good work, private.”

Lucas returned the salute. “Will do, Major Jobson, sir!”

Harry continued on from the bar and walked over to Jess at the fireplace. She flinched as though he had startled her. It wasn’t surprising; sounded as if the poor girl had been through worse than anyone tonight.

“You okay?” he asked her.

“Fine,” she said, stroking Peter’s forehead with a damp cloth she no doubt had warmed in front of the fire. “I can’t leave him here alone, and I don’t think it would be right to move him either. Jerry has gone to find us some snacks and he’ll be back soon to keep me company. Anyway, I have *this* if I get into real trouble.” Jess reached down beside the sofa and came up with a great shiny piece of metal.

Harry nodded. “The call bell. Good idea. Not a single man whose ears don’t prick up at that sound. Just ring if you need me, okay?”

Jess seemed proud for a moment, but her sombre expression soon returned when she went back to nursing Peter. When she spoke again, she did so without looking Harry in the eye. “How is Graham doing? His leg seems painful.”

*Painful* wasn't a good enough word to describe the result of Harry's stupidity. He smiled to reassure her. "Luckily, there's no bleeding. I think it's broken but he's okay for now. Chipper as ever as long as he has us bringing him beer."

"He seems like a nice old man," she said. "I hope he's okay."

Harry nodded. "Me too. Me too." He thought Jess was going to carry on the conversation a little longer but instead caught her looking over his shoulder. Her eyes widened slightly as though something concerned her.

*Why is she staring like that? Shit! Is something behind me?*

Harry spun around. Damien was stood up against him, and as usual the lad's face was a thick, syrupy mixture of frowns and scowls. But there seemed to be something else in his expression too. Harry felt his wariness of the lad return. Had he really been thinking that Damien wasn't dangerous? That he was a good person deep down?

*Idiot, Harry. He's probably looking to stamp your kneecaps in for dropping the barrel. God knows I deserve it.*

Damien's expression didn't change as he pointed over his shoulder with a thumb. "Come with me," he said, before walking off and leaving Harry wondering what to do.

Should he follow? Or should he grab a weapon and prepare to fight? He didn't know and decided that, until he did, it would be best to just play along.

Damien had headed over to the back exit corridor; the one leading outside or off to the toilets. It also led to the seldom used dance floor at the back of the pub. Harry doubled his pace to catch up; managing to get there a second or two before Damien stopped and turned around.



“Take a look,” Damien said, pointing to the exit door. “Look through the window at the top.”

For a second Harry had visions of doing as he was told and having his head rammed through the glass. Wasn't that the kind of thing gangsters do? Made you dig your own grave? Harry sighed. If something was going to happen, it was going to happen. He stepped toward the door, waiting for an attack.

“Look through,” Damien ordered again.

Harry moved up against the door and put his face against the glass. There was no prompting necessary on where to look or what to focus on. It was clear for him to see.

Damien spoke again from behind Harry. “We have big problems.”

*Damn right we do!*

Harry looked at the growing flames that seemed to rise from the snow in all directions – ten, twenty feet high. The fire formed a wall around the pub like a fiery prison.

*But is it meant to keep us all in? Or to drive us out?*

The fire was unnatural – *Impossible!* Ferocious infernos did not rise from the snow in any world that Harry knew of. What he was seeing could not be real.

But it was.

What really terrified Harry were the three crucifixes that sat within the flames, each with a struggling victim roasting alive. The screams had no sound, but Harry could see their agony as the skin peeled and blackened on their bones, leaving charred husks of arms and legs. It didn't take long for them to die.

Harry repeated Damien's words in his head and then found himself agreeing out loud.

"Big, big problems," he said, before throwing up.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“I don’t understand,” said Harry, turning to face Damien.

But Damien had gone.

*Where the hell has he gone? Is the magic show outside not interesting enough?*

Harry looked back out of the window. The fires were still burning high, whipping back and forth in the growing blizzard while sizzling snowflakes filling the air like locusts in a cornfield. It was bizarre and unsettling to see both unnatural flames and unnatural snow mingling in the same space.

*Like two separate nightmares merging into one.*

Harry started to feel like he was in a Salvador Dali painting and he needed to make sense of the situation. But did he tell the others? He wasn’t sure, but was astounded by the fact that he definitely wanted to ask Damien’s advice. The lad was calm under pressure.

*But where has he gone?*

Harry looked back out the window one last time before moving away. It seemed like a bad idea to take his eyes off the flames outside, but he couldn't stay there all night. Next to the exit it was freezing, and an aggressive breeze snuck under the door and rattled the wood on its hinges. Harry left the corridor.

Back in the main pub area, the others were still milling around, seeking out fuel for the furnace they planned to build. Nigel was busy, tearing cushions from the chairs and piling them up on the bar. Kath was gathering up beer mats and obviously hadn't realised that they would only burn for about three seconds apiece.

“Hey, Kath,” Harry said. “Maybe we can find something bigger to burn?”

The woman shot Harry a look that for a moment made him feel like she wanted him to die. He shivered, but a second later was sure he'd just imagined it.

“I guess you're right,” she conceded, smiling at him politely. “I'll go search for something else.” She threw down the pile of beer mats and they hit the table with a *slap!* Then she walked off towards the bar in a similar manner to what Harry would expect from a stropky teenager.

*Odd lady!*

There was still no sign of Damien. Harry tried to figure out where he had gone and why so suddenly. Also, why had he chosen only Harry to lead into the exit corridor? It didn't seem that anybody else knew about the flames outside. Which led him back to his previously unanswered question: Should he tell them? Or would they just panic? Surely they had the right to know either way?

Harry clapped his hands together. “Everyone listen!”

Lucas and Nigel were nearby and focused their attention on Harry, whilst Kath appeared from behind the bar. At the far end of the room, Jess stood up from the sofa, leaving Peter asleep under the watchful eye of Jerry. Harry moved into a spot that was roughly equidistant from them all. He put his hands together again and tried to find appropriate words. “I, um...I think there’s something that we all need to be aware of.”

“And what would that be, Harry Boy?” Lucas lifted himself up onto a bar stool. “Please tell.”

“Well, it’s not easy to explain, but I think we can all agree tonight is a strange night.”

“No argument there,” Nigel said.

Harry pushed himself to continue, his palms sweating. “I think we can also agree that there is some kind of threat outside, and I don’t just mean the cold.”

“You mean that stupid boy, Peter?” said Kath in the kind of spiteful, bullying tone that Harry had not heard since the playground. “I’m sure whatever trouble he has gotten himself into was something he deserved. That doesn’t mean that *we’re* in any danger.”

“You bitch!”

Harry turned to see that Jess was storming toward Kath at the other end of the pub. Jerry strayed behind her but seemed unsure whether or not he should be following.

Lucas moved away from the bar to intercept Jess. “Calm down there, lassie.”

“I swear to god, Kath!” Jess bunched her hands into fists. “If you say one more thing about Peter, and I mean *one more thing*, I’m gonna scratch your goddamn eyes out. This happened because of you, because you allowed him to wonder off alone.”

Kath snorted. “I’m not his babysitter. He’s a grown man and if he can’t look after himself then he should have stayed in Poland. God knows we don’t need his kind here.”

“You racist cow!”

“Call me whatever you like, dear. I’m only saying what most of the country thinks. Peter was probably just a petty criminal like the rest of them. Tonight he got his comeuppance.”

To the obvious surprise of everyone, Jess’s small frame managed to get loose of Lucas’s restraining grasp and she leapt towards a nearby table, snatching at the nearest thing she could find, which turned out to be an empty pint glass. Harry watched as Jess flung the object in a sweeping arc through the air, pitching it with all the aggression of a baseball player seeking their target. It hit Kath’s with an almighty *thonk!*

Immediately, Kath hit the floor, clutching at her face and screaming, not like an injured person but like...

*A furious person*, Harry thought.

Without delay Kath rose to her feet, almost like a boxer rising after being knocked down by a fluky sucker punch, ready to start swinging. She was not happy and her blood streaked face was a testament to it. “I’ll kill you!” she vowed.

“Nobody is going to kill anybody!”

Everyone turned to find Steph coming out from behind the bar. Damien was with her as she confronted them all. “Now, what the hell is going on? And why is Kath covered in blood?”

“The little bitch threw a glass at me. She’s insane.”

Steph turned to Jess with such ferocity that the young girl took a step back. “Is this true? Are you causing trouble in my pub?”

Jess nodded and took another step back.

Steph pointed. “Go look after Peter, and if I see you move from there for the rest of the night I’ll throw you out in the snow myself.”

Jess moved so quickly it was almost a sprint.

Steph turned to Kath. “There’s a first aid kit in the back, sweetheart, and a little kitchenette with a sink. Take a candle from the bar and clean yourself up. Okay?”

Kath still bristled with fury, but her bile-filled hate was beginning to simmer down. Not completely though. “That girl should be locked in a padded cell.”

Steph sighed. “Well, for now we don’t have that luxury, so the best I can do is keep you both separated. Jess will be staying up here so you should come downstairs with the rest of us. Now, go get that blood cleaned up before it freezes on your face.”

Kath nodded unhappily and left the room, while Lucas and Nigel went back to their tasks. Steph and Damien approached Harry.

“What happened?” Steph demanded.

Harry ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know. I was trying to get everyone together so I could tell them something and it all kicked off. Those two really don’t like each other!”

Steph sighed. “Tell me about it. I’d call the police if I could. There’s no excuse for that type of violence.”

“It wasn’t just Jess’s fault,” Harry said.

“I don’t doubt it. But violence is violence. And on a night like this everyone is tense enough already.”

“Speaking of tension,” Harry said. “There was something I was trying to tell everyone before it all went haywire. Come with me.”

Steph nodded and followed; Damien too.

*Good, he can back me up. He already knows about the fire and the crucifixes outside.*

The three of them made it over to the exit door. Harry pointed at the glass panel.

“Look through, but try to stay calm.”

“What do you mean?” Steph said. “You’re worrying me.”

“Just...look, and then we’ll talk.”

Anxiety etched itself across Steph’s face, but she obliged nonetheless, moving up against the door and peering through the glass for several seconds. “Jesus Christ,” she said finally.

“You see! You see what I mean?”

Steph turned around to face him. “Course I do. The snow out there is getting insane. We need to wrap up warm or we’re all going to freeze.”

Harry didn’t understand. “What?”

He pushed Steph to one side and peered through the glass.



The fire was gone. In fact it was as though it had never been there. The snow was deeper than ever and there were no shallow areas where the heat of a flame would have caused it to melt. Everywhere Harry looked was cold, bleak, empty, and white.

But there was no sign of fire.

“There were flames!” He almost shouted at her. “Flames everywhere.”

Steph looked confused and Harry didn’t blame her.

Damien looked at him impatiently. “What you talking about?”

Harry blinked and shook his head in disbelief. “What am I talking about? You saw it too! In fact it was *you* that showed me!”

Damien shook his head adamantly. “Think there’s a stripe missing off your Adidas, mate.”

“No,” said Harry, still shaking his head, feeling more and more desperate. *Am I going insane? No, I know what I saw and so does Damien.* “You saw the flames too! Why are you doing this?”

“Sorry dude! I think you got me confused with someone else good looking.” Damien walked away, leaving Harry alone with a confused-looking Steph.

“I swear it!” he said.

Out of the blue, Steph hugged him and whispered in his ear. “Harry, if you say there was a fire out there then I believe you, okay? Just don’t get yourself worked up, because I need you tonight. I would have gone insane if you weren’t here.”

“You really believe me?”

Steph nodded. “Yes, now go make yourself useful. Old Graham was asking for you, so go see him. I’m gonna get all the toilet paper and hand towels. We’re gonna get the fire going in a minute.”

Harry nodded and Steph left him there in the cold corridor, lost in thought about why Damien had not backed him up. *Just when I thought we were finally getting along, he makes me look like a lunatic, right in front of Steph. Stupid, Harry! Real stupid! You should never trust a snake.*

But Damien wasn’t worth the time right now, not when Steph had made it clear she needed Harry’s support. She was playing nursemaid, host, and authoritarian all at the same time. It was unfair that she’d had to put everyone else first when all they did was bicker. Harry needed to take some of the strain off her, but for now he was being summoned. Old Graham wanted to speak to him and Harry wasn’t going to keep the old guy waiting. He owed him too much already. He started walking, but couldn’t help thinking along the way: *Why did Damien lie?*

Before he exited the corridor something caught Harry’s attention. In the dance hall at the opposite end of the corridor was a light.

*Is somebody in there?*

Harry walked forward cautiously. It was probably just one of the others, looking for something to burn. The light was likely coming from their candles. For some reason, he wasn’t so sure. “Hey, who’s there?”

There was no reply, but the light seemed to get brighter, pulsing rapidly.

Harry crept down the corridor, anxiously awaiting a response. When he was sure that he would get none, he called out again. “I said who’s there?”

Again there was no response, which left Harry with the decision of whether to back away or continue on. Tonight was a night where strange things were happening in abundance, where backing away would be the sensible option to take, yet for some reason Harry felt compelled to investigate. His feet carried him forward.

At the end of the corridor the pulsing light was blinding. Harry had to shield his eyes with a forearm as he took the final few steps. When he eventually reached the doorway to the dance floor, Harry realised he was hot.

Inside the cavernous room it felt like a sauna, sticky heat clinging to his skin. After hours of freezing the feeling of warmth was wonderful, but Harry knew it was unnatural. There was no rational explanation for the backroom of an English pub feeling like a Mexican beach resort, especially when it was snowing outside. Something was wrong.

Rather than run away, Harry stepped onto the stiff wood of the dance floor. From the far end of the room the bright orange light continued to pulse. It was coming from behind an elevated DJ's booth built up against the wall, but as Harry got closer the light began to die. He hurried over to the booth and hoisted himself up the three steps that ran beside it. The light was still diminishing, fading like a setting sun behind a forest. Harry had the feeling that if he didn't get a look at its source immediately, he would miss something important. He unhooked the latch of the DJ's chest-level door and pulled it open.

His heart stopped.

It started beating again seconds later, but he was still unable to breath properly. Looking down at the glowing visage before him, Harry did not know whether to laugh, scream, or die. It was at the same time, the most wonderful and most painful thing he could have ever have hoped to have seen. He choked back a sob, trying to find words.

After a painful moment without air, Harry finally managed to splutter one word.

“Son?”

Cowering before him, lit by a rapidly fading glow was his son, Toby. The boy had not aged in the year and a half since his death and was now staring up at his father with deep, soulful eyes.

“Daddy.” Toby’s voice was an echo, his voice seeming to come from the walls rather than him. “Daddy, I’m scared.”

*Impossible!* An evil trick played by someone even eviler. Yet, somehow, Harry found himself saying, “It’s okay, Toby, daddy’s here now.”

The light around Toby had now completely died. He looked like a normal six year old boy. “You promise you’ll keep me safe now?” The question bounced off the walls and then entered Harry’s ears.

Harry nodded. “Yes, son. I won’t let anything hurt you. I’ll keep you safe.” He reached down to his little boy, ready to take him up in his arms, but Toby shuffled backwards out of his grasp.

“No, you won’t,” Toby said. “You can’t keep anyone safe. Daddy was a strong man. He taught me to ride a bike and would buy me chicken nuggets whenever I wanted. You’re not him, you can’t be! He was strong, but you’re weak. Weak!”

The final word did not seem to echo and did not sound like his son. The word crackled and hissed from Toby like hatred personified. Tears fell from Harry’s eyes. His son was dead, but the words of this monster were still true.

*I am weak, Harry thought. I failed you, Toby. I let you get hurt and all I've done since is feel sorry for myself.*

The false image of Toby looked at him curiously. The likeness was so accurate that it sent a chill through Harry's bones, but it wasn't perfect. Now, as he looked down at the hateful creature, Harry could see the lack of humanity in its eyes. The dark vortexes swirled with dark knowledge and twisted intentions. It was an abomination.

Harry backed away. "I have to go now, Toby."

The child looked at him with so much malice that Harry realised it was an entity far older than anything he had ever encountered. It laughed spitefully and the booming sound filled the entire room.

"Running away is all you're good for, Harry Jobson. You watched your family die and have been running away ever since. You are pathetic, wasting the life that He gave you. Death will be too good for you but nonetheless it will embrace you soon. Leave this place Harry Jobson and be done with it. Your time is over."

Harry didn't understand any of it, but he knew he had to get away. By taking the form of his son, it was obvious the creature meant to drive Harry insane, plucking at his grief like chords on a guitar. He didn't take his eyes from the DJ's booth as he sidled backwards along the dance floor, but it didn't stop Harry from noticing the growing light behind him.

He spun around and felt his heart stop again.

Thomas Morris stood before him, slowly coming into focus as the glow around him lessened. The man that took everything from Harry was smiling.

"Long time no see," the spirit said. "You're looking...older."

Harry said nothing.

“You really gonna ignore me? With the history you and I have, I thought you’d have more to say.”

Harry spat. “I have nothing to say to you!”

The apparition laughed again. “You never were much of a talker. You prefer to let your actions speak for you, am I right?”

Harry shook his head. Whatever this thing was, it could not hurt him. If it could, it would have done so, instead of trying to dredge up things from the past. Harry stepped around the image of Thomas Morris.

And hit the floor hard.

The man from Harry’s past stood over him, eyes filled with the same thick, malignant intent that Toby’s image had had. “You will pay for your actions, Harry Jobson. Everyone will pay. It is time for...retribution.”

Harry cowered on the floor. The thing had hit him, but how? Ghost, hallucinations, apparitions: none of these things could manifest physically. Could they? The occult was not one of Harry’s strong points and he decided it best not to hang around to find out. He leapt to his feet and headed for the door.

Thomas shouted after him, words and tone both wicked in intent. “You will die tonight, Harry Jobson. Death waits for you with its cold embrace, so go outside and face it. Do not delay what is already certain.”

“Suck my balls!” Harry shouted back. It was a phrase he had never used before, but it summed up pretty accurately how he felt. He reached the door and looked back, something he knew would slow him down, but something he couldn’t help.

Thomas was gone.

Harry sighed relief, but knew enough not to trust the situation. He had to get out of there, get to the others. He turned back around and faced the corridor.

This time his heart did not stop. He was becoming too used to the horrors.

Lying on the floor in front of him was his wife, Julie. Her body and face were battered and bruised, bones splintered and askew.

*Like a car crash victim.*

Harry looked down at the twisted form and felt his heart scream. The final image of his wife’s dying form had always been with him, but never had he had to confront it face to face. Not since the night it happened.

Julie turned her head up towards him and Harry heard the broken bones scraping against themselves, grating at his ears. She was the very personification of agony. “Harry,” she said. “Why did this happen to me? Why are you not with me?”

Harry shook his head. He didn’t have time for this shit anymore. This wasn’t his wife. “Because you’re dead Julie.” He stepped over the twisted, shattered body and started down the corridor, leaving it behind him. “And I’m not.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Damien wasn't sure why he lied; perhaps only because it was funny. Harry had made himself look like a right muppet in front of Steph and Damien couldn't help but laugh at the memory. *She ain't gonna fuck you now, sunshine.*

Was that why he had done it? Because of Steph? Did the thought of her and Harry copping off together irritate him? He was surprised to find that it did. Steph wasn't like the usual girls Damien fucked. She was strong, with a mind of her own, and took control of people in the same way he did. He admired that.

*Fact that she's fit as fuck doesn't hurt none either.*

But it was more than that. Damien had actually gained pleasure from Harry's predicament and that was what troubled him most. Over the last few hours, Damien had seen that Harry wasn't a bad bloke. The guy's heart was in the right place and it turned out that he *did* have a backbone after all. But, despite all that, Damien still could not tolerate the way Harry always played the wounded soldier. Always making people want to come up and ask



if everything was okay. Always moping and drinking himself into a stupor. *Oh, poor Harry,* they would say. *That man is so full of pain and anguish, yet he still keeps going. What a guy!*

Damien scowled. *Fuck that shit!* Everyone had it hard and Harry had no right to make out like his problems were worse than everyone else's.

*He did lose his son though.*

Damien shook his head and stood away from the bench he was sitting on. Nearby, Jess and Jerry sat with the dying polish kid. Damien had chosen to stay nearby just in case the kids needed help. Damien had been impressed when Jess had glassed the old bird.

*Took balls.*

Damien continued to brood about Harry. The man didn't deserve his sympathy because Damien had it just as bad as anyone else. No one cared about his problems though. No one ever gave a damn when his dad was wasted and beating him black and blue. *Trying to toughen you up, boy!* No one cared when Damien's dad made him deal drugs at ten years old. *No one will suspect a little lad, so get yourself on that corner and don't come home till you've sold it all* And no one cared when Damien's dad had tried to pin an assault charge on him.

The rage that flowed constantly through Damien's veins began to hot up.

When his dad had gone to prison last year, Damien had felt free for the first time in his life. But it didn't last. He'd been ordered to take over operations and report to his father in prison daily. *Keep the money safe for me, Dame, for when I get out. Make me proud, son.*

*Yeah, I'll make you real proud, dad!*

Damien thought back to when his dad went away and what for. *Kicking the shite out of that lad until he was a whimpering, bleeding mess.*

Gazz Brown had been a tough kid, and when he had knocked Damien out and took his stash, Damien's father was not happy. Not happy at all. So in a drunken rage, his dad – along with a group of the 'boys' – had taken Damien to go find Gazz. And find him they did. The well-built lad was at the back of a local supermarket selling Damien's supply to the warehouse workers. His father saw red, had gone red. Like a wild bull, he tore into the youth, cracking bones and shattering teeth, stamping and kicking long after the boy's beaten body covered the ground, motionless. It was almost ten minutes before Damien's father was dragged away, and by that time someone had called the Police.

Even now, Gazz was still in a coma, and Damien's father had gone to prison for the crime. *Who knew supermarkets had so many CCTV cameras?* The worse thing about the whole situation, at least for Damien, was that his dad had 'his boys' circulate rumours that it had been his son to put poor Gazz Brown into a coma. He had even tried to convince Damien to take the fall for it. It would *increase his rep*, he said. Despite the CCTV exonerating him, Damien had nonetheless become feared on the local estate as a vicious, animalistic, thug, and his father had finally become proud.

But tonight was supposed to be the night where Damien did something to make *himself* proud. He was going to disobey his father's most recent orders from prison and do the right thing for once. Instead he found himself trapped inside a rotten pub with a bunch of drunks.

*Drunks like Harry.*

Finally it clicked. He hated Harry because he cared more about getting wasted than anything else. Just like Damien's father had. Every time he looked at Harry downing another pint, night in night out, he had thought about his father. He had pegged Harry as just another, selfish – fuckface – father that would rather get pissed than look after his family.

But that was all wrong. Tonight Damien had learned that Harry was a good man and a good father. A bloke that cared so much about his son that, when Toby died – *however it had happened* – he'd just given up on life. Harry's family had obviously been his entire life, and when they died, part of him went with them. Damien finally understood the man's drinking.

And he could forgive it.

"I should apologise," said Damien out loud, "but first I gotta take a piss."

#

*This is it!* Nigel's body teemed with excitement. Harry had gone downstairs, freaking out about something, and Lucas had followed him. The grumpy shrew, Kath, had disappeared somewhere to clean the gore off her ugly face and Damien was at the other end of the pub, along with Jerry and the young girl, Jess. If he played his cards right, she would be next.

But first he had Steph to deal with.

*I'm finally gonna fuck her.*

Nigel watched with delight as everyone had gradually departed, and then Steph had gone into the toilets alone. Now was his chance. He would follow her in, knock her out cold,

have his way with her, and then slit her throat with his trusty pen knife (*sharpened to perfection*). By the time he dumped her body outside in the snow they'd be none the wiser. He would plead ignorance of her whereabouts, and while everyone would worry, that would be that. What else could they do?

Then first thing in the morning, he'd hop in his lorry and get the hell out of there, spend a few months in France maybe, and ensure that he never returned to the area. *Easiest thing in the world*. Raping and killing women had become as second nature to Nigel as hiking to a rambler. Come to think of it, he'd killed a rambler or two in his time as well.

Silently, Nigel pushed open the door to the men's toilets where he had seen Steph enter. The door creaked ever so slightly, but the sounds coming from inside, of Steph gathering up supplies, drowned out the slight noise. He slipped inside.

The toilets smelt of rancid piss and the room was lit only by a single candle that Steph had placed on the middle sink of three. She was at the far end of the small space, gathering up bundles of handtowels from a storage cupboard. Her back was to him.

*Perfect! She won't see it coming.*

With cat-like grace that belied his lumbering appearance, Nigel struck. He punched Steph from behind, hooking his fist round into the side of her jaw and knocking her cold; the thick Dolphin ring on his pinkie finger helping with his purpose.

Steph's limp body flopped to the side, falling into one of the cubicles. Her head hit the toilet bowl inside with a resounding *thung!* "Good, girl," Nigel grinned, "helping Daddy like that. You've found us a room and got yourself ready."

He bent down and groped with his hands. He couldn't see Steph's body in the dark but that only made it all the more exciting. He'd dreamed of having her for so long that each

touch of her flesh was enough to send small beads of ejaculate spurting from his swollen cock. He hadn't even noticed when he'd gotten hard. It was a natural occurrence to him, like breathing.

He rolled her onto her back and slid his eager, trembling fingers beneath the waistband of her jeans. Despite the perishing cold in the toilets, the flesh of Steph's belly and upper groin was warm, almost hot. Nigel's swollen penis started throbbing furiously, demanding satisfaction.

"Not long now, buddy. Just a little longer while I get this whore naked."

A soft murmur from Steph caused Nigel to halt. Maybe she needed another whack? He considered it, but decided that he would prefer her to be conscious. The quiet murmuring would only turn him on more. "That's it, you little slut, cry for Daddy. You love it, don't you?"

He fumbled excitedly at the buttons on her crotch and had to fight against his frustrations when they refused to pop. Taking a deep breath, Nigel steadied his hands and tried again. The buttons came loose one at a time.

*Pop.*

*Pop.*

*Pop.*

"That's it, darling, let's get you out of these clothes."

Just as Nigel was about to start tugging down Steph's unbuttoned jeans, he was alerted by a presence behind him.

Before he lost consciousness, due to the heavy blows that suddenly rained down upon him, Nigel heard someone say, “What the fuck is going on!”

*What the fuck indeed,* thought Nigel as he unwillingly went to sleep.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Harry had already been on his way to the toilet when he heard the ruckus. After seeing the apparitions in the dance hall, he had hurried downstairs into the cellar to regroup. The thing had reached out and struck him, but he was almost certain that was the extent of the threat. If it could have done him real harm then it would have done. Harry had no clue what was going on, but for now he would think on it. There was no need to panic the others with it. They would only think he was mad anyway. Now it seemed like something else was happening, a scuffle from inside the men's toilets.

It turned out that what Old Graham had wanted to speak with Harry about was a rather embarrassing matter. The old guy had needed to piss but couldn't get up with his bad leg. Harry had understood, but at first didn't know what to suggest. Then he had spotted the half empty bottle of Famous Grouse that Lucas had brought down. He gave the bottle to Old Graham who immediately necked most of the contents. "For the pain," he had said. Then Harry had given him a few minutes alone.

Now Harry was on his way to the urinals with a whiskey bottle full of old man piss, ready to empty the contents down one of the drains. He hadn't expected to run into trouble again so soon after his last encounter.

The toilet was partially lit by a candle when he entered, but there wasn't enough light to see clearly what was happening at the far end by the window. There was a scuffle going on and a soft wet thudding that he immediately recognised.

*Someone's getting a beating.*

Candle in hand, along with the whiskey bottle full of urine, Harry ran forwards, lighting the room in a narrow sphere as he moved. At the end of the space, he found Damien...and then he found Nigel. Damien was beating him as though he were tenderising a piece of beef, hands covered in blood and ruptured skin. They made soft *whapping* sounds as they bounced off Nigel's swollen face. But what upset Harry the most was Steph lying unconscious on the floor with her jeans undone.

Finally, Damien looked up and noticed Harry, but it was too late for the lad to say anything. Snarling, Harry smashed the whiskey bottle of piss over the young thug's head so hard that he wondered if he'd killed him.

Part of him hoped so.

#



In front of the fireplace, Jess watched over Peter with Jerry. She watched her sleeping friend turn paler and paler, and could not tell whether it was due to the cold or loss of blood. Most of Peter's wounds were bandaged, but they still wept constantly.

"You think he's gonna wake up?" Jerry asked, tugging her away from her thoughts. The usual child-like exuberance was absent from his voice and it had been for a while now.

*Ever since he watched his best friend turn to blood and dust.*

Jess shrugged. "He woke up once before, so who knows. How are *you* doing?"

Jerry frowned. "Me? I'm cushdy? It's *this* one we need to look after." He pointed at Peter.

Jess shrugged again. "I think he might have it easiest, being asleep. I want to know how you are. You know...about what happened to Ben."

Jerry's face crumbled like a moist sandcastle and, for a moment, Jess thought he was going to cry. He didn't. "It's stupid," he said, "but I miss him already."

Jess really hurt for the boy. "That's not stupid at all."

"Feels like it. I just keep wishing it was me."

"Now *that* is stupid. He wouldn't have wanted you to be dead, would he?"

Jerry shrugged. "Wouldn't surprise me. All I ever did was annoy him."

"Then why did he always keep you around?"

"Fate I guess. Maybe he just felt like he should."

Jess wasn't sure she understood where the conversation was going. "What do you mean, fate?"

Jerry rubbed at his eyes and somehow succeeded in making them look even more tired. “Ever seen the play, Blood Brothers?”

Jess shook her head.

Well,” Jerry explained. “It’s a film about these two brothers that get separated at birth. A mother has twins and can’t afford to keep them both, so she gives one away to the rich family that she works for.”

“Okay,” said Jess, still not following, but willing to listen.

“Somehow, the baby boy that she gave away ends up making friends with the son that she kept – his twin. They have completely different upbringings, one rich, one poor, but somehow they become best friends. Despite everything, they’re really very much alike.” Jerry stared at Jess and this time she was certain he would cry. But still he did not and smiled instead. “That’s like me and Ben. You get what I’m saying.”

Jess didn’t get the point at first. But then she thought about it a little harder and ventured a surprised guess: “You and Ben were brothers?” Jerry didn’t answer her but she knew it was a hit and not a miss. It still didn’t quite make sense though.

“Did Ben know?”

Finally Jerry allowed himself to cry. “We...we had the same dad but...I never told him that. My mom only told *me* when I was ten. By then I’d already been friends with Ben for three years.”

Jess was shocked. She thought this type of scenario was meant for films and fake talk shows, not real life. “Why did you never tell him?”

Jerry wiped some of the tears from his face but did nothing about the new ones that ran down to replace them. “Ashamed, I guess. My mom told me it was just a one-night stand and that it was *whilst* Ben’s dad was together with his mom.”

Jess understood and nodded. “You kept it to yourself because you didn’t want to hurt Ben or break up his family?”

Jerry avoided looking directly at her and chose instead to gaze into the fire as he spoke. “He idolised his dad and respected him as this great businessman. God knows why, the man was a small time jerk with more skeletons in the closet than Norman Bates. If I told him what his father – what our father – was really like, it would have broken him. I didn’t want to mess his life up like mine. He was my brother.”

Jess was emotionally winded by the story and had to remind herself to breath. What a beautiful sacrifice for someone to make, she thought, before hugging Jerry tightly, making him yell out in shock.

“Hey, what’s that for?”

Jess kissed his cheek. “For being such a decent person. I don’t think you realise how rare that is. Ben was lucky to have you as a friend, and a brother.” Jess realised that her comments had summoned fresh tears and even a little whimper from Jerry. She patted him on the back. “Sorry, didn’t mean to upset you.”

Jerry wiped his eyes. “It’s okay, think I needed that. Clears my head for what really matters.”

Jess frowned. “And what’s that?”

“What do you think?” Jerry spoke as if she were stupid. “You saw what happened to Ben. There’s something fucked up out there and it’s not gonna stop till it gets us all. I’m sure if Peter could wake up and speak, he’d tell us to get the hell out of this FUBAR situation.”

“He already did,” Jess blurted out. “He said I needed to get away.”

Jerry was silent for a moment, then took a deep breath and said, “I think that’s good advice. No one believed us about what we saw, but we both know we’re not crazy. There’s something out there that isn’t human.”

Jess considered for a moment that maybe she *was* crazy, but Jerry was definitely right. Both of them knew what they had seen...

They had to get away.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Make sure it’s tight”

“I am!” Harry tugged the curtain ties around Damien’s wrists and felt them dig into the boy’s flesh. “Any tighter and I’ll cut his arms off.”

“Good,” said Nigel. “Exactly what the dirty little rapist deserves.”

When Harry had swung the whiskey bottle at Damien’s head it had instantly shattered, sending streams of Old Graham’s salty piss over the both of them. Harry could still smell the vinegary pong on his clothes. When Nigel had regained consciousness, the two of them dragged Damien’s limp body into the bar area and heaved him onto a chair. They were currently in the process of restraining him to it as tightly as possible. The last thing they needed was Damien waking back up and endangering anybody else. They had enough on their plate, and Harry had not forgotten about the incident in the dance hall. Chaos had started coming at him from all directions.

Downstairs, Harry had placed Steph downstairs on a pile of blankets and covered her up with a duvet. She had stirred briefly when he'd first lifted her from the toilet floor, but she was yet to regain consciousness fully. Lucas had promised to look after her until Damien was fully secured upstairs.

Harry couldn't believe that Damien had tried to rape Steph. Had he been so wrong about the lad to have never thought for one minute that he was capable of such evil? At least he hadn't gotten away with it. Harry shook as he thought about what could have gone down if Nigel hadn't walked in and disturbed Damien.

"Nigel, I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't walked in when you did. Steph is so lucky you were there."

Nigel's chest puffed up proudly. Harry thought he looked like a dishevelled bear that had been hit in the face with a shovel. "I'm just sorry the little perv got the drop on me before I could take him down first. My head's still bloody banging."

Harry gave the curtain ropes one last tug and was at last satisfied that Damien was restrained adequately. "I'm not surprised," he said. "Vicious bastard *really* did a number on you. Soon as the phones are working, we'll call the police and get him squared away."

Nigel seemed to flinch. "Police, yeah"

Harry looked at him. "You okay, mate?"

Nigel smiled. "Just a bit dizzy. Need to sit down, I think."

Harry stood up, frozen knees straightening with a *click!* "I can keep an eye on things here. You go and rest."

"Thanks, Harry. Can I get you anything?"

Harry thought immediately about another beer, but for some reason just said, "I'm good, thanks."

Nigel walked away gingerly, clutching at his ribs. Harry shook his head as he imagined the pain. *Guy's lucky to be walking after the walloping he got. We all owe him big time.*

Harry stepped back and examined Damien, asleep in the chair. What could make a person so violent as to want to rape and beat people? It made his heart ache to think of the amount of hatred that infected the world. Damien was just one tiny ant in a whole colony of remorseless monsters. Harry started to wish that he'd asked for that beer.

A strangled snort came from Damien's direction and for a moment Harry thought he was going to wake up. The boy's eyelids fluttered for a second and his nose crinkled as though a fly had landed on it. But then he fell still again.

"What do we do with you now?" Harry asked himself. "Can't exactly leave you in the middle of the room to freeze."

*Or maybe that's exactly what you deserve.*

Harry's fists clenched themselves automatically as he thought about how frightened Steph must have been. He had to take deep breathes until the moment passed.

*Fuck! Let it go before it drives you insane.*

Harry had to get away from Damien. Just being near him made his stomach sick, but he couldn't leave in case he escaped. The only place warm enough to keep Damien prisoner was over by the fire, but that was already taken up by their casualty, Peter.

*Prisoners. Casualties. What the hell is happening tonight!*

The only other place that would be habitable was downstairs in the cellar – once they got the new fire started that is. But no way was he was gonna drag Damien into the same place as Steph. In fact he was never gonna let him anywhere near her ever again. They would have to leave the bastard beside the fireplace.

Harry walked over to Jess and Jerry. Both of them were on their knees tending to Peter, but they didn't seem to be actually doing anything useful other than merely keeping an eye on him. *What could they do, anyway?* He noticed that the two of them were shivering and rubbing at their arms. The fire was obviously failing in its task of keeping back the chill. Jess looked up at him as he approached and he saw that, despite her obvious weariness, she still managed to smile.

“Hey,” Harry said. “How you both holding up?”

“Starting to feel a bit like that film, *Alive*,” said Jerry.

Harry raised both eyebrows.

Jerry sighed. “You know...that movie where the plane crashes? The one where they're all freezing to death one by one? They all start to eat the dead bodies to stay alive?”

Harry shrugged his shoulders. “Sorry.”

Jerry's own shoulders deflated. “Goddamn it, dude.”

Jess spoke. “We want out of here, Harry.”

Harry hadn't expected that. Sure it was an obvious thing to say, given the circumstances, but Jess was an upbeat person and didn't seem like the kind to complain. “I know you do,” he said, “but that's not possible right now. You know what it's like out there.”



Jess nodded. “That’s what I mean. It’s not safe here. The snow is getting deeper and there’s something out there that wants us dead. We weren’t lying earlier. There’s something really bad happening tonight.”

Harry pictured the flames outside, growing from the snow like shimmering beanstalks, and felt a knot form in his stomach. Then he thought about the thing pretending to be his son. “I know,” he admitted.

Jerry’s face lit up, the cold air, mixed with the licking heat of the fire, made his cheeks blush like cherries. “So, you’ll help us then?”

“No,” Harry quickly said. “If we go out there we’ll be frozen stiff in a matter of minutes or maybe the victims of something even worse. It would be insane to leave before morning. Even then I’m not so sure.”

Jess seemed close to tears and possibly even full blown panic. She looked at Harry pleadingly. “So, what do you suggest? That we wait here until someone else comes flying through the window or Damien tries to rape someone else?”

Harry felt his face pull back in a snarl. “Damien won’t be hurting anyone else, don’t you worry about that.”

Jess shrugged as if his assertion meant nothing. “Okay,” she said, “but like I said, there’s something out there that’s less than friendly. You really just expect us to wait here till it tries to get in?”

“No,” said Harry. “We prepare, and if whatever is out there tries to get in...”

Jess and Jerry both looked at him. “Yeah?”

Harry snarled. “We make it wish it hadn’t.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Jess decided Harry was crazy. He had to be. Why else would he suggest bunkering down in the pub and waiting for whatever was outside to get in? Obviously he didn't understand the situation, and perhaps that made sense. Harry hadn't seen what she and Jerry had seen, hadn't seen Ben's young body disintegrate into a billion bloody granules of sand. No one else understood that there was a seven-foot psychopath out there with a film prop from *Braveheart*.

*I hope I never see a sword again in my life.*

When Harry left, she turned to Jerry and said, "Are we really gonna stay here?"

"You mean batten down the hatches like the kid from *Home Alone*? That dude under the hood is a demon or a vampire, or something, and if we duke it out we'll end up like Ben for sure...but what choice do we have?"

It was the first time Jerry had mentioned his friend's name without welling up and Jess wondered if he was turning an emotional corner. "Harry's right," she said. "We'll freeze to death out there if we try to leave, but I really don't feel any safer in here."

"Me neither."

“So, what do we do?”

Jerry shrugged. “Arnie-up, I guess. Get some weapons and take it to the first thing that comes through the door, *From Dusk till Dawn* style.”

“Whatever happens, I don’t think they’ll be using the door.” Jess looked down at Peter who was still sleeping on the sofa. He seemed more peaceful than before and she wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad thing. “Windows are more their style.”

Jerry laughed. “No shit.”

“Well,” Jess put her hands on her hips, “should we get started?”

Jerry nodded and rose up from his knees. Immediately he let out a shudder. “I think before we do anything we need to refuel the fire. I’m freezing and I think Peter’s turning blue.”

Jess looked down at Peter once more and saw the blue tint at the edge of his lips like a thin line of biro. She started to think that his peacefulness was indeed a bad sign. “I’ll go and check with Harry,” she said. “They’re building a fire downstairs anyway.”

She rose up from her knees and patted Peter on the forehead. His skin was cold.

Over at the other end of the pub, Harry stood with Lucas who had come from downstairs to help watch over an unconscious Damien. She couldn’t believe what Damien had tried to do to Steph. She knew he was a jerk, but this...

*I dunno. Something feels a bit off about the whole situation. Damien is a lot of things, but I never pegged him as a rapist. Still, how much do I know about the guy, really?*

“Harry,” she said, approaching him by the bar. “The fire is struggling and we need something to burn.”

Harry nodded and rubbed at his chin. The stubble there made his face seem dirty. “Yeah, I know,” he said. “We’ll get it going again soon. I forgot to say earlier that I think I’m gonna have to leave Damien over there with you and Jerry. The only other option is to put him in the cellar, but with Steph...”

Jess waved a hand. “That’s fine, I understand. We’ll keep an eye on him.”

Harry frowned. “You sure you’ll be ok?”

“Yeah, course. If he tries anything I’ll whack him with the fire poker, but you tied him pretty tight by the looks of things anyway.”

Harry looked down at Damien’s swollen wrists bound behind his back and saw that he had indeed done a good job. “I knew the Boy Scouts would come in handy one day.”

Jess laughed. “I knew there was something outdoorsy about you?”

“No,” said Harry. “That’s just the smell.”

Jess laughed again, this time louder. “You’re in a cheery mood despite everything.”

Harry seemed to stare into space for a moment before making eye contact with her. “Guess I decided it was time to start taking part.”

Jess didn’t know what that meant. There were a lot of things she didn’t understand tonight. “Taking part in what?” she asked him.

Harry smiled. “Life, I guess. Now, let’s go find you something for that fire.”

“Sounds like a plan.” She took Harry’s arm as he grabbed a candle from the bar with his other one. Lucas nodded to them both to let them know he would stay behind to supervise Damien. As the two of them sauntered towards the bar, Jess felt a surreal feeling of

safety that made her wonder if she was in some sort of denial. It was strange, but she felt positive that Harry's lightened mood meant that things might just work out okay.

Jess blinked twice and refocused her mind. Her skin felt tight under the prolonged attack of the cold and the chill felt like razor wire pulled tight around her flesh. She couldn't wait to get in front of a renewed fire and would get as much paper and firewood as possible, before settling in for the night.

*Maybe grab a little nap if Jerry doesn't mind watching over me.*

The fear that raced around inside of her for so long had finally exhausted her ability to care for the time being. Her emotions were being overridden by her physical needs for sleep and warmth. She shivered and yawned almost simultaneously as if her body wished to reiterate its demands.

*Just a couple of minutes now and you'll be nice and warm. Just a couple more minutes...*

She descended the stairs to the cellar, Harry lighting the way with his candle. At the bottom they entered the cellar and were immediately met by Steph, who seemed to have recovered partially from her ordeal. Old Graham lay on the floor under a blanket, seemingly drunk from the quiet little song he was muttering to himself and the empty beer bottles that surrounded him. At the edges of the room sat Nigel, partially shrouded from the lack of candlelight that didn't quite reach him. Kath was also sitting nearby but Jess didn't care to pay attention to the woman.

Steph took a step towards them and Jess saw that she was still a little shaky. There seemed to be something she needed to say. "We have a problem," she said, directly to Harry as though Jess were not there.

Harry's happy demeanour seemed to sour slightly and it made Jess feel unsafe again.

*Please no more problems. Not tonight.*

Harry sighed. "You should be resting. What's so important that it can't wait?"

Steph raised an arm behind her and pointed to a makeshift fire in the centre of the room. The steel barrel was half-stuffed with flammable materials from around the pub, mostly cardboard boxes and some cushions.

Jess knew straight away what Steph was going to tell them and she didn't want to believe it. She shook her head in despair. "That's all we could find to burn, isn't it?"

Steph changed her focus to Jess and nodded solemnly. "The cardboard recycling was done yesterday morning and we're all out of coal. I was going to buy some from Kath's supermarket tomorrow to stock up. We have a couple of crisp cartons that went empty today, and some handtowels from the toilets. But even if we burn the tables and chairs it won't be enough for both fires. In fact it's not even enough for one."

Jess was still shaking her head as she blurted out, "We're all going to freeze to death."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“What the Hell do we do?” asked Nigel from the floor, still shrouded in shadow.

Harry thought for a moment. “Steph, you’re absolutely sure that there’s nothing else we can burn? What about in Graham’s place upstairs?”

Steph shook her head. “Nigel already checked. It’s like a closing down sale up there. Barely enough furniture to fill one room.”

Harry thought again, shivering as he did so. He wondered whether he was as cold as he felt or if it was just his mind exaggerating. Before he had time to decide, his musings were interrupted as Jess asked, “What about the supermarket?”

He looked at the girl. “What do you mean?”

“Yeah, what do you mean?” Kath chimed in from the other side of the room.

“I mean,” Jess said, impatiently, “that the place is full of like a thousand cardboard boxes plus all the bags of coal in the warehouse. If we grab one of the trolleys, we can cart it all over here. There’s painkillers and other stuff too that we could give to Peter.”

Old Graham piped up from his resting place in the middle of the room. “Don’t bloody forget about me! I could use some pain relief too.”

Harry smiled. “Excellent. Then we have a plan.”

“Not yet we don’t,” Kath objected. “That is supermarket property you’re talking about. I can’t just let you in to ransack the place.”

Jess cursed out loud. “God sake, Kath, you still don’t get what’s going on, do you? Screw the supermarket! Our lives are more important.”

Kath snickered. “That’s debatable.”

Harry was starting to see why Jess hated the woman so much. She was indeed wretched, but before things got out of hand again, he decided he’d butt in. “Come on the both of you. Fighting isn’t helping anyone, is it? Enough people have already gotten hurt tonight.”

“Yeah,” said Kath, rubbing the swollen cut on her forehead. “I’m well aware of that, thank you very much.”

“Look,” Harry said in his calmest tone. “We’re lost without you here, Kath, and if you were kind enough to let us into the supermarket then we’d all be in debt to you. Our survival would most likely be down to you and we won’t forget that.”

Kath immediately seemed smug, as if her previously sour expression was just painted on and was now melting in the heat of the candle she held in front of her. “Well,” she said.



“I guess I can’t just let you all freeze, but I hope you realise the sacrifice I’m making. I have responsibilities that can’t be taken lightly.”

“Thank you,” said Harry. “So, you’ll give us the keys?”

Kath laughed as if he had just tried to convince her that the world was made of mashed potato. “Don’t be ridiculous. The store keys are to remain on the persons of authorised key holders at all times.”

“What are you suggesting?” Steph asked.

“Obviously I’m going to have to be present at all times. I’m going along.”

Harry smiled and was confident that it seemed genuine enough to fool everyone.

*Great, I get to be escorted by Cruella Deville.*

“I also must insist,” Kath added, “that Jess is to remain here. Her employment was terminated earlier tonight and ex-employees are prohibited from entering the premises. Petty vindictiveness is all too common these days, I’m afraid.”

Harry caught the sight of Jess about to explode and quickly intervened. “Okay, that’s fine. It’s too important that Jess stays here and keeps watch over Peter and Damien anyway. We can’t risk her going outside.” Jess seemed to settle down at this, but Harry couldn’t help but wonder how long he could keep the two women away from each other’s throats. He clapped his hands together, ready to get going. “Okay. Let’s get to work then. I’ll go ask Lucas if he’s up for the trip. Nigel would you be okay to watch over the women and our two wounded?”

Steph laughed. “Oh thank you, kind sir. What would we ladies do without a man to protect us?”

Harry leaned in close to her and spoke so that only she could hear. “After what you’ve been through tonight there’s no way I’m gonna leave you on your own. Nigel’s a big guy and I’d feel safer with him around. It’s more for *my* peace of mind more than it is yours.”

Steph seemed emotionally affected by Harry’s words but he didn’t have time to wonder what that meant. He turned back to Nigel, who had now stood up. “You okay with that, Nigel?”

The big man nodded. “I’ll protect them with my life. You can all count on me.”

Harry reached forward and shook Nigel’s hand. “Thank you, and if that thug tries to get free, you have all of our permissions to throw him on the fire.”

Nigel nodded and Harry made towards the stairs, starting to climb them one by one. As he ascended, he thought about whether or not it was really a good idea to leave the modest safety of the pub. After what Jess and Jerry had said happened to their friend, Ben, and the fact that something outside was strong enough – and crazy enough – to throw a human being through a window, Harry was half-expecting to be met by fire breathing dragons the moment he set foot into the snow. *Not to mention giant plumes of impossible fire climbing into the sky while people burn on crosses.* He tried not to think about it too much, but deep down he understood that something was very wrong with the world, or at least his small part of it. One thing for certain though was that they would all freeze to death without a constant fire going, so there was little choice really. Any way Harry looked at it, the risk of death was definitely better than the certainty of death. Whatever it was outside, he would have to face it.

It was time to start facing his problems.

“Harry boy, I take it you’ve been informed of our grave situation?”

Harry entered the bar area to find Lucas overlooking Damien. “Yeah, they told me. Nothing’s going right tonight is it?”

“You can say that again, Harry Boy. Still, I’m guessing you’re a man with a plan.”

He nodded. “And you’d be right. Kath and I are gonna go raid the supermarket for supplies. I wanted to ask you to come with us.”

Harry was not expecting the reaction he got from Lucas. The man seemed scared. “Well, um, you sure that’s the best course of action, now? Should I not stay here and keep an eye on the womenfolk?”

“Nigel is gonna do that. Plus, Jerry is over by the fire looking over Peter. I really need you to help, Lucas. We need the bags of coal that they sell there and I won’t be able to carry them all on my own.”

Lucas continued to shuffle uncomfortably, but seemed to slowly come round to the idea. “Well, okay, I guess I have little choice in the matter. Can’t let an honest fella like yourself down now, can I?”

Harry patted the Irishman on the shoulder. “I really appreciate it. Anyway, we’ll be fine. Quick in and out, military style. Like you said earlier, I’m Major Jobson and you can be Captain Fergus.” Harry snapped off a mock salute and stood straight.

Lucas chuckled. “Sounds like a plan. I just can’t help but worry about bumping into something unpleasant out there.”

Harry could understand the man's fear because he felt it himself. "I've been trying not to think about that too much, but it's either the supermarket or waiting until we all freeze to death. Besides, we'll go out there armed. Anything that tries it on will soon regret it."

Lucas clicked his fingers and did a little gig. "I like your spirit, Harry Boy. When do we depart?"

Harry shrugged. "No time like the present."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A baseball bat and a handful of kitchen knives; that was the best they could do. Harry hadn't expected guns or a flamethrower but was still hoping for something a little more intimidating than kid's toys and cutlery. Still, what they had was better than nothing.

“Right,” said Harry, passing the baseball bat to Kath and arming himself and Lucas with a chef's knife each. “The plan is to get across to the supermarket quickly and quietly, sticking together at all times. Once we get there it's over to you, Kath, because you know where everything is.”

Kath nodded and took over. “Our main priority is of course the coal so we will gather that first. There's some on the shop floor, but it would be prudent to ignore that and get the main supply from the warehouse. However, once inside, no one touches anything without my say so.”

“Would you mind if we breathe the air,” said Lucas.

Kath planted her hands on her hips. "If you're not going to obey my rules then we can just forget the whole thing."

"Fine," said Lucas. "Although, we could just tie you up like our young friend, Damien, and take the keys for ourselves."

Kath stared at Lucas and suddenly seemed worried.

Lucas chuckled. "Just pullin ye leg."

Harry slid off his stool and straightened himself up. "Okay, Nigel, you keep an eye on everything here and we'll be back as soon as we can. Jerry you make sure that Damien stays tied up nice and tight."

"No," said Jerry. He was holding the fire poker down by his thigh and shaking his head. "I'm coming with you."

Before Harry had time to object, he found that Jess had beaten him to it. "Are you insane?" she said.

Jerry was still shaking his head. "No, I'm not. Just tired of being useless. That's all I ever was when Ben was around and I'll be fucked if I'm gonna carry on being it now that he's gone."

"That's very noble," Harry said, "and we all understand you wanting to honour your friend. But there's no need to take the risk. We've got it covered."

"Dude, I don't really know you and you sure as hell don't know me, but one thing you're gonna learn real soon is that all of the shit me and Jess told you about is real. None of you have seen the dude in the hood up close, but I have."

"What's your point," said Harry.

“My point is that I am more qualified than you to go out there and face the crazy.”

Harry shrugged and started to wonder if he actually had the energy to do this. “We don’t have time to argue so I guess you’ll be coming along too.”

Harry watched Jess put a hand on Jerry’s shoulder and turn him to face her. He couldn’t hear their conversation so he decided to take the time to check on Steph. She was standing behind the bar, relighting candles that had gone out.

“You okay?” he asked her. “You’ve been through a lot tonight.”

She smiled at him, her features so delicate and faded that she almost seemed like a shivering ghost in the candlelight. “No more than normal. This place has never exactly been Disneyland.”

Harry took her hand and felt a jolt run through his skin when he felt her squeeze back. The room was freezing but her palm throbbed out heat. He smiled at her. “You don’t have to pretend, you know?”

Steph’s eyes welled up as though a tap had been turned loose somewhere inside of her. “You mean I should just be honest and say that I think we’re all gonna die?”

Her words hit Harry like a haymaker to the kidneys. Just when he’d started to find some strength and positivity inside of himself, Steph had lost hers. It was tragic because he knew that his strength had, in part, come from being around her positivity. He’d taken advantage of Steph’s emotional strength and now the poor girl was drained. He squeezed her hand tighter. “No one is going to hurt you, Steph. I promise. I agree that some weird business has been going down tonight, but things only seem bad because we’re all afraid.”

Steph laughed and wiped at her nose and face. The skin of her wrist glistened as she pulled it away. “There’s nothing to fear but fear itself, huh?”

Harry smiled. “Something like that.”

“You just get back here in one piece, okay! Then I’ll stop crying.”

“Okay, deal!”

Steph let go of Harry’s hand and pushed him away. “Well, get going then.”

Harry turned around. The others were waiting; Jerry, Kath, and Lucas forming an orderly queue by the door. Lucas still seemed reluctant to go outside and Harry wished he had more time to find out why. But time was something none of them had as the temperature continued to drop. Crisp layers of frost had now started to form on the cushions over by the broken window and a pile of snow had begun to form at the foot of the door.

Harry moved to the front of the queue and placed a hand against the lock, ready to unbolt it and push open the door. For one quick moment, Harry lost the nerve that he needed to continue, but he took a breath, swallowed, and managed to open the door. “Let’s go,” he said, stepping out into the snow.

Entering a world he no longer recognised.

#

Outside, the landscape was featureless and blank like an unused canvass. As Harry looked about himself, he could see nothing but white so pure that its gleaming intensity made his



eyeballs ache. But despite the blankness, there was movement everywhere; shifting, dancing specks of snow that fluttered in the air; each flake individual but also part of the same never-ending whole. He thought about rushing back inside the pub, regretting the whole idea, but when he looked over his shoulder he could no longer see it.

*Lost already!*

Lucas, Jerry, and Kath were following closely behind Harry, linking arms and forming a human chain. All of them seemed worried by what they were seeing and we're looking for him to lead them.

*But lead them where exactly? These people's safety is in my hands and I don't even know what to expect myself.*

"You alright there, Harry Boy?"

Harry turned to Lucas. "Yes, I'm just...thinking."

"Well, perhaps you'd like to do your wonderings some place a bit warmer. I don't know if you've noticed, but it's a tad cold out here this evening."

Harry nodded and moved ahead, the others shadowing him tightly. The snow enveloped each of them past their knees, which led to them almost *wading* rather than walking. It wouldn't be long before the snow was deep enough to swallow them whole, and the effort of each step left each of them panting. They could continue only in silence. It was too laborious to speak.

Several minutes passed.

Then: “Do you have any idea of where we’re going?” Kath was shouting from the back of their human chain, struggling to be heard over the howling wind. “We should have been there by now.”

*She’s right.* Harry had been thinking the same thing just before Kath said it out loud. He’d gotten them lost in weather cold enough to freeze a penguin solid.

“We’re lost aren’t we?” said Kath, accurately reading in on the meaning of Harry’s silence. It was more an accusation than a question.

Instead of Harry answering, Jerry did so for him. “Yes, we’re lost,” he said, “but Harry’s not to blame.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean I’m not to blame?”

“I mean that the *snow* made us lost.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Kath. “You sound just like that silly girl back at the pub.”

“Come now,” said Lucas, stopping and halting everybody in the line. “Let’s hear the boy out.”

Jerry prepared to give his explanation and the others gathered round close, all of them shivering except for Lucas who seemed to be coping slightly better. “It’s not normal snow,” Jerry stated. “It’s a magic snow.”

Despite the brevity of the situation, everyone started laughing.

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up,” Jerry said, deadly serious despite their mockery, “but I’m telling you that this snow is unnatural. It’s a force being wielded by a force even greater.”

Harry decided to humour him. “Wielded by whom?”

“Who you think? The guy in the hood. The snow is just his tool to trap us or get us lost and confused. Then he comes to take us like he did Ben.”

“Okay,” said Harry, trying his best to remain open-minded. “But, if you believe that, what the hell are you doing out here?”

Jerry smashed a fist against his open palm. “Because me and the guy in the hood have unfinished business. If he turns up, I’ll be the one to face him while the rest of you make a run for it.”

“Why would you want to do that?” Harry asked, seriously considering that Jerry may have begun to lose his mind. He was just a teenaged boy, not Rambo.

But Jerry seemed more than sane as he continued. “I need to take some responsibility instead of letting other people do it for me. If this is the end of the world then the least I can do is make it hard for the bastard. I’m gonna give him the ass-kicking of his life.”

“Erm....fellas?” The group turned to face Lucas, who seemed suddenly concerned. “That *bastard* in question,” Lucas pointed over Harry’s shoulder, “is right over there.”

Harry spun around to see a shape in the distance. The dark silhouette of a man taller than a man had right to be. It was coming towards them, slowly and methodically, as if it had eternity to get there. In the last year there had been numerous nights where Harry had drifted out of a nightmare and woken with a stinking hangover, but this was the very first time he had ever felt as though he were drifting *in* to a nightmare.

And the nightmare was getting closer.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“I better go check on Old Graham,” said Steph, walking away and leaving Jess and Nigel to look after Damien and Peter. Jess suddenly felt desperately lonely now that their numbers had halved. She just hoped the situation was temporary and that the others would return soon. *Everyone except for Kath, that is.* Jess wouldn’t care if she ever saw that woman again. She turned to Nigel. “Best settle in. It’s already been a long night.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Nigel replied.

The two of them slid down either side of the fire, leaving the middle clear so that its warmth could reach Peter on the sofa. Damien was still tied to a chair nearby, but not as close to the fire as the rest of them. They had dumped an assortment of blankets on him to keep him warm and he now looked how Jess imagined a geriatric old woman would look knitting in front of the fire. She pulled a nearby duvet up over herself and let out a shiver.

“Not getting any warmer is it?” Nigel commented. “Don’t they say you should all huddle together to share warmth?”

“Yeah,” said Jess. “They do say that.”

Nigel patted the floor beside him. “Well? You wanna come over?”

Jess tried to work the offer out. What was he suggesting? Nigel seemed like a nice guy – shy if anything – so she assumed he was just being practical rather than intending anything else. Still, the suggestion made her uncomfortable.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’m warm enough for now, but thanks for offering.”

For a half-second, Jess was sure she saw anger flush Nigel’s face, but when he spoke, she realised it must have been her imagination. He was harmless.

“Don’t mention it,” he told her. “I just don’t like to see a young girl suffer.”

Jess giggled. “My, what a gentleman.”

“Unlike some.” Nigel nodded towards Damien.

Jess thought about that for a moment. Something still didn’t sit right about what had happened earlier. “I still can’t believe that he tried to hurt Steph.”

“Well, believe it! The guy’s a fucking animal and he’s lucky I didn’t kill him.”

Jess was taken aback. “Calm down! I was just saying it was a shock, that’s all.”

Nigel rubbed at his eyes and shook his head. His gold pinkie ring glinted in the fire light, the image of a dolphin shining for a split-second. “Yeah, course, I’m sorry. I just get so angry that I wasn’t there to stop him sooner.”

“You stopped him soon enough,” she said. “He never got to hurt Steph. Well, not in *that way*, you know?”

He nodded and smiled, yet something about the gesture made Jess feel uncomfortable. It felt as though she were being looked at through a mask. That perhaps Nigel's smile was just a way of hiding something else.

*But what?*

“Do you mind holding down the fort for a couple minutes? I just want to see if Steph needs anything.”

Nigel's smile never faltered. “No problem,” he said.

Jess shivered again and was certain it wasn't because of the cold. She stood up and hurried away, glancing back over her shoulder to check that she wasn't being followed. She moved inside the bar and approached the darkness of the staff corridor. Jess felt even more that something wasn't right about Nigel, but her final glance showed that the man was still seated in front of the fire. It made her feel stupid and paranoid. Nigel didn't seem like he could hurt even a fly.

*Neither do frogs until they shoot out their slimy tongues and pull you in and swallow you whole.*

When Jess stepped into the cellar doorway at the top of the stairs, she immediately felt the warmth from the fire below, flowing up and over her face. She shuddered at the pleasant feeling and started to take the steps downwards.

At the bottom, Steph sat near the barrel fire with Old Graham. The two of them were chatting away like they didn't have a care in the world. Steph looked up at Jess as she approached and asked, “Everything good up there?”

Jess shrugged. "I wouldn't describe anything as good at the moment, but things are...stable."

"How's Peter?"

"Bad. I don't know what to do for him. I'm hoping that the others come back soon with medicine or something to help."

Steph bit her lip. Her face was swollen on one side where she'd been attacked and her right eye was half-closed. Jess wondered quite how much Steph had been affected by tonight's earlier incident. It was obvious she was trying not to show her emotions, but the feisty barmaid didn't seem quite as tough as usual. "Are you okay?" Jess asked her.

Steph seemed to snap out of a trance. "I'm fine. Just a bit worried I guess, but that's to be expected, right?"

"Hell yeah. You'd have to be made of stone not to be worried tonight. Speaking of which, how well do you know Nigel?"

Steph looked confused. "Nigel? Pretty well, I guess. Why?"

"He just makes me feel a bit uncomfortable."

Steph shook her head. "He's never caused any problems in the eight or nine months I've known him. Keeps to himself more or less."

"A nice guy...f-from...what I seen...tonight." Old Graham had fallen into a drunken haze, but still managed to fade in and out of the conversation. "A nice...guy."

"Maybe, I'm just being silly," said Jess.

"I'd say so. The guy saved me from being raped tonight!"

Jess nodded. There was a good chance she was just paranoid as she'd suspected earlier. Having Steph confirm it made her feel much better. She'd go back upstairs and look after Peter, thinking no more about it. But first she wanted to check on Steph's injuries. Someone needed to look after *her* too, especially after what had happened. "Let me have a quick look at your face, before I go back upstairs. You look pretty beat up."

Steph waved a hand. "Don't worry. Just a bruise."

"I'd feel better all the same." Jess slid down onto the floor besides her.

Half-asleep, Old Graham murmured something from the floor. "Let the girl...have a...look."

Steph sighed and leaned forward. "Fine, just keep your hands away. It hurts bad enough as it is."

Jess leaned forward slowly and cringed at the sight of Steph's bulging cheek. Her misty blue eye above the injury was bloodshot and teary. A second injury on her forehead seemed just as painful. A throbbing, aggressive bump that was already turning purple. "Jesus, you really took a whacking."

"I think I fell against the toilet bowl. Don't really remember much other than that. Someone just came out of the dark and hit me."

"You don't remember anything at all?"

Steph sighed. "No." She went to move her head away, but Jess stopped her.

"Hold on a sec." She looked closer at the wound on Steph's cheek, suddenly noticing something as her eyes adjusted to the dim light of the cellar. It was at the centre of the bruise,



lighter in colour than the surrounding tissue. It formed a shape, maybe matching the surface of whatever had hit her. The outline seemed to resemble a...

*Dolphin.*

The image seemed familiar to Jess and she scratched at her head as she tried to understand why. What could have hit Steph in the face that featured a small dolphin shape?

*A ring with an engraving on it, maybe?*

Jess's breath caught in her throat at the realisation. "Holy shit! Nigel!"

"Did I hear someone say my name?" Nigel was walking down the stairs.

Jess's stomach cramped as she tried to think of something to say. All she could come up with was: "Hi, Nigel. Yeah, we were just talking about you. Steph just told me what nice guy you are."

Nigel smiled at her and Jess finally understood what the expression was designed to disguise. It was indeed a mask.

*Intended to hide a monster.*

#

When Jess had suddenly excused herself, Nigel had been concerned. Maybe his attempts at getting the girl to sit beside him had eroded the harmless veneer he worked so hard to maintain. It was possible that the girl had seen his true intentions.

Now, as Nigel entered the cellar, he wasn't entirely sure. Jess certainly seemed jumpy at his presence but, considering the events of the last few hours, that was perhaps understandable. Steph seemed glad to see him however, that much was clear; she smiled and waved a hand at him as he approached. It wasn't surprising that he had her trust. After all, he'd been working on gaining it for the last eight months. As far as Steph was concerned, he was as harmless as a three-legged kitten with pneumonia.

*Dumb fuckin whore.*

It didn't matter if Jess suspected anything. They were both just his prey now; more victims to add to his mental highlight-reel of rape and torture. He figured he had at least an hour to have fun with them before he'd have to slit their throats, stash the bodies, and take a finger for his collection (and that was only if Harry and the others managed to make it back from the supermarket without freezing to death). Even if they did come back he'd have a story ready for them (and his trusty flick knife waiting in his pocket just in case they didn't believe it).

"Everything okay?" Jess asked him, still not giving away whether or not she suspected anything. "Shouldn't someone be watching Damien and Peter?"

Nigel nodded, trying his best to look solemn. An emotion he couldn't actually *feel* at all, but one he felt he was adept at emulating. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about, sweetheart. I think Peter's waking up. I heard him say your name."

Jess didn't react for a moment and Nigel wondered how well his lie had gone down. Finally, she replied, but made no attempts to get up and join him. "That's wonderful," she said. "Great news."

“Well,” said Nigel, offering out his hand, “you going to come see the poor lad or not? I’m sure you’re the first thing he’d like to wake up to.”

Jess shifted uncomfortably before him as if determined not to get up, but eventually she had no choice but to concede.

“You’re right,” she said. “Be right there. I just need to talk to Steph about something first. Girl problems, you know? So, did you want to meet me up there in five minutes or so?”

*She’s trying to warn Steph, the little bitch!*

Nigel closed his eyes and fought away the urge to rip the girl apart right there and then, tasting her wet insides as she gulped her dying breaths. He had to work *real* hard to control himself and keep his cool. He would be nowhere without his *control*. Far better to have fun once everyone was tied up and under his power. That way there could be no surprises and the party could really get started.

“I think you should probably go now,” Nigel suggested, keeping his voice soft so as not to alarm an unsuspecting Steph. “What if he doesn’t make it and this was his last chance to speak to you, Jess?”

Steph placed an arm around the girl, before frowning directly at him. “That’s a little bit harsh, Nigel. Let’s not condemn the poor boy just yet.”

“Thanks,” Jess replied.

“I do agree with him though, honey. You should go right away. Peter hasn’t been conscious much tonight and you wouldn’t want to miss out on anything he could tell us about what happened outside.”

Nigel grinned. *That's a good girl. Always so eager to help daddy, aren't you? Just like when you knocked yourself out for me in the toilets and lay still.*

Nigel reached his hand out further to Jess. "That's what I was trying to say. I didn't mean to upset you. I'm sure Peter's going to be fine, but right now he needs you."

Jess looked like one of the cats Nigel used to strangle as a child (before he moved onto women and children). Trapped and terrifyingly aware that death was quickly approaching, yet powerless to do anything about it. The girl was afraid and the sight of it made Nigel's cock begin to throb. He liked it so much better when they knew it was coming; loved that look in their eyes.

Jess started getting up, ignoring his outstretched hand and rising tentatively as though she expected a strong wind to blow her over at any moment. Nigel moved and waited patiently by the stairs for her. To his irritation, Jess turned to Steph and held out a hand. "Will you come with me?" she asked the other woman.

*Don't even try it! Just take what's coming to you and stop making things hard.*

Nigel was relieved when Steph shook her head. Jess seemed to deflate like a leaking balloon.

"I can't," Steph told her. "I need to stay here and look after Old Graham."

"But he's asleep," said Jess, the pleading and desperation in her voice was clear to Nigel. But was it clear to Steph? Much to his dismay, Steph did indeed seem to pick up on the girl's veiled pleas and was now staring at Jess as if trying to work her out. Nigel held his breath, waiting for the outcome.

"Okay," said Steph. "I'll come with you, but we'll have to be quick."

*Damn it!*

Nigel stood, irritated, as the two women huddled up and waited for him to lead on. It was obvious Steph had picked up something in Jess's tone, but he doubted if she suspected anything specific, anything close to the truth. She knew something was up, but, as long as he didn't leave the two of them alone, she wouldn't figure out *what* until it was far far too late.

Nigel started to creep up the stairs, making sure the women followed. He kept his steps slow so that Jess couldn't fall behind and whisper something to Steph without him hearing. When they reached the top, he stepped aside and ushered the women past him. From behind, he moved them into the candlelight of the bar and was immediately hit by the sub-zero temperature. It wasn't even biting cold any longer, but a far deeper sensation that his very blood was turning to ice in his veins. "Come on," he said, "let's get over to the fire."

The women walked ahead and he kept close behind, rubbing his palms against his arms to try and generate some friction and heat. But the only thing getting him *hot* right now was watching Steph move. He thought about all the things that he could do to that sexy, slender body that could warm him up for the rest of the night. The only thing left to figure out was the best way to take Jess out of the picture. For now he'd let things play out and wait for an opportunity to present itself. The flick knife in his pocket had made him heavily consider just stabbing the girl and being done with it, but that would be a waste. He had to have his fun with her first. If Steph was going to be the main course, then Jess would be the desert. *I'll eat her nipples as cherries*, Nigel thought as he let slip an excited laugh. He quickly stifled it when the women looked at him.

"Something funny, Nigel?" Steph asked.

He quickly shook his head. “Just the craziness of tonight making me a little loopy. I get the giggles when I’m nervous.”

“And why would you be nervous?” Jess asked in a tone that he didn’t like at all. It was almost goading.

“Well,” he said, “there’s a lot to worry about tonight, isn’t there, sweetheart?”

Jess took a step backwards and was nodding as though she knew a punch-line to a joke that no one was telling. Nigel felt his blood pressure rising as he fought the urge to rip into the girl and punish her insolence. She kept her eyes fixed on him as she continued stepping backwards. Steph was watching from a few feet away, obviously unsure of what was about to unfold. Nigel took steps of his own, keeping pace with Jess.

*Like a predator stalking its prey.*

“Or are you nervous,” Jess said, “because you lied about Peter being awake? Look at him, he’s still unconscious.”

Nigel grinned. *Of course* Peter was still unconscious; the kid was as good as dead. He looked down at the boy and had to stifle another laugh. *Pity he isn’t awake. He could have watched while I fuck his girlfriend.*

Jess took another step backwards, placing herself up against the wall beside the fire. No more space to retreat. Nigel continued approaching.

*You’re trapped now, bitch.*

“Or,” Jess continued, “are you nervous because I know that you’re the one that tried to rape Steph?”

Nigel looked at Steph and watched the sudden shock cause her to take a sharp intake of breath. Jess's revelation had sucked the wind out of him as well. He had expected her to try and blow his cover, but the fact that she did it right in front of Steph hurt him. He didn't want Steph to know the truth about him until the very last moment.

*Nothing to be done now though. Time to start ripping flesh.*

Nigel lunged at Jess like a snake uncoiling. Such momentum did he have that he was powerless to change direction as the teenaged girl swung at him with the fire poker she had somehow grabbed from its rack without him seeing.

The last thing Nigel thought as the steel rod arced towards his skull was...

## CHAPTER THIRTY

“You want another piece of me, huh? Well, if it’s Mortal Kombat you want then that’s exactly what you’re gonna get you cross-dressing freak.”

Harry managed to reach out and grab Jerry just before the lad managed to run off to his peril. “Hold it,” he said, clutching the boy by the collar.

Jerry struggled to get free. “Dude, not cool, let go of me. Him and me have got a date with destiny.”

Harry shook the lad. “This isn’t Star Wars and that’s not Obi Wan Kenobi.”

Jerry looked outraged. “Obi Wan is one of the good guys, you dork!”

“Yeah,” said Harry, “*I’m* the dork.”

“Fellas, while I’d love to have a discussion on the many wee sides of the force, I think we should get going.”



Harry nodded to Lucas and then looked into the distance at the approaching figure.

“Okay, let’s get back to the pub.”

Everyone agreed. They turned, ran...

...and stopped in their tracks.

“Holy shit!” Jerry cried out as ten foot flames exploded from the snow before them, cutting off any chance of escape. Harry felt the heat spread out in a wide semi-circle around them, leaving no place to go but towards the tall, hooded man.

Jerry put his fists up. “Time to fight.”

“You reckon?” Harry said.

“You got a better idea?” asked Kath.

“Don’t suppose anybody has a fire extinguisher?” Lucas asked, fanning his hands against the fire behind them.

Harry took several steps forwards. He wasn’t sure why and it seemed like a stupid idea. “What do you want from us?” he demanded. The hooded figure stopped moving, still too far buried by the blizzard for Harry to make out clearly. Despite that, he could feel the stranger’s stare boring into him, digging out the corners of his soul. “I said, what do you want?”

Silence.

Then: “WE HAVE COME FOR...THE SINNER.”

Harry shook his head. *What the fuck is with this guy? Did he overdose on bible studies as a kid?*

“Who exactly is the sinner?” he asked.

More silence.

Then: “YOU ARE, HARRY JOBSON.”

Harry fell down, for no other reason than his knees had ceased functioning. He flopped face-first into the snow like an awkward clown, dreading he would never be able to ever get back up again. *He* was the sinner? *He* was the cause of this madman wreaking havoc tonight? It seemed insane, but in a way...

*He knows my secret; knows what I've done. He's right...I am a sinner. But how did anybody ever find out?*

“Come on, Harry Boy, time to go.” Lucas lifted him and, at first, Harry thought it was to turn him in to the hooded stranger. It wasn't. Lucas gained assistance from Jerry and the two of them dragged Harry through the snow, aiming for a small gap between the semi-circle of fire and the hooded figure. Harry had every confidence that Kath was not part of his attempted rescue, yet he could hear her crunching footfalls following beyond.

*Trying to keep her safety in numbers.*

“What are we doing?” Harry asked wearily as they dragged him along by the armpits. His legs trailed along behind him like boneless chickens and he felt dazed.

“Running for our lives,” said Lucas. “What in the blazes do you think?”

“The supermarket must be nearby,” said Jerry, struggling with Harry's weight. “At least I hope so.”

“It is,” said Kath. “We're here.”

Harry looked up to see the dim shape of a building present itself through the snow, only twenty yards away.

*We're going to make it...*

Harry craned his neck to look back behind him, but his joints would not allow sufficient movement to see anything. "Where is that...thing?"

Lucas and Jerry continued to drag him, their speed increasing as the sight of the supermarket spurred them on. Kath overtook them all and started searching her pockets frantically, no doubt for the building's keys.

Harry repeated himself. "I said, where is it?"

They reached the supermarket's locked fire door and dumped Harry down. Lucas stared down at him and offered his hand. "I don't bloody know where it is. We lost it on our way here and I was in too much a hurry to keep looking back, so get up and get ready in case it comes back."

Kath pulled her keys from her pocket and started sifting through them. "I can't see a thing out here."

Harry finally managed to stand, his legs solidifying from jelly to setting-cement, not yet firm but getting there. He looked back in the direction they came from and found his heart stopping in his chest. "You best hurry up and get us inside, Kath. And I mean right NOW!"

Harry stood patiently while the others turned and saw for themselves. Coming through the snow with a steady and methodical purpose was the hooded figure. Either side of him were other tall, hooded, monk-like beings. *Dozens*. Their ghostly visages seemed to

melt into the background of the thick, whirling blizzard that could have hidden an army of those things for all he knew.

While Kath frantically tried keys on the lock, Lucas fell to his knees, muttering. Harry wasn't sure but he thought he heard the Irishman say something about 'an army of Christ', but it wasn't something he had time to ask about right now; the hooded figures were still approaching. He turned urgently to Kath at the door. "How's it going?"

The chinking of keys as Kath stumbled to find the lock was *not* music to Harry's ears. "I'm trying," she said, sounding close to tears. "I'm sodding trying."

As if things could get any worse, Harry heard a sound that chilled his blood several degrees beyond the ice that already flowed through it. *Growling*; so guttural that it sounded as though it emanated from a legion of rabid wolves. *Or a dozen beasts from hell*, Harry thought. Alongside the hooded figures appeared several other beast-like shapes, moving faster and more erratically than their two legged companions. They seemed like over-sized dogs, just as Jerry had described them. Harry wished he'd paid more attention

"It's the damned hounds of hell," said Jerry. "The ones I saw earlier with Jess. Believe me now?"

Harry clutched the chef's knife tightly in his hand, but had a horrible feeling that it would prove to be as useful as a handful of wet spaghetti. "Jerry," he said. "If we live through this then I will be the first in line to apologise for not believing you, but now's not the time for humble pie."

Jerry seemed buoyed by the vindication and actually began to smile. He moved over to Kath and picked up the baseball bat that she had propped against the supermarket's door.

Lucas was still on his knees, but had stopped his incoherent rambling. He fixed his gaze on Jerry. “What the b’jaysus is you doing, lad?”

Jerry narrowed his eyes at the man and said, “I’m getting even.”

With that, Jerry started trudging through the snow at a speed that was as close to running as was probably possible given the terrain. He held the baseball bat high above his head as if it were a holy sword of Justice. The strange army of unearthly figures continued approaching, led by the more quickly moving ‘hounds of hell’. Jerry didn’t seem concerned by any of them and was picking up speed.

“Jerry, get back here!” Harry shouted, but his words were wasted.

Moments before Jerry and the nearest dog-beast-thing (whatever they were) were set to collide, the boy stopped in his tracks. Harry watched the boy stick out an arm and make a beckoning motion with his hand.

“Let’s go, Cujo!” Jerry swung the baseball bat from over his head in a downwards arc. It connected with the skull of his closest attacker and, with a snarling whine, the beast shot sideways and into the snow, which quickly begun to melt around it. When Jerry swung the bat again it connected with the beast’s hindquarters, causing it to howl in agony. Before he could swing again, it got to its feet and fled. Jerry held the bat above his head triumphantly. “Yippee Ki Ay, motherfucker.”

Harry watched the surreal image of the spotty, teenaged boy taking on a pack of hell beasts with a decrepit baseball bat and wondered whether he was stoned. Had his drinking progressed to drug-abuse and he was now just lying somewhere, hallucinating the whole thing? It was a thought he would have liked to have held on to very much, but he knew it just

wasn't true. They were all in very serious danger and none of this was imaginary. And it wasn't a movie.

“Jerry! Get your ass back here, now!”

Harry's warning was too late. He and the others watched in horror as a wave of dog-beasts swarmed over Jerry's scrawny frame. Harry was unable to take his eyes away as flesh and fat were shorn from teenaged bones like meat from a turkey, razor sharp fangs piercing every inch of Jerry's skin. Harry thought his ears would explode under the force of the boy's agonised screams and was grateful that they only lasted a few seconds, the exertion eventually ripping free Jerry's vocal cords.

Harry sobbed.

“Thank God!” Kath said finally, unlocking the door and pushing it open so hard that she fell to her knees on the other side. Harry himself did not move, too transfixed by the pack of wretched beasts that feasted on Jerry's still-twitching body as though it were a packet of raw meat. Despite everything that had happened that night, Harry was only now realising the situation he was in. “They're here to kill us all, aren't they?”

“Maybe,” said Lucas, pulling him backwards and through the door. “But we're not going to let that happen without a fight, are we?”

Suddenly finding a defiance inside of himself that he did not know existed, Harry closed the supermarket's door behind them. “No way,” he said, “we certainly are *not*.”

Kath quickly locked the supermarket's door, while outside a dozen hooded demons surrounded them.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“Damien...”

“Damien, wake up.”

Damien opened his eyes, expecting light to stream in and burn his retinas; but there was only darkness. Gradually, he remembered the evening’s events. The unending snow, the power cut, and everybody freezing. He could remember no more than that at first, but when he found himself tied to a chair he began to panic. It all came flooding back to him.

“Steph!”

“I’m here, Damien. I’m going to untie you, but you’ve got to stay calm. We need your help.”

“That son of a bitch knocked me out. Harry, I’m gonna kill you.”

“Damien, I can only untie you if you calm down. The only reason Harry hit you was because he thought-“

“I was gonna rape you.”

“Yes,” said Steph. “We got it all wrong. It wasn’t you, it was-“

“Nigel!” Damien could remember. Remembered finding the sick pervert about to stick it in an unconscious woman. Not just any women either; it was Steph. Damien was a lot of things, but a rapist he was not. Sex offenders and nonces were a whole other level of scumbag; subhuman slugs. He pulled at his wrist restraints, furious when they would not come off. “Where the *hell* is that *fucker*?”

“I’m here princess and guess what? This time you get to watch.”

Damien strained in the darkness to see what was happening. He heard Nigel speak and the girls cry out in fear, but his eyes were still too unadjusted to the lack of light and could only make out vague, shifting shapes in front of the fireplace. He struggled at the ropes around his wrists. *Come on, come on. Need to put a stop to this before it gets nasty. Motherfucker needs to pay.*

The ropes were tight, too tight in fact, and the skin around his wrists was abraded and sore. Nevertheless, he began sawing his arms back and forth, trying to create some slack that could set him free. In front of the fire the struggle continued, punctuated by a wet slapping sound.

Damien flinched as a body fell down in front of him. Steph lay crumpled on the floor, dazed and semi-conscious, blood seeping from a wound on the bridge of her nose. She murmured something to Damien but it went by him. It sounded like the word ‘poker’. Damien continued rubbing his wrists back and forth and felt the ropes loosen a couple of millimetres.

*Yes, come on.*



At his feet, Damien could feel Steph squirming on the floor, slowly moving past his legs. At first he thought she was making a run for it, but a tugging sensation at his wrists made him realise what she was doing: untying him.

He felt the ropes loosen.

In front of him, Damien's eyes adjusted to the scene in front of him. Nigel had Jess up against the wall beside the fire, struggling back and forth as the girl held onto his wrists, keeping his hands away from her. Jess obviously put up more of a fight than Nigel expected. Damien almost smiled as he watched her spit and bite at his face, doing anything she could to defend herself.

*Girl's a fighter!*

Damien felt the ropes come free from his wrists and, with a jolt that emanated from his knees and spread through his entire body, he shot up and leapt towards Nigel, landing hard against the man's broad back. It felt like hitting a barn wall, but the blow was enough to send Nigel face first into the wall. Unfortunately, Jess was in the way and got squashed in between. The air exploded from her lungs in a great '*whoof!*' as she fell to the floor like a puppet without strings. Taking advantage of the confusion, Damien swung his fist.

And missed.

Nigel turned and ducked the blow, countering with a punch of his own. The man's large, meaty fist connected with Damien's ribcage with an echoing *thud!* The air flowed out of him like a whistle on a steam train; a drawn-out, strangled wheeze that seemed to go on forever. Damien fell to his knees and tried hard not to lose focus completely as the pain urged him to lie down and give up.

Nigel stomped towards him like a greasy-haired rhino, grunting and snorting. There was still too little air in Damien's winded lungs to launch an effective attack, and he was just about to resign himself to the oncoming onslaught when he spotted something.

Damien snatched at the poker that lay strewn at his feet. It seemed to glow in the soft light of the fire like a gift from the Gods. It was his salvation. His chance to knock the greasy haired rapist to hell and back. Damien rose up, sweeping the poker up and over his head.

The clanging sound that filled the room once the thick iron poker struck Nigel's skull was the most beautiful thing Damien had ever heard. It was music. *Head banging music.*

Nigel staggered backwards, already half-conscious, legs wobbling like a beaten boxer's. Damien watched the whites of Nigel's eyes roll back into his head. Watched as his hulking body crumpled. And watched as Nigel fell backwards into the fire.

With an agonising scream, Nigel's eyes rolled back into their normal position as his mind was forced back to lucidity. His head lay in the fire like as though it was a pillow; a pillow that quickly roasted and blistered his skin. Like a greyhound out of the starting gates, Nigel shot forward; leaping away from the fire like it was trying to consume him whole. The flames had died down to embers and was most likely the only reason Nigel wasn't a human fireball right now. The whole thing happened so quickly that Damien couldn't think fast enough to react to Nigel's enflamed body hurtling towards him.

When the knife entered, Damien thought it was ironic. *About time I found out what this feels like. I always thought it would have been sooner*

The pain was unbearable.

#

“What in the *blue hell* is happening tonight. I mean FUCK!” Harry felt like he was going to go insane, smash the place up like a coked-up rock star. He’d just watched a teenage boy get ripped to shreds like minced beef on a taco. This on a night where the world was being consumed by a never-ending torrent of snow and hooded demons stalked run-down English council estates for kicks. And on top of everything, it all seemed to have something to do with *him*. They had called Harry *‘the sinner’*.

“Seriously, can anybody tell me what is going on? I just watched Jerry get ripped apart by God-knows what, and now we’re trapped in a pitch-black supermarket surrounded by a bunch of homicidal monks.”

“I don’t think they’re monks,” said Kath.

“No shit,” said Harry.

Lucas walked over to the front fire door and looked out into the snow. There seemed to be movement outside. He turned around and faced Harry. “I think it would be shrewd if we thought a wee bit less about what they be and a lot more about how to get passed them and back to the pub. The others need us.”

Harry let the air flow out slowly from his lips, trying to calm his beating heart. It didn’t work and left Harry feeling even more anxious. “We’re fucked, you know that?”

Lucas nodded. “Aye, but better to take a fucking standing up than to bend over and take it.”

Harry couldn’t help but laugh. “You’ve obviously spent some time in prison, right?”

Lucas grinned. “You could say that, Harry Boy, and you wouldn’t be too far from God’s truth.”

“Okay,” said Kath. “Can we just do what we’re here to do? It’s even colder here than it was outside.”

Harry nodded and started moving. “Okay. Let’s get the coal, painkillers, food. Anything we need to take back, let’s get it all piled up over here.”

Kath and Lucas nodded and got to work. Before Lucas ran off into the darkness he saluted Harry and said, “Right away, Major Jobson.”

It was then that Harry realised something important. He’d never told Lucas what his surname was and he was sure no one else had either.

Which begged the question: *How does he know?*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Jess finally managed to take a breath, but it succeeded only in making her nauseous. She knew that the sick feeling was mostly due to having to watch helplessly as a badly-burned Nigel had hacked his knife into Damien's mid-section. Jess watched now as Nigel heaved a groggy Steph onto the chair that had earlier held Damien captive. He was busy fastening the ropes to her wrists and was currently paying Jess no attention.

*Now's my chance if ever I had one.*

Jess scanned the floor for a weapon. The only thing that she could see was the trusty fire poker, but that lay several feet away, next to Damien who was writhing on the floor and gritting his teeth against the pain.

*Poor Guy!*

Despite his unscrupulous activities around the local estate, Jess genuinely hoped that he would pull through. As things turned out, he wasn't so bad. But wishful thinking aside,

Jess still had to make it over to the poker without being spotted by an 18-stone rapist. And she had to do it while extreme cold sent her body into increasing and awkward spasms.

*So I have to be silent and stealthy while chattering like an over-excited monkey. Jerry would just love this. I bet he'd compare it to some videogame he'd played. Metal Gear Monkey!*

God, how she would just love for Jerry and the others to come barging through those doors right now and save her from this wretched nightmare. But if tonight had taught her anything, it was not to hope for the best because things had a habit of getting worse.

Without realising it, Jess had started moving, crawling carefully on her hands and knees, shivering every time she took her arms away from her body. The chill was now so bad that even the fibres of the carpet had begun to freeze. They had turned sharp and brittle like tiny pine needles. Up ahead lay the poker and perhaps her only chance to protect herself from Nigel. She looked up at the big man and saw that he was trying to stir Steph from her fussy haze. "Rise and shine, sleepyhead," he was saying. "I want you to be awake for this. No fun if you sleep through all the good fucking."

Steph opened her eyes and managed to focus on him. She spat. "Screw you!" As soon as it had arrived, the fight seemed to leave Steph again. She was too bruised and broken to keep it up. Nigel slapped her hard, the sound filling the crisp air and bouncing off the walls. Jess closed her eyes and winced, but continued crawling forward, the poker just a few feet away now.

Nigel slapped Steph again, although this time it was less vicious. "Spitting is very unladylike," he shouted, "and anything ill-befitting of a lady will not be tolerated. If I wanted a bloke for entertainment then I would have tied Damien back up in the chair. Speaking of

which, how are you big man?” Nigel turned to Damien who was still moaning on the floor. “Not so hard now, huh?” Then he took a run up and booted the lad in the chest. The air exploded from him like a car backfiring. Jess winced again, glad she wasn’t on the receiving end. She carried on shuffling towards the poker. It was nearly at arm’s length now.

*Almost there.*

*Almost...*

Jess cried out as a heavy work shoe crunched down on her hand. She knew right away that she’d blown it and that she would most likely pay for it with her life. Nigel twisted his heel and pushed down harder, cracking and bruising the small bones in her hand. She wailed in agony and struggled to get free, but could not. Nigel laughed sadistically, the sound more chilling than the cold air. Jess’s screams increased as she felt a rough hand tangle itself into her hair and yank. The pressure removed itself from her hand and she was hoisted to her feet, finding herself face to face with Nigel who was snarling like a feral beast. She tried to pull away.

“Not so fast, sweetheart. Now that Steph is nice and comfortable, you and me have some time on our hands.”

She tried to pull away again, but felt like she was being held in a vice. “The others will be back at any minute,” she said. “You’re gonna get your ass kicked, you sicko.”

Nigel smiled. “By who? Harry, the alcoholic? Jerry, the nerd? Or Lucas, the thick mick? I don’t think so. They’re probably already dead and if they’re not then I’ll see to it later.”

The thought of Nigel killing the other’s filled Jess with rage. She decided to take a leaf out of Steph’s book and spat. Nigel flinched as the saliva missile hit his cheek and she

used this opportunity to try and get free, driving her knee as hard as she could toward Nigel's groin. The blow missed the intended target but still managed to plant firmly in his mid-section. He staggered backwards, releasing her as the air escaped from his lungs. Jess used the time to make a grab for the poker, diving to the floor and reaching out with her hand. Her fingers closed around the metal and Jess's heart skipped a beat as she realised she had actually managed to get the weapon. Now she had to use it. She leapt to her feet and turned around, poker in hand, ready to let Nigel have it.

But he was gone.

Jess did a double take of the room. She knew that Nigel was hiding somewhere, waiting to pounce. But from where? With the poker held out in front of her, she took a tentative step forward, expecting an attack at any moment. Her nerves were tattered and burned out by the constant jolts of fear. If she lived through tonight Jess decided she should write a book. *The Winter Rapist? The Ice Killer?* She'd have to think about it later.

Moving past the sofa, she prepared to swing with all her might, sure that Nigel would jump out at her any second. She moved carefully, deciding that the most effective hiding place for a serial killer would be was behind the bar. There was only one entrance to the area behind it so, if she was quick enough, she could take Nigel out before he could manage to do anything to her. Jess slowed her pace, not wanting to rush into an encounter that could end up being life or death.

The bar loomed closer, lit by a number of dwindling candles. The struggling light shone on the liqueur bottles that lined the shelves, making them look like rows of crocodile teeth. The final few steps were nerve wracking and she had to come to a halt before she reached it. *Deep breaths, Jess. He has to be behind there and you're going to be ready for*



*him. Armed and ready.* She squeezed at the poker in her right hand, anxiety forcing her to check it was still there even though she knew it was. *Okay, here goes.*

Jess took the final steps towards the bar area and quickly sidestepped to see behind it. As she suspected, Nigel was crouched and waiting for her. What she hadn't expected was how quick the big man would be. And how much it was going to hurt having a Vodka bottle smashed over her head.

Straight away, Jess felt the blood cascade from the top of her head. It ran into her eyes, blinding her, and then into her mouth. She could hardly believe she was lucid enough to even taste the coppery, metallic taste of it, and that, somehow, the blow had not knocked her out. But it had certainly dazed her.

She teetered backwards, legs folding as she hit the floor. Her ears picked up the heavy *clunk* of the poker skittering across the floor. *How many times is that thing going to get dropped?* Despite everything, Jess found herself laughing at the thought. No need to lose her sense of humour now, not when she needed it more than ever. She collapsed onto her back and was too dizzy to get back up again. Not that it would have mattered because Nigel was on her like a shot, pinning her arms down with his knees and straddling her chest. Held to her throat was the broken remnants of the Vodka bottle.

Nigel sneered at her. "Time to die, bitch."

Jess sneered right back, blood covering her teeth. "See you in hell, you small prick mommy's boy!"

The comment seemed to hurt Nigel and Jess started to laugh again. Right now, the over-sized, sexual predator looked like an insecure little boy. That was the satisfying image

she decided she would take to her grave. Even as the jagged bottle descended towards her throat Jess continued to cackle out loud, closing her eyes and waiting for it all to be over.

Jess had expected a sharp piercing pain, but instead was jolted by a heavy force hitting her. She opened her eyes and at first could not understand what had happened. Then she realised that Nigel had collapsed forward onto her and that her face was now buried in his stomach. *What the hell?* She punched and prodded at Nigel's lumpy body, trying to move it, but, when it didn't budge, it became obvious that he was passed out.

*What the hell happened?*

After several attempts at rolling the dead weight aside, Jess finally managed to slump Nigel over to one side and slide out from under him. She still did not understand what had happened. At least not until she saw...

"Peter! You're okay?"

Her friend was standing over her, gripping the poker that now dripped goblets of blood from its tip onto the floor. He smiled at her, although his ruined face made the expression look ghoulish and grim. After several moments of him standing there, silent, he released the poker and dropped to his knees. He let out a long breath, then managed to speak. "Are you...okay...Jess?"

"Yes, yes. I'm fine, Peter. Thanks to you, that is."

Peter nodded and his smile widened. Then he lost consciousness, pitching forward and hitting the floor face down. Jess felt like doing the same.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

When Harry found a pile of children's sledges he thought that things were looking up, but only slightly. Sure it would make getting the coal and other supplies back to the pub far easier, but it didn't change the fact they were surrounded by god-knows-what and that Harry had evidence that Lucas was not who he said he was. Before he said anything, however, Harry had decided to complete the task they had come here for. Between the three of them, him, Lucas, and Kath had managed to pile up more than enough coal to keep the pub going till morning and beyond, along with a bag full of over-the-counter painkillers. They'd even found a couple of torches and two dozen packets of batteries. Now that they were done and ready to go, Harry was ready to confront Lucas. "Lucas, how do you know my surname?"

Lucas turned to Harry, a look of confusion on his face. "What's that now?"

"I said how do you know my surname? I didn't tell you."

Kath huffed. "Do we really have time for this? We need to get going."

Lucas shrugged. "I didn't realise it was such a secret."

“It’s not,” said Harry. “But I never told it to you.”

“The demon monks outside said it, didn’t they? They said, HARRY JOBSON YOU ARE THE SINNER. Or something like that.”

Harry thought for a moment. “No, Lucas, you knew before that. You called me Major Jobson earlier at The Trumpet.”

Kath looked pissed off, but at the same time seemed interested. It appeared that she also wanted to see what Lucas’s answer would be.

But he gave none.

Harry took a breath, trying to stay calm. “Lucas, I asked you a question.”

The Irishman scratched at his head before letting his arms loose to swing by his sides. “Do you really want to do this now, Harry Boy?”

Harry’s stomach churned as he wondered whether he really *did* want to do this now. He really had no idea who Lucas was, what he was planning, or what he was capable of. Harry swallowed. “Yeah, I want to do this, right now. Who the hell are you and how do you know me?”

Lucas walked over to the cash register and hopped up onto its surface, then took a long, deep breath. “Who I am is something we really don’t have time for right now, but how I know you is a little easier.”

“Well, get started then,” said Harry.

Lucas nodded. “I know you because you’re the sinner. Same reason them outside know you, who, might I add, have nothing to do with me.”

“You expect me to believe that. You must have something to do with them.”

“I really don’t. You have my word for what it’s worth. What happened tonight was going to happen whether I turned up or not.”

Kath stepped towards Lucas. “What, why? Who are you?”

Lucas looked tired of the questions already. “Again, Lass, both questions we don’t have time for. All I can say is that the fellas outside want Harry. Does the ‘what’ or the ‘why’ really matter?”

“It fucking does to me,” said Harry. It felt like his stomach was going to burst open and release his organs onto the floor. The scar on the back of his hand throbbed. It did when he was losing control, as though it were trying to remind him what could happen when he let his anger run away with him.

“Why me?” Harry asked, trying to keep his focus on what mattered: finding answers.

“B’Jaysus, we’re going around in circles. Because you’re the sinner.”

Kath shook her head. “Why is Harry ‘the sinner’?”

Harry told her why. It was time to own up. “Because I murdered a man.”

Lucas acted as though he knew this all along, but Kath recoiled in horror, stepping away from Harry and towards the door.

“Calm down, woman,” said Lucas. “He’s not intended to kill *you*.” He looked at Harry. “Are you?”

“No, of course not! The man I killed destroyed my life. It was revenge. There’s far worse people in the world, so why is this all because of me?”

“I agree,” said Lucas. “In the grand scale of things, you’re pretty low down on the Sin scale, but murder is murder.”

“But why did my sin cause all this? If that’s what you’re suggesting?” Harry felt dizzy. This morning he’d woken up expecting the day to end in a drunken stupor just like the 365 days before. He never expected it to end like this.

Lucas stared at Harry intensely and the man’s blue eyes seemed to light the darkness around him. “Because *yours* was the last. The sin that finally tipped the scales.”

Before Harry could demand to know what the hell that meant. Before he could grab Lucas around the throat and demand that he speak some sense. The doors blew inwards. Not a gust of wind swinging them open, but an actual concussive force that ripped them from their hinges and flung them across the room. The wind and snow flew in through the gap like the breath from a dragon. Harry ran to Lucas and grabbed the man by the arm. “What the hell is happening?”

Lucas had to shout to be heard above the howling wind. “They’re coming to get you.”

Harry shook his head. “But inside the pub we were safe, they left us alone. Why are they coming inside now?”

“They couldn’t enter the pub, but they can enter here. That’s all I can tell you, right now, but I can help you get out.”

“I’m listening.”

Lucas raised an eyebrow and smiled. “Go and get all of the porno magazines.”

“What?” said Kath, joining them over at the cash desk. The wind had blown her dark hair into a freakish mess of tangles. She looked like a homeless witch.

“I said, go and get me all the smutty magazines. You’ll see why.”

Harry lacked the energy for any more questions and the monsters outside would no doubt be inside any minute, led by the insidious dog beasts that had shredded poor, stupid Jerry to pieces. He turned, ran, and then sprinted over to the magazine aisle. It was the closest to where the fire doors had been and the nearest racks were shedding their contents under the harsh wind attacking them. Harry almost slipped on a gardening annual as he made his way over to the far end, where the shining images of bikini clad women lay three deep. Why on earth Lucas wanted all the lad mags, he didn’t know, but it seemed as though he know what was going on a lot better than anyone else. Harry saw little choice but to do what Lucas asked.

He picked up a copy of *Nipples* and then quickly gathered up several more publications of ill-repute. He clutched the pile to his chest and turned back in the opposite direction, making sure not to slip on the gardening annual as he ran back to Lucas. When he got there, the Irishman was accepting what looked like cello tape from Kath, who had obviously been sent on her own errand.

Harry stood in front of Lucas and waited. “Well?”

“Set the pornos down on the counter and pass me that broom behind the counter.”

Harry played along, leaning over the service desk to grab the wooden handle. “Okay, got it. Now what?”

Lucas took the broom and placed it on the counter with the magazines. Then he began to tear out the pages featuring naked women (as well as a few men).

“What are you doing?” Kath asked him.

He ignored the question and carried on tearing out the pages. Once he'd gathered a modest pile of immodest pictures, he grabbed the cello tape. What he did next was the most bizarre. Lucas began to wrap the broom head up in the naked pictures, fastening them with tape. After he was done, he started wrapping the handle up in the same way.

Harry couldn't take it anymore. "Okay, Lucas. I'm all for arts and crafts, but what is this helping?"

Lucas shoved the porno broom into Harry arms. "You'll see later. Right that sorts out the choir, now something for the hounds."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "The choir?"

Lucas ignored him and disappeared into one of the aisles. When he came back he was holding something in each hand.

"Salt?" said Kath.

"Yes," said Lucas. "It'll deal with the growly fellas, trust me." He handed one of the tubs of salt to Kath and kept one for himself. Apparently, the broom was going to be Harry's weapon.

"Fine," Harry sighed. "Let's just get out of here before those things come."

"Too late." Lucas pointed over to the doorway at one of the 'hounds'. It sat watching them, ears pricked like an over-sized spaniel.

*Except spaniels don't have so many teeth.*

When the beast saw that it had caught their attention, it began to snarl; a low, buzzing sound that increased to a full-blown rumbling.



“What should I do?” Kath asked nervously, holding the salt tub out in front of her with a shaking hand.

“Watch and learn,” said Lucas, who walked slowly, almost casually, towards the beast. As he got nearer, the creature bunched up, muscles tensing as it prepared to attack. Lucas was unconcerned and met the hound head on.

Harry swallowed in anticipation. *Insane.*

Lucas looked back at them and nodded, as if to say ‘watch this’, then flicked the salt container back and forth, spilling out a long stream of granules through the air. Instantly, the beast began to howl, its whimpers no different to a beaten puppy, weak and subservient. Harry soon smelt burning and realised it was the animal’s flesh. Like sausages grilling on a barbeque, but with a hint of something else.

*Eggs? No, I remember it from school...*

The smell was sulphur.

The creature bolted; turning and running back through the doorway and into the night, leaving behind a cloying puddle of dissolving flesh that made Harry want to retch.

“Now we can go,” said Lucas.

“What about the ‘choir’?” Harry asked.

“That’s what the broom’s for. Make sure you use it when the time is right.”

“And how do I know when that is?”

“It’ll be when something starts trying to kill you.”

*Right, thought Harry. I'll just use my broom kung fu on them. Fuck sake, when we get back to the pub, Lucas better have some goddamn answers.*

*Unless he stabs me in the back before we even get there.*

“Okay,” said Harry, looking out into the freezing dark night. “Let’s do this.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Jess held Peter in her arms, amazed that he was actually awake. Nearby, Steph was looking after Damien, who was doing okay despite having been stabbed. As things turned out, the blade had lodged between his ribs and hadn't gone in more than an inch or so. Damien said it hurt like hell but he'd be okay, despite the heavy bleeding.

When Jess had untied Steph, she'd had to wake her up first and coax her from unconsciousness. Once she'd snapped back to reality, Steph was visibly horrified by what Nigel had done and started weeping. Damien took her away to tend to his wound, but Jess had a feeling that he only suggested it to give her something to concentrate on.

Nigel was out cold in the middle of the floor. They would have to tie him up soon but, for now, everyone had one eye on him, ready to beat him down if he dared make a move.

After briefly losing consciousness again, Peter had slowly stirred back awake and was semi-lucid again. Lay across Jess's lap, she could feel his body warmth pulse through her

clothing. He was burning up badly and she worried about his temperature being so high. She looked down at him with more concern than she'd ever felt for a person.

“Did...the nasty man hurt you... Jessica?”

“No, Peter. You saved me and he never got the chance. You're my hero.”

Peter smiled a grim, broken-toothed smile. “I am...sorry I let you go out alone. I...looked for you.”

“I know you did. It wasn't your fault. No one could know what was going to happen tonight. I think it's the end of the world or something.”

Peter closed his eyes for a few seconds and Jess worried that he would not open them again. The boy's breathing was uneven and shallow. She shook him gently. “Peter, are you okay?”

He opened his eyes again. “I am...fine. The world is not ending, Jessica.”

“No?”

“No. As long as there are still beautiful things, we will be...okay.” He was looking at Jess and she realised that he meant her. “Can I...ask you...something?”

“Yes,” said Jess. “Of course you can. What is it?”

“Can I...kiss...you?”

Jess was taken aback. After all Peter had been through tonight, the only thing he asked for was a kiss. And from her? Had he had feelings for her before all of this? Or was he just delirious? Of all the times Jess had thought about kissing Peter, the whole time he had maybe been thinking the same. It hurt her soul to a point where she felt like she couldn't go

on and that she was ready to just lie down and wait for death. But first she had a question from a dear friend to answer. “Yes, Peter...you can kiss me.

“Peter?”

She looked down at her friend and realised that he was dead. The only thing stopping Jess from screaming was how peaceful he looked. She was glad that his pain was finally over and smiled down at him one last, final time. “Yes, Peter, you can kiss me.” She leant down and placed her lips against the soft, delicate mouth of her friend, sad and angry that he would never get to be anything more. “Goodbye,” she said, finally, placing him down on the floor. Jess was surprised to find an empty, hollow place inside of herself. Part of her had just died

Damien noticed that Jess had stood up and asked her if she was alright.

Then Steph noticed Peter lying dead on the floor. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Jess nodded, still feeling numb. “It’s okay. At least I got to say goodbye...in a way.”

Steph nodded. “Can we do anything?”

Jess was about to answer when movement from the corner of her eye startled her.

“Shit, Nigel’s up.”

The three of them grouped together as Nigel staggered about like a wounded animal, his skin blackened and weeping pus. Jess waited for him to run at them, wailing and screeching like a demon, but thankfully he hurried away instead.

“He’s trying to do one,” said Damien.

“Let him,” said Jess. “He can freeze out there.”

Nigel bumped into chairs and tables as he fled towards the door. Jess wasn't sure if he'd regained his senses from the blow to his head yet. He certainly seemed disorientated and unsettled, but somehow he managed to find his way to the door, flinging it open and staggering outside. Then he was gone, disappearing into the night.

“Good riddance!”

Steph put an arm around Jess. “Come on, sweetheart. We should get ourselves downstairs in front of the barrel fire now that we don't have to worry about him. The fire in here's about to go out and that broken window is going to freeze us to stone.”

Jess agreed. “Plus, Old Graham will be wondering what's going on.”

Steph's eyes widened. “Shite, I forgot all about Old Graham. Hopefully he was drunk enough to not hear any this.”

“We best get down there,” Jess said, turning with Steph, towards the bar. She took two steps and then stops. “Shit! Are you okay?” Damien was doubled up against the bar, taking in long, laboured breaths. “You're still bleeding?”

He waved a hand dismissively and Jess saw that it was soaked in blood. “Just a flesh wound,” he said then laughed. “I always wanted to say that.”

“It's not a joke, Damien. Are you okay?”

“I'll live. Just a bit sore. The blood is probably to be expected after getting stabbed. Like I told you though, it isn't deep.”

Steph didn't seem convinced and Jess wasn't either, but what could they do? Jess was thinking that maybe the wound was worse than he was letting on, but having never seen a

stab wound before there was a chance she was just overreacting. If Damien said he was fine then all they could do was believe him. “Let’s go downstairs,” she said finally.

The three of them gathered candles from the bar and entered the rear corridor. The air seemed no warmer inside, which was strange as earlier it had been filled with a warm air current flowing up from the stairs. Now it felt as cold as the rest of the pub. Steph took the staircase first and Jess and Damien followed. When they reached the bottom, darkness greeted them and Jess realised the fire had gone out.

“Oh no,” said Steph, lighting the room with her candle. The image of Old Graham shone into view, still lying on the floor where they had left him. Even in the poor light, Jess could see the waxy blue tinge that travelled the lines of the old man’s face and, particularly, his lips. Old Graham was dead.

Steph leapt down onto the floor, dropping her candle on the cement floor where it quickly extinguished. In the darkness, Jess and Damien had no choice but to listen to her scream.

#

Outside it was as Harry had feared. They were surrounded. In all directions the tall, hooded figures loomed over them, standing motionless, shoulder to shoulder, forming a wall of bodies. In front of them sat the hounds.

“What do we do?” said Harry.

Lucas shoved him forward. “Just swing for the first bugger that comes for you. Kath and I will handle the hounds.”

Harry willed his legs to take him forward and after several false starts he got himself moving. The monsters remained in place but watched him with great interest. Harry felt like a lowly ant beneath their stares. A low growl emanated from the hounds but they made no attempts to attack, heeled to their hooded masters, waiting for commands.

Harry was getting closer and wondered what he should do. Did Lucas really expect to take on this army with a broom and some salt shakers? They were going to die and any other outcome seemed impossible at that moment. Still, Harry wasn't going down without a fight. If they wanted him, they would have to take him down.

Once he got within a few feet of the wall of hooded figures, the hounds at their feet became agitated, hackles rising as they paced back and forth.

“Ready with the salt?” said Harry.

“Bring it on,” Lucas said, taking hold of Kath and bringing her forward. Both together, the two of them began hurling their salt into the air. It caught on the wind and dispersed in a thousand directions.

Harry watched and waited. Then the hounds began to squeal, their skin smoking and burning, dripping into the snow and turning it a dark, mottled brown. The beasts began to edge backwards, colliding with their masters who themselves were unmoving. After a few moments, the hounds managed to weave between the hooded figures and flee into the night.

Satisfied, Harry looked at Lucas, who nodded at the broom he was holding. Really? Was he really going to trust his survival on a domestic implement? Harry decided it was



time to find out. The three of them lined up and marched forward, meeting their attackers head on.

Harry raised the broom, flaps of porno pages filled with naked women fluttering in the wind. The hooded men remained motionless, their seven-foot frames like stone statues. When one of them finally moved, Harry thought he was going to soil himself.

The tall man at the centre of the wall stepped forward and flung out a hand. Harry curiously noticed that the things outstretched arm was normal and human. It was pointing at Lucas as its owner hissed the word, '*WORMWOOD*'.

Harry turned to Lucas who was grinning ear to ear, not out of good nature, but seemingly out of defiance. Lucas winked at the figure addressing him. "How ya doing there, Mickey? Been keeping well?"

"You know this...this thing?" Kath said, the disgust in her voice not even slightly hidden.

"Aye, but now is not the time."

"It never is with you," said Harry.

"Harry," said Lucas, "now would be a good time to sweep up the trash."

Harry didn't understand at first, until, finally, a light bulb went off in his head. He rammed the broom forwards, aiming for the hooded man's head. The blow missed and that seemed impossible. The intended victim had gone from motionless stone to dodging away from the blow in what seemed like an unearthly blur; a glowing wisp of light that didn't seem to actually move as to just simply appear somewhere else. Harry cursed out loud. "Damn it! I missed."

“No, you didn’t,” said Lucas. “Get you’re bloody arse moving.”

Harry realised that the attack had left a gap in the wall of hooded bodies. The three of them ran, stumbling through the deep snow and almost having to claw themselves along. Despite their early lack of movement, the hooded men were now giving chase, screeching and wailing as they did. As one got close, Harry swung out with the broom. It blinked out of existence and reappeared out of harm’s way just as his brethren had before. Harry didn’t mind if the swings were making contact or not, they were warding off the danger either way.

As he clambered through the snow, Harry came side by side with Lucas. He turned and looked at him. “What the hell are they, Lucas?”

Lucas looked back and smiled. “Angels.” He said it casually, as if the explanation was not completely insane.

Harry almost fell, just about managing to right himself with his next steps. “Angels?”

“Like I said, Harry Boy. Now’s not the time.”

The three of them continued making their way forward, not really knowing where they were heading other than away from danger. As Harry looked back, he saw that they were no longer being pursued. The ‘Angels’ were apparently in no rush to get their ‘sinner’. But despite the lack of pursuit coming from behind, Harry could clearly make out something ahead of him.”

“Something’s up ahead,” said Kath.

Harry nodded. “I know, I can see. Ready with the salt?”

“Yes. Ready with broom?”

The three of them slowed down (not that they were making particularly great speed anyway). The person in the distance began to come into clearer view, heading towards them quickly.

Kath stated the obvious. “They’re coming right at us.”

Harry focused, as much as he was able to in the blustering snow. “It’s...”

“Nigel!” Kath shouted the word gleefully. “Are we glad to see you!”

Nigel came up to them, huffing and puffing. Harry noticed that the man had dried blood on his clothes as well as terrible burns on the left side of his face. “You okay, man?”

Nigel looked feral, like an injured fox. When he answered, his words were slurred. “I’m fwine. Jush had an asscident.”

Lucas placed a hand on the man’s shoulder. “You don’t look fine, brother. In fact you sound worse than a chorus of drunks. And that head wound don’t look none too pretty. Let’s get you back to the pub.”

Nigel seemed dismayed by this suggestion and lashed out. “Get sh’fuck offsh me.”

Harry didn’t like the way the man was acting. “What happened Nigel? Is Steph okay?”

Nigel’s face scrunched up in a snarl at the mention of her name and Harry tried to understand why. Then he saw the bloody knife in the man’s hand and wondered why he hadn’t spotted it sooner. Harry’s eyes widened. “Did you hurt them?” Harry went to approach Nigel, but the man raised the knife at him.

Lucas put his hands out in front of him placatingly. “Whoa, whoa, there fella. We just want to know that the lasses are safe.”

Nigel spat blood into the snow, and began backing away as he spoke. “You tell that bitch, I’ll be back to finish what I started. I’ll slice her fucking fingers off and keep them in my truck with all the others from sluts I killed.”

Harry’s entire body contorted with rage as he realised what the man’s words meant. He began to wonder about whether that knife had been used on Steph and about whether Damien had been innocent of what they’d accused him of. He found both questions too hard to think about. “I’m gonna fucking kill you.”

Nigel continued backing away, holding the knife out in front of him in defense. Harry went to get after him, but Lucas stopped him. “No need, Harry Boy. Look!”

Harry looked past Nigel and saw the shapes behind him. Gathering in the distance was a group of hounds and Nigel was walking directly at them. Harry relaxed and waited for the inevitable to happen.

It took about three minutes for Nigel to realise that he had been surrounded. The things attacked him as one, enveloping him as they had Jerry. Harry watched with grim satisfaction as Nigel swiped impotently with his flick knife, managing to take a chunk or two of flesh from one hound, but failing to keep away the other dozen. Although it was hard to see past the writing bodies of fur, Harry could clearly make out Nigel’s intestines being fought over in a macabre tug of war.

But once the grim satisfaction begun to wane, the scene made Harry feel sick. He turned away and continued on into the snow, back towards The Trumpet.

Back towards Steph.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Despite the three of them being huddled together, Jess didn't feel any warmer. Damien had managed to get the fire going by setting fire to some of the surplus duvets. They wouldn't burn for long, but they were better than nothing. Now the three of them lay shivering beneath a dozen sheets and blankets, trying to hold on to as much warmth as possible.

“Poor Old Graham,” said Steph, still upset but past the worse of it. She had wailed for almost twenty minutes when she first discovered the old man had expired. Jess knew that Steph felt responsible for it, but everyone knew it was because of Nigel.

*Pervert. Hope he's frozen to death or being eaten alive by one of those monsters out there.*

Jess thought about the things she'd seen outside with Jerry and found it hard to imagine them clearly. With the hours that had passed it all seemed like some absurd hallucination. Monsters under the bed did not exist, she'd told herself that from a young age, but she could not deny the death and bloodshed that she had witnessed tonight. Ben. Peter.

Old Graham. They were all good guys. She just hoped that the other's made it back soon. She'd do anything to sit, listening to Jerry's inane references to pop culture. But it would be best not to dwell...

"How long did you know Old Graham?" she asked Steph.

Steph let out a little huff that was almost a laugh. "Whole time I worked here. Eighteen months I guess. He could bore you to death, but he didn't have a bad bone in his body. Complained all the time, but never about anyone or anything in particular. I think he was a lonely old man that just wanted to be around people."

"Least he lived a long life," Damien chimed in, his voice jittery from the chill affecting everyone's lungs.

"He didn't deserve to go like this though. He survived a war and this is how he dies? It's such a waste."

Jess squeezed Steph's hand under the blankets. "I think he went the way he would have liked. Drunk as a skunk and the centre of attention."

Steph and Damien laughed.

"So," said Jess, moving on. "Damien, are you really as much of a badass as you like to make people think?"

Damien was silent for a moment, but eventually answered. "Who says I want people to think that?"

"I dunno. Guess it's just the impression you give off. It confuses me though, because after tonight I'm starting to think, bullshit."

Jess didn't know why she felt the need to goad Damien, but she wanted a serious conversation to keep her mind occupied. Plus, she was intrigued about the kind of person Damien really was.

"You reckon?"

"Yeah," said Jess. "I actually think you're a nice guy. You just don't want people to know it."

"I agree," said Steph.

Damien was silent again for a moment. Jess could feel him rustling beneath the sheets. When he finally spoke up, he sounded tired. "Maybe the only reason I'm not a nice guy is because people think bad of me no matter what I do."

"But you make people think like that. You chose to make people think you're a thug."

Damien laughed. "You think I made people see me this way? I had no chance of ever being anything other than a thug."

Jess sighed. "Is this the part where you say your daddy never hugged you enough?"

"No," said Damien. "This is the part when I tell you my dad had me selling drugs for him at eight years old. No one would ever expect a kid, huh? Or how about how my dad put a lad in a coma a couple years ago and made me take credit for it around the local estate. 'It will make people fear you', he said. You're absolutely right; my dad never hugged me because that's not what gangsters do."

"Are you shitting me?" Steph asked. She sounded mortified.

"No, Steph. I'm not shitting you. Truth is I was glad the day he went to Jail. Thought it would set me free from his fucked-up demands, but I was just wishing on a fucking star. He

called me at least once a day, making sure I was running his empire for him 'til he got back. Selling the merchandise and bringing in the dime.”

“You can’t blame everything on your dad,” Jess told him. “I saw you cause enough trouble to see that you enjoyed being the big man.”

“Yeah, course I did. The only love and respect I got was from the guys I hung with. If people on the estate don’t fear me then I’m nothing. I’m alone with nothing.”

“Why didn’t you get out?” Steph said. “You could have done something.”

Damien was quiet once more but the sound of his breathing was heavy and distinct, laboured. “I was getting out tonight. I had a bunch of money stashed and I was going to stay with an old girlfriend that moved to Edinburgh a couple years back. I just had one last thing to do tonight, then I was out of here.”

“One last thing?” asked Steph.

“Warn someone.”

“Who?”

“The guy who gave evidence on my old man and sent him down. Took over a year but my dad’s mates finally managed to find out who it was. My orders were to kill the guy tonight; take him outside and stick a knife in him.”

“Jesus,” said Jess, not believing her ears. “You weren’t going to do that though, were you?”

“That’s what I’m telling you.” Damien raised his voice and it seemed to cause him pain. “I was...gonna warn him, tell him to get the hell out of...town. Soon as the snow



stopped I was going to get on a train and never come back. Maybe go to college and do business or something.”

No one spoke for a while. It was a revelation, for sure, and not one Jess had expected. She felt sad that Damien may not get the chance to fulfil his plans for atonement. Jess closed her eyes, feeling more tired than she'd ever felt. The cold was no longer bothering her much and in fact she was starting to feel quite numb. Maybe now she could finally rest for a while.

*So tired...*

#

Harry's legs ached and he wasn't sure how much further they would take him. He didn't know whether the pub was two yards away or two thousand. All he could see was snow, and although he could see nothing following them, angry growls and wailing from unseen beasts filled the air all around them.

Harry could no longer feel his feet from the cold and it felt as though he was walking around on nerveless stumps. He could see Kath was suffering too and hadn't heard her speak since they'd watched Nigel die. Lucas however seemed fine, unaffected by the cold for reasons that Harry was eager to find out. Was the man any more human than those things?

“So,” said Harry. “If the hooded men are Angels, what are the dog things?”

Lucas continued looking forward as he walked, but answered the question promptly. “Hounds of Hell.”

Harry scratched his chin. “But don't Angels come from Heaven.”

“Aye, they do, Harry Boy, but Angels have dominion over both heaven and hell during certain circumstances.”

Harry felt himself confused already. “Circumstances such as what?”

“You know, family reunions, birthdays, the apocalypse.”

Harry spluttered. “The apocalypse?”

“Aye, but it’s not as dramatic as you might think. There are no horsemen, none of that fire and brimstone nonsense. The old man upstairs likes to do things a bit more efficiently. Biblical floods and all that.”

“Or snow storms,” Kath added.

Lucas smiled. “Yes, or snow storms, my dear.”

Harry was trying to follow, but things still didn’t add up. If this really was the end of the world and God intended to freeze the world to death, then why did he need...

“The Angels, as you call them, why are they here?”

“Call them overseers if you will. God can’t just make the snow fall unendingly without having a presence on earth. He needs vessels to channel his power through. That’s why the Angels have come down here, to exercise His will.”

Harry nodded, an idea forming in his head. “So if we take out the angels, we can stop this?”

Lucas laughed, loud and hearty. “Do you know how many of them there are? We’re talking tens of thousands, and they don’t play nice.”

Harry sagged. “I still don’t understand why they are doing this. It can’t be because of me.”

“I already told you Harry Boy, it’s not just because of you, strictly speaking. It’s because of everyone, really. God gave Noah a second chance, but that’s all the big man had in his pocket of goodwill. He vowed that if the human’s threw it in His face one more time then they wouldn’t get another reprieve. But that’s what you all went and did anyway with your sinful ways. Fucking, murdering, raping, stealing, cheating, Facebook. You name it; you people have over indulged in it. Over time, you all tipped the scales why past the point of no return.”

“But not everyone is like that. Why can he not just punish the bad?”

Kath sighed. “Because there were probably too few to make it worthwhile.”

Lucas nodded. “Aye, there are a few decent souls, and He took that into consideration. He allowed man to pass judgement on man.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

“I mean that he decided to judge mankind by its own values. Harry, after your wife and son were mowed down you made the choice for everyone.”

Harry spat. “I had no choice. The guy had already lost his license for the same thing a year before. He was a lousy fucking drunk and probably mowed down a dozen children before my son. He was an alcoholic. No good to anyone.”

“Sounds like you, Harry,” Kath said, spitefully.

It made Harry angry but what was the use in arguing? “Maybe it is,” he conceded. “What would you have done after losing your family?”

“That’s the point,” said Lucas. “You had a choice. Did you get on with your life and make the memory of your family proud or did you give in to vice, rejecting the gifts God gave you? Did you know that the reason Thomas was a drunk was because he too lost a son in a tragic accident? Just like you, Harry. Ironic, no? Have you really behaved any differently than him?”

“No,” said Harry, understanding the hypocrisy. “But I never drove drunk. I never let my problems endanger anybody else.”

“No, you just got hammered one night and murdered the chap who accidentally killed your family. Understandable, I guess, but definitely not the right path. God decided to judge humanity by your actions and your choice was vengeance. Now vengeance has been reaped down upon you all. You committed man’s final sin...well the last one that counted in the grand scheme of things anyway.”

Harry thought about the night he had killed Thomas Morris; the night he had crept into the hospital ward where the man had been admitted for a simple hernia operation. Getting past the lone prison guard was easy. It wasn’t as if they were going to place a highly paid special detachment outside the door. It was just one guy who obviously didn’t want to be stuck at a hospital at 3am on a Friday night. Harry snuck past him and entered Thomas’s room. The man was in a deep sleep. Even after Harry shoved the plastic bag over his head.

It took several moments for the man to wake up, and the last thing Thomas would have seen through the clear plastic smothering his face was Harry’s dark, grinning expression as he suffocated the life out of him.

When it was all over, Harry had vomited in the en-suite toilet, before hurrying out of the room and snagging the back of his hand on the sharp edge of an unused gurney sitting in

the corridor. The blood had gone everywhere and a nurse in a nearby ward had sat him down and stitched the wound, remarking on how much it resembled the shape of a star. Harry had been silent the entire time the nurse looked after him, staring into space like a zombie, but somehow he had left the hospital without incident. He had just killed a man and no one had noticed a thing.

Harry had gone home immediately and drank for seven days straight. Later he sold his successful furniture business, as well as his house, leaving him with over half a million pounds to drink himself to death with. He hoped it wouldn't take that long. A year later, here he was, responsible for the death of mankind.

“Bullshit!” he said.

Lucas put his hands up. “Hey, I don't disagree. I don't want the world to end any more than you do, but it is what it is.”

“And there's nothing we can do?” asked Kath.

Lucas shook his head. “Unless you can convince the big man to change his mind, but I don't think he's listening. You can hold them off for now with objects of depravity like the porno mags, but that'll only work for so long. Same reason they can't enter the pub, it's a den of inequity and they can't step their holy toes in it.”

“How do you know so much?” Harry demanded. The snow was sapping his strength and he needed answers before he was too tired to ask them. “How do you know all about Angels?”

“Because I used to be one, laddie. Long time ago.”

Harry understood. It came to him in a flash of inspiration. “They called you wormwood.”

“That they did, but I prefer you to use my rightful name.”

“And what’s that?” said Kath, obviously not yet understanding.

Lucas turned to the woman and grinned, pointy teeth shining. “I’m Lucifer, the Prince of Hell. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Harry frowned. He should have been shouting ‘bullshit’, but somehow he knew it was true. Somehow the reality of the situation just could not be denied. He was trudging through the snow with the Devil, pursued by murderous angels. There was just one more thing that didn’t make sense. “Why the whole Irish jig then, Lucas Fergus?”

“Would you prefer I had horns and a red suit? Let’s just say that Ireland is close to my heart. Good, fun-loving, people. Although I can take many forms, and appear however I wish, Irish is my favourite. Plus the chicks dig the accent.”

Harry laughed. *What a head fuck.* “Why are you here? Are you helping the Angels?”

Lucas shook his head vehemently. “Those righteous do-gooders? Hell no. They may be my brothers, but we parted ways a long time ago for good reason. All of the Angels that were any fun came with me downstairs to set up Hell. It’s the place to be, as long as you haven’t been sent there for...treatment as it were.”

“So, we’re all gonna go to Heaven or Hell after this?” Kath sounded hopeful. She obviously thought she was destined for Heaven.

“Fraid not, luv. After the final sin, God forsook you all. You’re all coming downstairs with me to whichever level you deserve.”

“Level we deserve?” Kath sounded worried.

Lucas nodded; he seemed to be getting a bit impatient now as they continued through the snow. “The levels dish out appropriate punishment. A murderer gets murdered. Over and over. Forever. A rapist gets raped. A bully gets beaten. You get the general theme here, right?”

“Yeah, I get it.” Kath shut up and stayed that way, seemingly lost in disturbing thought.

“That just leaves you,” said Harry. “You still haven’t told us what part you have to play in all this.”

“Okay, I guess I should tell you.”

Before Lucas had chance, Harry found himself, for the second time that night, surrounded.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

“They’re not going to give up are they?”

“No,” Lucas confirmed. “Not until they have you.”

Harry raised the broom in front of him, hoping it would work as well as last time.

“What will they do to me?”

“Send you to Hell.”

Harry nodded. “Thought so.” He eyed up the line of Angels, wondering which one he should go for first. He decided to do as he did last time and aim for the middle, but before he had chance, a pillar of fire zigzagged towards him, sending him into a sideways dive. The snow cushioned his fall but was still jarring enough to knock the smut-broom from his hand.

Harry looked up just in time to see another wall of flames arcing in his direction. He rolled over, barely managing to dodge the burning death, but found himself even further away from his only weapon. “Lucas,” he shouted. “The broom.”



Lucas nodded, searched around the snow, located the broom, and then went for it. He was too slow though and Kath got to it first.”

“Great,” said Harry. “Throw it here.”

Kath drew her arm back and looked as though she was going to hurl the broom in his direction, but then she didn’t realise it. Instead she held it in front of herself and started to examine it. “Without this, you have no way of defending yourself, right?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “That’s why I need it, now!”

Kath walked away from him and, incredibly, started making her way over to the row of Angels. Specifically, she approached the one in the centre, the one that Harry had intended to attack. She held the weapon in front of herself, keeping the Angels at bay despite the fact that none of them moved an inch. “You just want Harry, right? What will you do for me if I give him to you?”

She waited for an answer from the thing, but received none.

Kath jabbed and wiggled the broom in the Angel’s face, not getting close enough to hit, but making her willingness to do so clear. “I asked you a question, so have some manners. Remove your hood and answer me!”

Harry was in shock. Firstly, that the woman was betraying him, but secondly that she was addressing an Angel like an impolite five-year-old. It was surreal. Even more surreal was that the Angel did as it was told. It removed its hood.

Beneath the old, grey cloth was something Harry had not expected. Maybe if he thought about what an angelic stereotype would look like it would have been less surprising, but seeing the beautiful face appear from beneath the tattered hood was not what Harry had

expected. The Angel had shining yellow hair that fell in thin tresses across a flawless complexion. His eyes were a breath-taking cyan and the light seemed to light up around them. The Angel's piercing blue orbs were currently studying Kath.

Kath was immediately mesmerised and Harry could see the same shock in her face that he no doubt had on his. She still held the broom out in front of her, but it was slowly lowering as though the weight of it was becoming too much.

Lucas moved up beside Harry, "That would be Lord Michael himself."

Harry considered for a moment. "You mean from the bible?"

"No, I mean from real life. That is God's Field General himself, Archangel Michael. My brother, the Angel of death."

Harry looked at Lucas. "If he's your brother can't you make him stop?"

"You really don't understand family do you, Harry boy? One thing about Michael is that the only person he listens to is his Daddy. That's why he was always favourite. Bloody eejit!"

Harry didn't have time to play agony aunt, something was happening up ahead. The Angel in front of Kath – *The Archangel Michael*. *Jeez!* – was producing something from within his cloak. Something long and metal that ignited in flames as it was pulled free.

"There she is," said Lucas. "The beauty herself. You know that back in the day that sword belonged to me? Bastard took it from me during the Holy war. Still, I guess it looks better on him anyway."

Harry shook his head. "What the bloody hell are you talking about?"

“The fiery sword of damnation. The very sword that turned Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes.”

*This is really it, isn't it? The end of the world. God has finally called last orders and I'm stuck here facing down the Angel of Death with his flaming penis extension. If it wasn't so goddamn insane, I think I'd be laughing my ass off.*

Harry watched as the Angel raised his sword, burning the cold air and changing it to a thick, acrid smoke. Kath was still mesmerised and Harry wondered if she was under some kind of thrall or if she had just gone into shock after finally realising the situation she was in. The answer was unimportant as Michael brought down his flaming sword in a vicious snap. It hissed and spat as Kath's blood congealed on its shaft, turning to black powder and peppering the snow. Somehow Kath managed to turn around and face Harry, and for a moment he thought that he had only imagined the sword going through her neck.

Then her head started to tilt forward, independent of the rest of her body. Harry saw that the blade had indeed gone through her, so seamlessly that she obviously hadn't felt a thing. Kath's head fell to the snow, spewing it's fluids into the air like a decorative garden feature. Her body remained standing however, gushing blood more heavily, spraying it into the air like a gory water cannon. The cracked end of her spine poked from her neck, flapping its severed spinal cord like an agitated cobra. Harry winced when Kath's lifeless body finally fell forward and buried itself in the snow, turning it red.

Despite the fact Kath had clearly been a bitch, Harry suddenly felt very isolated by her loss; a lone man surrounded by callous Angels and a wisecracking Devil. He needed Steph more than ever. If this was really the end then he wanted to be with her.

Harry ran for it, leaving Lucas behind and not seeing any reason to ask him to follow. He ploughed through the snow with all his energy, kicking and clawing with one thing on his mind. *Steph!* He had no idea where he was going and only hoped it was towards The Trumpet and not away from it. With the apocalyptic freeze as well as an apocalyptic army of Angels trying to send him to Hell, Harry knew that the rest of his life was most likely measured in minutes rather than hours. For so long Harry had wanted nothing but to die, to leave the world and all of its pain behind, but right now staying alive long enough to get to Steph was the only thing he wanted.

The snow seemed to be increasing by the second, up to his waist and still rising. Before long, there would be no world left. No buildings, no roads, no rivers. Nothing. Just unending snow, rising. Rising. Rising.

Harry struggled onwards, each step seizing up his calves and stabbing the muscle with icy daggers. If only he could go back and do the right thing. He knew back then that killing Thomas Morris was wrong, knew it hours before he had watched the glistening light of life leave the man's eyes. He knew it was wrong even more when he saw the regret and the sorrow in the man's eyes just before he died. Thomas Morris killed Harry's family but at that moment Harry knew that the man was sorry. He knew because Thomas never struggled. He accepted the punishment for what he had done and even seemed happy about it.

Now the whole world was accepting punishment for what Harry had done. He imagined the billions of people that had frozen to death in their homes already or that had been reaped uncaringly by the Angels. He wondered how many people were still alive, trying to convince their children that the snow would stop soon and everything would be okay, that it was just bad weather. Harry started to weep, but wiped the tears away. He had

to keep going and didn't deserve time to stop and cry. When the Angels finally sent him to Hell he would welcome it, because that was where he belonged.

Up ahead, Harry saw the dark rectangle of a building up on a hill. It had to be the pub looking down at him from its elevated resting place. With renewed vigour, Harry began to dive and leap through the snow, sinking and wobbling with every step. He was going at a snail's pace, he knew, but gradually the building was coming into view and it did indeed turn out to be The Trumpet.

"Thank God," said Harry, before considering the words he'd spoken. "Actually, screw that and fuck God."

He reached the bottom of the hill and looked up at the pub. It was dark. Deserted. Lifeless. A dead building in a condemned world, but inside could be the only person he cared about anymore. He started to wade through the snow and up the steps, feeling the broken brickwork beneath his feet. Inside his stomach, butterflies rioted.

As he neared the top, he felt their presence. He felt the Angels. "Damn you," he shouted, turning around to face them. Each had their hoods down now, exposing beautiful faces and full heads of blonde and brown gossamer hair. They looked beautiful...angelic, but Harry knew that they brought only death. "Damn you, I said. Just let me see her."

He turned and ran, determined to make it back into the pub where he would be safe. Lucas had said the Angels could not set foot inside a den of inequity and that meant Steph must still be safe inside. *Nearly there, just a few more feet.*

Harry stopped in his tracks, falling into the snow and looking up at the figure that blocked his way. He thought about defending himself before realising he could not. There was nothing he could use, not even the porno-wrapped broom. Harry looked down at the

snow, defeated and not wishing to witness the method of his execution. “Okay, you got me. Just get it over with.”

“Get what over with, Harry Boy?”

Harry looked up. “Lucas!”

“Aye,” said the man, offering out his hand. “I thought you were never gonna get here. Took your sweet time.”

Harry smiled, surprisingly happy to see the Devil offer him a hand. He took it and hoisted himself up, quickly pushing past Lucas and barging against the pub’s door. The door was stiff, frozen shut. He was just about to cry out in defeat when Lucas strolled up to join him.

“Keep your hair on, lad.” Lucas placed a hand on the door making steam immediately appear. The frost on the metal was melting. After a couple of seconds, Lucas banged his fist once on the door and it swung open slowly. Lucas looked at him and grinned. “Three millennium in the Hellzone Boy Scouts.”

Harry nodded. “No shit?”

Clumsily pushing through the pub’s door, the sudden feeling of an even, solid floor disorientating his weary legs, Harry made towards the bar. The entire room was dark and no longer lit by multiple candles, but Harry had been there enough times to know where he was going. He made it to the bar in six blind steps and was shocked to find Peter’s dead body on the floor. Harry could only just make out the boy’s features as all but one of the bar’s candles had extinguished. It wasn’t something he had time for. He’d pay his respects later.

He grabbed the remaining candle and made his way behind the bar and into the corridor behind. Right away the freezing temperature told him something was wrong. Earlier the corridor had acted as a flume for the warm air of the fire in the cellar, but now it was cold. That meant that the fire was out.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Harry took the steps two at a time, luckily making it down to the bottom without miss-stepping in the darkness. As his feet planted on the cellar floor, he moved the candle in a quick semi-circle in front of him. The room smelt heavily of smoke, but the barrel fire was unlit. Next to it was the still form of Old Graham. Until tonight, Harry had never seen a recently dead body before – not even his wife and child as they had died in the hospital – but he now knew without inspection that the old man had perished. Harry felt his gorge rise, the fear and sickness taking a hold of him as his mind screamed out. He span around, illuminating the dark corners of the cellar. Searching desperately

He found Damien first and crouched down to feel the lad’s cheek. It was stone cold and Harry realised he was dead. What concerned Harry most was that Damien’s mid-section was covered in blood and that, despite the cold, the boy did not have on his thick puffer jacket. Did somebody stab him?

The answer came quickly to him.

*Nigel? Damn it. I can’t believe I knocked Damien out when he was the one who saved Steph all along. Now he’s dead and I’ll never get to say sorry for my mistake.*

Beside Damien, beneath the same pile of duvets, was Jess. Dead as well. Harry felt numb at the sight of such a young and pretty girl frozen to death. He shone the candle to her face and saw that her lips were blue and starting to frost over.

When he noticed a third body beneath the blankets, he was paralysed, not wanting to move because that meant he would have to acknowledge whatever he would find.

Steph was swaddled up to the eyeballs by a lasagne of sheets and blankets, half a dozen layers deep. She looked as delicate and as beautiful as Harry had ever seen her and he finally allowed himself to cry. He reached out and touched her face. Like Damien's it was ice cold. She was wearing Damien's puffer jacket. He must have preferred her to have it.

*But it wasn't enough.*

Harry shook his head, a deep darkness spreading throughout his soul. There was nothing else left. "I'm sorry," he said to Steph's unmoving form. "I'm sorry that I caused all this and that I never got to say goodbye. I used to think I came here every night to get drunk and forget about the past, but tonight I realised that I kept coming here to see you. You were the only person that allowed me to see that there would be a tomorrow and that it would be easier than today. It was you that took away my pain, not the booze, but thanks to me there will be no more tomorrows."

"Harry."

The word was soft, below even a whisper, but he heard it. A few moments past and Harry started to think that his crippled mind was just playing tricks on him.

But then he heard it again.

"Harry," Steph whispered, louder this time.

*Holy Shit, she's alive.*

"Steph! Steph, can you hear me?"

It didn't seem like she could, but she knew he was there. "Harry...I...missed you."



“I missed you too, Steph.”

She smiled. “I knew you’d come back. I always knew you were a good man. That you...would end up being my hero...one day.”

Harry was stunned. “I wish that were true, Steph. I really do, but I let you down. I let everyone down.”

Steph shook her head, eyes still closed as though she were reciting a dream. “No, Harry. The only person you ever let down is yourself. You’re a good man, but you don’t...you don’t see it.”

Harry wiped the tears and snot from his face. “You know what I wish, Steph?”

“No, Harry. What do you...wish?”

“I wish that instead of killing Thomas Morris that night, I’d have met you instead. Maybe you could have saved me...saved everything.”

Steph’s face lit up in a smile, but then went still. She didn’t reply.

“Steph,” Harry said, softly. “Hey, Steph, I just realised that you were my second chance. I’m sorry I blew it, but I’m going to put it right.”

Harry moved forward and kissed Steph on her lips. He wanted nothing more than for her to be alive a moment longer so that she could kiss him back, but he knew that she was gone. *At least I got to say goodbye.*

Harry stood up straight, tensing his cold muscles and testing each one to make sure they were still working and not completely frozen yet. Despite taking the steps two at a time on the way down, he took them individually on the way up, taking his time to digest just what

he intended to do. He lit the corridor above with his candle and made his way to the bar.

Lucas was already there waiting for him

*Just the man I want to speak to.*

“Harry Boy,” Lucas’s normal chirpiness was gone and he sounded solemn, like a guard on death row. He handed over a beer and took one for himself, the top’s already removed. Harry decided whatever happened, it would be the last beer he ever drank. *One for the road.*

“Lucifer,” said Harry, sipping the beer. “It’s time isn’t it?”

Lucas nodded. “It’s up to you, lad. To be honest I’m only here tonight because I’m duty bound. The apocalypse and all that, you know? It’s kind of traditional.”

“That can’t just be the reason.”

Lucas laughed his charming Irishman laugh. “No, you’re right. The truth of it is that Michael summoned me here to see the destruction of mankind. I guess they think I had a hand in bringing down the ceiling. Leading men astray and all that.”

Harry shrugged. “Well, didn’t you?”

Lucas swigged his beer down to the bottom third. “Well, yes and no. When I first fell from Heaven I hated you – God’s most prized creation – and I sought to corrupt you all. I wanted to spoil God’s work and his image that lived in all of you, but you know what I found out?”

“What?” said Harry.

“I realised that I was wasting my time. Men were doing a fine thing of fucking stuff up on their own. I had a hand, here and there, sure, but Hitler, Bin Laden, Bundy, the

nuclear-fuckin-bomb? All that shit was on you. The worst, most corrupt men that ever lived are mostly people I've never met.”

“Then why does Heaven blame you? Why have they brought you here to watch us die?”

“Because I fell in love with humanity. At first I rebelled against God because I wanted to live by my own rules and I sought about destroying you all, but after a while I realised that man wasn't in God's image, they were in mine. Men have spent hundreds of years fighting for their freedom just the same way as I and some of my brothers did against Heaven. Few hundred years ago, I stopped trying to destroy you and started living amongst you. I buried my anger with God and stopped being the boogeyman you write about in your religious texts. I'm no different to you all and just as sad to see that the party's all over. The only reason I'm forced to witness it end is for them to make a point.”

“What point,” Harry asked.

“To prove that anyone that goes against God will not be tolerated. Me included.”

Harry laughed.

“Why do you laugh, Harry Boy?”

“Nothing. I guess I just find it amusing to find out that the Devil is benevolent and God is wrathful.”

Lucas laughed too. “Well, I hope it teaches you not to always believe what the media say. Especially the ancient Aramaic right-wing media. The bible got me all wrong, I tell you.”

The two of them shared a laugh and finished their beers. After a few moments, Harry put his empty bottle on the bar.”

“Time to go, I guess, but before I do, can I ask you a question.”

Lucas shrugged. “You’ve done little else for the past few hours. Why stop now?”

Harry took that to mean yes. “You mentioned the levels of Hell, earlier?”

“Aye.”

“Which is the worst?”

Lucas didn’t seem comfortable by the question. “Well...it’s all relative, really. The punishment tends to fit the crime.”

“I know that!” Harry was becoming impatient. He could feel his body shutting down under the constant attack of the cold and he had to finish this before he gave in to hyperthermia. “But surely some layers are worse than others. Where do the very worst go, like Judas Iscariot and Hitler. People like that?”

Lucas thought before he answered. “Well, if you listen to Dante Alighieri then there are just seven levels, but in truth the regions of Hell are never ending. Time and space there is eternal, but there is a deepest level reserved only for pure evil. Light does not exist there and neither does hope of any kind. It is suffering and despair without beginning and without end; a place where Evil reigns and flays the skin of any soul that dare venture there. It is a Hell beyond human understanding and no human, not even the vilest, has ever committed sin harsh enough to be sent there. It is deserving of no man. It was created to hold *me*.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “A Hell so bad that it was made to torture the Devil himself?”

Lucas nodded and seemed upset by the thought of it. “Aye, they call it...The Abyss.”

Harry took that information in and held onto it. *The Abyss. The darkest, most desperate level of hell that is fit only for the Devil himself. A place of torture beyond anything a man could imagine. Okay, got it.*

“Lucas,” Harry said. “It’s been a pleasure meeting you and I sincerely hope that the Abyss never claims you. Sounds strange to say, but I think you might actually be one of the good guys.”

Lucas laughed. “I have many names, but that’s a first.”

Harry shook the Devil’s hand and walked away, leaving his candle on the bar and entering the darkness.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Harry opened The Trumpet's door and looked out over the landscape. The blizzard had finally begun to die down, its job almost completed. The world had been rendered featureless. Everywhere Harry looked was pure white and buried beneath giant snow banks. Across the street, the tops of buildings were just about visible, but their doorways were covered up past their tops. Harry had a feeling that Lucas had something to do with The Trumpet not yet being buried.

At the bottom of the hill stood the Angels, lined up and stretching on forever like the Great Wall of China.

*Although that's probably buried along with everything else. The world's greatest achievements reduced to featureless white.*

Harry hailed them. "I'm coming over. I give up, okay?"

The blond Angel in the centre – *Michael?* – nodded. Then he lifted his arms out in front of him and shot fire.

“Hey!” Harry protested. “I said I’m coming!”

Harry thought he was about to get fried but realised that wasn’t Michael’s intention. In front of him the steps had been cleared of snow, melted by a rapidly disappearing river of fire. “Oh, er...cheers.”

Harry took the newly uncovered steps slowly, in no rush to test out the theory he had in his head.

*I guess time doesn't mean much when you're eternal*

The Angels stood patiently, seemingly happy to wait for him. Michael had taken a step forward, exiting the line. When Harry reached the bottom of the steps, he saw that Michael was smiling reassuringly, like a Dentist about to perform a root canal.

“Welcome, Sinner,” said Michael in a far softer voice than he had in the previous instances that Harry had heard him speak. His presence was no less awesome.

“Can, we just use ‘Harry’ for now, yes?”

“As you wish, Harry Jobson.”

“Just ‘Harry’ is fine...you know, don’t worry about it.”

Michael bowed his head at Harry as if there was a great pity that he was forced to acknowledge. It made Harry angry, but he couldn’t let it distract him.

“Are you ready? It is time.” said the Angel.

“I just have a couple of questions to ask first.”

Michael looked at him and something that Harry thought was anger streamed through the archangel’s eyes.

*Obviously, The Angel of Death doesn't appreciate being delayed by a mere mortal. I bet he thinks it's 'impertinent'.*

Harry wanted to laugh in the Angel's face.

Michael seemed to calm himself as he spoke again. "Ask your questions quickly, Sinner."

*There's that word again. Fucker!*

Harry nodded, also wanting to hurry things along, before he lost his nerve. "After what I did, after I committed the....final sin, or whatever, it condemned everyone to Hell, right?"

Michael nodded.

"Do you think that's fair?"

Michael was visibly annoyed. "It is His will."

Harry nodded. "Right, right, didn't think appealing to your better nature would work, so I guess I should skip straight to plan B."

"Plan B?" Michael repeated, confused.

"Yeah, I want to make a deal."

Michael exploded, but managed to do so without moving an inch. He seemed to oppress the air around him. "YOU DO NOT MAKE DEALS WITH AN AGENT OF HEAVEN. YOUR WILL IS INCONSEQUENTIAL TO HIS DECISIONS. YOU WILL OBEY, SINNER."



“Okay, okay, but my final wish is just that you hear me out. If He ignores my offer then so be it and I will take what comes to me.”

Michael begun laughing and Harry was disturbed by how much like a child it sounded. “Okay, mortal, I will allow you to amuse me. Speak your deal.”

*Okay, here goes.*

“Send me to the Abyss.”

Michael actually seemed to flinch at the suggestion and Harry hoped that it was a good sign. “Don’t send me to whatever Hell I deserve, send me to the Hell that no man deserves. Send me there and leave me there forever.”

Michael seemed to soften, no longer angry. It almost seemed like he was suddenly in awe of Harry. “You speak of things that you could never hope to understand, Harry Jobson. The Abyss is a punishment befitting no man. Why would you ask for such endless suffering?”

“I’ll tell you, but first let me know, can it be done? Can you send me there?”

Michael nodded. “Yes.”

“Then my offer is that you send me to the Abyss in exchange for all of the souls that have been damned to Hell since I murdered Thomas Morris. Save Steph, Jess, Jerry, and all the other people that don’t deserve Hell and instead send me to Abyss to pay for humanity’s sin. Will my torture there outweigh the debt needed by sparing these people?”

Michael shook his head and began to be sob. The sight of it was almost heart-wrenching – the very act of an Angel crying seemed to be the embodiment of the word ‘tragedy’. “The debt of suffering would be a thousand times more than that which is owed.

You cannot imagine the suffering. You should not make such frivolous suggestions without knowing the full consequence of what you suggest. It would be for ever and you wish to make that decision on a romantic whim. You are a fool, Harry Jobson.”

Harry stepped forward and was amazed to see Michael wince. Apparently, talk of the Abyss was enough to make the Angel very anxious. Harry knelt down. “Then show me what I seek and then let me decide.”

“So be it,” said Michael, placing both of his hands upon Harry’s head.

What happened next was indescribable. Images and feelings shot through Harry’s very soul, showing him inhuman tortures at the hands of even more inhuman creatures. It was a place of endless and unimaginable pain and suffering. A place where even a single second lasted centuries and was enough to break a man’s mind into a million horrified splinters. It was eternal agony in a place where only evil and sadness existed. It was the heart and soul of Hell itself.

Harry shot back from Michael’s grip, falling onto his back and panting. Tears fell from his eyes and already his soul felt damaged just from seeing images of the Abyss.

*Can I do this?*

Harry dragged himself up off the floor, weak and terrified. He took the steps needed to take him toe to toe with Michael. After what he had just witnessed, Harry found it hard to breath and even harder to talk.

But he had to do this.

“Spare their souls,” he said. “Send me to...the Abyss.”

Michael seemed sad, in fact the Angel's very being seemed to turn to sadness itself.

“So be it, Harry Jobson.”

God's Angel of Death reached forward to place his hands on Harry's forehead, but just as he expected to feel the touch of Angel fingers searing his soul from his flesh, something else happened.

Michael took a step backwards and looked up at the sky; so did all of the other Angels, forming a never-ending line of stargazing figures. Harry looked up at the black sky too, but could see nothing but stars and a full moon. Harry wasn't happy about the delay because it gave him an opportunity to back out of his crazy request for eternal damnation.

*No Harry, you decided to do this, and that's exactly what you're gonna do. Steph and the others don't deserve to go to Hell because of my crimes.*

Michael was smiling and the feeling of joy seemed to cascade from the archangel in bright, colourful waves. He looked at Harry and nodded, as if he knew something that he did not. “Goodbye, Harry Jobson,” Michael said, and then placed his hands on Harry's skull.

The pain of his soul being ripped from his body was exquisite. Like having a thousand fish hooks dragged through the insides of his body. *The pain's already starting*, Harry thought as his soulless husk of a body fell to the floor.

## EPILOGUE

A news reporter came onscreen. She was enveloped by an over-sized pink ski-jacket. “Good evening, I’m Jane Hamilton, reporting for Midland-UK News. Fortunately, after nearly 19-inches of snow, the weather finally seems to be improving. Temperatures have already begun to rise and the snow is predicted to end soon. Roads will soon be in the process of being reopened while rail links are expected to be resumed within the next few d-“

Harry found himself at the bar of The Trumpet. It didn’t happen instantly and it felt as though he had flowed back into his body like gravy through a sieve. At first he remembered nothing...

Until the person next to him spoke.

“How you feeling there, Harry Boy?”

Harry almost choked at the sight of the Irishman – *The Devil* – and started to panic as it all came rushing back. *Please, not again. Is this hell? Is this the abyss?*

“Calm there, fella. You made it. All is well for another millennium or so. The big guy gave you all another chance.”

Harry was stunned. “He...he did?”

Lucas laughed and sipped a pint in front of him. “Don’t act so feckin surprised, it’s what you planned, isn’t it?”

“Well...yeah, but I didn’t expect to be back at the bar. I thought I really would go to the Abyss, or maybe, best-case-scenario, God would let me into Heaven for my good deed. I didn’t expect...this.”

“Well as it turns out the man-upstairs loves a little sacrifice, here and there, and yours was a biggy. He decided that your final deed was enough to convince him that maybe humanity still had a fighting chance. Good on you, lad! Though you’re the only one that can remember any of it, so don’t expect a fanfare.”

Harry shook his head, blinking, and feeling like he’d just awoken from a dream. “So why are you here? Here now, I mean?”

“Because I wanted to give my thanks. I like this crazy, fecked-up world as much as anyone, and without it I wouldn’t have a thing to do but sit around in an overcrowded Hell. Truth is I knew there was a chance you might turn things around.”

“That’s why you were here wasn’t it? To help me?”

Lucas hushed him and looked left and right shiftily. “Keep your voice down. If Michael and his choir of gayboys heard that, they’d be after me with their self-righteous wings all in a flap. I didn’t come to help you. I just wanted to make sure you were...properly informed.”

Harry nodded and smiled, looking around the brightly lit bar and feeling more hope than since Toby was born. “Well, Lucas,” he said, “if you didn’t fill me in on what was happening then I wouldn’t have had a clue. I certainly wouldn’t have made the deal I did. If you hadn’t turned up we’d all be in Hell, so... thank you. For a Devil you’re sure not what I expected...Lucas?”

The Prince of Hell had departed, disappearing without Harry or anybody else noticing. Harry hoped Lucas had stayed long enough to hear him say thanks.

At the end of the bar, Harry noticed Old Graham sitting alone, drinking by himself. Harry smiled, finding it ironic that he was so happy to see the old codger. Harry made his way over to Old Graham who looked up as he approached.

“Hey, Harry,” he said.

Harry sat on the stool next to the old man. “Hey, Graham. You’re into History and all that aren’t you? Weren’t you in the army?”

Old Graham beamed proudly. “That I was, ten long years. In the Signals I was. Hit the Falklands a full hour before the SAS did. Yet they get all the glory.”

“Brilliant,” said Harry. “I wanted to learn more about the past, and about brave men like you. I was thinking about going to the Imperial War museum at the weekend. Would you like to come with me and be my guide?”

For a moment, Harry thought the old man was going to fall off his stool. Then he gathered himself together and nodded enthusiastically. “You know I haven’t been out of this bloody town in eight years. I would love to come, Harry. Thank you, I mean it.”

Harry patted him on the back. “Good. We’ll have to make a regular thing of it. Right now though, I’ve got to go, so I’ll come by tomorrow night to see you. You’ll be here right?”

Old Graham laughed. “Does the Devil have horns?”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “I think you’d be surprised.”

Old Graham obviously didn’t understand and Harry was glad about that. Knowledge of the night’s previous run of events was a burden he was more than happy to shoulder alone. He walked over to the centre of the bar where he had been speaking to Lucas before he disappeared. *Back to Hell or wherever.* On the other side of the wooden surface was someone he wanted to talk to very much.

Steph spun around and smiled when she saw him. Harry couldn’t forgive himself for ever ignoring how beautiful she was. He would make up for it though.

“Harry,” she said to him. “Another drink?”

Harry shook his head. “No thanks, I’ve given up.”

Steph looked at him in bewilderment. “What since five minutes ago?”

Harry nodded and grinned. “It seems like longer, but yes I have. Time to start living my life in better ways.”

Steph seemed genuinely happy. “Good for you, Harry.” Then suddenly her expression flipped upside down and she seemed very sad. “Does that mean you won’t be coming in here anymore?”

“Maybe,” said Harry. “Which is why I wanted to know if you’d come to dinner with me on your next night off.”

Steph's face lit up. "I'd love to. I'm free Thursday night."

Harry reached out and took Steph's hand. She seemed embarrassed but he could tell that she also liked the feel of the two of them touching. "Then it's a date. You can tell me all about this pet grooming business you're going to set up."

Steph was surprised. "How did you know about that?"

"I don't know," said Harry, "but I want to learn all about it, and all about you. Right now I have to go, so I'll be back tomorrow night to arrange with you."

Harry left Steph in a fluster behind the bar and moved towards the exit. Damien was lay across the coach, enjoying the fire. As Harry got closer Damien noticed him staring. The boy stood up.

"The fuck you looking at?"

Harry smiled. Finally he could see through Damien's hardman disguise and see the lost boy beneath it. "Hey, Damien. I just wanted to ask you something."

"What?"

"Well, I used to have a successful business, but I sold it. I was thinking of starting up again, so I need a partner; someone young and smart. Guess I'm looking for an apprentice, but I don't have a son. I used to but he died. His name was Toby."

Damien's eyes flickered back and forth, as if he expected a sneaky attack to come at any moment.

Harry continued. "I know you're a busy guy, but I don't think you enjoy selling drugs. You're better than that and I'd really like to help you be successful in a less dangerous way. I need a man like you. I think we can make a lot of good honest money together."



For a while it seemed like Damien was going to strike out and hit him. Harry wondered for a moment if he'd misjudged the boy and was relieved when his demeanour finally softened. "You serious?" he said.

"Very!" Harry went for a handshake. "Deal?"

Damien smiled and shook Harry's hand. "Yeah, deal."

"Great, I'll speak to you about it soon." Harry walked away, but Damien stopped him.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. You know, for the opportunity and everything. Most people just think I'm a thug."

Harry nodded. "You and I are going to change their opinion."

He made it over to the pub's door and prepared to leave. There was a lot to do in order to get his life back on track, but first he needed to find a phone. Harry was going to make a call to the Police and tell them about a rapist named Nigel. The sicko's truck was parked off the main road right now and if they came quickly they would find enough evidence inside to put the man away for a very long time.

Harry was going to start living his life, putting the world right and making things better one thing at a time. For the first time in his life, he was looking forward.

## THE PEELING OF SAMUEL LLOYD COLLINS

### Thursday

My big toenail fell off today. That leaves three on my right foot and two on my left. It stung at first, but now my toe just feels...hot. I'm keeping the nail in an ashtray in the kitchen.

My name is Samuel Lloyd Collins and I suppose, in a way, this is my last will and testament, except I don't have anybody to leave anything to, so I guess this is really just my last testament. Or maybe writing this is merely the closest thing I have to company.

I don't have to be alone. I could go next door and take part in one of their endless political debates that echo through the walls and keep me awake at night. Sometimes I think about yelling at them to 'keep it down', but what would be the use? Politics are high on everybody's agenda right now. One would expect them to be.

Everyone has their own theory on how 'The Peeling' started, but I personally think it was the Arabs. It's always the Arabs, isn't it? Saddam is dead and the Yanks finally got Osama. So what choice did they have left but to go for broke? Everyone assumed their master plan would culminate with a nuclear attack on a major city, but in many ways this virus is worse. We may have snuffed out the leaders, but their passion for killing, it seems, will never die. You cut the head off a chicken and it runs around like a maniac, spraying

anyone nearby with blood. That's what 'The Peeling' is: arterial chicken blood spraying us all with its infectious filth. I guess the Arabs won in the end...

I came down with the sickness on Tuesday. Two days ago. I've already lost a bit of hair and some skin off my testicles, and you already know about the toenails. Funnily enough, my fingernails are currently unaffected, probably the only reason I'm able to write this. I thought about typing this on the computer, but somehow it felt like a man's final words should be in ink, don't you think? Maybe when it comes right down to it, paper is more permanent than a collection of cheap circuits.

My future is laid out for me now. I'll be dead within a week, give or take a day. The beauty of the Peeling is that it leaves no room for hypothesising. No room for hope. It kills every time, no exceptions. In a way that certainty has allowed me to come to terms and accept my fate. This time next week I will be a bubbling oil-slick of rancid, dissolving flesh. Somehow I'm fine with that.

But I need to know who is responsible for the pain I'm in. I already told you I think it's the Arabs, but unless I know for sure... Well let's just say that knowing for definite would bring a certain degree of closure to the situation. Of course, the honourable men and women of the Government's various agencies are urgently investigating the origin of this disease and those responsible, but as each second passes, Great Britain withers and dies beneath its second great plague. I just hope to be alive when they determine the guilty party.

Already know it was the Arabs, just need to know for sure...

**Friday**

I woke up this morning stuck to my pillow. Not because I had been drooling in my sleep, but because the skin below my left eye had rotted and fused with the cotton. I had to rip the pillow away and half of my face with it. The resulting meld of infected flesh and sickly white cotton reminded me of a surrealist painting, beautiful in a way. Maybe I'll have it framed before I die.

What an odd thing to muse upon! It would not surprise me if I have gone quite mad. I'm already starting to feel delightfully delirious (or maybe that's just the throbbing and burning where my face used to be).

Such good bone structure I was blessed with, but did not know of, until I was today faced with it in the mirror. The bone of my cheek now shows right through, covered only by several, thin slivers of sinewy gristle. I look like the Phantom of the Opera (albeit a grizzlier version). I wonder what part of me will dissolve tomorrow. That's the fun part of this sickness, I suppose, not knowing which chunk of skin will decompose next. It isn't like typical flesh-eating diseases; they have a point of infection and usually spread systematically. But The Peeling strikes the body at random, necrotising a man's feet before popping up a day later and doing the same to his ears. I've seen hundreds of case photographs and no two victims follow the same path of infection. The only non-variable: it's always fatal. No one understands this disease at all...

...and no one can stop it.

I think it's starting on my chest...

## **Saturday**

I can see my ribs. Two of them, glistening at me like curved piano keys. It's amusing, in some morbidly fascinating way, to see one's inner workings. The pain is starting to subside, and thankfully only throbbled for a few hours in the morning, but the cloying odour inside the

house is repugnant. Ideally, I would open the curtains and windows, but I don't wish to be disturbed by the outside world. I would only become resentful of those who still have all of their skin. Besides, it was being around other people that infected me in the first place, sealing my fate, and I hate them for that! But retaining my humanity is all I have left to focus on for now and resentment will only make that task harder. I have decisions ahead of me that should not be made in temper...

I have been corresponding all day with a trusted associate that is supplying me with up-to-date information on the current pandemic, along with the progress of the on-going Government investigations into the crisis. So far it seems clear that this was a premeditated and focused attack on the western world. The Peeling has, so far, hit 90% of Europe and is seeping its way into the East. USA and South America are also stricken, worse than we are in fact, but it is unsurprising to me that, as yet, the Arab world is unaffected. I am eager to see just how far into the East the disease spreads before ceasing its journey of human pestilence. I'm guessing that it will be shortly after it runs out of Christian nations to infect.

## **Sunday**

I lost a hand today. Thank God it was my left and that I can still continue writing this. I now have a withered stump that drips periodically with a viscous yellow discharge. It looks similar to the contents of a Cadbury Cream Egg but smells worse than anything I could ever hope to describe to you now. I suppose it's the aroma of lingering death.

Next door are still at it. Talking incessantly at all hours. I need peace and quiet right now. Time to think. I already informed my colleagues that I would be working from home for the next week and am not to be disturbed under any circumstances. They were not happy, but I'm the Boss, so they'll have to cope. They don't know that I have the sickness, of

course, probably too wrapped up in their own fear of it to even consider the possibility.

People only worry about themselves nowadays.

My associate emailed today and told me that the infection was definitely engineered – *Wow. What a revelation!* – and that it was unleashed upon the world at strategic locations: Major cities, along coastal areas so that the disease would work inwards from all directions, eating around the edges of England as though it were a Jaffa Cake with a chewy orange centre...

God what I would do for a box of Jaffa Cakes right now! The stump of my wrist is itching just thinking about it. Perhaps it's excitement?

Anyway, I have sent a reply email asking what is currently known about WHO engineered the disease. That is what I have to know.

Then maybe I can do something about it.

## **Monday**

I have lost an eye today. It is indeed unfortunate, but in a way I am blessed to have persevered this long anyway. Many do not, and at least I have the other eye. My left one just dribbled out of its socket today like an under-boiled egg with its top sliced off: all foamy white and custardy-yellow. I almost laughed when I looked in the mirror. I look like a zombie-pirate.

At least it doesn't hurt. Not physically.

I suspect I have little time left now and I am anxiously awaiting news from my associate. I can feel the illness seizing my internal organs in its corrosive grip and it's only a matter of time before they start to decay completely. I have already taken to soiling myself involuntarily, so I assume that my intestines are already rotten. I would take a shower to get

clean, but the pressure would only shred what remaining skin I have left. For now I will sit and wait for my associate to provide me the information I so desire...

Who is responsible? Who turned me, and most of the free world, into a quivering mass of mutilated flesh?

I wonder if there's any Jaffa Cakes in the pantry.

## **Tuesday**

It has now been one week since I first noticed the skin under my armpit was peeling away in pus-filled chunks. One week since I realised I was a dead man walking.

Dead man peeling! Ha!

But I am still alive, devoid of nearly all my skin, granted, but alive nonetheless.

Moist splatters of pungent flesh litter my home now, whilst foul scabs fall from my body constantly. The only merciful thing about this disease is that I feel nothing.

Nothing except for the soft scraping of insanity inside my fleshless skull.

## **Wednesday**

Today will be my last. I can feel it. My lower legs snapped today when I got out of bed, too rotten and malformed to bear what little weight my frail body has left. It is of no importance however, as I awakened to something wonderful: *You have mail.*

I am about to drag my withered limbs over to the computer right now, to see what my trusted associate has for me. I will record the email, and my response, for you right here, as I feel it will be important.

*Dear Prime Minister.*

*I sincerely hope that you are keeping well in this time of dire need. Great Britain is within the talons of great turmoil and despair, but I trust that your inspired leadership will see us through as ever. This shall not be the end of our endless empire and the good people of this nation will go on stronger than before. That is our way and always will be. May Angels sit on our shoulders as God guides our souls through the times ahead. Long live Great Britain.*

*But without further ado, Prime Minister, I will provide you with the Intel you require. It was discovered at 0300 GMT today that the disease is not contained to western nations as first assumed. In fact we now have reliable information that the infection, commonly referred to as 'The Peeling', was contracted in Turkey and has quickly spread as far east as Japan. I'm sure you can appreciate, that with the USA also affected, it effectively means the disease has travelled the entire circumference of the world... Yet there is one country that has shown no effects of the illness, despite being surrounded by it on all borders. We have tried to contact that nation's Government but they have declined all opportunities to reply. It now seems a reasonable assumption that the country in question is responsible for this worldwide plague.*

*That country is North Korea.*

*As always, I await your orders on how to proceed, but I implore you to act wisely.*

*Yours,*

*General Harvey Whitehead*

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*Dear Harvey*

*I was certain it was the Arabs! Guess we can all be wrong sometimes...*

*Regardless, since my dear Martha and the children were taken from me by this wretched sickness, I have had no time to mourn them, so I regret to inform you that this will be my final act as leader of this nation. I hope that you and your family are well, and remain so. I wish the same for Great Britain.*

*Without continued procrastination, my orders, in regards to the Godless entity of North Korea, are as follows:*

*Send the Nukes.*

*Send them all...*

*They will not take this world as their own.*

*Yours regretfully,*

*Prime Minister Samuel Lloyd Collins*