

Does Evil Exist in Realistic Child Characterisation in Literature?

Explored through the creation of a novel, *The Cuckoo's Nest*,
a literature survey and the application of psychology and philosophy

by
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Abstract

The thesis comprises a novel and a critical exegesis. They explore how creative practice can be used to investigate the potentiality of evil in a realistic child character in literature and from where that evil might originate if the character is found to be evil.

The writing of the novel, *The Cuckoo's Nest*, allows a testing out of the author's beliefs, emotions, preoccupations, and ideas related to evil. Through such a sustained narrative, there is space to explore a long timeline, and in the case of the novel, the development of a child through nature/nurture and whether that child's behaviour could be considered evil. Such practice-led research is a way of generating new knowledge from a story not previously told.

From an examination of the concept of evil, my test of evil, based upon previous tests of evil, is used to determine whether the child protagonist in the novel is truly evil. This means their behaviour must encompass an evil act with evil intention where there is no defence. The test of evil is also used to establish the presence of evil in a selection of realistic child characters who sit within the trope of the Evil Child in Literature from the 1950s to current times.

The thesis challenges prior views of evil in fictional characterisation where some commentators claim that evil exists only in supernormal and supernatural characters. The child protagonist in *The Cuckoo's Nest* is realistic, like children are in real life, and in line with the Evil Children in Literature examined through a literature survey.

The result was not as expected. The children in the literature survey, including the child protagonist of *The Cuckoo's Nest*, turned out not to be truly evil as they had a defence.

Key words: Evil, Realistic, Children, Literature, Creative Writing, Phenomenology, Nature, Nurture

Declaration

This thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted in any form for the award of a Higher Degree at any other Educational Institution.

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A reed warbler feeding a cuckoo chick on the nest (RSPB, 2024)

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Does Evil Exist in Realistic Child Characterisation in Literature?

Introduction

During the 1990s I was working as a primary schoolteacher in the leafy suburbs of Staffordshire. With nice children, and supportive parents in middle-class surroundings, the worst a pupil might do was to engage in a playground spat. So, when on 12th February 1993, I heard on the news that two ten-year-old boys, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, had kidnapped, tortured and killed a two-year-old child, James Bulger, I was flabbergasted. A headline in *The Guardian* (1993) proclaimed: “James Bulger ‘battered with bricks’”, the article outlining the means of his demise:

The Merseyside toddler whose mutilated body was found on a railway line at Walton, Liverpool, in February, was violently attacked with bricks, stones, and a piece of metal...James...died from multiple injuries to the head, said Richard Henriques, QC, prosecuting. His body was then placed on the railway track and was cut in two by a train (*The Guardian*, 1993, p.1).

Employed in a school in a pleasant area, I was a world away from two dysfunctional Liverpoolian families. Even the judge, Mr Justice Morland, said ‘the killing of James Bulger was an act of unparalleled evil’ (House of Lords, 1997). The question which came to mind was what drove them to it. Could the answer lie in bullying and violence at home, poor parenting, a genetic predisposition for aggression, the need to control and overpower, or — the influence of video nasties? I remember it was suggested that *Child’s Play 3*, in which an evil doll, Chucky, who was possessed by the soul of a serial killer, might have inspired the real-life murder when it was released in 1988. Rumours in the media circulated that Thompson and Venables had watched this film prior to the crime but this was disputed by Venables’s father. Apparently, the film includes a scene in which Chucky dies after being splattered with paint then smashed in the face — James Bulger was splashed with paint and battered to death. Although I have read that

there is 'no conclusive link between video and violence' (BBC News, 2011) there was an article in *The Independent* (1993) which reported a possible connection between the film and another real-life killing, that of Suzanne Capper in 1992. I have since found out that a novel by Josh Webster called *The Doll* (1986), published two years earlier than the film, could have influenced it, where the book involves a pair of identical twins who receive a doll, a miniature replica of themselves, which reveals evil secrets motivating one of the girls, Gretchen, to torment her sister forever; she is evil to the core.

Following my reading of a selection of novels incorporating so-called 'evil' children I was incentivised to write my own novel to include a realistic child, like a boy in real life who, in this case, does bad things, and to investigate whether his deviant behaviour could be classed as evil. Throughout the writing process I deliberated on my child protagonist's behaviour and why he had turned out this way. Questions I asked myself were, what does he have to do to be evil, and what exactly does it mean to be evil? Via a synthesis of three discrete methodologies, I wanted to explore the existence of evil in realistic child characterisation in literature. I used creative writing as a means of enquiry into an exploration of the creation of identity; a literature survey to analyse earlier works of literature incorporating the trope of the Evil Child; and psychological theories and philosophical argument pertaining to the concept of evil to investigate the sources of bad behaviour with the possible existence of evil, and all of this in a bid to ensure his validity as a realistic child.

The act of writing is research where 'writing is a method of inquiry to be a viable way in which to learn' (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2011, p.959). The writing of my novel, *The Cuckoo's Nest*, allowed me to test out my beliefs, emotions, preoccupations, and ideas related to evil. Through a sustained narrative such as this, there is space to explore a long timeline, and in the case of my novel, the development

of a child through nature/nurture and whether that child's behaviour could be considered evil. Such practice-led research is a way of generating new knowledge. According to NAWA, 'The process of artistic practice and its resulting output are perceived as contributions to knowledge' (Neale et al, 2018, 1.1). Creative writing research allows writers to inquire, think through and communicate their findings so that readers can interpret what they have read as a means of learning something new from a story not previously told. A novel is not just to entertain but 'to enlighten, disturb, invigorate, upend or otherwise engage the reader' (Webb, 2015, p.4).

My novel, *The Cuckoo's Nest*, explores how social relations and natural temperament can impact upon behaviour. The story originated out of a short story written for an Open University course entitled 'Start Writing' following my early retirement from primary school teaching in 2011. The inspiration for the story was a television documentary featuring the parasitic behaviour of the female cuckoo where she lays her eggs in the nests of other bird species. The surrogate bird nurtures the cuckoo as though it is its own and the cuckoo chick will push unrelated eggs and chicks out of the nest. In the novel, cuckoo behaviour is analogous to human behaviour where a baby is abandoned by its mother in a stranger's house. The couple 'adopt' the baby and bring him up as their own. After they produce a natural child, the 'baby cuckoo', Joel, must destroy his sibling. This overarching metaphor in *The Cuckoo's Nest* affects everything and everyone in the novel. According to Richardson (2000) using metaphor, a literary device, it is possible to experience one thing in terms of another, accomplished through comparison or analogy. The metaphor of the cuckoo influenced the plot, the attempted killing by Joel of his sister, and Joel's increasingly challenging behaviour as he grows throughout the novel. Joel was destined, therefore, to be a potential killer. It is in the final chapter that Magda reveals Joel's involvement.

'She was chasing it round...I could hear it, the dog barking, her laughing, getting excited. The next thing, I heard him telling her to stop. He was getting angrier and angrier, I could hear it in his voice, and I thought...oh no...here we go again, and I was just about to get up to see what was going on when I saw him, through the mirror. He forced her onto the knife. He had her from behind, gripping her elbows. I'll never forget the look on his face. He was enjoying it. He knew what he was doing' (p.290).

As a primary schoolteacher I often reflected upon the reasons underlying some children's poor behaviour: a difficult home life, deprivation, poverty, deficient parenting skills where bad nurturing was often the cause of bad behaviour. Saying this, children from 'good' homes are not averse to anti-social behaviour where the excuse of poverty, for example, may be absent. Pushy parents also contribute to a plethora of reasons why bad behaviour happens at school. At Parents' Evenings I often heard a parent respond to reports of their offspring's aggression, rudeness, or stubborn behaviour with comments like 'he/she is just like his father/mother', making me wonder whether nature also, had a part to play. Like his ornithological counterpart, would Joel too in *The Cuckoo's Nest* possess an innate desire to kill, an in-built tendency to murder his siblings?

The word 'evil' is often linked to an act of misbehaviour, however minor or major the crime. Whilst reading Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* I discovered, by a cursory internet search, that the young Ben Lovatt was on a list of 'Evil Children in Literature'. Other characters on the list included Jack Merridew from *Lord of the Flies*, Flashman from *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, Regan MacNeil from *The Exorcist* and, to my surprise, the girls of St Trinian's (Furness, 2015). This type of source offers engagement in a narrative in which the public is consciously interested. For me it was a launchpad into academic enquiry where I questioned the meaning of 'evil' and what it takes to be evil if, indeed, 'evil' exists, as some deny its very existence. Renner (2013) is on the academic forefront when dealing with evil children in film, literature, and popular culture. In her book, *The 'Evil' Child in Literature, Film and Popular Culture*, she

outlines a list of evil children, claiming that the figurative trope grew post World War Two with a book entitled *The Bad Seed* by William March. The quotation marks around the word 'evil' in the title of Renner's book are significant as she claims that only supernormal and supernatural children can be evil. Indeed, Cole, in *The Myth of Evil*, claims that evil exists only in fiction through the creation of inhuman, demonic, monstrous characters (Cole, 2006, in Russell, 2010). It is here that Renner and I differ, as I uphold the existence of evil in realistic fictional children in contrast to Renner's claim.

As a result, I seized upon the opportunity to create new knowledge in the field of literature and creative writing by exploring whether realistic children in literature can be evil. I build on Renner's work by challenging her view that evil exists only in supernormal and supernatural child characters. I explore whether some realistic child characters in literature are evil by applying a test of evil and I produce new knowledge to show that although evil actions exist, evil intention in realistic child characterisation in literature is more difficult to prove.

The evil deeds of real-life children are set forth in Listverse (2007) Top 10 Evil Children where Robert Thompson and Jon Venables are fourth on the list. According to Morrison (1998), this child killing by child murderers must be one of the worst types of killing, making them the youngest convicted murderers in British history. Seeing that art can reflect real life, then it is entirely possible that real-life child murderers can exist in fiction, too.

The objective was to write a novel to explore what it would take for Joel to be evil, not as the supernatural Regan or Damien in *The Exorcist* and *The Omen*, but to write about a realistic child character, like the school children I had taught. Central to writing a novel is its dependence on character. The reproduction of speech, behaviour

and thoughts in a naturalistic representation should enable emotional investment in the reader. Writing in the form of a novel can, also, be an "instrument of scientific inquiry" (Crawford, 1951, cited in Richardson, 2000, p.6), a blurring of literature and science and, in this case, psychology. Therefore, the methodology of creative writing was used to explore the origins of deviant behaviour through a realistic representation of a rounded character. What affects him most? Those around him, the environment he lives in, his natural temperament, or is a mixture of all these impactions to blame?

There was another reason for using creative writing as a methodology. Joel is an identical twin separated from his brother shortly after birth. The research is a novel due to ethical issues. It would be unethical to separate identical twins to investigate their unshared experiences in different social settings. This happened in the 1960s in a now discredited New York twin study where five sets of identical twins and one set of identical triplets were separated and adopted by parents of differing socio/cultural groups on the advice of Dr Viola Bernard, a Columbia University psychiatrist (Segal, 2018). Joel is 'adopted' by a wealthy couple. Therefore, my novel is a reimagination of the life of a fictional monozygotic twin. This enables him to take advantage of opportunities unavailable to his twin, the protagonist of a subsequent novel, who will be an interesting contrast, subject to a life of poverty and deprivation. The objective of Joel's creation was to explore the reasons underpinning his deviant behaviour, whether that behaviour is evil and from where that evil might originate — the nature/nurture debate. Regarding the project's question, Joel had to be portrayed as realistic, in line with other realistic characters who sit within the tradition of the trope of the Evil Child in Literature.

In the project's question, *Does Evil Exist in Realistic Child Characterisation in Literature?* the words 'evil' and 'realistic' need further consideration. Regarding

'realistic', what does it take for a character to be realistic? Joel was to be realistic, meaning like a person is in real life. Despite his shortcomings he would speak and act like a regular child, unlike a supernormal or supernatural character who might fly or be demonically possessed. For this research I thought it vital to work within a process where:

Realistic plots and characters are constructed in accordance with secular empirical rules. Events and people in the story are explicable in terms of natural causation without resort to the supernatural or divine intervention (Morris, 2003, p.3).

In fiction, a realistic character has goals and motivations as well as flaws and faults.

They resemble real people exhibiting believable traits, emotions and behaviour. Critics have debated a definition of "Realism, a mode that is not simply about reality but mimics it" (Nash, 1994, p. 4). It is a movement synonymous with some nineteenth century novels, and in particular *Madam Bovary*. Flaubert once declared that:

There will be no 'effable', no supernatural, no dragons, no paradise, no hell...no monsters...and nothing that is finally 'naturally' inexplicable. (Flaubert, 1953, cited in Nash, 1994, p.13).

Nash goes onto say that Realism is about everything which humans experience.

However, he is keen to point out that "a work that is realistic for one culture eludes precise and accurate description as realistic for another". Therefore, even though a belief in witchcraft, involving the practice of magic powers, possibly evil ones, is *bona fide* to some in Haiti, a novel incorporating such activity could be classed as Realism as the people involved are human beings functioning in everyday reality; in this case, Magical Realism might better define the term. Although two of the characters in the literature survey carry out behaviours incorporating elements of witchcraft, Merricat Blackwood and Frank Cauldhame, they do not reside in countries, the US and Scotland, which readily accept it as the norm. Both characters do so due to dysfunctional backgrounds and mental illness.

The word 'evil' requires more consideration, an examination of which, when looking at the concept of evil, will take place following the novel when considering the possibility of Joel's evilness and of other realistic characters who belong to the trope of the Evil Child in Literature.

The Cuckoo's Nest is a psychological thriller designed for a wide readership in the commercial market of popular fiction. It explores the impact of nature and/or nurture on a realistic child characterised in literature — a child whose behaviour causes such injury and harm that it could be considered abnormal and possibly evil.

* * * *

The Cuckoo's Nest

PART 1

Chapter 1

Thursday 27th March 2008, 5.10pm

For the first time in his married life, Robin was locked out of his house at twenty-four Canorus Square. No matter how much he turned the key and pushed the door, it would not budge. He was getting soaked. It was tipping it down, the water splashing around his feet. Peering over the railings to the basement, a miniature waterfall was cascading down the steps flooding the yard below. The drainage still needed sorting. He'd promised Jenny he'd sort it a while ago. Finding a plumber in London, and one who wouldn't rip you off for living in Chelsea, was difficult. He tried the key once more, and with a bit of brute force managed to loosen the door, shouldering his way in. From inside the house, and now unjammed, the door closed more easily. Funny, really; it had never stuck in the wet before.

In the hall, he kept to the door mat, trying to shake off the rain from his jacket. Overflowing drains and a wet parquet floor? He could imagine her face. He switched on the light. It was one of those dull afternoons in early spring before the clocks change. The chandelier cast a veil of shadows around the walls across Jenny's Cescetti landscapes. Despite their characteristic grey skies, looking at them made him feel calm.

He went into his study, a small room off the hall facing the square. He sat at his desk and flicked on the computer. His aim was to finish the report he'd been working on at the office before the fire alarm had gone off, sending them out to shiver in the street. It was the third time they'd been evacuated that week. The preservation of the Art Deco building was paramount. You only had to sneeze to send some buzzer into a frenzy, and

with that thought he sneezed, spraying the computer screen on which an image of a stubbled square-jawed brute of a man stared back at him. Standing around in the cold had taken its toll. Using his shirt sleeve to wipe his nose, he considered making a drink to warm himself up. The room was chilly. It had gone five. The heating should soon be on. Nevertheless, needs must. He decided that finishing the report took priority over coffee and so started to proofread it, again. After months of investigating the modus operandi of a slippery Bulgarian gangster, he now had a decent story.

Outside, the rain began to fall more heavily. It was a sharp intensive shower this time, as though someone had suddenly switched it on, and the noise was acute, made worse by a rumble of thunder. He got up and looked through the window into the yard below. The rain was bouncing off its surface, the water still rushing down the steps. Mrs Lewis, the old busybody from next door, emerged from the communal garden opposite. He could just make her out through the blurry glass as she scurried across the street with her precious Pekinese tucked inside her coat. She let the garden gate swing to without securing the lock. This always irritated Robin, as it was a private garden, intended only for the inhabitants of Canorus Square. It was run by a residents' committee, of which Jenny was a member. She was more interested in nature than he, due to her 'posh country upbringing', as he liked to tease, whilst he didn't know a dandelion from a daisy.

He returned to his work and leaned on the desk, his hands in a prayer-like pose in front of the screen. If he could make the Editor's seven o'clock deadline, Bukhalov's vile face, and his despicable life, would be flashed across tomorrow's edition. Although it could increase his kudos if it made the front page, Robin thought his story, along with Pete's photographs, better suited a bigger full-page spread in the middle of the newspaper. He examined the photos again. Pete had clearly captured the culprit letting

two young girls out of the back of a white van. Then, in another, there they were, the three of them, entering that house in Camden, the one he'd sat watching for the past six months, well-known for its ill repute. The girls looked about twelve. It made him sick to think of those sleazeballs queuing up to abuse them.

Hearing the front door squeak as it was being pushed open, he looked up into the hall to see Jenny appear, eager to keep the wet umbrella on the coir mat as she closed it up. She wiped her feet, then placed it in a stand to catch the drips.

Robin smiled. 'Hi love, bloody horrible, isn't it?'

'You can say that again. It's so cold,' she said, wringing her hands. She pulled off her cream stilettos, which matched perfectly with her skirt suit, and pushed on a pair of sheepskin slippers. 'How come you're home so early? I didn't expect you to be in.'

He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms behind his head. 'The fire alarm went off again. We were outside for ages. Then, when we were allowed back in, the heating had gone off, too, so I came home to work.' He watched her inspecting her hair in the hall mirror, flicking her fringe to one side, tweaking her bob back into shape.

'Mum and Dad are coming tonight...you hadn't forgotten, had you?' She was eyeing him through the hall mirror with the schoolmarmish look she had perfected.

He leaned forward on the desk and ran both hands through his hair. 'I did actually,' he said, sighing heavily. 'I need to submit this story tonight.'

'Can't you give it a rest for once?'

'Got tons to do,' he said, shaking his head. He was silent for a moment. He needed to muster some stamina. 'Do you think...we could cancel them tonight? I'm snowed under.'

'Cancel them again?'

'I'll make it up to you.'

Pressing her lips together, she scowled. 'I'll be in the bath.'

'Jenny...'

He pushed back the chair to follow; she could sulk for England. But by the time he'd reached the stairs, she was already at the top. 'Jen...don't be like that.'

Dragging his hands over his face, he caught his reflection in the mirror. He stood right up to the glass, pulled down the bottom lid of his left eye and examined it intently. It was bloodshot, a pink patch smeared around the brown iris, and there were puffy semi-circles of skin under both of his eyes, the result, he knew, of too many late nights at the office.

From the bottom of the stairs he shouted, 'I'll bring you up a drink.'

She opened the bathroom door a touch and peeped out. 'Make it a Merlot.'

He checked his watch. Half past five. Too early for wine. He'd wait a while. He returned to the study instead. This report had given him grief. He had to get it right. He and Pete had spent too much time hanging about in grotty south London streets for the Editor to throw it straight back. Despite being a seasoned reporter, this whole affair had jarred his sensibilities like no other story had done before. Child exploitation was the lowest of the low. He read it out loud. Mistakes were easier to spot that way.

Yesterday, Emil Bukhalov, the Bulgarian leader of a human trafficking gang, was convicted for 15 years at the Old Bailey. DI Mike Smith, of the Metropolitan Police, was pleased with the results of Operation Flycatcher, which had taken eighteen months to bring closure to his sordid trade of the sexual exploitation of girls, ranging from seven to thirteen years of age...

Robin blew out a large breath of air. The antics of some humans staggered him. In his opinion, it wasn't enough. He should have got life. He pondered over every sentence once again, questioning the language he had chosen. Was it too opinionated? More rant than news? It was an exposé after all. Child trafficking was more widespread

than the average person liked to think. This would certainly stir up the punters. It would get them crying out for cesspits like 'The Jungle', to be wiped off the face of the Earth. He had read it umpteen times, replacing a comma here for a full stop there, so that eventually, just before six, he pressed 'submit', and sat back and closed his eyes. They felt dry and sore. He had suffered several bouts of conjunctivitis in recent weeks. He needed to chill more. Then, he remembered the Merlot.

In the kitchen, he made straight for the wine rack. After pulling out a bottle of Australian red and perusing the label to make sure it was one she liked, he heard from behind an odd scratching sound and immediately thought of mice. At Jenny's insistence he had set humane traps under the floorboards of the ground floor rooms; they had failed miserably. More drastic measures were needed. He looked around the kitchen. Everything seemed to be normal: tidy worktops, nothing in the oven on timed, coffee machine off, toaster, laundry basket with ironing and definitely no mice. Then he heard the sound again. It was coming from the laundry basket on the table. It was creaking. Something was inside it. Not that damn cat, again? He'd found that ginger tom curled up on the bed a few times; the one that Jenny felt sorry for, feeding it scraps in the kitchen. They were known to sleep in things like baskets. Placing the bottle on the worktop, he crept towards the table. It was better to sneak up on it and grab it by surprise before it could escape. He peered over the rim. There was only a blanket inside the basket, of pale blue, and one that he did not recognise. But then the blanket moved; there was something underneath it causing little bumps to rise and fall. A sneeze suddenly took hold as a pungent smell like ammonia hit him. Expecting something to shoot out, he pinched the embroidered edge between finger and thumb and, tentatively, pulled it back.

He had to catch his breath. 'Oh...my...God!'

A baby was wriggling in a white towelling suit. Its eyes opened and shut, and it panted quietly with its little fists squirming against its tiny body. Robin was stunned. Thoughts flitted around his head as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing. He looked at the back door, then went to check it, pressing down the handle and, to his surprise, the door was unlocked. He scanned the floor for the key, but there was no sign. Fishing his keys from his trouser pocket, his own back door key was jangling with the rest. Suddenly, the baby began to cry. He returned to the table and jiggled the basket trying to quieten the noise which suddenly crescendoed into a painful shriek. Robin looked up towards the direction of the bathroom. He needed Jenny now. He marched into the hall and bound up the stairs taking two at a time. 'Jenny,' he called, then opened the bathroom door. In a towelling robe and with a towel wrapped around her head, she was stretching over the bath wiping it down, the taps gushing water as it rumbled loudly, magnified in the confined space.

'Jenny, turn that off.'

She turned and eyed him.

'There's a baby in the kitchen.'

'What?'

He pushed past her and turned off the tap. His heart was beating fast. 'There's a baby in the kitchen.'

'A baby?' Her face turned a ghostly pallor.

'It's in a basket on the kitchen table,' said Robin.

She followed him briskly down the stairs and into the kitchen. From the basket, there came a helpless mix of whimpering and sobbing, and it creaked every time the baby rolled from side to side pushing against the wooden weave.

Jenny's face creased. 'Poor little mite. What are you doing *here?*'

Robin stared at the baby, an indistinct layer of fair hair covering the head. 'Who the hell has left it? And why here, more to the point? They've got *in* through the back door, it's unlocked. I'll get on to the police and...'

'Wait, there might be a note.'

'A note?'

'With instructions...telling us about him...why he's here. This could well be something to do with your work, Robin.'

'My work?'

Jenny stared at him. 'All that child trafficking you write about.'

Robin froze. Bukhalov. Was this one of *his* doings to get back at him for helping to jail him up?

She put her hands into the basket and felt around the baby's body. 'There's nothing with him,' she said.

Robin gazed down at the baby. 'How do you know it's a him?'

'The blue blanket? I'll check.' She opened the poppers lining the towelling suit. After unfastening the front of the nappy, she pulled it a little way from his body. 'I thought so.' Taking care to hold his head, she lifted him out and cradled him in her arms. Robin examined the baby's face: blond eyelashes, bright blue eyes, a fine covering of hair and white flaky patches across his scalp. Robin was flummoxed.

'Is this some sort of joke?' he said, clamping his palm to his forehead.

The baby punched the air with perfect miniature hands and began to twist and kick, then turned bright red, puffed out his cheeks and let out another enormous shriek.

Robin cringed. 'He's got a good pair of lungs.' He felt a headache coming on.

'Probably needs feeding.' She stroked the baby's wrinkled brow. Immediately the crying stopped as he fixed his eyes upon her.

Robin watched her closely. She was smiling at the baby. 'Don't get too attached. He's not ours. We've got to report this. It's a criminal incident.'

'Just...let's think things through. Don't be in such a rush.'

'Do *you* know anything about this before I phone them? We need to, we've been broken into.'

She scrunched her nose at him. 'Don't be ridiculous.'

He went over to the door and opened it again, then proceeded to examine it carefully, running his fingers down the length of its edge. 'Look, here, the wood's chipped. This door's been forced. I'd better check the rest of the house; we might've been burgled as well.'

The lounge was shrouded in darkness. After flicking on the light switch, he turned to look back at Jenny. She was rocking the baby who was sucking the end of her little finger. It was surreal; Jenny was taking it all in her stride whilst he, *The Daily News's* Chief Investigative Reporter into vice, was getting all hot-and-bothered.

Robin glanced around the room. Everything was in its usual place: the mahogany bureau, the Chippendale dining table and chairs, *House and Home*, *Country Life*, *Vogue*, all stacked neatly on the coffee table, the cream cushions of the three-piece suite, still puffed from Jenny's morning round of last-minute grooming. He opened drawers, scanned bookshelves, inspected the surfaces to see if anything was amiss. Although he'd been in the study, he made a point of checking it again, opening and closing desk and filing cabinet drawers, ensuring no files had been taken. Upstairs, Jenny's jewellery was still in its white leather box, and on unlocking the safe in the wall at the back of the wardrobe, it was clear that nothing had been touched. Whoever it was had breezed in and out, placing the basket on the kitchen table like the mythical stork.

Robin returned to the kitchen. 'Why us, Jen? Has somebody set this up? Something... we may have said?' She was still engrossed, rocking the baby. It was bizarre. A baby left in their kitchen. They must have used the passageway which ran from the street to the back. It separated them from Mrs Lewis. 'Are you sure you haven't said something...to someone?'

'So, it's my fault, is it?' The baby began to whimper. 'It's probably connected with you...you know...one of those girls who's got pregnant and left him with us because she's skint. Anyway, I think he's hungry.'

Robin could feel the tension rising in him. Normally, he was the one who kept control. Jenny's resolve was beginning to irritate. With the back of his hand, he swept hot beads of perspiration from his brow and clenched his other into a fist. 'Jenny...'

'Can you go to the shops and get him some food,' she said. 'I'll write you a list.'

'I need to go to the police, not the shops.'

'I know, but he's hungry. That's the priority now. We don't know when he was last fed.'

'It's not up...!' He stopped himself before going too far.

'It's not up to what? For us to feed him? Have you no compassion, Robin?'

'You know what I mean. He's not ours. It's Social Services' job to take care of him.'

'Shush, you'll upset him.'

Robin's frustration was telling. How much more did he have to spell it out? It was the same with the Editor at the office. The times he'd tried to explain the foolishness of rushing reports with dodgy facts were not worth mentioning. Jenny could be so condescending. There they were, with what amounted to a stranger in the house, and there she was, taking the moral high ground. He took a deep breath to quell his

nerves. 'I know you're trying to comfort him, but he's got to go.' He took his phone out of his trouser pocket and began to tap on the keypad.

'Stop it, Robin. Don't be so heartless...he's got to go! He's not a dog. We're not sending him back to the kennels.'

The baby started to cry again. Once more, his face turned red, and he screwed his eyes tight shut to shriek at the top of his voice. 'Sh, sh, sh. You're upsetting him,' she said, lowering her voice. 'The neighbours will hear. They'll be round to see what's going on.' To quieten the child, she placed her little finger in his mouth; he sucked on it instinctively. She turned her back on Robin and moved away. 'He's hungry. Go to the shops and get him something now...please.'

'No, Jenny, I'm going straight to the police. He's not our responsibility.' He grabbed his house keys off the table.

She glared at him; determination etched on her face. 'You do, and I swear I'll...' But her words were drowned by the baby's renewed cries of alarm.

'Do what?' He shook his head in disbelief. 'You're acting like a fool, Jen, as though he has a right to be here. I'm warning you now...'

'Don't dare to warn me!' She lifted his tiny body on to her shoulder and gently patted his back. It had the effect of calming her and the baby, as she held her face against his soft downy skin. 'Shush little one. Just let me enjoy holding him. He's perfect. Fancy someone wanting to leave him.' The baby was gripping her fingers, his own exact miniatures grasping hers. 'Look how contented he is. He's better off here than with some...junkie mother. That's what'll happen when they send him back.'

'He'll be fostered tonight. He'll be taken care of.'

'But we could do that.'

'I know, but legally, not by taking someone else's.'

'We're giving him a little respite, that's all. He's warm and safe here. Why do you think she left him in our house?'

'Well, that's the big question, isn't it?' He eyed the back door, chewing on his thumbnail. It was puzzling how they had got in. Initially, he had the notion it had been forced, but on subsequent inspection, he wasn't so convinced. Surely there should be more damage than a chipped piece of wood. Robin left the house to check the passageway linking the two Georgian terraces. He stepped along the tunnel, scanning for any tell-tale signs — scratches on the wall or something dropped on the way in. Back in the kitchen, he took a deep breath. 'No clues out there. Someone must have been watching us. Taking note of our comings and goings. In any case, the police need to know we've had a break-in.'

'But I thought you said nothing had been taken?'

'No. A thief got in and left a baby instead. Give me strength,' he muttered clenching his teeth. Antagonising Jenny was not a good idea. She had a short fuse. An image of his football programmes, in shreds on the back lawn, came to mind, after he failed to move three piles of them stacked in the study.

She hadn't been listening to him. She was smiling at the baby and the baby was smiling back. 'Doesn't it just melt your heart,' she said, her gaze intent upon his face. 'I can't imagine him living in some filthy flat.'

'We don't know where he comes from. We don't know his history or his mother's, for that matter.' Robin's thoughts flashed to that horrendous house in Camberwell, the one with the starving child eating scraps off the bird table.

Jenny raised her eyes to the clock on the wall. 'It's nearly a quarter to seven already. He needs to eat. Can you please go...now?'

'Okay, okay,' he said, raising his hands in surrender. 'What do you need?'

She dictated a list of items which he tapped into his phone. 'Powdered milk...disposable nappies...Vaseline, baby shampoo, talcum powder, feeding bottles...and...oh yes, a thermometer.'

'A thermometer?'

'To test the temperature of the milk.'

'Do you really need one? Can't you just use your finger?'

'Just do it, Robin.'

No point in arguing, he thought, as he marched out, grabbing his Puffa from the coat stand in the hall.

On his way down the King's Road, he strode past a couple of people prostrate in the doorway of a closed-up shop. Covered by cardboard, lying with a pair of curled-up dogs, he wondered whether the baby's mother was homeless, too. An image suddenly appeared in his mind of a female in dirty clothes and matted hair, scurrying down the passageway between the two houses. Mrs Lewis rarely used it. Once, she told him how scared she was, of its darkness even in daylight. It wouldn't take much for somebody to hide in the communal garden and, when the coast was clear, to nip down the passageway, hidden from sight. Was that it? Was Jenny right? Is this child the result of one of his exploitation news stories? He hated traffickers as much as he hated paedophiles, rapists, and sexual abusers. They were all eggs in the same basket as far as he was concerned. That South London gang he'd hit upon came to mind, its leader, a titled toff, head of his own finance firm, the vice side of the business keeping him in Rollers.

The street was busy, mainly with traffic. A bus pulled up in front of him to release a woman with a folded-up push chair in one hand, while she held the hand of a small child in the other as she jumped him off the step. He knew that Jenny would have

bitten off her hand to be in the same position. Not to travel on London buses; before living here, she had never used public transport. A chauffeur-driven Bentley had been her usual run-around. But despite her privileged position of never needing to go without, they had, so far, not managed to conceive. It wasn't without effort; they'd been trying for a while, had spent a packet on IVF.

The police station was not too far ahead. As he approached the blue light over the entrance, he slowed right down to peer stealthily through a set of revolving doors. There looked to be a receptionist behind a counter, and a tall leafy plant filling the gap between herself and a row of people on blue plastic chairs. It resembled a doctor's surgery. He walked towards the doors, then stopped. He knew what he should do, but Jenny could be very persuasive. An image of her holding the baby flashed in his mind. She said they were doing the authorities a favour. He *was* warm and safe. It would be only for a short time. Perhaps she was right, for now. He wavered on the pavement, walking one way, then the other, returning to the same spot where he stared into the building yet again.

'Do you need any help, sir?' came a voice from behind. It made him jump and he turned to find a uniformed policeman immediately by his side. 'If you've got anything to report, go ahead, we don't bite.'

'Hm...no, no, I'm fine thanks, it can wait...it's not important.' He looked away, rubbing his eye with the pretence he had something in it; anything to avoid the officer's face.

'Well, you know where we are if you need us. Goodnight, sir.'

Robin nodded. With his head down and his hands in his pockets he beat a retreat along the road. In his black clothes and black woollen hat, he felt like a fugitive fleeing the scene of a crime.

At the minimart, he scanned the list she had provided. Unfamiliar with the products of the baby aisle, Robin took time to scan the shelves. There was an array of infant needs and accessories taking up a whole block of the fully stocked shop. No wonder she had abandoned him. How could someone on benefits afford all this? London was full of single parents trying to make ends meet. He remembered writing an article on British urban poverty. An image of Sonia popped up — the teenage mother he had interviewed with only a ragged armchair and a crate for a table in the living room of a sparse Hackney flat.

Robin tried to peer in front of a shop assistant arranging boxes on a shelf.

'Need some help?' she said.

'I can't see the thermometers.'

'Thermometers.' She pointed down to a place on his right. 'Just below the dummies. New baby?'

'Mm...my wife's a stickler for perfection. She wants to make sure the milk won't burn his mouth.'

'Typical new mum. I used to use my finger. If it's too hot for you, then it'll be too hot for the baby. It's common sense really...no offence.'

It wasn't just him then, questioning a thermometer as a rather unusual thing to buy. His phone buzzing in his pocket sent her away. It was Jenny, no doubt demanding a progress report.

'Hi, everything okay?' he said.

'Where are you?'

'In the shop.' He could hear the baby crying. 'Is everything alright?'

'Yes. No. I've had to put mum off. She wasn't happy.'

'What did you tell her?'

'I had a bug. Didn't want them to catch it.'

'That's good, isn't it?'

'She wasn't impressed. They'd set off.'

'Have they gone back?'

'Apparently.'

'Good. I'll be home in a minute, we'll talk about it then. Got to go. Okay?'

Bye...bye.'

That's all they needed, her mother kicking off. He scanned the labels of the multitude of jars and cartons of baby food on display. There was so much choice, so much to take in. He was afraid of buying the wrong product. The shop assistant was hovering in the aisle again, watching him muttering to himself, reading the labels aloud. She offered to help him choose. 'How old is the baby?'

Robin was put on the spot. Good question. 'I...is this milk okay...for a newborn?'

'Ready-made or powdered?'

He checked Jenny's list. 'Powdered it seems.'

'This'll be the one,' she said, selecting a blue container with a prancing lamb and *First Infant Milk* daubed upon the side.

He allowed the assistant to mother him, to bag up the items from the list before sending him off into the cold night air. Robin quickened his pace, side-stepping pedestrians, and dodging traffic in his quest to reach home. He imagined Jenny pacing the kitchen, bobbing the screaming child in her arms, cursing his whereabouts.

But back at the house, all was quiet. Jenny was calm, comforting the baby in the lounge. A golden glow emanated from the standard lamp and with the curtains closed and the central heating on, the room was warm and cosy.

'Hi. Got everything,' said Robin.

The baby, lying next to Jenny on the settee, started to wiggle his legs as Robin placed the two bulging carrier bags on the glass-topped coffee table in the centre of the room.

'Right, you watch him,' she said, getting up. 'I'll make up the milk. He got very fractious when you were out. It's a good job he was quiet when I phoned mum.' Jenny hastened to the door which led into the kitchen at the dining end of the room. 'I nearly forgot to ring her...'

Robin didn't catch the rest. By now, she was in the kitchen. He could hear her unpacking the bags. She would be meticulously checking what he had bought. Any minute now, he would hear her complaining, about an incorrect purchase or something he had forgotten. But, with neither moan nor groan, there was a rustling of cellophane, followed by the microwave's whirr.

He sat in her place beside the baby, who was lying on the blue blanket. It was frayed in parts around the edge where the stitching had come undone. Robin caught a whiff of an unpleasant smell. He sniffed the baby. There was no sign that he needed changing. He turned his attention to the blanket instead. It was a definite cat smell, the same pee-like odour which lingered in the kitchen after Jenny had been feeding that cat. On closer inspection, there were short white hairs stuck to the woollen fibres, as though something sticky, like Velcro, had caught them in its teeth. When Robin turned him on to his side, the baby was content to allow Robin to pull the blanket away from his tiny frame. Robin turned up his nose. Gingerly, he picked up a corner using finger and thumb, and dropped the blanket on to the marble hearth.

'What are you doing?' Jenny was standing behind him holding a baby's bottle full of milk.

'It's filthy,' said Robin, pulling his face. 'It's full of cat hairs and stinks of pee. Don't touch it. The police'll need it for evidence.'

'Oh, for goodness' sake, Robin.' Sitting beside the baby, she picked him up and held him in her arms, his head nestled in the crook of her arm. Gently, she placed the teat between his perfect cherubic lips. He suckled on the teat like a starving lamb, finishing the milk in no time. Then, with a towel under his chin, she sat him up and kept him steady with her right hand, while making circular movements with her left around his back.

'You seem to know what to do.'

'I used to watch Mum with my sister. It's to stop him getting colic,' Jenny explained. 'Babies don't have the strength to bring up wind themselves.'

He was impressed. 'You'd make a good mother,' he said, then wished he hadn't and bit into his lower lip.

She pursed her lips at him.

'Sorry,' he mouthed. He knew the child would soon be gone, back with his mother, after she had regretted her stupid mistake. But most probably he would be fostered, taken in by an experienced couple on the Social Services' books.

Chapter 2

Thursday 27 March 2008 - 10.00pm

They did not call the police. Jenny said it was far too late and, against his better judgement, Robin agreed they would wait until morning. All through the night they stayed up in the lounge with the lights dimmed low. Although the baby was sleeping soundly now, there had been a traumatic moment when halfway through his first feed, he began to cough and fight for breath. Sitting him upright upon her knee, Jenny patted his back to wind him, but to no avail; he wheezed and gasped for air. She started to panic and shouted for Robin.

'Robin, he's choking,' she cried.

'Give him to me,' Robin demanded, taking the baby from her without her protesting, placing him chest down along his thighs. The baby's head flopped over the end of Robin's knees, and his chubby little arms dangled limply with fingers tinged a blueish hue. With the palm of his hand Robin thumped his back as firmly as he dared.

'What are you doing?' she cried, reaching out for the baby.

He swung away from her. 'It's to dislodge anything stuck, I know what I'm doing,' he said, continuing to hit him.

Jenny shouted for him to stop, but he carried on, pushing her away whenever she grabbed at his hand. Despite Robin's efforts, the baby still did not cry. His body was wilting lifelessly before them. Jenny kneeled on the floor, on a level with the baby's head. 'Oh my God, his eyes are closed...his mouth's open,' she whined examining his face. The baby was silent. She felt around his neck trying to detect a pulse. 'I can't feel anything, Robin. We've lost him, we've lost him,' she cried and began to wail and rock back and forth, her hands pressed against her cheeks, pleading for the baby to live.

'Try to keep calm, Jenny, please...you're not helping.' Robin thumped his back again but still there was no response. Turning him over to sit him upright upon his knee, the baby's head lolled backwards. Robin cupped his skull in his hand, pushed a finger between the baby's lips, forcing them apart to peer inside his mouth. 'I can't see anything trapped, his tongue's not stopping him from breathing.' Placing the baby face-down along his thigh, he began to hit him between the shoulder blades. Jenny screamed for him to stop.

'What are you doing? Give him to me.' She made for the baby, his arms dangling like a rag doll.

Robin tried to stop her. She pulled at his shoulder. He pushed her away with such force she fell backwards, hitting her head on the coffee table's rim. Suddenly, the baby coughed, spurted milk onto the floor. With his arm, Robin held the baby's head and body. He sat down on the edge of the settee, and slowly raised him upright using his knees. Jenny was sprawled on the floor rubbing the side of her head.

'Are you okay?' he said anxiously.

'Let *me* have him,' she said, hauling herself to her feet.' Folding her arms around his little body, she pressed her face against his. 'At least you're okay, little one.'

'He's got a huge sulk on,' said Robin, trying to lighten the frostiness between them. The baby's mouth turned down and he started to cry.

Jenny kissed his forehead repeatedly. She sat away from Robin, on the chair near the window, and held the baby close. His face had returned to a pinkish glow.

Robin held up the bottle to examine the milk. 'He was probably drinking it too quickly,' he said. 'Most of it's gone.'

Jenny closed her eyes and shushed the child. Robin noticed tears seeping from under her lashes. 'Jen,' he said, going to her to squeeze her shoulder, 'I'm sorry.' She shrugged him off.

He stood above them, helplessly. 'I knew what to do with him, Jen, but you were stopping me. Please, come on, he's alright now, he's fine.'

'Yes, but he wasn't a bloody minute ago, was he? I thought he was dead. I thought you were going to kill him. I really believed we'd lost him.' She wept quietly into golden hair. It resembled the finest silk thread, as soft as gossamer on a Christmas tree, Angel's Hair.

'Here...try him again with the bottle...' The cries of a baby were disturbing to him.

She took it reluctantly and placed it against his lips. The baby reached out and grasped the bottle, then forced it into his mouth where he sucked greedily, pumping the milk. Fearful of a repeat performance, Jenny pulled it out quickly, but he yelled in earnest, compelling her to try it once again. This time the baby closed his eyes and settled into a much steadier rhythm. Watching them together, Robin felt a surge of anguish. She was becoming too involved. Bonds were already beginning to strengthen. Robin could see that, although she'd known the baby for only a matter of hours, it was going to be difficult for her to give him up. A baby was just what she wanted. He had witnessed the extremes to which some women would go, their maternal instincts so strong they subsumed all common sense, forcing them into preposterous acts. A woman came to mind, the one they had headlined 'The Baby Snatcher of Peckham'. Robin could see her now, in court, overweight and tattooed, her hair scraped-back like a dog's docked tail.

'I know you were trying to help him,' she said, weeping into her sleeve, 'but it seemed so harsh, the way you were hitting him. I couldn't bear to watch you do it. I know you had to do something, but it was awful. How did you know what to do?'

He looked at her blankly. He was miles away, still thinking of the baby snatcher; she'd got ten years for walking into a hospital ward, then out with another woman's child.

'Robin?'

'Sorry...what did you say?'

'How did you know what to do...when he couldn't breathe?'

'Oh...!' He rubbed his eyes. They felt sore again. 'We did a Red Cross first aid course at work.'

'It's a good job you remembered,' she said. 'I can't imagine what kind of trouble we'd be in if we lost him.'

He nodded. 'It's not worth thinking about. We'd be up to our necks. I need a drink,' he said getting up.

In the kitchen, the first thing he saw was the basket. He stared at it. Touching the rim, he noticed, about an inch from the top, a green line, a thin ribbon of wood woven into its oval shape. He examined the interior for any clues as to its function. The baby had just about fitted in, although it was deep. It had no handles and loaded up he reckoned it would be heavy and awkward to lift. A woman might find it too difficult. Had a man left it instead? He thought of the man in his white apron, the one who delivered groceries to Lady Penelope's house at the far end of the square. It wasn't her real name, but she reminded him of a puppet which used to be on TV. A middle-aged blonde with bouffant hair, she always seemed to be wearing the same strappy nightdress whenever he caught sight of her at the door.

He placed Jenny's mug of coffee on the glass-topped table she had fallen against and studied it for marks, but there was no blood. 'How's your head?' he asked. She managed a smile and muttered that it was fine, before turning away to gaze at the baby who was lying behind a wall of cushions on the settee. Robin slumped down in the armchair by the window spilling whiskey on his trousers. With his head laid back and resting his now-depleted single malt on his knee, Robin stared at the ceiling and closed his eyes. He was washed out. He ran his tongue over his teeth. They felt furry and unclean, that odd salty taste still in his mouth, a side-effect, he figured, of the sleeping tablets his doctor had prescribed for him until he regained his equilibrium. During the consultation, the doctor had used that very word — equilibrium. Perhaps the glasses he was wearing at the time, the ones he wore to avoid computer-strained eyes, made him look intelligent. Equilibrium, a calm and normal state of mind. That's a laugh. He swirled the last dregs around the glass. No chance of feeling calm tonight, not if Jenny had anything to do with it. He was frustrated with her, the way she was doting on a stranger's child as if he was theirs on which to dote. He watched her through slit eyes, her dark hair falling across her face, hiding her features except for the tip of her turned-up nose. She just wanted a baby, he could see that, but he was not the one. Whose was he though? Who on earth had got into their house? How had they done it? Why leave him here? He was mystified. Turning these questions over and over in his mind, his brain churned thoughts like a hamster on a wheel it could not stop. He tried to rationalise, make sense of the situation. Who was behind this? A teenager, desperate to offload an unwanted child? An image of the kind appeared in his mind, the type he had crossed in the seedier side of his work. Poor, drug dependent, wiry, with blotchy needle-shot arms, scrawny from smoking, into prostitution, the only means of paying the rent. Not the type of person to be found in Canorus Square. So why not leave him

somewhere else? In the toilets, at a station? Lady Bracknell came to mind. 'A handbag?' he heard his teacher quoting in a poncey accent. 'Do you think she's on the streets?' Robin said, unthinkingly aloud.

'Who?'

'His mother...or whoever left him here.'

Jenny shook her head and shrugged.

'Why us? That's the bit that's puzzling me.' He hauled himself out of the chair and stood by the fireplace, leaning on the mantelpiece. The house was far too hot, the normally cold white marble exuded heat. She had insisted on switching the heating to constant. 'Perhaps...' he said, pointing a finger with a sudden burst of enthusiasm, 'it's a case of mistaken identity.' His investigative brain was coming into play. 'What do you think, Jen?' She was resting her head back against the settee, her eyes about to close. He glanced at the clock on the mantel shelf. Twenty to two. 'Jenny?' She forced open her eyelids. The child's presence was clearly a strain, her normally blushing complexion pasty and drawn. 'That'd explain everything,' he said perking up.

'What would?' She looked at him, the groove above her nose deepening to a frown.

'That it's all a mistake. He's been left in the wrong house. Why didn't we think of that before? He should have been left in someone else's instead.'

'How do you make that out, Sherlock? I thought you said they had a key.'

'Mm....well, they've got in some way...' He scratched his head. 'Have we given someone a key...a workman perhaps? What about the guy who fitted the worktops in the kitchen?'

'I let him in. I was here all day.'

Robin massaged one shoulder and stretched his neck. 'There's something else that's bothering me.'

'Give it a rest, Robin. I'm too tired to listen right now.'

'But this is important, Jenny. We're in possession of someone else's child. What are we going to tell the police when they question us about it?'

'You're making *us* out as criminals? It's a good job *we* found him. He could have been left on the streets.'

'Still, our stories need to match. I was in the study; you were in the bath...I didn't go into the kitchen until...'

'Oh Robin, stop it. Please. We haven't done anything wrong. Why do we need to cover our tracks? You're giving me a headache.'

'He's giving us both a headache.'

'Don't be so heartless,' she said, tucking the picnic blanket around him, the one her mother had bought. 'Poor little thing. Here is he...unwanted by his mother...left abandoned...'

'For a wealthy couple to look after.'

'Good...I'm glad she did. Better us than left in some...dirty alleyway.'

'Perhaps she got the wrong house. For all we know, it may not be a case of abandonment after all. Perhaps she was taking him to the babysitter...I don't know,' he said, running his hand through his hair. 'But why leave him with that blanket, it's filthy?' He flicked it with his foot. 'It does look as though she was trying to hide him.' He pursed his lips and frowned.

'Oh,' she said, rolling her eyes. 'Perhaps he wasn't being deliberately hidden. He could have grabbed hold of it...pulled it over himself.'

'We were lucky he didn't suffocate then.' Robin had once reported on a sudden infant death where the mother had got life. She was released after fifteen years, to be told that her baby had died of cot death syndrome instead.

'My God. What was that?' said Jenny, suddenly sitting up to stare past him towards the window.

'What's up?' said Robin, twisting round to look.

'A blue light's just passed.'

Robin stood and peered through a gap where the curtains did not quite meet. To his right, on their side of the street, a police car had stopped a few houses down. Robin felt suddenly hot. He wiped the back of his neck of sweat and stared at the vehicle.

'What is it?' whispered Jenny.

'A police car.'

'Oh no...is it still there?'

'No. It's parked down the street...next to nosy Lewis's I think.'

'Oh God, Robin. What we going to do?'

'Don't start panicking for goodness' sake. It might not be anything to do with us.'

The driver's door opened, and a policeman got out. Careful not to be seen, Robin inched back a little way from the window, keeping his eyes focused on the figure looking up and down the street. Robin gulped in a large breath of air. His mouth felt dry and salty. The policeman looked down at something in his hand. To Robin, it seemed he was looking for an address as he sauntered towards their house, occasionally stopping to check something he was holding.

'I think this is it, Jen, I think he's coming here,' said Robin stepping back a little more, not wanting to take his eyes off the policeman who was now standing at the bottom of their steps. 'I think we've been rumbled. Perhaps his crying has alerted that

bloody nosy cow.' He stood stock still behind the curtain to avoid being seen and waited for the doorbell to ring. But his blood was pumping in his ears blotting out all other sound, and as the seconds ticked by, he was aware of his breathing and his heartbeat so intensely as he had never felt before. He turned to look at Jenny, eyes wide, not daring to move, and cocked his head to one side, listening out for the slightest sound. He was so conscious of the noises of the house that he jumped when the fridge suddenly rattled into life and used the soft ticking of the carriage clock on the mantelpiece to calm his nerves. The waiting continued but, even so, the scrape of the footsteps did not come, and the doorbell did not ring. He wanted to peer through the gap again but knew that any flicker of the curtains from outside would grab the policeman's attention. He ran his eyes over the contents of the room, from their newly purchased wide screen TV, past the fire guard on the hearth, to Jenny and the baby on the cream settee. At least the baby was still asleep. Carefully, he pinched the green damask, pulling it slightly apart and with one eye closed, focused his other through the tiniest gap he could muster, enough to see only darkness and the faint glow from the old-fashioned lamp in the garden opposite.

'He's gone,' said Robin, 'I can see his car moving off.' He waited a moment before creeping to the door leading into the hall. A faint strip of light appeared on the parquet floor, the steady tick of the grandfather clock, the only audible sound. Robin tiptoed to the door, quietly slipped the chain, then turned the Yale lock. The door squeaked open as usual. Robin looked through the crack. His eyes widened.

Chapter 3

Friday 28 March 2008 - 2.00am

Robin was confronted by a dark figure standing on the steps. He switched on the outside light which instantly illuminated Gerald Harper's balding head and usual hangdog look.

'Sorry to disturb you, but I seem to have a problem,' he began in clipped tones.

Robin slipped out, on to the step, pulling the door closed behind him. 'And what might that be, Gerald?' he said quietly, expecting a complaint. They had little to do with this neighbour who adjoined them on the other side, and whenever they did, he came with a moan, pussyfooting around the problem before coming to the point.

'My cat's gone missing — again. I'd just finished watching a film and realised she hadn't come in.'

Robin dropped his chin and smiled to himself.

'I've searched the house, walked the square, checked the communal garden and I was wondering...' he took a deep breath and paused before continuing, 'whether she's in your shed again. You wouldn't mind looking, would you?'

'Is that it?' said Robin, trying not to smirk. 'You've just missed the Old Bill; you could have reported it to them.'

'Oh, so that's who it was. I thought I heard a car. I didn't see anything; I was in the garden at the time. I'm sorry it's late,' he said, pulling back his sleeve. Robin glimpsed the time on his watch. It had just gone two. 'I saw your light on and assumed you were up.'

'Alright,' said Robin, sighing, relieved. 'I'll go and look.' He re-entered the hall pushing the door close to, keeping Gerald waiting on the doorstep despite the chill in

the air. On his way to the kitchen, he passed through the lounge, whispering in Jenny's ear that 'Gerald's lost his cat', before exiting the house at the back.

The security light lit up the path down the middle of their postage stamp of a lawn, as he made for the shed at the bottom of the garden. He pulled the latch across and with the torch on his mobile, scanned a stack of plastic seats, a strimmer, a pile of empty plant pots and a range of tools standing in the corner. There wasn't a cat in sight. It wouldn't be the first time his cat had been locked inside their shed. Robin disliked the way it treated their garden as its own, defecating and killing birds, leaving its detritus on the patio. He recalled the previous time the Siamese had gone missing; Gerald had suspected him of deliberately locking it up. He hadn't said so in so many words, but the accusation was there, disguised in his clever rhetoric. It hadn't been seen for a couple of days until Jenny needed extra seating for her book group. On discovery in the shed, it had launched itself at her, catching her arm with its claws. He closed the shed door. It was a damn nuisance, that cat. Gerald treated it like a child. The baby came to mind, prompting a cloud of doom, irritating him like an itchy wound. Just then, he heard something scratching the wooden fence behind the shed; it separated their garden from the one behind. His torch lit up a panel made of horizontal woven slats and, through a hole between two pieces which had fallen apart, a pair of red eyes reflected in the beam of light. Robin crept closer, curious to find out more. He was surprised by the redness, like eyes captured in a camera's flash. As he bent down and approached it, the animal hissed, then the eyes disappeared from the gap, followed by the crackle of breaking twigs and a swishing of leaves.

Robin returned to Gerald who was hugging himself, jiggling from side to side on the steps.

'No luck, I'm afraid, but it may be in the garden behind us. Sounded like a cat in the bushes. You'd better go in Gerald, you look frozen,' said Robin, eager to close the door. He noted a coating of frost on the spearheads of the metal railings bordering the yard. As a means of closing their conversation, Robin stepped back inside the hall, conscious of escaping heat, when Gerald thrust out a hand. 'There's something else,' he said, in a sterner voice. For a second, Robin froze. 'I've had a break-in. Yesterday morning it was. When I got home at lunch, the patio doors were open. Fortunately, nothing had been taken and I hadn't set the alarm either.'

'Did you call the police?' asked Robin.

'Yes, but it was a waste of time. Woman on the end of the phone said that since nothing had been stolen, I might not get a visit. The police would keep an eye on the area instead.'

'Perhaps why that copper was here?' said Robin inching the door to.

'Burglaries are not exactly top priority at the moment,' said Gerald, oblivious to the hint. 'Goodness knows why, it's rife in London. Apparently, policing's all to do with keeping vulnerable people safe. I should know, I attend the Justice Committee regularly. Anyway, thought I'd let you know. Best be on your guard,' he said, tapping his nose.

'Thanks, goodnight. Hope you find your cat.'

Joining Jenny in the lounge, Robin said, 'It gets worse. Gerald was broken into yesterday. They'd got in but left without taking anything. Coincidence or what?'

'When did that happen?' Jenny sat up, all ears.

'Yesterday morning. It's got to be connected.'

'How did they get in?'

'Through the patio doors at the back.' Robin hastened to the far end of the room and examined the French doors. There was no sign of force, the locks still bolted in

place. Hovering by the dresser, he caught sight of the whiskey bottle and deliberated another. Just a small one this time, he decided, unscrewing the top.

With a third tot of his favourite tippie, he sank down in the armchair, closed his eyes and inhaled the smoky aroma of Double Black. He peered at the clock on the mantelpiece. Nearly ten to three. He needed some sleep. Work would soon beckon. He had to make the breakfast meeting, to persuade the Editor to put his story on the front page. He'd had second thoughts in the night. Bukhalov needed exposing, big time. A headline such as, 'Evil Trafficker Should Do Life' might help in forcing the Attorney General to review his sentence. He was fed up with scumbags treating people like lumps of meat. He turned his attention to the baby, still asleep next to Jenny, who was resting her head on the arm of the settee. Perhaps his mother was a trafficking victim too, tricked into the country on the promise of a decent job. Nevertheless, whatever trouble she had got herself into, he found it hard to warm towards her. This wasn't like him. He was normally on the side of victims of the sex trade. But it wasn't right, her dragging an innocent couple into her seedy life, dumping her problem on them.

Through the night, when he wasn't ruminating about the hole they were digging themselves into, he was worrying about work. He hadn't slept for months. The twitch under his eye began to pulse. Typically, the doctor had diagnosed stress. Stress and paracetamol, the stock-phrase of the General Practitioner. They seemed to offer little else. For sure, the NHS was in crisis, not the service his parents had paid into. He saw his father's face and the thick black hair he had inherited from his dad, down to his widow's peak. His mother hadn't coped since his father had died, phoning him at all hours on the pretext of sorting out his dad's affairs, even if it was in the middle of the night. What with the police and Gerald turning up, a call from his mother now would

top it off nicely. Thankfully, the policeman had disappeared. He'd probably been checking for burglars, he mused, taking his last sip.

Jenny sat up, stretching, and rubbing her neck.

'What are we going to do?' he said. 'I've got to be at work early. I can't throw a sickie. Not today.'

'You go to work,' she said, blinking herself awake. 'Let's not do anything rash.' She yawned. 'Give it till lunchtime, then we'll think again.'

'What's there to think again? He can't stay here, Jenny,' he said, trying to finish on a more conciliatory note. He needed to keep her sweet, stop her from going off on one. Reaching forward, he placed his empty glass on the coffee table, and, at the same time, the baby began to stir, gradually stretching his legs into a rigid pose. His face turned bright red, accompanied by the sound of him heaving and straining, quickly followed by a burst of wailing. Robin cringed. 'What's wrong with him, now?'

'I think he needs changing,' she said, wrinkling her nose to sniff the air. With the baby on her shoulder, she supported his head with one hand, and with the other deftly grasped the picnic blanket, to arrange it on the rug, before carefully laying him down. 'I never used to like the smell of my sister's nappies,' she said, undoing the poppers on his suit. 'They made me feel sick. I used to wonder how Mum coped with a dirty nappy, but it's not so bad after all.'

Robin disagreed, although he didn't say so. He thought the smell repugnant, on a par with dog dirt stuck to your shoe.

Magically, the crying stopped once the nappy tape was secured. And that was another thing, something else on which he harboured strong opinion, the use of disposable nappies. He'd written an article about them once, exposing their environmental impact, the way people left them on beaches and in lay-bys, to

biologically degrade sometime next century. He'd had a ticking off from a group of mothers on the *Daily News* Facebook page. What were they supposed to do? they chanted. Toil over steaming buckets of Terries like their grandmothers decades before? Now, after watching Jenny effortlessly change his nappy, he could well see their point. Robin was amazed by her unusual calmness too, the way she was taking it all in her stride. She wasn't always like this. He had witnessed her reactions to the most innocuous of things — like a spider in the bath or a mouse in the kitchen, the one which forced her to stand on a chair as it skittered across the room.

A muffled bang from next door sent Robin to the window where he peered through the gap in the curtains. In the early morning gloom and patting rain, Gerald was opening his umbrella on the top step before scurrying off down the street. Robin checked the time. It was only twenty to four. Dressed in his work clothes, Robin surmised he wasn't looking for the cat. 'Hope his crying hasn't disturbed him,' he said, pulling the curtains together, 'driven him to work for a bit of peace.'

'Did he mention he'd heard someone crying?' piped up Jenny.

'No...no, he didn't. He was too upset about the cat. Don't cats go out at night anyway? I'm still suspicious...him knocking on the door in the middle of the night. It's not normal.'

'We'll tell him we're babysitting, if he mentions it,' she said, her finger lodged in the baby's hand. 'He's got a strong grip, you know.'

'Perhaps his father's a bouncer.' Robin's remark prompted a questioning frown from her. 'You'd need a strong grip to throw someone out of a night club,' he explained.

'Don't assume his background. You never know, he might be the product of a high court judge, or a politician and his bit on the side.'

'Then why leave him in a journalist's house? Now that would be asking for trouble. No...I think our little man has much humbler origins.'

She caught Robin's eye. 'Our little man?' she said, raising an eyebrow.

He shook his head. 'Don't start. He needs his mother, Jen.'

She picked up the blue blanket and was beginning to fold it when Robin called out. 'Hold on... let me see that again. There were hairs on this.' Examining the blanket, he homed onto a minute strand of white hair. 'Here's one,' he remarked, holding it up. 'His cat's the same colour as this.'

Jenny focused on the tiny hair pinched between his fingers. 'Oh yes...but don't lots of cats have white hairs? What are you suggesting anyway? That he's Gerald's love child, so he left him here, desperate to get rid?' She chuckled. 'You'd do anything for a story.'

Robin leaned forwards on his elbows, pressing his fists into his chin. 'Well, that's just it, I wouldn't, but somebody would. This is one story you couldn't make up. It sounds like something out of the Bible. How do we know that Gerald didn't hear him, and the cat thing was a ruse to snoop? He may be on his way to the police right now, and the first thing the police would ask is, why didn't we ring them the moment we found him? Then, you can imagine at a press conference, all the papers would get to know. That asshole Jewkes at the Daily Wail would have a field day if he found out.' Robin covered his face with his hands and sighed. They should have reported him by now. He must have told her a dozen times; he felt like shaking her.

'Look Robin, we're not the ones in the wrong.' She came around the table to kneel at his feet, clasping her hands over his. 'She's the one with the problem, not us. She'll be the one in trouble — for abandoning him. We're looking after him — for the moment — keeping him safe. What harm will one night do?'

'I don't want us to be another news story,' he said, staring into her dark brown eyes, barely inches away.

'Hmph.' She sat back on her heels and let go of his hands. 'So, you're not thinking of a defenseless child, but how it'll make you look instead. We'll just tell the truth...or...we could make something up and say...'

'We can't make anything up, Jenny. It would be a false statement in the eyes of the law. What if something happens to him now? It nearly did a few hours ago.'

'Like what? What if this, what if that,' she exclaimed throwing her hands in the air.

The baby started to cry, their raised voices disturbing his slumber. Jenny leaped to her feet and gathered him up, anxious to pacify the child. She walked out of the room.

Robin closed his eyes. Miserable, with a thumping head, a tension headache pulsed his hot sticky skin.

The next time he opened them, he was disorientated. A large grey fish was no longer biting his finger, its needle-sharp teeth piercing his flesh, and the lizards had scattered from plaguing his dream. As a sharp strip of sunlight severed the room, the events of the night gradually returned to haunt him. He was back in his nightmarish reality. With a surge of panic, he looked for the clock, but the face was blurred. He couldn't focus through fatigue. He pulled himself out of the chair and rubbed his eyes of the gooey sleep gumming up his lashes. And on opening the curtains, the sun glared in his face, through a hole in grey cloud. He looked away and switched on *Breakfast News*. There was nothing to cause concern. No mention of lost children, abandoned babies, no distraught mothers pleading repentance at some emotional press conference. In the corner of the screen the time was 7.28.

'I'm watching the time,' said Jenny. She had joined him in the lounge, the baby, asleep in her arms, now replete with milk. She placed him behind the wall of cushions. Her face was drawn, her knuckles white from supporting his weight. She seemed as nervous as an athlete waiting for the gun, until, at seven thirty precisely, she tapped on her phone. Pacing the room, she fumbled for appropriate words, feigning sickness after an Indian meal.

Robin dare not excuse himself. He began to fret about the breakfast meeting, whether his story would prevail the editorial inquisition. It could make his name, give him a leg up the media ladder. He leaped up the stairs like a deer and after shutting the bathroom door, gripped the sink to steady his nerves before a swill and a shave and a quick change of clothes renewed his equilibrium. He sniggered at the word. Jenny was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. 'Got to go,' he said, kissing her on the cheek before dashing out, 'be back at lunch. Then, we'll talk.'

She closed the door. The hall phone rang. Jenny stood listening to its retro bell, until the answer machine kicked in, and her mother's voice came down the line. She picked up the receiver. 'Hello?' she said tentatively. 'Hi Mum...what...you'll be here by lunch time?'

Chapter 4

Friday 28 March 2008 - 8.30am

At the office, sprawling and open plan, everything was normal. No funny looks or suspicious whisperings, the journalists, screened behind perspex partitions, their eyes clamped on monitors, did not suddenly quieten the moment he walked in. Robin switched on his computer and checked his emails first. Seventy-five had come in overnight. He scanned the list — about half from Andrew, worried about deadlines as usual. Pete had sent the photos from Reuters and there was a batch of emails from Emma, the new graduate trainee. He had insisted on proofreading her work; her punctuation was abysmal. He regretted this now. Assigned as her mentor, he wanted to be helpful, but the extra workload had taken its toll.

After deleting or moving the rest, he was left with one.

Mary Watts

27 March

2008 21.00

To Robin Watts

Look after him.

He stared at the screen. The surrounding chatter faded as he slid into his own world. He looked around, seeing but not hearing his colleagues talking, as though they were miles away. He minimised the screen, then made for the gents, locked himself in a cubicle and sat on the toilet lid holding his face in his hands. There was a buzzing sensation in his head, his throat felt tight and he loosened his tie. He began talking to himself, muttering

crazily, and took deep breaths in the hope of calming himself down. 'Mary Watts?' He tried to think. Was she a relative? One of the Australian side of the family? He knew his father had lost touch. His head began to throb. He sat there in limbo, holding his head, wishing his thoughts would stop spinning haphazardly inside his skull. Splashing cold water over his face, he examined his eyes in the mirror. They were both bloodshot now, little red veins criss-crossing the whites like marble. The baby had to go, there was no choice. Whatever their good intentions, he wasn't theirs, he was someone else's child. They had to get rid of him.

Back at his desk, Robin searched the net. Apart from an artist called Mary Seton Watts who died in 1938, the other namesakes were all Americans, still alive, though highly improbable candidates; like the Ohio shop keeper, or the teacher from San Diego who clearly had nothing to do with a baby found in a London house. Every couple of minutes he checked his phone. He and Jenny had been texting each other constantly. He'd nearly run down a pedestrian on a zebra crossing on his way in to work; one hand on the steering wheel, the other on the phone. Then his desk phone rang. It was Andrew, pressing him as usual, urging him to get to the boardroom quick as the meeting was about to begin. And on replacing the handset, he could hardly remember the details of their brief conversation. With no sleep, he was exhausted from fatigue and stress; concentration would be difficult.

Robin began the meeting in a daze. He felt out of it, as though he'd been drugged. Surely Paracetamol wasn't that strong. He'd only taken them ten minutes ago, after scrabbling in a drawer to find the last two in a blister pack. Alcohol wouldn't have helped either; a malty sensation pervaded his mouth. To avoid breathing on Tim's or Rob Talbot's faces, he shuffled the chair forward a touch, to be nearer the table, trying his best to squeeze them out. Although Tim was a mate, Robin was now on a mission;

to make his story the standalone on tomorrow's front page. He'd had second thoughts in the night. He'd worked too hard on it not to make headline news. It had been his baby. Wedged between the two, it wasn't easy gaining ground, the meeting crowded with people chattering and laughing until Andrew banged a spoon for quiet. Being the Editor, he took pride of place, alone, at one end of the long rectangular table where he could sit and pull in his chair with the luxury of space. Beginning in his usual no-nonsense way, Andrew demanded articles to fill the following day's news hole. Robin knew he had to get in first, ahead of the pack, especially as pushy Talbot was literally on his heels. But his head throbbed and he felt sick and half-heartedly raised a hand, calling Andrew's name, to be drowned out by half a dozen others in tow. Robin slumped back in his chair and withdrew into passive submission as Rob Talbot, current holder of their Reporter of the Year title, pitched to the room. Robin hardly heard what was being said, his brain was so fugged with murk. If only this lot knew what a story he could tell, they'd be on him like a pack of hounds. The fact he was a colleague would be immaterial. That was the nature of the journalist's game. He pulled his mobile from his pocket and texted home. 'How's things?' he tapped, but accidentally touched 'send' before he had time to reword the message; it sounded like one you would send to a mate you hadn't seen for a while. Regrettably it had gone. He tried again. 'Hope you're alright. Something urgent to tell you. R xxx' The reply came instantly. 'That's all we need,' whispered Robin. Tim nudged his arm and frowned concernedly. Robin mouthed 'nothing' and shook his head.

For the next two hours the meeting dragged, just like Keith Hobart's lectures used to do. A picture of Keith in his Fair Isle sweater flashed in his mind, bespectacled and bearded, bumbling his way through Ethics and Journalism. Nevertheless, with all the effort he could muster, Robin sold his story, for the following Sunday's supplement. It was better than nothing, considering his present state of mind, and it took the pressure

off. At 12.05, he was relieved when the meeting was brought to a close. He needed to go home to speak to Jenny, to come to some decision or at least for them to get their story straight before her mother turned up. He had asked Jenny to put her off, but, like mother, like daughter, Alice was stubborn and hated being told what to do.

Back in the office, a hand suddenly gripped his shoulder. 'You okay, mate?' Robin jumped. Tim was hovering above him. 'You look like shit. Got something on your mind? Not had another row with Andy have you?'

'No...no. I'm alright. Just a bit tired,' said Robin, averting his eyes from his towering colleague. They had known each other for years, since starting on the paper together. From the corner of his eye, Tim's inflated stomach bulged through his pink stripy shirt.

Tim checked his watch. 'Lunch time, mate. Could do with a drink.'

Robin's forehead and palms were clammy. 'I don't feel that well, actually. Must be that flu bug.' It had been sweeping around the office for several weeks, picking off victims like a voracious hawk. Robin reached for his laptop bag. 'Thanks for asking, pal. I think I'm going home. I'll work from there instead.'

With his head down and his shoulders slumped, Robin trudged towards the lift. The doors swept open and Mrs. Scarlett's tea trolley came rattling over the metal gap.

'On your way out, Mr Watts? Don't want a cuppa before you go?'

'No thanks, Janet. Got to rush.'

Chapter 5

Friday 28 March 2008 - 12.45pm

When he walked in Jenny was holding the baby, her eyes fixed on the headlines rolling across the bottom of the screen. *Soaring oil prices panic world market, Heavy flooding across south of England, Mugabe faces his toughest challenge yet.* Nothing of immediate concern.

She hugged the child closer, swaddling the picnic blanket around him. She looked up at him. 'You're back, then.'

'I couldn't concentrate,' he said, flopping down in the armchair by the window. He rested his head against its back. 'I feel ill, Jen.'

'You look tired. Your eyes are red.'

He closed them and sighed.

'You look pale, too; like you've seen a ghost.'

'I think I have,' he said, snapping them open, 'or at least I've been contacted by one. She sent me an email.'

'What?' she exclaimed, frowning deeply.

'I've had an email...from someone called Mary Watts. She knows about *him*,' he said, tipping his head towards her and the baby. 'I've no idea who she is, I don't know of a Mary in the family. It was in my inbox when I got to work.'

'What did it say?' She began to rotate her wedding ring around her finger.

'*Look after him.*' That's all,' he said, shrugging. 'It was sent last night, around nine.'

She placed the baby on the settee, stood in front of the fireplace and pressing her fist against her mouth, proceeded, pensively, to pace the room. 'Look after him?'

'Are you alright?' said Robin. He noticed she had steady herself against the decorative plastered archway dividing the room.

'I'm okay.' She held her chin, circling the dining table. 'It's got to be his mother,' she continued, 'who else can it be?' She sunk into the cushion beside the baby. 'She's left him with us, so we can take care of him. She's chosen us to do it, Robin.'

'Don't make it sound biblical, Jen. We've been chosen? Like Mary and Joseph? I'm going to make that call.'

'Wait...just think...if she *is* a relative of yours, do you really want to get her into trouble?'

He stopped himself from rising. He was on the edge of his seat. He gazed up into her eyes.

She came over to him and perched on the arm of his chair. Pulling his head, gently, towards her, she buried her face in his hair.

'There hasn't been anything to raise suspicion on the news this morning,' she said, resting her chin on his head. 'When you came in, I thought you'd lost your job, you looked so ill. I'll put the TV on. Let's hope there's still no news. It'll give us more time to find out if he *is* related. It's a bit of a coincidence, isn't it? This woman having the same name as us?'

He nodded and checked his watch. 'The one o'clock news'll be on.'

The familiar opening music of the television news was in full flow, followed immediately by the newsreader's introduction to the day's current events:-

'A second day of misery for passengers at Heathrow's Terminal Five,' she began. *'Dozens more flights are cancelled...'*

'Anger as a convicted criminal is released early due to prison overcrowding...'

'The value of your home takes another tumble,' she went on, as a photograph of an ordinary bay terrace appeared, the type lining any British street. They watched and listened in silence. Their senses were on high alert, like two anxious deer, wary and watchful. She held his hand, but he wasn't in the mood for being comforted, until a film, showing a baby being passed under barbed wire between two helpless souls, appeared on the screen. Suddenly, his forefinger and thumb began to twitch, but soon relaxed, when it became obvious that the baby was a long way off, in some arid poverty-stricken land. And afterwards, the regional news was essentially news free, the rise of Japanese sushi restaurants in London being the topic of the day. No mention of missing babies.

'Thank goodness for that,' she said, as the weather girl forecast a weekend of sunny spells and scattered showers. 'No news is good news.'

He squeezed her hand.

'You look exhausted,' she said. 'Why don't you have a lie down?' She stroked his cheek. 'Take a power nap.'

'I could do with it, I'm bushed. But I've got something to do first.' It was an effort getting up.

He felt her eyes upon him as he dragged himself off towards the study.

'I'll ring back as soon as I can.' Robin ended the voice mail. His mother wasn't answering, again. The silly woman refused to use the mobile he had bought her, keeping it for emergencies instead. She'd been out a lot recently. He had left several messages, and she hadn't replied to one. Did she really say, when he last visited, that she didn't get out that much? He'd better go round, make sure she was alright. He needed her help now more than ever. Perhaps she knew a Mary Watts, a distant relative who'd found herself in a fix; perhaps it had got round he'd married into money.

He leaned his head against the back of his office chair. The ceiling light started to spin, and his head started to pound. He was sinking, weighed down by a large lump of baby muscle. Usually, it worked the other way, Jenny in a fix. In his mind's eye, he saw her trashing that consultant's room in Harley Street, after Professor Alexander had delivered the news. It was to be expected she would be disappointed, but not to that extent. It was embarrassing, the way she had cleared his desk in one fell swoop — her personal file including scans, everything in fact, tipped on to the floor, smashing his glasses in the process. It was the queen of all tantrums. Just like her mother would have behaved, no doubt. Alice had a lot to answer for. The continuance of the Manners's tribe was paramount. Pressure on Jenny to reproduce was the be all and end all, especially for her mother. Robin did wonder what sort of family he had married into; the Manners were old-established aristocrats. Take George the Third, for instance. The preservation of blue blood had a lot to answer for. This whole affair would be sending *him* mad if it wasn't sorted soon. He blocked it out with a dismissive shake of the head. It wasn't worth dwelling on.

By now, Robin was out of his seat, and with his hands in his pocket, he was standing by the door, gazing through the window, pondering his next move, when he heard Jenny speaking in what sounded like awkward tones. He stopped dead to listen. Fragments of her conversation wafted across the hall, from the lounge to the study through doors, ajar. It was probably her mother on the line. He strode across the hall and barged into the room to hear her declare, in no uncertain terms, 'but you agreed', then quickly aborted the call. Her knitted brows said it all.

'Your mother?' enquired Robin. 'Are you alright? You look shaken up.'

'It's nothing,' she replied irritably and pushed the phone into her jeans pocket.

'Well, it's obviously not nothing. What's wrong? Tell me.'

'Just leave it, Robin, please.'

'We need to be honest with each other, especially now. No keeping things back...however annoying your mother can be...'

The doorbell rang. They froze. Trying not to be seen, Robin stood a little way from the window, craning to peer through the gap in the curtains. There was a police car outside, again, two officers on the top step.

'Police, again?' he whispered. 'They've definitely come for him this time.'

The bell rang once more.

Jenny held the baby closer.

'I'll have to answer it,' he said. 'We can't pretend we're not in. They may have seen me.'

He left the room, closing the lounge door behind him to re-enter a minute later followed by the policemen. She was sitting on the couch with the baby on her lap; red in the face, he was straining and smiling distortedly.

'Good afternoon, madam. I'm PC Allen and this is PC Jones.'

'This is my wife, Jenny.' Robin gestured for them to sit, turned off the TV, then sat close to her, his back rigid, his hands resting on his knees in preparation for the worst. He could feel Jenny tense like a coiled spring.

A voice began speaking on the radio attached to the stab vest of the officer sitting by the window. He spoke briefly into it before terminating the call. The other officer, perched on the end of the settee, took out a small black notebook and pen.

'We've had a report sir, about an incident involving your car this morning. Could you confirm you have a green Jaguar, registration WV07 4BS?'

Robin's heart took a leap. At least they hadn't come about the baby. He glanced at Jenny, who was kissing the baby's head, and inhaled the sweet smell of talcum permeating the room. 'Yes. It's in the garage round the back.'

'Apparently, you failed to stop at a zebra crossing. According to the witness, you nearly knocked a pedestrian down. She took note of your registration plate. Now — we need your side of the story, sir.'

Leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, he then looked down at the floor and covered his face with his hands. He was quiet for a moment, before lifting his head to reply. 'I know what you're referring to, but I stopped, I didn't hit him.' He remembered texting at the time. Had the witness seen that too?

'Why didn't you stop at the crossing? There were pedestrians on it.'

The other officer was scribbling away.

'Were you distracted by anything at the time?'

Robin scratched his head. 'No...n...I am under a lot of pressure at work.' He thrust out his bottom lip and nodded. 'I had things on my mind.' Being interrogated reminded him of his schooldays, denying a childish prank to a demanding teacher.

'Were you carrying any passengers?'

'No.' He shook his head.

The scratch of the pen across the page was amplified in the quietness of the room, until the baby gurgled, blowing tiny bubbles, and flapping his hands.

'The witness seemed to think you had no intention of stopping. Did you know the pedestrian?'

'No...well, I may have been distracted for a moment.' He closed his eyes and rubbed his temple.

'I thought you said you weren't distracted. You seem to find it difficult to remember whether you were or not. Had you been drinking?'

'Certainly not,' replied Robin. He gulped and sat up and leaned back, hoping they hadn't caught the remains of any whiskey on his breath.

'Were you under the influence of drugs?'

'I don't take drugs. I've never taken them.'

'Would you be agreeable to a drugs test?'

'Yes, of course. I've never taken drugs in my life. I don't even like taking painkillers.' Robin felt hot and tapped his foot, his palms were moist with sweat. He turned to look at Jenny, but she was preoccupied mouthing baby talk at the child. Suddenly, the baby's face glowed, and letting out an enormous screech, his expression changed from one of contentment into a picture of painful contortion. Robin's rising blood pressure took second place to the baby's behaviour. Distracting proceedings, all eyes fell upon him as Jenny cuddled him closer, but he was in no mood to be pacified; she was forced to stand up, then move around slowly, jiggling him gently, shushing him as she went towards the far end of the room.

'Were you using a mobile phone at the time?' the officer continued.

'No,' he replied, looking down at his shoes and biting a nail. The other policeman was still scribbling away.

'Well...seeing that nobody's been injured, I'll let you off with a caution this time,' said the interrogating officer, 'but, in future, I suggest you concentrate when you're driving, sir.'

The policeman stood. 'This won't be taken any further,' he said. 'Good afternoon, madam.'

Robin thanked him and followed them out. From the lounge window, he watched the car drive away. 'Thank God they've gone,' he said, squinting at a shaft of sunlight which suddenly appeared from behind a black cloud. The light intensified. Robin flinched and turned away from the glare. When he opened his eyes, Jenny and the baby were standing right beside him. The baby's eyes, motionless and unblinking, were fixed upon his face. 'I think I'm losing it,' said Robin. 'I'm so used to dealing with tricky situations, people asking awkward questions, getting out of scrapes. But I feel everything's stacked against us, out of our control. I need to...find my mojo again...' He snorted. 'Get my equilibrium back to normal.' He checked the time. It had just gone half past two. 'Is your mother still coming?'

'No...not now,' said Jenny, swaying from one foot to the other.

'Is that what you were arguing about earlier on the phone?'

'When?'

'You know when I walked in on you. It was obvious you weren't very happy with someone.'

'Oh...yeah...it was after I texted and told her I was ill. I had to put my phone on silent because she kept ringing. I rang her back and made it quite clear... she just worries about me. Hopefully she's got the message...about not coming, but if she does come, we'll just...'

'Not answer the door. We don't want any more surprises. Two cops are enough. This is serious Jenny. It's a crime scene now. Do you understand that?'

'Of course I do. Don't berate me. I'm not at school, you know.'

'It's just that...!' He moderated his tone. 'I've been thinking...I don't want the police involved just yet. As you suggested, this Mary Watts could be a relative. Someone in trouble. Perhaps after our money. Think I need a stiff one.'

Jenny raised her eyebrows.

'And don't tell me not to,' he said, shaking his head. 'I'll be in the study, if you need me.'

From the study window, the sky was cloudy, raindrops now tapping at the glass, blurring the trees in the communal garden. He bit a thumbnail watching keenly as new emails came flooding in. Nothing new from Mary Watts. He read her email again, what little it said. *Look after him*. Nothing else. He pressed the reply button.

Dear Mary Watts

Received your email. Perhaps we could meet and talk about this. Why us? Are you a relative? Don't want to get anyone into trouble but this can't be kept a secret for long. Please contact me asap.

Regards

Robin Watts

He pressed 'send' and leaned back, stretched out his legs and clasped his hands behind his head. Opposite the desk, the notice board was cluttered: newspaper cuttings depicting stories he had covered, a busy calendar showing March's photograph of a warbler, a variety of business cards, plus the tennis club schedule for the new summer season. He thought about his mother and phoned her again on the off chance.

'Oh, hi Mum...I've managed to get you at last. Been a bit elusive, haven't you? No...it's good to know you're okay...I was bit worried when you weren't replying...Me? I'm fine, a bit tired perhaps...You alright?...Good. Anyway, I'm after some information. Do you know of anybody in Dad's family called Mary...No...You can't think of anyone...It's just that I've had an email at work from someone called Mary

Watts...Just wondered if she rang a bell with you...Okay...That's great if you could. I didn't know Dad was into that kind of thing...Thanks Mum.'

Jenny opened the door. She stood behind him, placed her hands on his shoulders and kissed his neck.

'Got to go anyway...I'll visit tomorrow...Is that okay?...Yes...See you then. Jenny sends her love. Bye. Bye.'

'How is she?' she said, nestling her cheek in his hair.

'Lonely. Missing Dad. She's going to ask around Dad's family. There's not many left. She was very friendly with Auntie Jean.'

'Auntie Jean?'

'You know. Dad's sister. She's still alive. Lives in Brighton. Haven't seen her for years. I'm seeing Mum tomorrow. Dad did some family history on the Watts's. Perhaps that'll shed some light.' He placed his hands over hers. Felt her breath on his cheek. Knew she was peering at the screen.

'What's this? Have you replied to her?'

'Yep. That's the email she sent and that's my reply. Hopefully it'll spur her into action. Whoever she is.'

She stood back, dropping her hands from his shoulders. There was a cold silence.

Robin turned to look at her, a sadness soiling her face. 'Hey, come on.' He touched her hand. 'Where is he, anyway?'

'Asleep. I've put him in the basket on the floor. It's far too small though. He seems to have grown overnight. I think he needs something bigger.'

Robin looked at his watch. 'Just gone three. Go and see what you can get.'

'Really?'

'Just don't bump into anyone you know.' He jiggled her hand.

'Yes. I am supposed to be sick.'

'I'm sure you can think of something if you do.'

'Thank you.' She bent down and kissed his cheek.

'For what?'

'For...for being so understanding.'

'Go on, quick, before I change my mind.'

'I won't be long.'

'Don't worry...he'll still be here when you get back.'

She mouthed a thank you from the door.

On his way out of the study to check on the baby, Robin noticed something on the notice board. Pinned to the bottom overhanging the radiator was a party invitation from the previous year, an A4 sheet displaying a magnifying glass in each corner and a photo of Andrew as a private detective in a trilby and fawn-coloured mac. He and Jenny had enjoyed that party. He'd never used a private detective. There was no need. Cheapskate was his main source of information, an ex-underground cop, ex-military intelligence. He pictured 'The Old Bell' where they'd met. A shaven head and scuffed leather jacket masking the public-school accent, and the Arsenal own goal on the telly above the bar which had led them into genial conversation like a couple of old mates. He hadn't seen him for a while.

His phone pinged and at the same time a piercing shriek erupted from the lounge. Robin darted across the hall to find the baby on his back, screaming on the carpet, tears streaming down his cheeks.

He picked him up and held him close. 'There, there,' he said, 'it's alright,' but the baby flailed his arms, punched his fists and kicked him in the chest. The basket had

toppled over, the tartan blanket splayed across the carpet. Robin was puzzled at the strength of this little body, tipping over such a wide object on to its side. Fortunately, he'd landed on his back. The alternative didn't bear thinking about, him lying face down, undiscovered, perhaps even suffocating, when he should have been in charge taking care of him. Robin paced the room, rocking him with increasing vigour, but the motion only made things worse. The baby continued to scream and kick and struck him on the chin. A feeling of helplessness began to overwhelm Robin's normally rational mind, again. He realised how easy it was to flounder under the weight of child-rearing with the sudden presence of a new human being. He patted the baby's back and peered through the window, praying for Jenny's quick return. What a natural she was to have bonded so quickly with a stranger's child.

He remembered what Tim had said — something about driving babies around to make them sleep. After the birth of their first, and subsequent sleepless nights, Tim and Alison had driven round London during the night, the motion of the car eventually lulling Joshua to sleep. Could he smuggle the baby out and into the car? He upturned the basket with his foot and placed the baby inside. He wondered. Could he get to the car without anyone realising what he was carrying? He'd have to stop this yelling if he did. Robin squatted by the basket and placed the end of his little finger in his mouth. The baby sucked on it hungrily then bit. Robin pulled it out. There was a drop of blood on his skin and a deep red mark. He looked inside the baby's mouth — a sharp little tooth was protruding from the gum. Suddenly, the crying stopped, and the baby smiled, but not at Robin — a sort of contorted, twisted smile. Then, he began to strain and heave with all his might, his body stiffened, and his face turned red before delivering an ear-piercing screech and all this accompanied by a feculent smell. Where was Jenny when he needed her?

The aisles of the baby shop were brimming with the pale pastel colours of androgynous miniature outfits, designer children's clothes and soft padded toys. She breezed around the shelves holding aloft little hangers draped with diminutive polo shirts, hoodies, and jeans. The metal basket, secured in the pit of her elbow, was gradually filling with sleeping suits, jogging bottoms, socks, and vests — an array of essential garments for children zero plus. It was going to be expensive. She wondered how the less fortunate coped with such extortionate price tags and pictured a down-and-out teenager in some dirty squat. Mary Watts came to mind.

One corner of the shop had been sectioned off. Jenny's eyes widened. The characters from Winnie-the-Pooh adorned every part of the space — printed on mobiles, lamp shades, duvets, and blankets, patterning the walls and curtains surrounding a variety of cots and baby carriers, buggies, and prams. Her eye was drawn to a large wicker basket on a stand, the inside covered with blue and yellow material and the same matching Pooh design. It was perfect. But then again, perhaps not; he was a growing child.

When she arrived home, the house was silent. She called out for Robin, but there was no reply. She opened the study door, but the room was empty, as was the lounge and the kitchen, too. She hastened upstairs and rushed from room to room, her breathing now short and rapid, her quivering voice growing to an all-out shout each time she called his name.

The basket and the baby were gone.

Chapter 6

Friday 28 March 2008 - 4.00pm

'Jenny's not answering her phone. I've left several messages.'

George was unbuttoning his raincoat. 'Have you tried ringing the house?'

Alice didn't answer immediately. She was searching for Jenny's office number.

'I've already tried the house,' she replied. 'There's no answer.' She found the number on her handwritten list and tapped it out on the keypad.

The refined tones of a young woman came down the phone. 'Neil Winter Publications.'

'Good afternoon. I'd like to speak to Jennifer Watts please.'

'One moment please. I'll transfer you.'

Alice bit her bottom lip whilst being put on hold, with Vivaldi's 'Spring' meant to ease the wait.

'Sales and advertising. Can I help you?'

'Could I speak to Jennifer Watts please? It's her mother.'

'I'm afraid she isn't in today. She phoned in sick this morning.'

'Oh...right...I'll ring her at home then. Sorry to have troubled you. Goodbye.'

'Nothing wrong I hope,' said George, pushing off his second wellington with his other foot.

She took a moment to answer before turning to him. 'So...Jenny *is* ill. Most unusual. She's never off work.'

'You sounded as though you were doubting her.' George placed his hands on her shoulders and smiled. 'Well? That's *that* mystery solved. You're worrying for nothing.'

Alice wasn't so sure. 'Oh, I don't know,' she said, wringing her hands. 'She's always pretty quick getting back to me.'

'Perhaps she's in bed, especially if she isn't feeling very well.'

'I think we should still go over George. To look after her if nothing else.'

He took her hands and squeezed them gently. 'Check with Robin first before rushing off. She might not appreciate visitors.'

'We're her parents, George.' She found Robin's number on the list and tried his mobile, but it continued to ring. 'That's it. We're going. I'll get my coat.'

Taking his waxed jacket off the stand, George blew a muted sigh, closed his eyes, and shook his head.

With her long woollen coat slung over her arm, Alice had already opened the front door allowing a chilly draught to rush in and was halfway down the steps while George was still in the hall lacing up his shoes.

They set off in the Range Rover which crunched its way down the beech-lined drive, the bare trees highlighted by the headlights in the afternoon gloom.

'I'm sure she's fine,' said George, steering the car down the middle of the lane, trying to avoid the overgrown barbs of the hawthorn hedges he still hadn't managed to cut. Soon it would be too late, the birds already having nested. 'I hope whatever she's got isn't catching, I've only just recovered from that nasty cold.'

Alice looked askance and frowned at him. 'Have some sympathy, George.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that,' he said. 'Hope she won't mind us turning up out of the blue.'

'Why should she? She'll be pleased to see us. Oh no!' She placed one hand upon her forehead. 'I forgot. I could've brought that tray of chocolate brownies I made. That would've cheered her up. You know how much she likes chocolate.'

'She's not a child, Alice.'

'She's still one of our children, George.'

Jenny was the eldest of two daughters. When she was two years old, Alice had miscarried following a further pregnancy and was advised by the doctor to wait before trying again. Four years later, Caroline was born. Jenny adored her. She had treated Caroline like a real-life doll, wanting to hold her all the time, always on hand to help her mother bathe and dress her new little sister. The girls had lived a privileged life, riding their own ponies, picnicking in the tree house in the ancient oak, playing tennis on the court in the garden. And then, after leaving boarding school at eighteen, Jenny had attended a Swiss finishing school, where she had passed the Higher Certificate in Etiquette and Protocol with flying colours, the surest way of supporting the rich businessman or titled aristocrat she was meant to secure. It was when she was in Switzerland that she made friends with another English girl whose father owned a major publishing house. This incorporated a national newspaper, and a few fashionable magazines and it was due to this contact that she was offered a job, as a trainee, in the sales department of her current magazine. At school, she had harboured few ambitious plans, only really seeing herself in an ideal marriage with a wealthy husband, and two perfect children in domestic bliss. It was, therefore, unexpected when she found herself loving the job, despite the long hours, relishing planning strategy and pricing philosophy, wholeheartedly throwing herself into the realms of the publishing world.

She met Robin, a young reporter, at her first office party. The board room had been divested of its massive oak table and was crammed with about a hundred people chatting and laughing, standing in little gatherings of two or more.

Robin was picking peanuts from a small glass bowl. Glasses and drinks and a variety of other nibbles and appetisers had been set out on a series of tables, extending

along one side of the room. Through a narrow gap in the crowd, he had spotted an empty chair by the windows. He squeezed between the closely packed bodies, his glassful of wine held high, to find two young women sharing the table with the empty seat. The slimmest one took his eye. With her perfect legs and the most astonishingly large brown eyes, he was immediately hooked. It wasn't long before all three were engaged in lively conversation — introductions, followed by talk about jobs, their flats, and flatmates, likes and dislikes. Further inhibitions were relaxed, revealing idiosyncrasies and unusual hobbies. Robin and Jenny discovered a mutual enjoyment of wildlife, of a kind, and promptly fell into a discussion about the demise of garden birds. For Jenny, it had been her father's interest in conservation which she had acquired, inspiring her to care for the environment, too.

Robin's introduction to wildlife had been an altogether different affair. His father had kept racing pigeons on an allotment in the East End. Ever since, he had been amazed at the ingenuity of these birds, how they found their way home after flying over such long distances. He had skipped school on numerous occasions, going off with his dad to France in a specially converted truck, stacked high with baskets replete with pigeons. One of them was a champion. He remembered being with his dad in the pub, who was well-oiled at the time, proudly clinching a large silver cup.

It wasn't long before Jenny's friend, Annabelle, grew bored with the topic; she meddled with her phone while surreptitiously eyeing Jenny and Robin with displeasure. Glowering sternly, she zipped up her bag, and with a purposeful sweep, slung it over one shoulder, then barged her way through their touching legs as they chatted and laughed together.

By the end of the night, Robin and Jenny had swapped numbers.

They met, a week later, for a game of indoor tennis at Robin's sports club.

In Canorus Square, Jenny was distraught. 'Robin, where the hell are you?'

Jenny had resorted to shouting at the phone. She stood by the window, urging his return, racking her brains, wondering where they could be. Had something happened to the baby? Was he ill, compelling Robin to rush him off to hospital? Or had his mother reappeared demanding her child and, if she had, then where was Robin now? Talking to the police? Fretting in some sparse police station cell? Jenny was beside herself. She grabbed her coat and umbrella as it had started to rain, the light, hindered by dark menacing clouds, was fading. Pulling the door shut, she fumbled with the umbrella until it finally opened. The rain pattered fiercely. Setting off down the street, it lashed against her legs, soaking her jeans, as she made her way to one corner of the square. It was a good vantage point; from there, she could see the cars turning off the main Camden Road.

It was while she was standing shivering, pulling together the lapels of her coat, that she noticed some branches shuffling in the garden in the middle of the square. She wondered if it was the fox, the poor mangy vixen the residents fed. It came into their garden, too. She left out scraps for it, much to the annoyance of the blue-rinsed widow next door who had complained to Robin, afraid it might sneak into her house and set upon her beloved Pekingese. The scaremongering tactics of the media had frightened people; reports of foxes attacking children in their beds had vilified these animals.

Suddenly, from between a dark patch of leaves, she noticed a small light as though someone was shining a torch. She watched it move through the lower bushes, intermittently visible as it weaved in and out of the leaves, before climbing to the top of a tree. It could be the cat she fed. The streetlights illuminated the outer edges of the

garden, but the centre was pitch-black. Rumour had it a tramp had once lived there, under a tarpaulin sheet, unnoticed for months.

Just then, to her left, a bright pair of headlights approached. She squinted towards them. It wasn't Robin's Jaguar, but a large four-wheel drive, and as it slowed down to turn into the square, she recognised her parents, spot lit by the streetlamp, in the front seats. Jenny took a sharp intake of breath. 'Oh no! Just what I don't need,' she muttered, and walked towards it as it drew to a halt outside their house. She waited as they clambered out, the dripping umbrella dangling from her hand. The rain had suddenly stopped.

Alice seemed surprised to see her waiting on the pavement on such a rotten night. 'Jenny? What are you doing outside? They told me you were sick.'

'Who told you?' Jenny replied, turning the key in the lock. She pushed the door open to be welcomed by the brightness of the room and a rush of warm air.

'One of your work colleagues,' said Alice, unbuttoning her coat. 'I phoned them earlier. She said you'd phoned in sick. I was so worried when I couldn't get hold of you or Robin.'

Jenny kissed them both, then took their coats. 'I'm sorry, it's been on silent,' she said, draping the coats over the banister rail. She ushered her parents into the sitting room. 'It's a long way for you to come. Sit down. I'll make us a drink.'

In the kitchen, Jenny placed the umbrella in the sink, then proceeded to fill the kettle. When she returned to the lounge, Alice and George were sitting silently on the settee. She flopped down in the armchair by the window. Her headache had worsened throughout the day. Holding one hand against her right temple, she could feel a painful thumping pulse. It had started as soon as she returned from the shops — to find the house empty. She put it down to stress — the stress of not knowing where Robin and

the baby could be. She thought Paracetamol would do the trick, but there was none in the house; she wasn't normally prone to headaches and Robin's aversion to medication meant that he'd rather endure pain than succumb to a pill.

'You don't look well, darling,' said Alice following an awkward silence. 'Have you got a headache? Have you taken anything for it?'

'I've run out of tablets, Mum. I was on my way to the chemist when I saw you drive up.' She was used to thinking on her feet.

Alice delved into her bag, pulled out a small cardboard box and reached over to Jenny.

'Thanks,' she said, leaning towards her mother.

Jenny filled a glass with water at the sink and gulped a capsule down. It left behind a bitter taste, and she pulled a face. Leaning with both hands on the sink, she stared through the kitchen window at her reflection through the glass, the darkness partially concealing her face. Where on earth was Robin? Where had he taken the baby? Pulling her phone from her jeans pocket she checked it yet again. Still no reply to the messages she had left. His silence had unnerved her to the point of her tapping two nines on to the phone, before stopping at the third.

Jenny reclined her head against the back of the armchair near the window and closed her eyes. Her head still ached. The clock on the mantelpiece ticked, the heating quietly hissed and in the distance from the main road, there was the occasional impatient hooting of a horn.

'How are you feeling, dear?' asked Alice.

'OK,' she whispered.

'Is Robin still at work? It's gone seven. His phone was off when I tried to ring him. Does he know you're ill? It isn't good you not being able to contact him, Jenny. Surely, he should be home by now. It's a good job we came...'

'Mum, please. He's often late, you know it's his job.'

Peering through slit eyes, Jenny caught her father gazing absentmindedly at the floor. He had never been a great conversationalist, leaving most of the talking to her mother. He was just that kind of man, quiet and unassuming, with few airs and graces, despite his demeanour and background. He was the Right Honourable George Manners, a landowner, with two thousand acres of prime Oxfordshire pastureland, and a prize-winning herd of Herefordshire cattle. Attired in a brown tweed suit, he resembled the typical countryman, a member of the hunting, shooting, and fishing set. But he was a paradox, having never hunted, shot, or caught anything in his life, not since the time when, as a six-year-old, he was blooded in the hunting field.

Just then a van pulled up outside. Jenny turned to look through the window. A man was opening the back doors of a tall-sided vehicle. The doorbell rang.

'Should I get it, darling?' asked Alice, beginning to push herself up.

'No, I'll go,' said Jenny, holding up a discouraging hand.

There was a cold rush of air when she opened the door, and two men in dark clothing were standing on the step.

'Watts?' said the one nearest the door. 'Cot for delivery?'

Jenny nodded.

'Sign here please.' He held out a plastic device like a large mobile phone and a plastic pen.

The box seemed enormous leaning against the radiator in the hall. It was a couple of metres long and the width of a single bed with 'Babycare - Please handle

carefully' displayed in prominent black lettering across the side. Suddenly, the sitting room door opened. Alice was in the doorway. She stared at the box.

'Oh, darling,' she said, turning and smiling at Jenny. 'So that's why you've been unwell?'

Jenny touched her forehead, the headache beginning to throb again sharply, after abating a little from the effects of the pill. 'No. It's nothing like that. We need to talk, Mum.'

Her mother was on the edge of her seat, waiting for Jenny to speak. Jenny was perched on the chair by the window and, leaning forward with clasped hands, she tried to compose herself while thinking of something to say.

'Robin and I can't have children,' she began.

Her mother's face dropped. A silence ensued. 'Oh darling, you've never mentioned this before...'

'We've had tests. So...we've decided to adopt, well, foster for now. There's a possibility a baby will need fostering very soon.' Jenny was afraid to look at them.

'I'm sure you know what you're doing, darling,' Alice began, 'but some of these children can be difficult...coming from troubled backgrounds.'

Jenny covered her face with her hands and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees.

'I'm,' began Alice, to be stopped in mid-sentence by George placing his hand on her arm. He leaned over and touched Jenny's knee.

'Whatever you decide to do, you know we will always support you,' he said soothingly.

She uncovered her face, smiled, and nodded. Suddenly, there was the sound of a key in the lock. 'Robin?' said Jenny, turning her head towards the hall. She got up

quickly and left the room, making sure to close the lounge door behind her. To Jenny's relief Robin was stepping over the threshold using the basket to push open the door.

'Thank God,' she whispered. 'Where've you been?' She looked inside the basket. The baby was fast asleep. 'Take him upstairs,' she whispered, jerking a finger upwards. 'Mum and Dad are here,' she said, flicking her head in the direction of the lounge. With one hand securing the handle, she watched him creeping up the stairs with the precious cargo tucked beneath his arm, before disappearing out of sight.

'It's Robin,' she said with relief and closed the door behind her. 'He...just needs the bathroom...I'll make us something to eat.' She hastened to the CD player in the dining area, put on a Celine Dion album, and turned up the volume to conceal any possible baby noise. She chopped some veg and left some mince to simmer, then went upstairs to Robin who was perched on the edge of their bed, gazing at the sleeping child.

'Where've you been, Robin? I've been sending you loads of messages.'

He sighed and looked towards the window. A yellow rectangle of light was shining from the house on the opposite side of the square. 'The office.' He raised his eyes to meet her gaze. 'Andrew called us in. We've had to hand in our phones. There's going to be a police investigation...something about phone hacking.'

Jenny sat on the bed by the basket. The baby was sleeping peacefully. 'Phone hacking?'

'Like computer hacking but listening in to other people's conversations and texts. It's illegal.'

'It surely doesn't involve you?'

Robin did not answer.

'Robin?' she looked at him pleadingly, like a mother chastising a naughty child.

He shook his head. 'I did it once.' He held up his hands. 'That's all.' He leaned one elbow on his knee and squeezed his pulsing brow. 'You don't realise the pressure I'm under, we're all under, to get information, especially when a deadline's hanging over you.'

'And what if you're caught?'

'Listen, Jen. It happened once. About two months ago. Everyone does it. It'll probably come to nothing.' He swung round to sit next to her and placed his arm around her, but she moved away.

'And where was he when you were in this meeting?' She sounded annoyed.

'In the car.'

'You left him alone?'

'I used an old sheet from the garage to cover the basket.'

She stared at him, her eyes wide, her mouth severe. 'I don't believe you,' she said, shaking her head.

'He was fine.'

'You stupid man. He could have suffocated, and what would've happened if someone had seen him?'

'But he didn't, and nobody did. I parked the car well away from any others and I wasn't gone that long. A matter of minutes. I told Andrew I couldn't stay.' He paused for a moment. 'There's something else as well. Mary Watts has been in touch again. Another email. She sent a link this time, but no message. I need to find out where it came from. I know someone who can help.'

'Who?'

'A colleague.' He shook his head and averted his eyes.

At that, the baby woke, his fingers were flexing in agitation, and he let out a piercing cry.

'Sh, sh, sh,' said Jenny, lifting him out of the basket.

Robin watched her pacing the room, backwards and forwards, patting his bottom gently until he was quiet, his fingers splayed against his body. 'What have you said to your parents? They've obviously seen the cot?'

'That we're intending to foster. Then, however long he's here, it won't be a surprise, a baby suddenly showing up.'

Robin sighed. 'We'll have to keep him hidden for now. There's too much going on at the minute to call the police. I don't want to be arrested on a double charge. It's bad enough reporting on scandals without being in one yourself.'

Jenny's magic had worked again. The baby had drifted off. She kissed his forehead and placed him in the basket, partially covering him with a blanket. 'I'll have to go down,' she said, 'they'll be wondering what's going on. I'll make up an excuse for you.'

Alice and George looked up as she came in. Jenny hated being deceitful. She hoped they wouldn't detect it on her face.

'I thought we were hearing things, darling. Your father thought he'd heard a baby cry.'

Palpitations stirred in Jenny's chest. With her eyes averted from their steady gaze, she tidied the already neat pile of magazines on the coffee table between herself and them. 'It's probably the vixen we feed in the garden. You know how they cry at night — like babies in distress.' The music was coming to an end. 'I'll put something else on,' she said, avoiding their faces, as she rushed past them, head down, conscious of her now moist red eyes. 'Robin will be down soon. He's just...finishing something off.'

In the kitchen, Jenny stared through the window. Her face reflected in the darkness of the glass, and in the blackness of her shadow there glowed a pair of green eyes.

Chapter 7

Friday 28 March 2008 - 8.00pm

Jenny was conscious of a presence in the kitchen. She turned to find her mother in the doorway. Alice was frowning at the baby's half-empty bottle and an open bundle of disposable nappies spewed across the kitchen table. With her lips pressed tightly together, her whole countenance shouted confusion and hurt. Jenny sensed her mother's thoughts churning haphazardly behind those rheumy grey eyes. She hated telling a lie, leading her mother up the proverbial garden path.

'Mum,' said Jenny, her eyes drawn to the bottle and nappies. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to deceive you.' She leaned back against the sink and folded her arms. 'Daddy was right, he did hear a baby cry. He's upstairs with Robin. We didn't want to say anything until we'd got him.' The lies cranked up again. 'We've been asked to keep it quiet. He only came last night.'

Alice's look showed anger and dismay.

'We've been thinking about fostering for a while. It's happened so quickly.'

'When was it all arranged?'

'A few months ago. Through an agency,' Jenny said, squeezing her forehead between fingers and thumb.

'What sort of agency?'

'One that organises fostering, Mum, what do you think?'

Alice was clearly hurt. 'Sorry,' said Jenny, 'I didn't mean to be rude.'

'But, you were going to tell us?'

'Of course we were.'

'But you said you had to keep it quiet. Is there a problem?'

'No, Mum.' She went to Alice and hugged her.

Maddened, Alice did not reciprocate and stood rigidly, her arms firmly by her side. The disconnection was palpable between them, and Jenny was induced to step back, knocking her thigh against the kitchen table. 'It's happened very quickly — just a matter of days. We've been asked to keep him safe,' she said, 'for the time being.' Jenny averted her gaze from Alice's downcast face.

'Why is that?' said Alice. 'What do you know about him?'

Jenny scabbled for an explanation. 'Just...the essential facts.'

'When did you decide to foster?'

'A few months ago. After finding out I'm...infertile.' Jenny's head began to throb once more.

'Infertile? Why haven't you said until now?'

'I didn't want to upset you. I know you've always wanted a grandson.'

'The Manners are a proud family going back centuries. It would be nice to carry it on.' She closed her eyes for a moment. 'I'm sorry, I'm just being selfish. I can see you're trying to help. Can I at least see the baby? You said it was a boy.'

Distracted by a cellophane-wrapped dummy under the table, Jenny stooped to pick it up and answered hesitantly that they ought to wait for a moment as he was asleep. The gulf between them was suffocating. She felt panic rising in her chest and was overcome by a need to escape the bed of lies she was making for herself. 'I need to check on things. Go into the lounge and sit with Dad. I'm going upstairs...I'll be down shortly.'

'But what am I supposed to tell your Father?'

'Whatever you like,' Jenny blurted. She left her mother standing in the kitchen, as she rushed out to pad quickly up the stairs, and to Robin, who was lying on their bed.

'Robin,' she whispered.

He lifted his head. 'Yep?' he said squinting at her. He'd switched off the light to rest his eyes.

'Oh, sweetheart,' she said, touching the blanket. The baby was murmuring in the basket which was placed beside the bed on the floor. 'Mum knows, Robin, I've had to tell her. She saw baby items in the kitchen.' Jenny sat on the edge of the bed, staring at Robin stretched out, her right arm spanning his legs.

He leaned up on his elbows. 'What did you say?' he asked curiously.

'Like I said before, that we decided to foster. She's upset with me...I feel disloyal. She's hurt.'

'Why...why should she be hurt?'

'Because we haven't mentioned fostering before now.'

'That's because we've never discussed it.'

'We've always been close, we've never had secrets, Mum and I.'

He sighed, flopped back, and closed his eyes. 'This is getting out of hand. She'll get over it. You're more concerned about your mother's feelings...not the trouble we might be in.'

'Trouble? We're taking care of him.'

'Don't be stupid, Jen, you're an intelligent woman, you know what I mean. We should've reported him last night. We are in possession of somebody else's child. What part of that don't you seem to understand. The last thing we need is your mother throwing a wobbly.'

'She is not throwing a wobbly. She's concerned.'

'For whom? Herself? That we might have brought low life into the house? I know how she thinks.'

Jenny jumped up. 'Your accusing my Mother of snobbery. After all she's done for us. She accepted you quickly enough.'

'Huh, thanks very much. What's that supposed to mean? I'm not good enough for you?' He swung his legs off the bed and reached out to touch her, but she pulled away. 'Oh, come on, let's not argue about this, Jenny. Your mother's been very good to me. I'm sorry. This is all too much.' He took a step towards her. She relented, allowing him to fold his arms around her.

'We've always been close, Mum and I,' she said, her head against his chest. 'I've been lucky...able to tell her anything...unlike some girls.' She turned to look at the baby. 'Take *his* mother for instance. If she'd been able to tell her mother she was pregnant, he may not be here now.'

He rested his chin on her head. 'Pity she wasn't able to tell her, then...instead of landing us with the problem. It still comes down to, why us? That's what I can't understand. Anyway, I need to go and see my mother...see if she knows anything about a Mary Watts.'

She looked up into his face. There was stubble lining his jaw, and grey patches under his eyes. 'Come down...so we can speak to them together.' She turned to look at the basket. 'Should we take him down, too?'

'Leave him for now. He'll be alright. Look, his eyes are closing. I'll wedge the duvet around him. In case he falls out. Come on,' he said, nodding towards the door, 'let's go down and get this over with.'

In the lounge, Robin perched on the edge of his seat. His hands were clasped like a doctor about to relate some terrible news. But he reeled the story off fluently with conviction, relating the tale of the fostering agency, and its desperate measures to re-home a newly possessed child.

'Well, I just hope it works out for you. I hope you know what you're doing,' said Alice. 'I've always wanted grandchildren. But this is just not how I expected things to happen. What about your job, darling? How will you fit it all in? You must have a nanny. Norland nannies are highly recommended. The royal family...'

'We'll sort it,' interjected Robin. She'll have his name down for Eton at this rate. He could see the story spiraling out of control. 'Anyway, we're only fostering. It's a temporary arrangement. It might not suit us.'

'And if it does, will you go in for adoption?'

'It's early days. This is a trial.' In more ways than one, he thought to himself.

'It's very important to get the right child. We're an old established family...George, what do you think?'

George was nonplussed, was about to open his mouth when Alice rattled on.

'There's a title to inherit and...property...substantial property...a Queen Anne manor house and land...lots of land. We need a suitable male to inherit.'

Not any old bod could inherit the family silver. Robin's knee began to vibrate, restless leg syndrome had set in.

'From what I've heard,' continued Alice, 'most adopted children are older...with problems and from...a different culture.'

'I'm sure they'll do their best to make a good match, Mum. The baby must be right for us, too.'

'But you might not get a baby. That's what I'm saying. It's more likely to be an older child.'

'Well, they do exist,' said Jenny. 'There's one upstairs. He's perfect.'

'We're only fostering him, though.' Robin stared, wide-eyed at Jenny.

'We'll support you whatever,' said George, folding a large comforting hand over Alice's clenched fist.

Jenny went to kneel at her mother's feet. She held Alice's hands. 'Forgive me now, Mum? We didn't want to say anything in case...we were building up our hopes too much.'

Alice nodded. 'But you must tell me in future, darling. Your father and I are much too old for shocks like this.'

Before they left that night, Robin and Jenny let them see the baby. He remained asleep, as all four stood shadowed in the doorway, whispering. They were afraid to waken him, as if he was a wild creature, dormant in its den.

On the doorstep they made promises, agreeing to meet more often, vowing to respond promptly to texts. Jenny and Alice hugged and said they would ring each day. Robin and George arranged 'must do' visits to Oxfordshire; the baby would love the lambs. George said there were one hundred and ninety-five at the last count with no casualties, despite the cold Spring. Engrossed in their camaraderie, it slipped their minds that the baby was alone in the house.

They waved them off and closed the door. Jenny leaned back against it. Robin put his arms around her shoulders and pulled her towards him, so that she pressed her cheek against his chest and wrapped her arms around his waist. He stroked her hair then kissed it. 'Happier now?' he said, resting his chin on the top of her head. 'I'm glad you've made it up with your mother.'

'Not entirely. She's not keen on a fostered child.'

'Jenny?' He looked her in the face. 'We're not fostering him. He'll have to go, once I've checked he's not related to me.' He pressed his lips together. 'This Mary Watts is a puzzle.'

She let the smile slip from her face.

'I know what we need to do,' he said encouragingly. 'Open that.' He tipped his head towards the box.

It was tedious, pulling each section of the cot from its enormous packaging, then carrying each part, wrapped in thick plastic, to the first-floor landing, where each piece was stacked against the wall. Robin cringed as he tore through the plastic sheeting. He pulled their bedroom door to, keen to avoid disturbing the baby. The grandfather clock chimed midnight from downstairs. With some trepidation, Jenny pushed the door slightly open, allowing a slice of light into the darkness of the room, and popped her head around the door. She crept inside, towards the basket on the floor, straining her eyes to locate the baby's face. But it wasn't there. She flicked on the main light. The basket had overturned, the baby face down on the carpet.

'Robin, quick,' she shouted. She picked up the baby and turned him to face her.

Robin stumbled over the wrapping into the room. 'Give him to me,' he said, taking him from her.

She relinquished the child, to let Robin lie him on the bed. His head flopped to one side. His eyes were closed, his arms lying in a cruciform pose, his legs, fingers, and toes motionless. Robin felt his neck. 'There's a pulse, thank God.' He lifted each eyelid. 'They're a little red.'

'Be careful with him, Robin...please.' Jenny held her face between her hands.

All of a sudden, the baby coughed and began to cry. 'Thank goodness,' said Robin. He slid his hands around the baby's body and hugged him closely and, with one hand supporting his head, placed his mouth against his fine golden hair. Then, he let her take him. She sat on the bed and propped the baby on her knee to scrutinize his face.

'He's breathing normally,' she said, tears rolling down her cheek.

'This is twice he's rolled out of that basket.'

'Twice?'

'When you were at the shops. It happened then.'

'You didn't tell me that.'

'Well I'm telling you now. Look, he was alright...but he fell on his face then. We need to get him checked out. He'll be full of bruises at this rate. Then we'll be up the creek.'

'But where can we take him? We can't go to a hospital.'

'There's a doctor we use at work, a Dr Graham. He's a private GP. I've never been to him, but we can try that. He might be more discreet.' He touched the baby's hand, gripping the blanket's edge. 'He seems to be alright now.' Robin stretched down to upturn the basket. It ought not to have toppled that easily. Its sides were shallower than its broader base. But with those powerful chubby thighs Robin believed that anything could happen. Already, he'd felt their force against his chest.

He sat down, to cosy up to her on the bed. She placed her head on his shoulder. 'Parenting is hard, Rob.'

His grimace agreed the fact. She wouldn't have to put up with it for long. 'Do you want to get some sleep?' he whispered.

'It's fine. I'll watch him.'

'Think Andrew said the police are coming tomorrow. We'll take him to that doctor first thing, before I go to work.' He sighed heavily. 'Do you mind if I get some shut eye in the spare room?'

She shook her head.

He had a nightmarish sleep, chasing the baby in a runaway pram, his leaden legs hindering pursuit.

In the morning the baby looked well. His eyes were no longer red. They took him to see Dr Graham whose surgery was in a grand terraced house off Moorgate. From behind an antique desk in a wood-paneled room, he stood and gestured for them to sit. He was an elderly man with a paunch, wearing an old-fashioned pin-striped suit, more befitting a bank manager than a doctor.

'What can I do for you?' he said, clasping his hands before resting them on the green leather surface of the desk.

'We'd like you to check the baby,' said Robin. He wiped a bead of sweat from his brow. 'He rolled out of his basket. Unfortunately, he fell on his face. The basket was on the floor at the time.'

The doctor frowned. 'We'd better examine him then. How old is he?' He walked around the side of the desk to where Jenny was sitting with the baby on her knee.

Robin looked at her with a wide-eyed plea when the doctor was bending over the baby. 'Mmm...about...two months?'

'You don't sound very sure,' said Dr Graham, gently pulling up the baby's left eyelid.

'Oh, you know how it is, new baby, sleepless nights.' He scratched his head. 'I don't know what day it is sometimes.'

'Hmmm,' came the reply. The baby was incredibly quiet as a bright light was being shone into his right eye. 'They seem fine. Pupils are normal. There is this slight bruising on his nose though.'

'Where?' said Robin, and he stared into the baby's face. There was a pink patch of skin on his right nostril. 'He wasn't out of the basket for long, I picked him up straightaway.'

The doctor didn't answer. 'This is unusual. I notice he has a tooth coming through. Babies don't normally get their first teeth until they're six months old. Was he born with it?'

'Erm...' Robin began.

'Yes he was,' said Jenny.

'It's just that they're usually removed at birth — in the hospital. I wonder why they didn't take it out. Was it a home birth?'

'Yes.' Jenny was quick to reply.

Robin loosened his tie. He could feel the sweat on the back of his neck, under pressure from the doctor's prying.

'Has he been vomiting?'

Robin felt flushed.

'No,' she said, stepping in.

'Any prolonged crying?'

'Not really.'

The doctor tapped on the keyboard, then handed her a printout. 'Well...he seems to be fine, but, just to be on the safe side, give this to the hospital. I suggest you get him x-rayed. Just to make sure there's no internal injuries.'

'It wasn't that much of a fall,' said Robin. 'He merely rolled over.'

'Just in case,' insisted the doctor.

Robin took it gingerly from his plump freckled hand.

'You'll need to inform your own doctor, too. They'll need a record of my diagnosis. People usually come to me in emergencies.'

Robin felt his blood pressure rising. The doctor was quick to pick up on his mood.

'When they can't get a quick appointment on the NHS,' he continued.

'Exactly. That's why we're here,' said Robin standing before pushing back his seat. 'Thank you.' He went to shake the doctor's hand.

'Goodbye, then...Mr and Mrs Watts.'

As they emerged into the chilly Spring air, the nets of the large bay window flickered.

Chapter 8

Saturday 29 March 2008 – 11.00am

The next day, while Jenny was with the baby, Robin visited his mother.

The street was solid with parked cars. He had no option but to squeeze the Jaguar between a rusty white van and a black BMW with tinted windows and a dent in the driver's door. He parked outside number twelve and, due to a slight rise in temperature, walked with his jacket slung over his shoulder, along a crooked pavement past a row of semis so far extended they resembled terraces, to his mother's house at thirty-two. Even though the sky was overcast, it was brighter and a little warmer. The sun squinted through grey clouds; it almost felt like Spring.

Pressing the doorbell, he turned to survey Alderbrook Road. Fifteen years had passed since his parents retired to this house. His dad never settled in suburbia — he loved the flat above the chippy in West Ham, the one they shared a bathroom with old Mrs Grimmet on the second floor.

Robin pulled his face at all the grimy net curtains, untidily pulled across each window of every single house, and the tacky front porches, botched up with UPVC doors and window frames. Their original garden walls had vanished, too, as had the gardens, replaced with tarmac drives on which a vehicle or two had been squeezed. His parents hadn't made this alteration. They'd never owned a car, had held on to their little lawn, a rare green sight amidst the urban sprawl. The street resembled a car park. There were more cars now than the last time he came. And when was that, he pondered? Three months ago?

Standing on the doorstep of his mother's house, he heard a key turning in the lock. The door opened as far as the chain would go. Through a narrow gap in the

doorway, there appeared a sliver of wrinkly sunburnt skin, one deep brown eye and a wisp of dyed blond hair.

'Not today,' she said in her Cockney twang.

Robin smiled back. 'Hello, Mum,' he replied.

She unfastened the chain and let him in to a narrow hallway, just wide enough for the two of them. 'Must be my birthday, you turning up.' She led him into a dimly lit sitting room with net curtains pristinely shrouding the bay.

'Well, I did say I'd come. You look well,' he said, settling himself down on one of a matching pair of small settees cluttering the room.

Although it was officially Spring and barely warm at that, his mother was already in a floral sleeveless dress and flip flops, making the best of her permanent tan.

'You look as though you're ready for summer, Mum.' He nodded at the dress. 'You were always a sun lover.' For a second, he pictured a hot Mediterranean beach, his mother in a bikini on a lounge, his dad, pale and freckled, huddled beneath a parasol. It was his dad's last holiday, in Fuengirola, just over a year ago now.

'Cup of tea, love?'

'Lovely, not too strong though,' he replied, just in case she'd forgotten. He wondered whether it was longer than three months since his last visit.

She sidestepped through a gap between the two settees, and out through a door in the corner of the room leading into the kitchen. He heard a rattling of cups and the switch of a kettle while scrutinising the photo frames lining the wooden mantel above the old-fashioned gas fire, topped by a small copper flue. Pride of place, in the centre of the mantelpiece was their wedding photo, a portrait print of Jenny and himself in a fancy gold frame. Jenny looked stunning in her mother's antique dress, and there he

was, looking rather suave, he thought, in top hat and tails outside that picturesque little church in Bladon.

In the next photo, his parents were dressed to the nines, in the gardens of Buckingham Palace, his dad's MBE pinned to the lapel of the hired 'penguin suit', as he'd called it — 'for services to retail' — another of dad's little jokes. In other mismatched frames, at various stages of school life, Robin saw himself posing with freckles, and that unsightly gap between his two front teeth. Then, in another, he was smirking with a Beckham Mohican, at odds with his grammar school blazer. Finally, at the far end, in a transparent plastic frame, he was holding a shield aloft, wearing tennis whites and a scabby knee. He remembered that scrape stinging from the TCP, the red clay court, and his embarrassment at his mother's attentions in front of his classmates.

'There we go, lovely,' said his mother, handing him a mug of tea. It would be china cups in Oxfordshire. A gold-rimmed teacup and saucer came to mind.

Clasping the mug with both hands, he leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. He wondered where to begin. Should he wade in now and mention the baby? The fostering story was plausible, she knew about their struggle to conceive, but finding a baby in the kitchen was, maybe, a step too far. He would stall matters for now.

'Do you know a Mary Watts, Mum?'

'Ma...ry Watts?' She took her time over the words, then simultaneously grimaced and shook her head. 'Who is she?'

'That's what I want to find out.'

'Can I ask why?'

'Just something I'm working on...her name came up at work. I was wondering if she was a relative.'

'I can't think of anyone called Mary on your father's side. She might be on that family tree he did. It's in the cupboard.' She pointed to another piece of dated furniture, an MFI cabinet crammed with Doulton figurines and Waterford glass, squashed into the recess between the chimney breast, and the flat screen television — far too big for the size of the room. From the bottom of a cupboard in what he considered a nineteen-seventies' monstrosity, she pulled out a faded green file.

'I haven't looked at it since your father died,' she said. She wiped a tear with the back of her hand then sat next to him, resting the box on a fake rococo coffee table hogging the remaining space.

He pulled the table towards them. Made of marble and heavy with a crack down the middle, he could still see the join where his dad had dropped it. The silly sod had tried to clean it by removing the brown and white slab from its gilt surround. Clueless to the properties of stone, his dad had balanced it on his palms, apparently in the wrong place according to the stonemason who repaired the split down the middle.

Rummaging through a selection of bills, receipts, guarantees and dog-eared black and white photographs, Robin found the family tree. He uncurled a long strip of paper made up of A4 sheets cello-taped together. Set out in fading blue biro, his dad had capitalised the names on the family tree, his usual handwriting. Robin never understood why he wrote in that way, but it was always neat and tidy, even when written at speed. At the top of the tree were Jethro Watts and Ida Jones and under those two were the names of nine descendants with Albert on the left and Flora on the right. He scanned the chart for a Mary.

'Any luck, love,' his mother said. She moved closer to peer at the paper through rimless specs.

'This is interesting.' He tapped the bottom of the chart. 'There's a Mary Anne here.'

'Let me have a look,' she said, running a finger left, to Robin's paternal grandparents, Alfred and Alice Watts. 'She's the same age as them. She could still be alive. Some of the Watts's were long livers.'

'One thing we do know, she's not the Mary Watts I'm looking for — she's too old.'

'Too old for what?'

'It doesn't matter. It's not important.'

'Then why do you want to find her?'

'It's nothing really, Mum, just a whim. This woman, Mary Watts, made me think of the family. It's a name that came up at work.' For a moment, he thought of Jenny and the baby. Telling lies was an uncomfortable business. He sympathised with Jenny's guilt, at keeping Alice in the dark. Jenny's parents knew so why shouldn't his mother be told? 'No, it just got me thinking about the family and...I haven't seen you for a while, so I thought I'd come and see you.'

'You can say that again. When were you last here? Christmas?' She laughed.

'Surely not. Anyway, you can always visit us — it takes two, you know. We talk on the phone.'

'Not enough. You're the one with the car, Robin, you know how much I hate the Tube, especially after dark.'

Robin took her hand. 'I know. It's just that I'm so...' he ran his other hand through his hair.

'Busy?'

Robin nodded. 'It's no excuse though.'

'I'd like to see you more often. I get lonely without your dad. It's only a year you know. We were together forty years.'

'I know, I'm sorry. You can always ring me...whenever you like.'

'You've got too much on,' she said dismissively. 'I don't like to disturb you, either of you...and...well, I don't always feel right...you live in a beautiful home...in a very nice part of London...it's another world.'

He squeezed her hand. 'Don't be daft, you're always welcome.' There was one thing to be said about Jenny. Despite her background, she wasn't a snob, unlike her mother.

'I've just remembered,' she said, 'I'm sure Joyce's daughter's called Mary. She'd be about your age. Haven't seen Joyce for ages. You remember Joyce, your dad's cousin? Lives in Shoreditch, or she did the last time we saw her...at your grandmother's funeral.'

'When would that be?'

'Hmm...about 10 years ago now.'

'Have you got her address or phone number? She was a Mary?'

'Well, not sure when I think of it. Could be Maria instead? It was something religious. They were all church goers on your father's side. Did this woman try to contact *you* in particular?'

Robin nodded.

'I wonder what she's after if it is her? Perhaps she'd heard you'd married into money.' She gave him a mischievous wink.

Robin checked his watch. 'Oh, well, got to be off, Mum. Got someone to see. Let me know if you find anything out.' He pecked her on the cheek. He felt rather guilty

leaving so soon, but needs must, he couldn't be late for his next appointment.

Cheapskate was a stickler for time.

When he walked in, the cafe was quiet, the midday rush over, the office workers back at their desks. Cheapskate was already sitting by the window. The thin, swarthy man in a black leather jacket and scruffy jeans scraped back his chair and held out his hand.

'Long time, no see,' he said, gesturing for Robin to join him at a small pine table for two. Robin was pleased the traffic was noisy; it would help to hide their conversation from the only other people in the shop, a young woman dressed as a Goth, plugged into her mobile, and a lad behind the counter. Robin went up to order the drinks. Typical of modern-day coffee shops, he was the only one in charge. He ordered two espressos and left the barista, the word displayed on the back of his creased orange shirt, to fuss around the Italian coffee machine, polishing silver tubes and discarding used granules into a bin.

'So...what are you after?' said Cheapskate, as Robin rejoined him at the table.

Robin sniggered. Straight to the point as usual. He glanced at the careworn face, complete with prickly grey stubble which had spread across his normally balding head. He kept his voice down. 'Can you trace someone for me? A woman, name of Mary Watts.'

'Relative?'

'Not sure. That's what I want you to find out.'

'Anything else to go on?'

'No. Just the name. She sent me an email. I need to know who she is. It's rather important.' Robin leaned closer and propped up his chin on his hands in a prayer-like stance.

'Any other info I could use?'

'Not really. I just need help tracking this woman down.'

'What's in it for me?'

'This is private. Nothing to do with the job...thirty per cent of the usual price.'

'Fifty.'

'You drive a hard bargain.'

'I do a thorough job.'

'Well, I hope you can this time.'

'You seem a bit on edge.'

Over the past twenty-four hours, Robin had developed a nervous twitch under his right eye. It refused to go away. It was like a constant pulse, reminding him of the trouble lying in wait at home.

Cheapskate started to tap on his phone.

'I've already tried that,' said Robin.

'Tried what?'

'Googling the name.' Robin studied Cheapskate's fingernails bitten to the quick, blue inky letters spelling out 'LOVE', scrawled across the knuckles of his right hand. Only a mother could love a grease ball like him. You wouldn't think he was one of the upper classes. Robin had been led to believe his old man was an earl. But that was supposition. He had never known his real identity. Cheapskate had only ever been Cheapskate.

'Nothing came up on the net when I checked,' said Robin.

'Nothing at all?'

'Only Americans.'

'What's wrong with Americans?' Cheapskate laughed.

Robin sniggered again. 'It's a bit of a coincidence...us having the same surname.'

'I bet you're glad it's not Smith.'

'I was wondering if we're related,' said Robin, drumming the table. 'I've looked at my family tree. There's a 'Mary Anne' on it. Problem is...she could be in her eighties now...if she's still alive.'

'Would it matter if she was...in her eighties, I mean?'

Robin had to remind himself not to give too much away. 'There's also a Maria on it...she could be a second cousin.'

'What's this all about anyway? It's sounding like a family history job. I don't do that kind of work.'

'All I can say is...she's party to some important information.'

'And you can't say what?'

Robin shook his head.

'And you can't tell me anything more?'

Robin grimaced. 'Sorry, pal.' He glanced at the girl in the corner, still drawn to the phone.

The waiter was approaching. They stopped talking as he placed the espressos down, giving Robin a minute to reflect on his counterpart, investigation their common factor. Although he had known Cheapskate for several years, their relationship was on a strictly professional basis. Cheapskate kept strict terms of reference regarding his personal life. Robin had tried delving but to no avail. Questions like 'Are you married?' and 'Have you got kids?' had been ill received. Often, he had to wait for information. He knew he'd been a soldier, the paras tattoo on his right forearm gave that away, and when they'd first got to know each other, Cheapskate had slipped the Intelligence Corps into conversation. Anyone would think he was a spy. Now and again, Robin tried to

infiltrate this wall of silence, but got little, if nothing, every time. Brute force or torture would be the only way.

'Coffee good, mate?' Robin often conceded to 'mate' or 'pal', fully aware that terms of endearment were never repaid. 'Anything to go with it? Muffin? Rocky road?'

'Huh.' Cheapskate shook his head. 'Watching my diet,' he said, patting his stomach.

'Watching your diet? You're as skinny as a rake.'

'Diabetes. It runs in the family.'

Robin raised his eyebrows enquiringly. Was he about to break his wall of silence? He dared to probe. 'From your father or your mother?'

Cheapskate looked away through the window, to a double decker bus blocking the view of the busy street. Tired, with lack of sleep, Robin couldn't be bothered to pry further. It would be easier drawing blood. Finishing his coffee, Robin scraped back his chair, stood, and held out his hand. 'Got to go. Let me know if you find anything out.'

'Will do,' said Cheapskate, returning Robin's handshake with a bone-crunching grip.

As he left the cafe and closed the door, the woman with the earphones followed him out.

Chapter 9

Saturday 5 April 2008 - 9.30am

A week later, the baby was still in the house.

Since her first email imploring Robin to '*Look after him*', there had been that second one, attaching a link. She'd mentioned nothing about wanting to meet him and though he didn't trust links, his curiosity was aroused, and he couldn't resist opening it up. It had led to a hospital scan, portraying the ghostly outline of the head and chest of a foetus in the womb. Jenny had cooed over the image, had traced her finger around the clearly defined profile of a baby. They assumed it was the baby. The time (9.45am) and date (29.11.2007), plus meaningless numbers and codes, were printed at the bottom. Despite an internet search on pre-natal scans, they could only speculate his birth date and age. To the untrained eye, the spectral image of the baby in the womb provided no clues as to its stage of development before its rite of passage into the world.

Robin's investigation into his family affairs had been put on abeyance. According to his mother, dad's octogenarian sister, Auntie Jean, had Alzheimer's in a Brighton care home, and she was still on the case of his father's cousin's daughter, whatever relation she happened to be. He'd been pinning his hopes that she was the mother. But why not come clean from the start? Robin agonized over her motives for abandoning her son. Shame, embarrassment, poverty crossed his mind. It was still hard to believe that a woman could desert her own flesh and blood. She'd carried him for nine months. Why go to the bitter end when it could have been terminated? Perhaps she didn't agree with abortion? His mother had said dad's side were religious. But Robin didn't think they were Catholics. What deep hole had she fallen into? Involvement with a married man? An unfortunate victim of rape? Too many other mouths to feed? That

didn't seem plausible; not in the twenty-first century. His paper was awash with stories of multi-child families living the good life on state benefit.

Such thoughts had harangued him all week — ever since she had jettisoned her baby into their lives.

Through the study window the sky was steel grey. It looked as though it was about to thunder. He leaned his forehead against the glass. How had it come to this? The situation was surreal, an archetypal bad dream. He'd reported on a couple of abandoned babies in the past. One was named Kyle, after the paramedic who'd been first on the scene. What happened after that was anyone's guess, he'd never found out. The protective arm of the law always prohibited further press enquiry.

Robin paced the room holding his chin. In the last couple of days, Jenny's resolve had surprised him again. While he'd been stewing in fear of exposure, he'd been impressed by her sudden composure, her painless acceptance of this bizarre situation. She was a contrary character. Throughout their five years of marriage, Jenny seemed to wear two hats. She was both Jekyll and Hyde. Confident and assertive on the one hand; her editor even singling her out as a natural leader. And Robin had seen her in action, charming the pants off prospective clients at publishing events. But within the confines of their home, she often fell to bits. Throwing a tantrum over a cake that hadn't risen, or eggs that refused to scramble. He'd seen her throw down the towel, proclaiming her uselessness. She could be harassed by the tiniest of things.

He went upstairs to the bedroom where Jenny was propped against the headboard feeding the baby.

'There's nothing better than this,' she said. 'Better than battling the Tube or hassling people on the phone.'

The baby was suckling the rubber teat, his eyes closed, his fingers wrapped possessively around the bottle. But as Robin approached, his eyes suddenly shot open, he spat out the bottle and let rip a penetrating cry.

'I'm not going to hurt you,' said Robin. 'Every time I come near, you make a fuss. I don't think you like me,' he remarked, peering into the baby's face.

'Don't be silly. You surprised him. He hasn't learned to take sides...not yet,' she said with a chuckle.

'He's managed to force me out of the bedroom though,' Robin joked. 'He's doing his damndest to keep me away from you.'

Over the week, they had realised the futility of Robin's involvement in the nighttime feed. Contrary to what they believed to be normal infant behaviour, Robin seemed incapable of pacifying the baby with a cuddle. Every time he picked him up, the baby continued to scream. Robin was, therefore, banished to the spare room in the attic. Since his removal from the marital bed, the baby had settled well.

Just then the phone in the hall rang. 'I'll get that,' said Robin. 'Might be my mother. She may have some news.'

Jenny glanced through the window. Snow white clouds interspersed with patches of blue sky, and the sunlight shining in boosted Jenny's already happy mood. She was mesmerised by the force of the baby's sucking action on the teat and was relieved not to be breastfeeding. She imagined him clamped to her, that lower incisor pinching her skin, pulling at her nipple. Stroking his forehead, she reflected upon his appearance. A white widow's peak tapered to join his equally white eyebrows. He was totally covered in soft white down over a ruddy complexion, reminding her of the feral albino kittens she had found abandoned in the barn at home. Momentarily, he opened and closed his

icy blue eyes, as he drew greedily on the milk, gulping large mouthfuls, so that within minutes, it seemed the bottle was empty. She thought that any other baby would be satisfied by now, but his face creased, and he wailed out for more. She was prepared for his demands though. A second bottle full to the brim, insulating in a special flask, was ready and waiting on the bedside table. He'd been craving extra all week — draining two whole bottles every mealtime with considerable ease; his coughing fits fortunately over. As she approached with the bottle, she was surprised by the way he snatched at it, and pulled it away from her, to grip it tightly between spread-eagled fingers, before eventually ramming it into his mouth. She was amazed by his strength, his propensity for food, and would have run dry by now if forced to breastfeed.

Robin bounded up the stairs. 'Bloody hell, Jen,' he said rushing into the room. 'That was Andrew. Rob Talbot's been arrested.'

'Why?' asked Jenny, drying the baby's chin with a bib.

'He wants us in at twelve for a meeting. He's had his phone seized. The police have taken it for evidence.'

'Is it to do with this hacking business?'

'Well, yeah, what else could it be?' said Robin. He caught his reflection in the dressing table mirror and approached it. His hair was awry, and when he went to sleek it back, his thick dark mop refused to flatten.

'Not going to work like that, are you?' she said smiling, 'your shirt's hanging out.'

Tucking it in, he spied her through the mirror. She could easily pass for the baby's mother, the tender way she was stroking his wispy white hair. Suddenly Robin winced and placed his hand on his lower right side, the spot where the appendix was

supposed to be. It wasn't the first time he'd experienced the pain and couldn't help thinking it was all Mary Watts's fault.

The doorbell rang.

'Who's that now?' he said, turning to Jenny.

She shrugged.

He went downstairs and looked through the spy hole in the door. It was the postman, his head oddly distorted through the fisheye lens.

'Sorry, sir,' said the postman, passing Robin a large white envelope, 'there's not enough postage on this. You owe twenty-eight pence.'

Robin paid the fee and closed the door. He studied the writing on the envelope — handwritten in capitals in what seemed an unsteady hand. It looked as if the letters had been laboriously produced, reminding him of his grandad's writing, after he had suffered a stroke, as though a drunken spider had crawled across the page. After his illness, he had been forced to write with his left hand, following the paralysis which had struck the right-hand side of his body. He had died when Robin was six. He retained a vague recollection of his grandad; a man in his sixties with a crook-handled stick, dragging one foot, his left arm dangling by his side. Robin tore open the envelope.

'Who was that?' said Jenny.

Robin froze in the doorway.

'Are you alright? You look as if you've had a shock.'

Without a trace of a smile, he walked to her in silence and handed her a card. A blue teddy bear was holding a balloon floating in a pale blue sky. A curly font proclaimed, 'A New Baby Boy'.

Chapter 10

Saturday 5 April 2008 -12.00pm

At the meeting on Docklands, the editor, sub-editors, reporters, and writers were gathered around the enormous rectangular table, in a room with a plate glass wall and a panoramic view of the city. To avoid Andrew's line of sight, Robin sat at the opposite end of the table from his boss. Already that morning he'd received three reminders from Andrew, querying the whereabouts of the cannabis farm slavery story. It was still unfinished, dormant on his computer. He'd bashed it out during the week and hadn't looked at it since. He stroked his chin. Rough stubble shadowed his jaw. Usually fastidious about his appearance, he'd forgotten to shave again. The past seven days had been a trial.

Alice had been true to her word. She'd rung every night about eight, on the dot. Jenny seemed to be animated on the phone, thankful for her mother's slight shift of interest in favour of their situation. Robin had quizzed her, tactfully, about Alice's feelings on the subject, and was dismayed to learn that Alice might be coming round to the idea of them at least fostering the baby if nothing else. From then on, whenever possible, he eavesdropped into their conversations as he went about the house. Jenny had taken to sitting on the bottom stair, whilst talking to her mother on the phone. He had got into the habit, therefore, of leaving doors ajar or, sneakily turning down the telly whenever he heard the phone ring. Worryingly, she seemed possessed by a calm acceptance of their plight, and during one of her chats with her mother, Robin had worked himself up, into a bundle of nervous agitation, as he listened in, to a conversation involving entrance exams and Eton.

He'd had a to-do on Wednesday night as well, with Mrs Lewis. Expecting George and Alice to drop in, as they were due to visit friends in town, he'd answered the door holding the baby, still grizzling for what seemed hours, whilst Jenny was taking her time in the bath. Mrs Lewis's face was a picture. 'Oh,' she began, but he was quick to chime in with some excuse about babysitting, then shot her a defiant look, stopping her dead in her tracks. She'd wanted to borrow a newspaper. As if. He closed the door firmly behind her. She'd heard him screaming. The whole of Chelsea had heard him screaming, and she'd come round to snoop.

Screened behind Tim's shoulder, Robin yawned, his eyeballs ached, and a tension headache pulsed his forehead. Following a night tossing and turning, drifting in and out of sleep, it was hard to stay awake, and he was jolted back into the room after hearing his name being called, to sit up, automatically, like a schoolboy caught daydreaming in class.

A file marked 'Cannabis Farm Slaves' came sliding towards him along the table. 'Tonight, Rob. You've got till eight. I want it on Monday's front page.'

Everything Andrew said was an order. His world was either black or white with little room for grey, and his zero tolerance often put the wind up staff. Although Robin had witnessed the effects of Andrew's wrath on unsuspecting employees — their attempts to hide tears following reprimand in his office — Robin never allowed himself to stoop so low. He'd witnessed Andrew's humanity, too: relaxed over the protracted length of time he'd spent out of the office taking Jenny to numerous gynae appointments; turning a blind eye at his failure to meet deadlines; rearranging copy to coincide with Robin's domestic needs.

Today, he was back to his grumpy old self, uncompromising and difficult. It wasn't surprising, ironic really. Rival press coverage was inevitable, given what had

happened to Rob Talbot. Ordinarily, Andrew's demand would have spurred him into action. The thought of his story headlining, in preference to any number of others up for grabs, especially smartarse Talbot's, would have made his day. But he was in shock, from the bombshell dropped on the doormat that morning. His head was spinning with teddies tangled up in blue scrawly writing.

The action of his name being called, combined with the file landing virtually on his lap after rocketing down the table, had the effect of stirring his consciousness. He scanned the room. Rob Talbot was absent.

'You know why you're all here,' barked Andrew, 'and you know why Rob isn't. He's in Wapping nick. Arrested for phone hacking. There's to be no listening into voicemails from now on,' he said, slicing the air with a horizontal sweep of the hand. 'Be careful,' he warned, now pointing a headmasterly finger. Total hush swamped the room. 'Don't cross the line, however tempting. You'll end up like Rob otherwise,' and tapped his biro to emphasize the point. With his thinning grey hair and sallow complexion, Andrew looked pasty and suddenly very old.

An hour later, the end of the meeting brought a scrabbling of chairs, as people aimed to escape like a class being dismissed.

'Talbot's crown's been knocked off,' sniggered Robin, as he and Tim made for the door.

Tim smiled and nodded. 'Yep, serve the arrogant bastard right.'

Before leaving for home, Robin checked his emails. Not a dickie bird from Mary Watts. His father's family tree was in his bag. He spread it out across the desk. Tracing the lines upwards and sideways from his name somewhere near the bottom, he arrived at Jethro and Ida Watts who pinnacle the chart. Puzzled by his relationship to Mary Anne, Robin checked each name from the top. Jethro and Ida had produced nine

children, three of whom hadn't survived. Robin and Mary Anne were descendants via separate lines, the eventual issue of siblings, Albert, and Mary respectively, Jethro and Ida's first and second children. And there was the other problem; Mary Anne being a different generation to himself, on a par with Robin's grandfather.

Robin was amazed at his dad's research. He'd never owned a computer. Unless he'd used one at the library, he must have relied on certificates from Catherine House. Dates of marriages, births, and deaths of everyone on the chart had been meticulously recorded, except for one at the bottom, an anonymous grandchild belonging to Mary Anne. She'd married her cousin, a John Watts. They'd produced one child, another John, who in turn had borne two offspring, a boy, also named John, whose year of birth matched Robin's own — that of 1974 — and an unnamed child born later. Oddly, a question mark indicated the spot where there should have been a name for this other sibling. Robin perked up. If there was a succession of Johns, then might there be a succession of Marys, too? Was this anonymous person a girl, a Mary? She could be in her thirties by now, and capable of childbearing. His mother might know more. He got out his phone to ring her, but it went to voicemail, her Cockney tones promising to ring back as soon as she could.

That afternoon, when he arrived home around three, he was surprised to see Jenny opening the door, before he had chance to put the key in the lock.

'Thank God you're back. Something's wrong with the baby.' Jenny was in panic mode.

'Again?' groaned Robin.

'He's not eating. He keeps spitting out his bottle now.'

'Ohh,' he sighed, following her into the sitting room. The baby was lying quietly in the new carry cot she'd bought. 'Here, let me try,' said Robin, irritated. He picked him

up and sat him upright upon his knee, then tried to place the bottle into his mouth. But the baby's mood suddenly changed, and he wailed and clamped his lips firmly shut. 'It's obvious, he's not hungry.'

'But he hasn't had anything since yesterday. He had nothing in the night. He woke at two but refused the milk.'

Robin placed the teat against his lips again. The baby was having none of it, and he punched the bottle aside with such force, it propelled out of Robin's hand and toppled to the floor, spraying milk on the Persian rug. 'He's got a good left hook,' said Robin, rubbing the spilt milk into the carpet with his foot. Robin's stomach churned. He'd been so wrapped up in his family tree, he'd forgotten to eat the sandwich he'd grabbed on the way to the office. He fished it out of his bag. Like a begging dog, the baby's eyes followed its progression into Robin's mouth. Suddenly, stretching out his chubby little arms, he shook his clenched fists up and down, as though banging on a table, and screeched.

'No need for a tantrum. Is it some of this you're after?' said Robin, proffering the baby the half-eaten tuna sandwich.

The baby grabbed at it, his fingers curled and stiff like claws.

'Did you see that, Jen? He's after me sarnie.'

'He's too young for that.'

'Are you sure? He's got a tooth. If he keeps on refusing the milk, give him one of those jars of horrible brown mush.'

'Liquidised food, I think you mean.'

'Well, whatever. Anyway...I don't think there's much wrong with him. Here, take him back. I've got some work to do.'

Sitting at the computer in the study, Robin smiled wryly at the screen. Although Andrew's request had buoyed his mood, he snickered at the realization of Andrew's motive to stick his story on Monday's front page. Rob Talbot's scoop on the Royals should be headlining instead. He gazed through the window. A ray of sunlight disappeared behind a cloud. Jenny stuck her head round the door and asked him to listen out for the baby. She was taking the opportunity, while he was asleep, to slip out, to buy some medicine in case he had colic. Robin thought it a good idea, although he didn't admit to Jenny that it wouldn't be wise to return a sick child to its mother. At this rate, they'd both end up in Wapping nick. Neglect and kidnapping? The crimes were totting up.

Robin worked non-stop on the report, rewriting, proofreading, checking every detail; it was soon to be out in the public eye. He was a stickler for accuracy. He'd learnt the hard way, as a young trainee, mismatching a photo of a topless Princess Margaret in Mustique, with a caption naming the Queen. It hadn't done him any favours, he'd nearly got the sack. Andrew had had to grovel to the Palace.

An hour later he'd finished, sending the story on its way with a ceremonial tap of the key. He wandered into the lounge where the baby was sleeping. Peering inside the cot, the baby's eyes suddenly sprung open, his body began to shake, and he let out a high-pitched scream. Robin shushed him and waggled the cot, but the baby continued to cry with such vehemence, he barely heard his phone ringing in his pocket. It was Andrew. The baby, flailing his arms and pumping his legs like pistons, dug in his heels, and levered himself off the mattress to arch his back. Robin picked him up, juggling the baby and the phone. Perhaps he did have colic after all? The phone continued to ring. Struggling to swipe the screen, he replaced the screeching child in the cot to answer the call. Robin dared to inch away, towards the window, with his eyes still glued on the

baby, who was now caterpillaring himself, shaking the cot violently on its stand, whilst Robin was desperate to shield Andrew from the racket.

'Andrew,' he said with a raised voice, in an attempt to block out the din, 'I'm taking a few hours off as arranged...Crying?...Just something on TV.' He glared at the baby. The hysterics continued as he kept sentinel in the doorway to the hall. A key was turning in the lock. 'Sorry Andrew, I've got to go...Yep, yep...!' Jenny appeared, weighed down with a couple of carrier bags. 'Yep, I will...Will do...I know...' She dumped the bags, shot him a questioning look, then barged past into the lounge. Robin rolled his eyes and retreated to the relative peace of the study and slumped in the swivel chair. 'Yeah, I'm still here...Okay, okay...Will do,' he said, ending the call with a heavy sigh. He was sweating, and his palms were clammy. Inhaling deeply, he massaged his temples to ease the persistent buzzing in his head. He was in the doghouse, again. He stood by the door trying to steady his nerves before facing her, feeling like a misbehaved puppy, waiting to be punished.

From the hallway, all was quiet, until he heard a chair scraping tiles in the kitchen. He proceeded down the hall and hovered in the doorway. Jenny was sitting at the table feeding the baby with a teaspoonful of milk.

'That's good,' said Robin, raising his eyebrows and nodding, 'he's eating again.'

She ignored him, intent upon the baby's face, as he accepted the milk.

Robin approached and pulled out a chair from under the table, then lowered himself, quietly, on to the seat.

'Did you get him some medicine?' he said.

'The pharmacist suggested a spoon.' She didn't look up. Her tone was clinical and unyielding.

'A spoon?'

'Instead of the teat.' She pronounced each word distinctly.

Robin looked away, at the floor, for a moment. 'I'm not with you. What's wrong with a teat?'

'It's common for newborns to reject it,' she said, then exhaled a large breath of air.

'Jenny...I,' he began. The tension between them was palpable. He got up from the chair to lean on the sink and stared through the window. The day seemed drearier than was hinted by the covering of bright clouds. Turning around, he called her again. Slowly, she raised her head, and looked him full in the face, almost with contempt. He recognized those unsmiling eyes. She was itching for a row. Why did he always have to be the one to give in? 'I know why you're annoyed. It's because he was crying when you came in, but I *was* watching him...

'Watching him?' she replied indignantly, her eyes narrowed. 'I thought he was having a convulsion. The cot was about to tip over. Was your call that important?'

'Well, yes, it was. I do have a job to do.'

'It is the weekend, Robin. Give it a rest.'

The baby turned down his mouth and began to cry.

'Oh no, you were doing so well.' She offered him another spoonful of milk, but he shoved it away with his hand.

Steam erupted from the kettle as it clicked off.

'Do you want me to make you a drink?' said Robin, trying to appease.

She shook her head and lifted the baby over her shoulder, who then stopped crying.

'He seems to be okay now.' He filled a mug for himself. 'It was Andrew, I had to take the call.'

'But he was distressed.' She leaned her head against the baby's, and rocked him gently, so that he merely whimpered and blew bubbles.

He placed the mug on the table and sat watching her softly pat the baby's back.

After an awkward pause she said, 'I should be able to leave him with you...to trust you to take care of him.'

'Well, of course you can.'

'If we were babysitting...'

'Which we are, in effect...for the time being...'

'Just hear me out...or if we had our own children, then you'd have to be more responsible. You'd have to get your priorities right, instead of putting work first all the time. You'd need a better work life balance.'

'I would, if we had our own.'

'Oh..so you wouldn't if we adopted?'

'That's just it, Jen. I don't know. I'm putting my hands up,' he said, raising his hands in the air. 'I don't know whether I could love a child that wasn't my own. I admit, I'm finding it difficult with him.'

She looked at him, dismayed. 'Well, if that's how you feel, then why are we carrying on? We may as well call it quits. I'm not prepared to go through life childless...'

'Oh Jenny, don't be like that.'

'But it's the truth. That's exactly how I feel.'

'I don't want to let you go. I love you. Let's just sort this problem out before we say things we're going to regret.'

'It's you who needs to sort it out. He could be a member of your family. Isn't that why he's still here?'

'Well, yes. I'll have to get on to my Mother about that...see if she's got any news.'

'So...am I right in thinking, that even if he is a relative, you wouldn't want him because he's not actually ours?'

'No...that's different...'

'Why?'

'Because we'd be sharing...DNA...or the same genes...'

She gasped. 'And you call my mother a snob. What a cheek.'

'But your mother doesn't want us to foster or adopt because of the potential bad blood we could be bringing into the Manners's family and soiling the name.'

'So, what you're saying is that you could only love a child with the same genes as yourself? You'd reject a destitute baby off the streets?'

'You're missing the point, Jen.'

'Don't patronize me. It's got nothing to do with background, it's how a child's brought up and cherished is what matters, and I just can't see how you could not do that.' She looked down at the baby as he gurgled away. 'I'd still love him no matter where he came from.'

Robin thought she was her own worst enemy. 'The longer he's here, the worse it's going to be, when he goes,' he said.

She stood up. 'Well... until that time comes, he's going nowhere,' and she marched out of the room gripping the baby's hand.

Robin watched her go. She'd always got what she wanted: horses; fast cars; an expensive London house, it had been the story of her life. She wanted this baby, and nothing or nobody was going to stand in her way.

PART 2

Chapter 11

FIVE YEARS LATER

March 2013

'Mummy said I mustn't talk to strangers.'

Robin turned in the direction the child was pointing. Hugh, another dad, with whom he'd become quite friendly since taking his turn on the school run, was hovering on the outskirts of a small group of mothers nattering at the school gates. He was Robin's only male ally amongst the matriarchs comprising the gate committee of James's Prep.

'Uncle Hugh?' frowned Robin, 'he's not a stranger, mate.'

'Not him — her,' said the boy, straining his outstretched arm. Robin squinted for a closer look. Hugh appeared to be standing alone.

'She tries to give me sweets, but Mummy says I must say no.' Joel displayed pursed lips and steely eyes.

'Well, Daddy thinks so, too.'

'And he isn't my uncle. I've told you, Daddy, that's telling lies.'

'I know he isn't your real uncle...'

'So why do you keep saying it then?' Joel frowned.

'I'm only joking, it's because we're friends. Charlie calls me Uncle Robin.'

Charlie was a classmate, who Joel thought rather silly and stupid.

'And you're my Daddy, I don't like you saying mate.'

'Anyway, you're a very sensible boy not to take things from strangers...' He nearly finished with 'mate' but managed to stop the word rolling off his tongue. Robin looked again at the people by the gate. He ought to have a friendly word with whoever was offering him sweets, make up some excuse about them being bad for his teeth. And when Robin asked Joel to point her out once more, the boy said she'd gone. Perhaps it was one of the other mums. Jenny was friendly with somebody called Carol. He scanned the playground, but he couldn't see her, a short dumpy woman with blonde streaks, utterly at odds with the other mums, with their regulation heels and long flowing hair.

Joel began to pull him towards the gates, digging his nails into Robin's hand in the process. 'Don't do that, please,' threatened Robin under his breath, and he prised the boy's fingers from his own. Inspecting his hand, there were small red semi-circles branded into his flesh. His sharp little nails had easily marked the smooth skin of his writer's hands. Their only sign of manual labour was a pressure indentation near the tip of his middle finger, evidence from a lifetime of gripping pens.

'I need to go Daddy; I'll be late for Mr. Thomas.' Joel's eyes began to fill.

'Why are you so upset? You're not scared of him, are you?'

'No, I am not.' Joel was adamant and stamped his foot.

Robin dropped to his level. 'Then what is it, Joel? Is Mr Thomas bossy? Does he tell you off?' Joel seemed to have met his match with Mr Thomas, big-bellied with a bushy beard and a strong Welsh twang. 'Come on. Let's go. You'll be fine.'

Robin led him out of school to a line of Chelsea tractors parked end to end outside the curlicue metal gates.

He was fastening his seat belt and about to start the car when Mrs Harris, the headmistress, bent down to peer through the passenger side window. Robin let the window slide down.

She thrust her face into the car. 'Could we have a word, Mr Watts?' she said quietly. He noticed her quick sideways glance to Joel in the back seat of the Jag.

'Now?'

'If you don't mind.'

'Erm...' He checked his watch. 'Joel's got a piano lesson in thirty minutes,' he said, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. 'Erm...' It was too late to cancel the lesson. He'd still end up paying.

'Tomorrow morning, then? It is rather important. Before the start of school, if that's more convenient for you?'

Andrew's face flashed in his mind as he saw himself missing the morning meeting, yet again. It was the second time this term Mrs Harris had called him in. Andrew had been fine until now, but his fuse was short. Since promotion to Features Editor, Robin was still trying to impress.

'After school, then?' asked Mrs Harris. Her brow softened. Perhaps she was sensing he had a problem with trying to fit her into his busy schedule.

'No, no. Joel's more important, we'll do it now. Is that okay, Joel?' he said, turning to the youngster in his booster seat. He was eyeballing Mrs Harris.

Jenny wouldn't be happy. She was keen for Joel to progress with his piano lessons. He wasn't going to make a concert pianist at this rate. She was the archetypal ambitious mother. 'I'll text the piano teacher, then, stop him coming to the house.' What was fifty quid in the scale of things? They could afford it.

Robin led Joel through a stream of women and uniformed kids still spilling out of school, and tried to engage in friendly chit-chat with Mrs Harris, hopeful for any hints regarding their impending talk. 'This isn't bad news I hope?' he said, jokingly. She remained tight-lipped, unwilling, as she informed him, to discuss individual children on the playground. Robin wasn't unnerved; no glaring looks followed the three of them as they made their way into school.

Entering the large Victorian house with its red brick gables and candy cane chimney pots, Robin had no reason to doubt Joel's behaviour. Last month's parents' evening had gone better than expected. His school report had provided them with much to be proud. He'd received a glowing account from Miss Wells, a pleasant twenty-something who, despite her newly qualified status, seemed to know her stuff. Joel liked Miss Wells, too. Whatever she was doing was working. He spoke enthusiastically about her lessons, and she appeared to favour him with prestigious classroom jobs, like tidying the bookcase and sharpening the pencils. Joel said he liked sharpening the pencils, because he was the only one allowed to touch the big purple pencil sharpener which was clamped to her desk. He especially liked putting the pencils into the spirally blade, he had told Robin; the way it made little wooden swirls drop on to the floor, so that George could pick them up for him. George was his friend, Joel said. It was the first time he'd mentioned a friend, since starting the school the previous September.

Mrs Harris's wood-panelled room reminded him of Dr Graham's surgery. Robin and Jenny continued to visit his newly refurbished private practice. After visiting the doctor five years ago, where he had insisted they take Joel for a hospital check-up, Jenny had arranged an appointment with a law firm in Mayfair. This had come out by chance. Robin had heard her on the phone discussing birth certificates and Personal Child Care Records a day after their visit to the surgery. Livid wasn't strong enough a

word to describe how Robin had felt. On the pretext that she was on his side, had wanted to find out more about Mary Watts, she'd gone above his head, ignored his demands that they report him, and had dragged him along, the very next day, to see a Mr Caraway, a solicitor on a respectable back street off St James's Park. As soon as they stepped through the door and into a waiting room, freezing cold, with bare walls and a few plastic chairs, Robin had had his suspicions. Family law firm my foot, he remembered thinking. He could sniff out sleaze like a bloodhound. He'd had enough practice in his trade. The thickness of the wad of notes Jenny retrieved from her handbag gave the game away, the steely look she shot him after handing over the cash for the solicitor to stash in a safe behind a wooden panel on the wall spoke volumes. And this was before the interview had started. No Code of Conduct requirements were explained at the outset, it was straight in, with Jenny asking a series of what ifs, nothing to do with searching for a missing person with family ties. She'd stopped Robin in mid-sentence after he'd tried to intervene in her conversation with Mr Caraway, when they'd strayed onto the subject of an adoption agreement. She *was* paying after all, she had declared in no uncertain terms. In the hallway following the meeting, and before going out onto the street, Robin wanted to know what the hell she was playing at, arranging such a contract when they had no idea who the mother was in the first place. 'Just in case it's necessary,' she had replied through gritted teeth.

In an office adjoining Mrs Harris's room, Joel waited with her secretary. Mrs Harris wanted to speak to Robin alone. Closing the door, she took her seat behind an enormous oak desk. She resembled a Victorian schoolmarm as she tucked a strand of grey hair into her prim and proper bun. Nevertheless, Robin had no reason to think he was there for a tongue-lashing.

'There's been an incident in Joel's class today,' she began. 'I'm going to ask Miss Wells to come in. She's in a better position to explain matters. It happened in her classroom.'

Robin rolled his eyes. Their run of good news was too good to be true. As soon as she disappeared, he took the opportunity of checking up on Joel. 'Alright ma...,' he said, raising his eyebrows, as he peered around the doorway of the secretary's room. He smiled at the boy sitting straight-backed on a wooden chair against the wall. Joel did not return the smile. 'Don't look so worried, you're not in trouble,' said Robin. He might regret those words very soon; be accused, by Joel, of telling lies, for the second time within an hour.

The secretary stopped typing. She peered at Robin above her rimless specs. So struck was he by her unwelcome vibes, he retreated, like a naughty schoolboy, into the headmistress's room, and returned to his seat. Glancing around, he surveyed a line of silverware along the black marble mantelpiece and caught the icy stare of a rather imposing woman in cap and gown, peering down at him from an oil above the fireplace. He wondered who she was, another authoritative woman, no doubt. The place was full of them.

The last time he'd sat in this very chair, Mrs Harris assured him and Jenny that biting other children was a passing phase. During the Christmas pantomime, he'd taken the playing of Peter Pan's dog a little too far. The marks of his two front teeth had indented Wendy's ankle. There had been a complaint by the little girl's mother. Mrs Harris had done well to offset a potentially damaging situation to the school's reputation, excusing Joel's behaviour as childish over-excitement, due to Christmas. She assured the parent it would not happen again.

Just then, the lady in question swept through the door with Miss Wells in tow. They took their seats on the other side of the desk, a convenient barrier, the gap between him and the two of them immediately apparent.

'We don't know how this happened,' began the headmistress. She leaned on her hands clasped tightly on the desk. 'I need to speak to several sets of parents whose children are in Class One.'

'And I'm the first?' said Robin instantly, on high alert.

'I just happened to see you in the playground, Mr Watts, so I thought I'd take the opportunity to speak to you.'

Robin shifted uneasily in his seat. She'd just happened to see him first? He'd spotted Oliver's mother at the entrance door. She'd walked right past the woman.

'Is there any reason for Joel being kept out of this conversation?' Robin went into investigative mode. 'If something's happened in the classroom, surely he can tell you more than I.'

Mrs Harris looked at the door and took a deep breath.

'It's rather delicate. Miss Wells has discovered something which would upset the hardiest of children.' She tipped her head towards the teacher, who cleared her throat before relating the facts; how Class One's pet mouse had been missing since Wednesday, leaving an unpleasant smell to linger in the room, and how, at this afternoon's break, she'd found it in the storeroom, under the sink.

'But that isn't the last of it,' Mrs Harris interjected, pulling open the top drawer of her desk to bring out a Tupperware box. Robin could see white paper through the opaque plastic sides. She placed her hand on top and looked at him squarely in the eye. 'It isn't pleasant,' she said, with the sort of condescending ring to her voice that she might employ with a disobedient pupil sent down for a telling off. As she levered the lid

from the box, a smell of decaying flesh polluted the air. Robin recognised the fetid stench of dead vermin. He'd collected enough of them, unknown to Jenny, after he'd poisoned them in the loft. The way in which Mrs Harris gradually revealed the contents of the box sent his thoughts racing back. First, after snapping off the lid, she peeled it back, slowly, and carefully, like removing a sticking plaster from a wound. Struck by a jolt of *déjà vu*, Robin relived the uncomfortable memory of taking the blanket off the basket in the kitchen.

Gradually, she opened the kitchen towel. First, its head appeared — pointed ears, pink nose, fine soft whiskers, a sleek little body of snow-white fur until... Robin leaned forward, for a closer look. 'What's that?' he said, pointing to the animal laid bare on its paper shroud. A small red splotch blotted its body.

Mrs Harris took another item from the box. 'This was found next to the mouse.' She held up a long pink pencil, discoloured red at the nib.

Robin grimaced. It looked as if the mouse had been the victim of a stabbing. He raised his eyes to meet the headmistress's no-nonsense stare. 'I just hope you're not suggesting Joel did this...are you? He loves animals. He's devoted to his cat; she follows him everywhere.'

She held up her hands. 'Now, I'm not blaming anyone, Mr Watts. As I've said, this is the beginning of my enquiry. I shall contact all the parents of the children in Class One. I'm merely starting with the Blue table because it was their turn, this week, to take care of the mouse. This could well be an unfortunate accident.'

'Or a deliberate killing?' He looked at her askance. 'And Joel's your first suspect?'

'I'm not blaming any child at present, Mr Watts, but I have to start somewhere...'

'Then why not start with one of the other children instead? You were quick to ask me in. You passed Oliver's mother at the entrance door, why wasn't she asked first?'

Mrs Harris did not reply. She remained calm, poised, with her hands confidently clasped, refusing to be drawn into an argument. Under her unflinching gaze, Robin sat up in his seat, in preparation for a stand-off.

'Miss Wells? Could you give us any more information please?' She spoke calmly, with self-control.

Miss Wells looked terrified, inexperience telling through the blotchy red marks materialising on her neck.

'About the Blue table...perhaps a little more detail, Miss Wells?'

Miss Wells looked down; at a notebook she had brought. 'I'll just look at my notes...I record everything...anything that might be useful...'

Robin tried to recall the other children who shared the Blue table with Joel. There was Oliver, of course, who sat next to him. He didn't seem a mouse killer. He was a rather pale, weedy child; Jenny had had words with Joel for calling him a wuss. Joel's cause of dislike revolved around Oliver's habit of copying; Joel said he did it all the time because he didn't know any answers.

Miss Wells cleared her throat. 'Yes...it was Joel and Holly's turn on Wednesday to feed and water Pinky,' she said, looking up, 'that's what the children call...called the mouse.' She flicked over the page and continued to scan her notes, mentioning Holly again during the perusal.

Well, there's your culprit, Robin thought. On hearing her name, alarm bells began to ring. Gate gossip was rife concerning the behaviour of this girl. Already, at the tender age of five, she had a reputation for disruption, by running around the classroom, shouting out in lessons, refusing to put up her hand when asked by Miss Wells, amongst

other misdemeanours. It seemed to Robin that Joel reported her antics to him and Jenny on a daily basis. He'd had a mind to make an appointment, to find out what they were going to do about her.

'They had a bit of an argument, as children do,' said Miss Wells, giggling nervously, 'over Pinky's water bottle in the cage. I think they both wanted to fill it up. There was a bit of a tussle between them, not a fight, I mean...a bit of pushing and pulling...the bottle ending up in pieces on the floor. While I was clearing it up, Holly got Pinky out...and then Joel wanted to hold him, too, and they started to argue again. I'm going to have to separate them, have them on different tables, they're obviously not getting on. Perhaps if I move Joel to the Red table.'

'And separate Joel from George? They're best friends.'

'We're only acting in the best interests of the children, Mr Watts,' said Mrs Harris.

'Well, why not move Holly instead? I was on the verge of coming in about her. She sounds like a born troublemaker to me.'

'You are welcome any time, Mr Watts. Although it's not a good idea to listen to playground gossip.'

She was at it again, treating him like one of her pupils. Robin looked at his watch. It was nearly four o'clock. He suggested bringing Joel into the room, to hear his side of the story.

The mouse was replaced in the box in the desk drawer before the secretary was asked to bring him in. Robin sat Joel on his knee. Miss Wells brought her chair to his side of the desk. Mrs Harris said she was going to leave them to it, as too many adults could overwhelm the child.

'I didn't do anything,' protested Joel as soon as she'd gone. He burst into tears and covered his eyes with his fists.

'Hey, hey, it's alright. Just tell Miss Wells what happened on Wednesday. It's important to tell the truth. Mummy and Daddy always tell you that. You like Miss Wells, don't you?'

Joel sniffled and nodded his head.

Miss Wells leaned towards them. 'What happened between you and Holly on Wednesday, Joel, when Pinky went missing?'

Distracted by Miss Wells's rather low-cut dress, Robin turned to focus on Joel's mass of platinum hair. The boy instantly looked up at him. His mouth was downturned, his eyes watery blue and his lower eyelids were redder than normal. 'I'm not in trouble, am I, Daddy?'

'Why do you think you might be in trouble, Joel?' said Miss Wells. Her soft voice had been enough to quieten him.

'I don't know. Holly dropped the bottle, not me.'

'It's not the bottle we're worried about Joel. It's what's happened to Pinky. Do you know what has happened to him?'

Joel frowned and shook his head.

'I found him in the storeroom, and he's died,' went on Miss Wells. 'Do you know what that means, Joel?'

Joel nodded. 'That he's in heaven?'

'That's right. But it was the way he died...it wasn't very nice. Do you know how he died, Joel?'

'No, I didn't kill him.' Joel began to cry out loud. He turned to Robin and pummelled his chest with his hands tightly clenched. 'I want to go home, I want to go home,' he screamed at the top of his voice, and kicked Robin's legs repeatedly.

'Hey, hey, hey, it's okay, there's no need for this. I think he's had enough. I'm taking him home,' declared Robin, and he hauled himself to his feet, grappling with the brawling child who continued to pound his chest and knee him in the stomach. Robin let Joel's feet drop to the floor, but Joel was quick to grab his hair and pull it hard. 'Ouch! Stop it, Joel, stop it, now!' shouted Robin, as the boy continued to kick him in the shins. Robin yelped in pain, trying with one hand to hold the boy back at arm's length and to rub his leg with the other. At that moment, Mrs Harris rushed into the room and seizing the child's arms, restrained him, by holding them down against his sides.

'Joel,' she said calmly, 'this is not good behaviour. This is not the first time I have had to speak to you about this.' She turned him around to face her and asked him, slowly and responsibly, to refrain from crying and to look at her. Joel did as he was told. 'I think you need to go home, now,' she said. 'Perhaps, when you feel a little better, you will be able to tell Mummy and Daddy what happened to Pinky.'

All the way home, they were bumper to bumper, stop-starting through the crowded streets, until they found themselves stuck at a standstill, at a junction with traffic lights. They were stationary for ages, at a set of the most ridiculously programmed lights imaginable. Robin thought he ought to sue the council for his rise in blood pressure, the way the lights changed, only every few cars. It was difficult keeping his language clean with a five-year-old in earshot. He watched Joel in the mirror. The boy was looking away. Compared to other children, Robin had always believed that Joel had inherited a smaller than average head. He felt guilty thinking such thoughts, but it was true — and his eyes were widely spaced. Dr Graham had mentioned some

syndrome beginning with 'hyper'; Jenny would remember. He'd suggested they keep an eye on him. As if they wouldn't; he was only two at the time and 'into everything', as his mother complained when she'd caught him pulling her chihuahua's ears. As though sensing Robin's gaze, Joel turned to look straight at him. Robin smiled.

'I didn't do anything, Daddy,' said Joel, quite unapologetically. 'Holly's always trying to get me into trouble. She thinks she's the only one allowed to hold Pinky.'

Pot and kettle came to mind. 'How did he escape, then?'

'I think she let him out on purpose,' Joel affirmed.

Robin frowned. 'But why would she do that?'

'So that no one else could hold him.'

'But if he escaped and got lost, then even she couldn't hold him. It doesn't make sense.'

'But that's just it,' Joel proclaimed. 'Holly said if she can't be the only one to hold him, then nobody can. She's selfish Daddy. She wanted him all to herself.'

'And that's why you think she let him out?'

Joel nodded. 'Yes, I think she did.'

'Mm...!' said Robin, nodding and pressing his lips tightly together. He was astonished at the child's powers of thought; the way he imagined what she was thinking. The boy never ceased to amaze him. He was an odd one though; one minute spouting high levels of reasoning, the next not getting 'Uncle Hugh'. Robin had explained to Joel that it was a term of endearment, quite acceptable to call Hugh 'uncle', even though he was unrelated. He had used those very words — 'term of endearment'. Just like Mummy calling you 'my little soldier.' Robin had explained that he wasn't really a soldier, it was because Mummy and Daddy thought he was a big brave boy. No point pussyfooting around where language was concerned. He and Jenny made a point of using the correct

vocabulary whenever they could. Surely, he was intelligent enough to understand. He'd been reading since the age of three, and was top of the class in literacy, according to his teacher. Nevertheless, the difference between stranger danger and recognising friends was a sticking point with Joel.

And that was something else Robin noticed; Joel's tendency to have the last word. Earlier, in the playground, Robin hadn't bothered trying to explain the use of 'mate'. He knew he'd lose the argument. He was proving to be a far from easy child. How different it had been five years ago, virtually to the day, from the moment he'd first clapped eyes on him in the basket. How innocent and vulnerable, how unlike the awkward little boy he could sometimes be. He possessed an unfortunate trait of antagonism, treating most people with disdain. Robin knew he wasn't the source of this behaviour. Perhaps it was Jenny's fault; she'd put him on a pedestal from the very beginning. Sometimes, he wondered whether the boy had some sort of mental issue. Jenny was most put out after Robin dared to mention this; she reminded him of Joel's tender years, his cognitive development still in its early phase. She'd been avidly reading child development literature, and didn't he know it!

Robin brought the car to a standstill in front of the garage they rented around the corner from the house. He'd need it in a couple of hours, for his tennis match against Tim in *The Daily News* League.

In the sitting room, Jenny and Ellie were playing with a large pink aeroplane on the carpet. 'Hi girls,' said Robin, 'had a nice day?'

'Of course,' said Jenny, 'we've been very busy, haven't we darling?' Jenny smiled at Ellie stacking little brown suitcases, neatly, into the hold. 'And how's my best boy, then?' She held out her arms for Joel, who was standing by the window, glaring at a

jumble of Ellie's toys spread across the floor. He went to Jenny and offered her his cheek. 'Is that it? I like hugs, too.'

'Sorry, Mummy,' said Joel flinging his arms around her neck.

'That's more like it,' said Jenny, squeezing him. 'How was school today?'

'I wouldn't ask at the moment, Mummy,' said Robin, frowning to Jenny, so that Joel could not see.

'Why?' she mouthed.

Robin shook his head.

Just then, the cat appeared, meowing and arching its back whilst rubbing its black fur against the corner of the settee.

'Biscuit,' shouted Joel with delight, and he ran towards it, trampling Ellie's favourite teddy on the way. Attempting to scoop it up with his hands, Joel grabbed its little body so tightly, it screeched in protest.

'Nicely now,' said Robin, cringing at its cry.

Joel turned and scowled at Robin. He held the kitten's face against his cheek, then buried his face in its thick, soft fur and kissed the top of her head.

'Good boy, Joel...hold her nicely,' said Jenny.

Robin watched Joel rocking the cat to and fro. He sighed then left the room, after kissing Jenny and Ellie on their foreheads, and closed the door behind him. Scrutinising his hair in the hall mirror, he thought that even more flecks of grey seemed to have sprung up since that morning. It was five years to the day and, on checking his watch, just short of an hour, when he'd found Joel in the kitchen.

He sat on the bed and noticed the book on the bedside cabinet. He picked up the novel he'd managed to start reading the previous night. Tim had let him borrow it, on the promise of a good, but gory read. It had been lying there for days. Robin was

suddenly struck by the picture on the front and picked it up to examine. Feeling a knot churning in his stomach, a sting of pain rose in his chest. He felt sick and queasy. 'God no, I don't believe it,' he said, then stared, open-mouthed, in shock. He began to feel light-headed, his hands becoming weak and limp, so that his fingers unfurled. Horrified by the image, he threw 'The Rat Catcher' on to the floor. The book lay splayed, apart. A large brown rat, pierced with a nail through its body, was splashed across its cover.

Chapter 12

ONE YEAR LATER

February 2014

Love you always, it said, in the same predictable biro scrawl. Cheapskate's handwriting expert had detected a curious mix of anger and generosity in the heavy-handed downward strokes and widely spaced gaps between each word. Robin failed to see the logic in this and considered graphology spurious; as untrustworthy as lie detector tests, legal in American law.

Multi-coloured rockets and robots floated around a star-studded galaxy across the front of the card, and a bright red message announced *Today You Are Six* on a ribbon, wrapped around a yellow cratered planet in the middle.

Robin grimaced and shook his head; he was no nearer to solving the mystery of the source of these cards. After Joel's arrival, six years ago on the twenty-seventh of March, and following much deliberation between the two of them regarding his age, Jenny finally got her way. With the involvement of a different solicitor than the slippery Mr Caraway, and one that Robin had had a say in, they had been issued with Joel's birth certificate, after signing a parental order permanently reassigning parenthood to them. Jenny had plumped for the end of February as a reasonable estimate of his birth. For her, he possessed all the characteristics of a one-month-old child. She'd researched it on the net. He could coo and gurgle, grunt, and hum, and track his favourite rattle from side to side, so that eventually, after becoming transfixed by the object and, bizarrely cross-eyed, he would fall hypnotically to sleep. Since that first birthday card, addressed to Joel and postmarked SW1, others had followed each year, arriving on the twenty-eighth. Jenny insisted it was pure coincidence she'd guessed the right date. But then,

when one arrived on the twenty-ninth, it seemed like an omen to Robin, imbibing Joel with an increasing sense of mysticism. Dusting for fingerprints and swabbing for DNA on both card and envelope had proven to be as fruitless as the graphology. Robin imagined her writing in a pair of woollen gloves. Cheapskate had a contact in the police, an ex-para buddy who had joined the force in forensics. No information had surfaced regarding the identity of Mary Watts. He and Jenny assumed that she was, indeed, the mother, the mystery woman who sent the cards, not just for his birthday, but for Christmas and Easter, too.

He slotted the card back into its envelope. Just then, the key turning in the lock followed by a gaggle of noisy children, chattering excitedly, being herded into the hall, broke the silence. He pushed the kitchen door to and hid the card under a pile of small items of household junk in a drawer. He'd promised Jenny he'd sort that drawer, but, somehow, what with work and a growing family, he never quite found the time.

When they had a minute, later in the day, when they were alone, and out of sight of Joel and a houseful of screaming children, he'd show her the card. For all this woman's attempts to invade their privacy, they'd managed to keep Joel in the dark; he was unaware of her existence. So far, Robin had succeeded in intercepting the cards before Joel had a chance to obtain them. But as Joel grew up, Robin knew it would be harder to prevent; he could hardly hang around the hall guarding the letter box without attracting some suspicion — and *love you always* would be tricky to explain.

Jenny burst into the kitchen. 'Enjoyed your peace and quiet? I'll need some help with the food, Robin. The children are starving. Don't want them anywhere near a hot oven.'

'Don't worry, pizza's already in.'

'I'll keep guard, sis. I won't let them in until you're ready,' said Catherine, standing in the doorway to the lounge.

'Hi Cate,' said Robin, pinching a sandwich off the table. 'Has Hampstead Heath recovered? How did the games go?'

She tutted. 'They were really well behaved — well, mostly,' she said, screwing up her nose. The sisters looked very alike to Robin, with their large brown eyes, heavy lidded and ethereal, except that Catherine looked older than Jenny despite the age gap in Catherine's favour. Robin thought the deep lines scoring her forehead, and the hints of grey flecking her cropped brown hair, were probably the result of her struggle to cope with hyperactive two-year old twins.

'Joel only wanted to stroke the dog,' said Jenny. She opened the oven door to remove the pizza, then re-loaded it with a baking tray full of sausage rolls. 'Where's Biscuit anyway? We don't want her scratching any of the children. She will — if they mess with her.'

'Upstairs, out of the way, if she's got any sense,' said Robin. 'What do you mean, he only wanted to stroke the dog? Sounds a bit ominous.'

'It was a fuss over nothing,' said Jenny, slicing the pizza. 'You know how he loves Biscuit to death...well, there was this woman with a shih tzu puppy, a gorgeous little thing. Joel only wanted to say hello...so he tried to pick it up...and you know how he can be a little heavy-handed...well, he dropped it, and the stupid old cow went berserk. She had a real go at Joel.'

'How did he take that?'

'He said sorry,' she said, eyes wide, 'for not asking permission to stroke the dog.' Then, she proceeded to place silver spiralled candles into little plastic holders on his cake.

Robin raised an eyebrow.

'He did, Robin. All by himself.'

Robin tightened his lips and nodded. 'Well, that's good to know. At least he apologised. I presume the dog was okay?'

'It was fine. Fuss over nothing.'

The conversation was interrupted by a kerfuffle at the door, as Catherine tried to prevent a tide of youngsters from suddenly invading the kitchen. Whiffs of savouriness seeping from the oven had lured them in. Stretching her arms across the doorway and, at the same time, insisting they form an orderly queue, she was elbowed by Joel in the stomach as he pushed his way to the front, knocking the toddler twins to the floor.

'I'm first,' he declared.

'Joel!' shouted Robin. He grabbed Joel's hand and drew him into the kitchen. 'Don't spoil things. Mummy said you've been good this morning.'

Joel pulled away.

'Don't start.' Robin wagged a finger in front of his scowling face. 'I think you owe the twins an apology, and Aunty Catherine, too,' he said, glowering, his countenance barely inches from Joel's.

Enraged, Joel punched him in the stomach. 'Ow!' cried Robin winded by the blow. 'That hurt, you little...!' and he grabbed Joel's wrists to restrain him.

'Stop it, Robin. Take your hands off him, you're going to hurt him,' said Jenny, pushing in between the two of them. 'My darling boy, come to Mummy.' She wrapped her arms around Joel who was bawling and pulsating tears with snot streaming down his blood red cheeks.

'He's hurt me!' Robin's heart was pumping fast. A surge of heat spread from his neck to his forehead, and he was acutely aware of being watched, of Catherine and the children gawping at him, too stunned to speak.

Joel had buried his face in her chest.

Resting her chin on the top of his head, she rocked and shushed him.

Robin stood back. The gulf between them was manifest. 'He needs to apologise, Jenny. Look what he's done to the twins?' and pointed to Catherine consoling the sobbing pair in the lounge.

The other children, still in a queue at the door, looked silently on, their mouths agape.

Robin pulled his hands over his face. 'You're both impossible.' He took deep breaths in, and slowly out.

'He's excited. Can't you see that?' There was a quiver in her voice and tears filled her eyes. 'It's his birthday party. He didn't hit Cate deliberately. It was an accident.'

Robin closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. 'That's no excuse. He barged his way to the front and knocked the twins down. Giving him excuses is no way to teach him right from wrong. You...we shouldn't let him get away with such bad behaviour.'

Joel was snivelling, eyeing his father from the protection of his mother's body. The crocodile tears had now temporarily ceased, his mouth squeezed into what Robin considered a smirk.

With one hand cupped behind Joel's head, Jenny looked down into his doleful upturned eyes. 'Will you say sorry to Edie and Eleanor, darling, and Aunty Catherine, too?'

'Alright, Mummy,' Joel replied. 'I'll do what *you* say.'

'Good boy.' She stroked his hair.

Robin felt sickened and noticed the slight she'd cast by ignoring his hurt, the violence he'd suffered at the hands of a child.

As Joel was leaving the room, he looked askance at Robin, defiance daubed upon his face.

Gripping the edge of the sink, Robin shook his head. He was seething, his teeth clenched. 'He's getting mixed messages, Jenny.' He couldn't bear to look at her. 'Here's me, trying to chastise him, and there's you, allowing him to get away with such...terrible behaviour.'

'Terrible behaviour? Don't be so dramatic, he's only a child. It's immaturity. He's six. He just got over-excited. Look how sorry he is now.'

From the corner of his eye, Robin could see her pointing to the lounge. 'Well, he's old enough to know better.' He stopped short as Joel re-entered the kitchen, went to his mother and wrapped his arms around her.

She unravelled him from her and, holding his plate, guided him around the table laden with party food, helping him choose from sandwich triangles filled with chocolate spread and peanut butter. Robin was aghast she'd allowed such trashy food. It wasn't her normal choice of spread. What was that about e-numbers? Why not the usual tuna and mayonnaise today? 'It's Joel's party so he can have what he wants,' she'd said that morning, as he'd watched her preparing the food, trimming the crusts off the bread because Joel refused to eat them.

Why should he care anyway? If it kept them quiet. A house full of rowdy kids wasn't exactly his idea of a Saturday afternoon off. And that blue and yellow icing on those police car's stripes was a sure way of sending them hyper. Their new nanny had made the cake. He'd blame her when he needed to scrape them off the ceiling.

As the children, subdued after the scene with Joel, filed into the kitchen, it dawned upon Robin exactly what Jenny was up to. By handpicking the guests, who included George and Oliver and another foursome from Joel's class, she'd done her utmost to avoid trouble, deliberately choosing nice children, ones who wouldn't retaliate when Joel tried to wind them up. With Catherine's twins, Ellie, and the birthday boy, the party made ten. No parents had been invited. Jenny was adamant she could cope; he'd heard her telling a mother on the phone. She was good at spinning a yarn. But pussyfooting around Joel was not going to help her deal with his tantrums.

As the afternoon wore on, it was clear that Jenny was doing her best to pacify Joel. Whenever she could she sat him upon her knee, plying him compliments, as he ate his food, and blew out the candles on the cake Catherine held out before him. Anything to keep the peace. Robin turned his attention to Joel's classmates playing a game on the carpet whilst Joel, sitting with Jenny, was preoccupied with his principal gift, a robotic beagle toy.

Joel's schoolmates were huddled together with their shoulders hunched in, towards the centre of a circle they'd assembled on the fireside rug. Advertised as family-friendly for ages seven plus, *Exploding Kittens* wasn't the gift of Robin's choice, but Joel had badgered Jenny until she finally succumbed to pester power. So much for his love of cats. Joel and the cat were two of a kind, prickly and unpredictable. On arrival from school, he would call her name first, and wouldn't be happy until he scooped the black Persian in his arms and kissed her fluffy head. Miraculously, she let him do it; she hated human contact. Ellie wouldn't go near — she'd come off worse too many times, the scratches on her cheek put paid to that.

Robin, stretched out with Ellie on the settee, was twiddling strands of her hair. With his thumb, he traced the outline of her pudgy fingers streaked brown from the

remnants of a profiterole. Glancing at Jenny, he enclosed Ellie's hand with the intention of wiping them, before her eagle eyes could spot a chocolate-smear on the settee. From the chair by the window, Joel was lolling across the whole length of his mother, as the two of them watched the game below. Robin ran his fingers through Ellie's burnished brown curls. From this angle, he could just make out the curve of her dark lashes, and the snub little nose she'd inherited from her mother; however, her colouring, the dark brown hair, and the olive skin, was a product of them both. After years of trying, Robin never ceased to be amazed by Ellie, forever struck with this angel, lying contentedly by his side.

'You should've exploded, Oliver,' bellowed Joel suddenly, and he heaved himself off his mother by ramming her in the stomach, then leapt into the circle, missing Oliver's head by a whisker, to land on the cards scattering the pack.

'No, he shouldn't,' said George, 'he can use his Defuse card and put the Exploding Kitten card back.'

'It's too boring that way...nobody blows up then,' said Joel.

'Yes, they will. They will if they don't have any Defuse cards.'

'Well, I'm changing the rules. I'm going to make sure nobody has Defuse cards. I'm taking them all out. It makes it more dangerous then.'

'But that isn't fair,' said George, 'it doesn't give anyone a chance.'

'Exactly,' said Joel. 'You've got more chance of being exploded up then.'

'You can't say exploded *up*, darling. It's just exploded. This is a horrible game, ' said Jenny, picking up the lid from the box to examine it. 'If I'd known it was this violent, I'd never have bought it.'

'I did warn you,' said Robin.

Jenny screwed up her nose and shook her head at him.

'It's only a game Mummy, it's not real,' said Joel, picking out the Defuse cards from the pack spewed across the rug.

'I think we should follow the rules,' said George.

'It's my game,' said Joel staring down at George sitting cross-legged, propping up his chin with his hands, an irksome expression set upon his face.

'But you weren't playing,' said George.

'I am *now*,' declared Joel. 'I'm in charge.'

Robin was sure he detected a collective group sigh. 'Hold on, guys,' he said, slipping off the settee, and intervening before things got nasty and set off one of his migraines. He knelt outside the circle. 'You must follow the rules, Joel. Play fairly, that's what Mummy and I always tell you.' He turned to Jenny. 'I knew this game would mean trouble, it's like Russian roulette.'

'What's Russian roulette?' said Joel.

'Never you mind,' said Robin.

'Why should I mind?'

'Oh, here we go...questions, questions, questions.' Robin ran his hands through his hair.

'Joel's right, we always encourage him to ask if he doesn't understand.'

'That's what Miss Carter says, Mummy.'

'Right. You explain it then.' Robin nearly said 'if you're so clever' but managed to hold it back.

Jenny leaned forward, her elbows resting on her knees. 'It's when someone nasty points a gun at another person, and there's only one bullet in the gun, but you don't know when it's going to be fired. I think that's all you need to know. It only happens in films.'

'Which films, Mummy?'

'Oh...I don't know, they're not the sort of films we'd watch.'

'Then how do you know? You shouldn't say something you know isn't true.'

That's what you say, Mummy.'

Robin sniggered. You've had your comeuppance, Jen, he thought smiling, then mouthed 'what' to the scowl she shot him across the room.

'You'll play, won't you, Oliver?' said Joel, wrapping his arm around Oliver's neck.

Oliver gulped and nodded his head.

'Let's play another game,' said Robin, 'one that everyone likes, even the little ones.' He scanned the room. 'What about...musical cushions?'

'Musical chairs you mean,' protested Joel.

'I know, big boy, but we haven't got the space. We'll use cushions instead.' He pushed the settee aside and placed ten in a circle around which the children walked until the music stopped, when there was a mad dash to find one that wasn't already sat upon. 'No pushing or shoving,' said Robin, before turning up the music, and off they went, their eyes trained on cushions like hawks. Suddenly, *Mamma Mia* stopped, leaving some of the children scrabbling to the floor, with George pushing Oliver off the one on which they had simultaneously collided. From his cushion, Joel laughed out loud and pointed at Oliver. Robin thought Oliver was about to cry and held out his hand to steer the child towards him. By the time there was only one cushion remaining, Joel and George were last in the game. Like animals circling their prey, they alternately stared at the cushion and eyed each other. Robin kept them waiting, letting the music go on until he stopped it abruptly, causing the two boys to leap into the circle, landing as in a long jump, with George's feet just hitting the cushion first.

'George is the winner,' declared Robin. 'You know what we do to the winner, Joel?'

Standing above the victorious George, Joel's face turned red with rage before it started to crumble, so that he had to sniff repeatedly, to hold back the tears.

'What do we say to the winner, Joel?'

Puckering his mouth, Joel slowly released his tightly clenched fists, and stretched out his fingers. There was a silence choking the room as all eyes fell upon the two, before George, unsmiling, accepted his hand.

'What do we say, Joel?' said Robin.

Still gripping George's hand, Joel looked at Robin deadpan, then turned back to George, who was now standing facing him, awaiting his congratulations. Joel was making him wait, staring past George to something behind him on the floor. Robin turned to look at what had taken Joel's attention, but there was only the settee, pushed back against the wall. The tension was palpable as Joel's fixation persisted, until he was suddenly released from his trance-like state, and his mouth contorted upwards into a weird kind of revelatory smile. George winced, not just from the smile Robin perceived, but from the force of Joel's grip, which led to a vigorous shaking of George's hand, causing both bodies to vibrate. 'Well done,' said Joel nodding. He looked bizarrely pleased with himself, like a bulb had been switched on in his mind, as he'd come to realise the solution to a problem.

At that moment, the lounge door opened and their nanny, a young slim blonde, entered the room.

'Ah, well-timed,' said Robin, puffing out his cheeks, 'can you look after the little ones, Magda, while the big ones play a game in the garden?'

'Yes, of course,' replied the nanny. 'Come Edie, Eleanor. You too, Ellie.'

'Me as well?' piped up Joel.

Robin interjected quickly. 'Definitely not young man, I need you to start the new game.'

'What new game?'

'You'll see. Out in the garden everyone.'

With that, the remaining six seemed relieved at the prospect of fresh air, replacing the stifling atmosphere inside. They leapt to their feet to follow him; all except Joel, who clung to Magdalena in his usual way, grabbing her around the waist when he wanted attention.

'Go with the others, Joel,' Robin heard her say.

'I want to stay with *you*,' said Joel.

Magda looked pleadingly from Jenny to Robin, who had now halted in the doorway, and at the same time she was trying to unwind the boy's arms from her body.

'Now, Joel, don't be silly,' said Jenny, 'go with the older children outside, you're too big to play with the little ones.'

'No, I'm not,' whined Joel. 'I want to be with Magda.'

'Go with them, Joel,' urged the nanny. 'I might have a surprise for you afterwards.'

'What surprise?' Joel said, grinning up at her.

'If you go with papa, I'll show you later,' Magda said, touching the tip of his nose.

'Promise?' said Joel, juddering up and down on his toes.

'Yes, go,' she said, widening her eyes. Joel backed down and allowed her to release his arms.

Outside, Robin announced they were to play hide and seek; they could hide where they liked, if they were sensible, and didn't leave the garden. As it was Joel's birthday, he could be on. Robin tied a blindfold around his head and spun him, making the child totter when the blindfold was released. 'I'm coming', Joel shouted.

In the kitchen, Robin could hear them running around upstairs, laughing, and slamming doors. He shook his head and smiled to himself. It sounded like a game of chase. After closing the doors to the lounge and the hall, he took out the birthday card and stuck it under Jenny's nose. 'Now's a good time to show you this.'

But she hardly looked at it and continued to wipe the table. 'What do you want me to do, Robin? You're the one with the private detective — what good *he's* been.'

'Doesn't it worry you this is still going on? That she's still sending him cards six years later? When's she going to stop? When he's eighteen? I don't think I can take this much longer.'

She stopped what she was doing and looked him in the eye. 'Listen, I know it's still happening, but...that's all it is — a card-sending exercise. She hasn't done anything else to cause any trouble. She's grateful for our help. Us bringing him up, looking after him...'

'We're being watched though, Jenny. Spied upon. It's horrible...it's like... we're not in control. We're being manipulated, like a couple of puppets.'

'I don't see it like that, Robin. We're doing someone a favour...someone who can't do it for themselves.'

'That's just it, Jen, we most definitely *are* doing someone a favour. *She's* not the one having to put up with his tantrums or be dragged into school because he's been bullying. Have you noticed those bruises on Oliver's leg?'

'We've already sorted that out with Mrs Harris. Oliver admitted it was Holly kicking him under the table. Joel hadn't any bruises, too, you know. You forget that. You're too quick to blame him first.'

'How can you say that? I'm just as...protective of him as you are. But Joel's no angel, you can't deny that.'

'Don't lecture me, Robin. I don't want to discuss it anymore. Just leave it. You're determined to ruin his birthday.' She threw down the cloth and stormed out.

'Jenny...' he said, following her into the lounge.

She plonked herself down on a chair overlooking the garden, then sat suddenly upright. 'What's going on?' she said, peering through the nets. 'Oh...it's only Joel, chasing George.' She slumped back down on her seat.

Robin took her hand. He raised his eyebrows to her and inclined his head towards the kitchen.

She frowned.

'Just hear me out,' he whispered in her ear.

Rolling her eyes, she stood and followed him.

Robin closed the door behind them. They sat at the table. Jenny's choice of seat was significant.

Across the table from him, she said, 'Go on then, what is it now?'

Robin leaned towards her. 'I saw Magda yesterday.'

She frowned. 'And your point?'

'Outside a knocking shop in Peckham. On Bukhalov's patch?' He raised an eyebrow.

She shot him a look.

'What agency did you say she came from?'

'A reputable one, that's what.'

'Which one though? I could check it out, Jenny. If they've sent us...'

'Don't question me. I'm not one of your...interviewees.'

Pressing his lips together, Robin shook his head. He stood up, and with his hands in his pockets walked to the window. Biscuit was sitting at the shed door. 'I'm sure it was her. She was wearing a...what would you call it? A shoulder-less dress?' He turned to face her. 'Right up to here, too.' He indicated a point on his upper thigh. 'It was bloody freezing. And there's something else. I could swear I could smell booze on her the other day.'

'Well, I never have. She's got good references.'

'Anyone could've written those.'

'And she's very good with Joel.'

'Well, there is that. At least she can control him...'

'Meaning I can't.'

'Look, I'm sorry.' He held up his hands. 'I was probably mistaken.' Then ran them through his hair. 'She's got a double though. Perhaps she's a twin.'

Just then, the door banged open wide. Joel burst in. 'I've found them all Daddy — apart from George.' Then he ran into the garden.

Raindrops were now pattering the window, beginning to obscure Robin's view. 'Come in, Joel, you're going to get wet,' he called from the door. Joel, ignoring his pleas, carried on fiddling with something in his hand. 'Joel. Come in, now.' Joel turned away, so that Robin, head down, had to squelch across the lawn towards the boy, who suddenly whipped around before Robin had a chance to grab him. 'He's not here, Daddy. He's not in the garden. He must be inside.' Joel grabbed Robin's hand and pulled him towards the house as a cloudburst had suddenly caught them out.

In the lounge, the women were curled up with the little ones watching *Finding Nemo*. Edie was pointing and gaping at the plight of a clownfish trapped in the jaws of an evil-looking shark. Robin thought the film a fitting analogy to his present state. He shivered, and his feet were wet. There was mud on the carpet. 'Just going to check on the game. It sounds eerily quiet upstairs,' he said, and tiptoed out into the kitchen to kick off his dirty trainers.

Robin couldn't understand where the children were. By now, he'd probed every room, including the attic, a must for a game of hide and seek, and was sure Joel said he'd found them all. But then, back in the hall, he heard voices in the study, and was relieved to see them crowded around Joel leaning on the desk, playing on his iPad. 'Where's George, Joel?'

Joel stared at Robin. Quite matter-of-factly, he replied, 'I don't know, Daddy. Perhaps he's been naughty and gone out, into the street.'

The wind had picked up in the garden, was waving the tall leylandii to bend and brush the roof of the shed which, from where he was standing, was shadowed, desolate under greying skies.

Where can the little bugger be? agonised Robin, feeling a rush of anxiety at the thought of losing someone's child. He strode down the passageway, now pitch black as daylight was fading fast, then hurried to the communal garden, thankful that the gate had been left open. Following the gravel path, he pushed aside overgrown branches, and stooped to peer under bushes in the hope of finding George, too scared to come out, frightened of being told off. But the more he called, the more his breathing quickened, as it became clear that George was not there. The prospects of a missing child were unthinkable. His pulse thudded, blood pounded his ears, and his head began to spin, sending him reeling momentarily, until he managed to steady himself against a rough-

hewn stump. The dizziness worsened, and little black dots began to blur his vision. Then, he thought he could hear Jenny's voice, and through the gloom, he glimpsed her rounding a tree. Breathless, she said, 'Come quickly Robin, we've found George in the shed. He's collapsed.'

'Collapsed? In the shed? But it was locked. There's an old tin of creosote in there.' Robin held his chest; he'd been suddenly stabbed by a jolt of pain.

'Are you alright, Robin?'

He was bent over, sitting on the stump. 'I'll be okay,' he said glancing up, 'let's just get to George.'

Catherine was crouching beside the boy slumped in a corner, coughing and wheezing.

'I think he's having an asthma attack,' she said, trying to prop him up.

'Here, let me help,' said Robin. George's cheeks were lacking their usual glow, and his lips had turned white, as he heaved and gasped for air.

'Oh God no, he's got worse,' whined Jenny, covering her mouth with both hands.

'Stay calm, Jen,' said Catherine. She squeezed her sister's hand. 'Does he have an inhaler?'

'I'll go and see, I'll call an ambulance too,' said Robin, and he rushed towards the children bunched around the door, with Magda trying to usher them in.

'Back now, everyone, and listen,' he said, putting a teacherly finger to his lips. 'Where's George's inhaler? Does anyone know?'

The children shook their heads.

'There might be one in his coat,' said Oliver.

'Which one's his?' He stared at the coat stand in the hall, overflowing with the children's clothes.

Joel ran to it and pulled out a purple sleeve. 'It's this one.'

Robin searched the pockets, but they were empty.

'Look in the lounge,' said Robin. This gave the signal for the children to bound around the floor like excitable puppies, and grope under furniture as though desperate to retrieve a toy. Even so, there was no joy. Robin called a stop to the hunt. A frenzy was beginning to brew.

'How is he?' said Robin, returning to the shed.

Catherine was comforting George, stroking his hand.

'We can't find an inhaler anywhere. An ambulance is on its way.' At least he isn't gasping anymore, Robin thought, but his breathing was shallow, barely detectable against the palm of his hand which he'd placed in front of George's mouth. He got up to examine the lock. 'I still can't understand it. I'm positive it was locked this morning.'

'No, it was definitely open when we found him,' said Jenny.

'How did you know where he was?' Robin scratched his head.

'I saw Biscuit clawing some poor creature to death on the lawn and when I went to rescue it, I heard George coughing in the shed.'

Robin heard talking in the garden. From the kitchen door, Magda was sending two paramedics towards the shed.

'We think he's had an asthma attack,' said Cate to the first one, already opening his bag.

'What's his name?' the paramedic asked.

'George,' said Cate and moved out of his way.

He knelt beside George, whose eyes were now closed. 'Hello George, we're here to help.' He placed his ear to the boy's mouth and listened for several seconds. 'I need to measure his oxygen levels.' After attaching a clip like a peg to his finger, he took a

reading. 'I'm going to give you some more air George, so you can breathe better.' He slid a nebuliser, as he called it, over George's nose and mouth. 'Hopefully, this'll do the trick.'

You could hear a pin drop. The rain was no longer banging on the roof. Robin's eyes were trained upon George, a plastic mask strapped around his head. Colour began to return to his face. Robin was relieved to see a more prominent rise and fall in his chest. Slowly but surely, his breathing became steadier, the wheezing all but went. 'He's going to be alright, isn't he?'

'He is now.'

Robin could hear some commotion. From the shed door, he beckoned George's parents.

They pushed their way in to cradle their son.

'He's going to be fine, madam.'

'Thank God for that. I've brought an inhaler,' said his mother, stooping in front of George now seeming to breathe normally.

'He's had a serious bout of asthma,' said the paramedic. 'Try to make sure he always carries it.' He inhaled deeply. 'Mm... a bad reaction to something.' Then he removed the mask.

'I always insist he takes it everywhere.' She was shaking her head with relief. 'Thank you so much.'

He repacked the bag, and they left.

'I don't understand it,' said his mother. 'You had it with you, George. You know you've always got to carry it.'

'We couldn't find it anywhere,' said Robin. 'We searched the house.'

George was beginning to come round now — blushed cheeks, his face aglow.

'How are you, darling?'

'Better, Mummy,' he said, nodding.

'But where's your inhaler, George? You did bring it, didn't you?'

George felt his pockets. 'It was here, Mummy. It was in my pocket. I must have dropped it when we were playing games.'

'It's difficult to tell a child not to overdo it. You've got to be careful, George.'

'I was being chased.'

Robin shuffled uneasily.

'Well, it doesn't matter now. What matters is, you're alright. We'll take you home, now. You've had enough excitement for one day.'

Later that evening, Jenny's mobile rang. Gradually, as the conversation wore on, she developed an ever-deepening frown. Ending the call, she said, 'That was Oliver's mother. She wants to know if anyone's lost an inhaler. She's found one in his coat pocket.'

Chapter 13

ONE YEAR LATER

February 2015

What alerted him to it was the single headlight. Robin glanced again through the rear-view mirror. It was a dark saloon. He'd noticed the car five minutes ago, pulling out of a side street, tucking behind him in the queue. At first, he thought nothing of it; just another driver, like himself, blocking up the streets on the rush-hour quest to get home. The glare from a supermarket window flashed across the car like a prison search light, a BMW with brand new plates and a broken light? Even so, the driver remained unrecognisable, partially hidden behind the visor, just the mouth and chin apparent.

Turning left at the next set of lights, then first right down a one-way street, it moved over when he did, and continued to follow as he veered off, on his usual route down a side street, cutting out the traffic on the main road. At the end of this street, Robin accelerated across the busy junction. But the car kept up, through an area of bleak flats above small, converted shops.

It was still on his tail through Lewisham. Could it be Bukhalov? He caught his breath. Who else would follow him? Fifteen years, he'd got. Nothing, for what he'd done. The image of a silencer in Bukhalov's coat forced him to step on the pedal. Mindful of cameras, he held his speed, and dodged into a narrow parked-up street, leaving a decent enough gap to lose him. He was half-way down when a single full beam struck him between the eyes. He spotted the car kerb crawling around the corner. The windows looked tinted, too. He grimaced at the thought of trafficked girls trembling in the back. Then he recalled Bukhalov's parting words, shouting his way out

of court. 'I'll get you, you bastard...and your wife.' The words were imprinted on his mind.

He picked up speed, and after butting into a stream of traffic on the South Circular, was honked and flashed when he cut up a van. Robin glanced at the mirror, wiped the sweat from his brow; the driver was giving him the finger. Trying to relax his grip on the steering wheel, Robin practised the slow breathing technique he'd been taught, puffing his cheeks in time with each exhalation. It was beginning to pay off, his nerves were beginning to calm, his breathing steadier. There was no opportunity to overtake, the lanes were solid, but even if he was still behind, he'd be way back. Robin thought he'd lost him; that was, until he came to the next set of lights where the man in the van turned off, leaving a motor bike between himself and his pursuer. The one working light was flashing in anger. Robin squinted at the intermittent dazzle and flipped down the mirror to a position which deadened its brightness. Road works were just ahead though. The lights were in his favour, but just as he was approaching, they changed to red and the bus in front dutifully halted. 'Fuck!' he shouted, banging his hand on the wheel. This delay was the final straw. Although the flashing had now stopped, on repositioning the mirror, Robin saw a maniacal grin staring back at him. He leaned back his head, closed his eyes, and sighed. His head was pounding now. There was no escape. He was jammed in, between a double decker and a dangerous criminal. Hunkering down in his seat, he clicked the central lock and reached for his phone in the glove compartment. Should he make a run for it, but would he survive? Bukhalov had killed at three hundred yards. His thoughts were killing him, bouncing between one decision and another when, suddenly, a face appeared at the window.

'Excuse me,' she said, knocking frantically on the glass. Robin looked furtively sideways to see pouting lips, then heavily mascaraed eyes and a great mane of black

flowing hair barely inches away. 'I've been trying to get your attention. You backed your car into mine on the multi-storey and smashed my headlight.'

The woman refused to move despite the now green light and the horn of an impatient white van. Robin let down the window a touch and instructed her to follow. He feathered the brake to keep her back, from sitting on his boot. He just wanted to be rid of her; even considered stopping at an ATM to pay her off. If it wasn't double yellow lines, it was parked cars which scuppered any idea of him pulling over. In any case, how much would she want? Was there enough in that account? The travel firm were due to take the balance of the holiday they'd booked to Disneyland in July.

Suddenly, a fox shot out and he was forced to make an emergency stop between his car and the one in front. The woman hit the horn again, jolting him out of his daydream. Lip reading her words through the mirror, he considered that with her two front teeth pressed into her bottom lip, followed by a wide-mouthed expression, she was mouthing 'fucking idiot'. Robin grasped the wheel and looked over the bonnet. He couldn't see the animal. She kept on at the horn, flashing the headlight at the same time. Robin could feel his heart racing. He stepped on the pedal and the car shot forward with a screeching of brakes. The mangy-looking thing had made it to the pavement. Jenny would approve.

The brightly lit windows, the dark buildings, the swarming pavements, the never-ending line of cars flickered into an incongruous mix, blurring his vision. A surge of heat overcame him. He turned down the heater and opened the window to an influx of noise and fumes and leaned his elbow on the sill. A chill breeze stung his hand and face. This wasn't the first time he thought he was being followed. Last December, the week before Christmas, a Vauxhall Corsa had trailed him every night. He'd convinced himself it was Joel's mother. It was the type of vehicle a woman in her circumstances

might have driven; hard-up, just about managing, prepared to put up with a battered old motor with only one working wiper. It had come to nothing — although he'd been impressed by her tracking skills, the way she'd managed to stick with the Jag through the maze of London streets, until he lost her, somewhere along the King's Road, never to be seen again.

The lights at Parliament Square had brought him to a standstill. He checked the mirror. Smoke was puffing out of the window. Perhaps he should have accepted that counselling session after all. Well-being assessment, Andrew had called it, a corporate scheme to reduce stress. He pushed the car into drive. She was still there, doggedly determined to stay with him, through Westminster, past the Abbey, illuminated. He had to admit, he was wracked with suspicion; it tormented him, at times monopolised his very being. Whether he was out on a job, or in the office, at the tennis club, or visiting friends, or his mother, he had an urge to survey his surroundings, like a fugitive at large. He shook his head, at the sheer absurdity of his paranoia.

Robin winced as the wheel hub scraped the kerb on the narrow driveway leading to the garages, a street away from Canorus Square. His thoughts were sent flying to the back of the Jag, the potential damage he'd inflicted. The BMW pulled in behind him, sending the Jaguar's rear alarm into a permanent screech. His priority was to check the cars for damage. He tried to squeeze between them, but their proximity made it difficult. He peered through her windscreen. She was on the phone, looking the other way. He needed more light. Partly hidden in the branches of a tree, the nearest streetlamp was nearer the garaged area, too obscured between overgrown twigs to spread enough light for him to see. He used the torch on his phone to examine his car. He ran his hand along the boot and the bumper and was relieved to find no obvious scratches or dents, no broken lights, or jagged bits of plastic. He turned to hers, to inspect the offending

headlight. That's odd. He checked it again. It seemed to be in perfect condition, not a broken bulb in sight; strangely intact. The next minute, she was out of the car, hovering around him.

'Can't see any damage,' he began.

'It's broken. Look. Here.' She slid an enormously long painted fingernail across the light, from one side to the other. 'Put your finger along here.'

Robin pushed the tip of his forefinger along the same route, feeling for the slightest groove in this apparent break she'd identified. 'I can't feel anything,' he said straightening up, coming face to face with a hardened stare.

'My husband will not be happy when he sees this. He has only had this car two days. He will not let me borrow it again if he sees it in this state. It needs fixing tomorrow, before he returns home.'

He ran his hand over the area to which she had jabbed her finger. There was a crack alright. But was he responsible? The Jag seemed undamaged. She was tapping her foot, muttering in a foreign tongue, massacring the lilting tones of what he thought to be Arabic or Hebrew. He took his time to feel for it again. There was, indeed, a slight break in the plastic cover, stretching from the centre of the light to where it curved up like an eye around the passenger side wing. It would be difficult to prove he hadn't done it. He frowned; he couldn't remember the alarm going off at the time. Then it dawned upon him. Could he be the victim of a scam? But she *was* wearing a nice bit of bling, a thick gold necklace shaped like a Pharaoh's collar. He sneered. Perhaps that was why. A clever fake in a scamming racket — is that what she is? Whoever she'd been speaking to might turn up in a minute — possibly with a weapon if he didn't pay up. He knew how these people worked. He'd reported on them. That conned consultant surgeon came to mind. It happened to the best of folk. How could he have been so stupid? His

imagination was running out of control, again; he needed to break out of this awful mind set.

He stood up, thrust his hands in his pockets and said, 'when did you say this happened?'

'In the car park. You reversed into me.'

'It's odd. I don't remember the rear alarm going off. There's no sign of damage on my car. Are you sure it wasn't you who drove into me?'

'La!' she exclaimed, and held up her head, rolled her eyes and clicked her tongue. 'You did this. This is your fault.' She stabbed a finger at him.

'It's hardly substantial. I can't see why it's not working.'

She folded her arms and braced herself. 'Look. Do you want me to get into serious trouble? My husband is not forgiving.'

Robin grimaced and shook his head, pulled his keys from his pocket to select the front door Yale. Running his thumb along its jagged outline, he was turning things over in his mind. His stomach started to rumble. He looked at his watch. It was just after seven. Inhaling deeply, he said, 'it shouldn't take much to fix this, there's only a bit of a crack.'

'The car is new...'

'I can see that...'

'I do not want him to know about this,' she said in a low voice, as though her husband was standing listening.

The large leather bag in the crook of her arm looked Italian. She didn't look short of cash. 'You could just get it fixed. Send me the bill. I'll see you right.'

'I want payment first.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'A couple of hundred then?'

'Not enough,' she said, shaking her head. 'More like five. It is an expensive car.'

'Let's say three and we'll call it quits. I know someone who'll do it for you. I've got his number at home. You can tell him I sent you.'

'He can do it early tomorrow?'

'First thing.'

She nodded, then proceeded to follow him after he grabbed his computer bag from the boot and double clicked the door lock.

'Live locally?' Robin asked. The tapping of her high heels echoed against the end wall of the corner house of Canorus Square.

'Not too far.'

'Whereabouts?' He was after information, testing her genuineness. Like a good reporter, he needed the score.

She waved her hand, hummed, and hawed before mentioning a street he'd never heard of, then blurted out Knightsbridge, as though plucked from the air.

'Mm.' A knot began to tighten in his gut. She didn't seem that sure. He pondered on the thought, recalled the Arabs who'd flocked to the area in recent years. Trouble was, they usually drove Lamborghinis, not run of the mill Beemers.

They walked the short length of the street in silence, until his railings came into view where he ascended the steps, her clattering shoes in tow.

'You live here?' she said, scanning the impregnable Georgian façade.

'Don't look so surprised.' He looked at her askance. On opening the door, he tried to leave it ajar so that he could reach into the hall to switch on the light and keep her on the step, but she was inside before he knew it.

'A beautiful house. The chandelier is...'

A pain to clean, he felt like adding, ignoring her inane remarks. 'Wait here,' he said, and retreated into the lounge. He closed the door behind him, drew the curtains, then switched on the standard lamp by the fire. Keeping his eyes on the door, he slipped his hand in a gap between the fireplace and the tiles surrounding the wood-burning stove to retrieve a key from a hook.

Conscious of her eyes following him up the stairs, he hastened to their bedroom, then rifled through the wardrobe to unlock the safe in the wall. There should have been three hundred quid in there. He'd be pig sick if there wasn't.

From halfway down the stairs, Robin was disturbed to see she'd vanished from the hall. 'Hello', he shouted, trotting down the final few. He stood motionless at the bottom to ponder his next step. The kitchen was in darkness. The study door was closed. Just the soft cream light emitted from the lounge. Warily, he pushed the door open, and was annoyed to see her standing there, by the fireplace, holding a silver-framed photograph she'd taken from the mantelpiece. Now he realised her full extent. In skinny jeans, extreme high heels and an ankle chain, Robin was struck with further doubt surrounding her identity. She resembled a high-class prostitute he'd once interviewed in Soho. Her pimp had had a black BMW too; but didn't they all? Her fixation with the photograph unnerved him.

'Blond hair is honoured in my country. He is not like you or your wife and daughter.'

Robin gasped. 'You know them?'

She tapped on the glass. 'Your wife is pretty.'

'scuse me? How do you know her?'

She smirked. 'You'd be surprised who I know,' she said, raising her eyebrows.

Robin felt a pit in his stomach. 'You haven't answered me. How do you know my wife? Where would you have met her?'

'I know something else, too.' She raised her charcoaled brows once more.

'Know what?'

She tilted her head towards the photograph.

Don't rush in. Let her speak, he told himself, inhaling. He was slipping into investigation mode, into a story where his wife might be the suspect.

'I heard them talking...at the hairdressers. They did not think I could. The dryers were on. It was your wife. Make no mistake.'

'Who was talking?'

'Jodie and your wife.'

'Jodie?'

'The stylist.'

'You were a customer?'

She shook her head. 'When I first came to this country, I helped in the family business, a high-class salon. It was before I met my husband. That is where I met him — washing his hair.' She turned the photograph towards him. 'Do you see this?' She pointed to Jenny's head. 'This is a stacked bob...used to be Jodie's trademark. Your wife insisted it be perfect every time. That was, until Jodie cut the layers too short, and your wife walked out. She was very angry. I saw her do it. Strange really...Jodie leaving after that.'

'When did you hear this so-called conversation?'

'Five years ago?' she said, screwing up her face.

'Five years? How can you be so sure that the woman you think you saw five years ago is the same woman in this photo? Are you kidding me?'

'Not at all. They were...how do you say...up to something.'

Robin looked away and frowned. He'd remembered Jenny calling some hairstylist rotten, how she felt like suing her for damages. It was while ago though. He took the photograph back. Alice had taken it in Kensington Gardens, the summer before Joel had started James's Prep; little Ellie and her big brother holding hands, him and Jenny clutching their shoulders. Robin looked the woman in the eye. 'How do I know you're telling the truth?'

'When she first came to the salon, she had a...mole on her face...just here.' She pointed to a spot on her own face, just left of her mouth, in line with her top lip, to the same place where Jenny had had one, too, before Dr Graham advised it be removed. 'Am I right?'

Robin froze. 'Who are you? What do you want?'

'A woman with a damaged car and in answer to your second question, I do not think three hundred is enough. I think five hundred will be better.'

'What for? This conversation you overheard?'

She turned to the photograph again. 'When I saw your wife in this picture, I remembered where I had seen her before. It is...as you English say...a small world.'

'What exactly did you overhear?'

She rubbed her fingers, gesturing for money.

Robin's face dropped. He couldn't believe the gall of the woman, for holding him to ransom in his own home. He held out the cash and she grasped it, letting him sweat before snatching it away. He watched her tuck the wad into the inside pocket of what he now recognised as a fake leather jacket. The cheap leatherette pouches were beginning to split. He felt suddenly headachy, the strain of this was taxing.

'It is warm in here,' she said, zipping down her coat to reveal a voluptuous bosom in a skimpy black top.

Robin's eyes widened. The squat little body and curving wings of a scarab beetle came into sharp focus above her left breast. Not any old pro then but the madam herself. 'I think you'd better go. You've had enough out of me already. I'm still sceptical about that light.'

She got out her phone. 'I will have to make a call then.' She looked at him askance, her tongue bulging her cheek.

'I'm going to phone the police,' said Robin, going for his pocket.

'Call them,' she said, leaning towards him, screwing her eyes. 'It is not me who has damaged somebody's car.' She prodded her chest in the process.

Then it hit him, like a brick. Was she connected to Joel, somehow? Blackmailing her way into their lives? He was curious. 'How much more?' he said, curling his lip.

'How much are you willing to pay, to get rid of me for good?'

Robin took out his wallet. There'd been more in the safe than he'd thought. 'Fifty, a hundred, a hundred and fifty, two hundred,' he said, counting it out. 'That's your lot. Five hundred's enough.'

She tucked the money in her jeans. 'In the hairdressers, it was not what was said, it was what I found...after your wife had gone. It was under her seat...must have fallen from her bag.'

'What did?'

'A cheque. I could not believe the amount.'

'How much for? '

'It was for five hundred thousand pounds.'

'Half a million quid? What did you do with it?'

'I ran into the street and tried to catch her.' She shrugged. 'But she had gone. I am telling the truth,' she said, holding up her hands. 'There was no name on it.' She harrumphed. 'A less honourable woman would have been tempted...but it had not been signed.'

'It could have been anyone's then?'

'Nobody had sat in that chair all morning...not until she did. I would have found it. I used to spend most of my time brushing up. We kept a very high standard.' She eyed him quizzically. 'You do not know about this, do you?'

Robin felt dejected. Why was Jenny writing a cheque for that amount? And who was she writing it for? Something else she hadn't told him. His heart sank. A feeling of betrayal hit him, like a boxing glove, as though he'd been punched in the face. At that moment, he felt more betrayed by his own wife than this charlatan standing before him. 'So, what were they plotting?' he said, emphatically.

'Oh...women's talk.'

Robin pulled his face. 'What sort of women's talk?'

'Babies.' She leaned in. 'You get the story of their lives in that job. I had a woman tell me her husband had robbed a bank once. You would be amazed what they say.'

'What about babies?'

'Your wife said something about being...infertile?'

His shoulders slumped. Fancy discussing that with stranger. Fertility treatment had cost a fortune. Was the cheque to do with that?

'Women tell their hairdressers everything.'

Obvious, thought Robin, straightening up. 'I thought you were going to tell me something I didn't know.'

She eyed him. 'I have, haven't I? About the cheque.'

'That could've been anybody's.'

'I do not think so. Your wife is Mrs Jennifer Watts.'

Robin went quiet. 'How do you know that?'

She laughed. 'Jodie said the name printed on the cheque was this woman — your wife,' she said, and pointed to the photograph.

'It's a bit odd you remembering her name now, after all this time.' He thrust his face close to hers, careful not to touch, attempting to stare her out. 'You're not leaving until you tell me what you really know?'

Pulling back, she stepped away. 'Nothing — there was too much noise. Do not threaten me. My husband will not like it,' and she picked up her bag and marched off before stopping and turning in the doorway. 'She said you could not get it on,' and gave him the finger.

He herded her out, watched her tripping noisily away. Mrs Lewis's curtains twitched shut. Robin ran his hand through his hair. The pain still pulsed his forehead. Sitting on the bottom stair, he held his head, followed the lines of the parquet floor. He was trying to make sense of it all. It was too coincidental; the conveniently broken headlight, her knowing Jenny, remembering her name, and Joel, being singled out. And she'd robbed him of five hundred quid. Highway, bloody, robbery. He wasn't used to being taken for a ride, was downright angry at being taken in.

Robin paced the lounge. Thoughts whirled in his head; a calamity of distrust of his wife and deception by a stranger, all revolved uncontrollably. He went to the drinks cabinet and poured himself a whiskey, then slumped in an armchair, placed the bottle on

the floor, leaned back his head and stretched out his legs. The clock on the mantelpiece chimed eight. A car door slammed in the square. Robin looked at the door leading to the hall, listening out for footsteps. He held his breath. None came. Two more whiskies later, he was beginning to feel more mellow; the glass ceiling light began to swirl. With a third and a fourth, the mirror over the mantelpiece swayed in time with the ticking of the clock.

He was sitting in the passenger seat with Bukhalov driving. He tried the door, but it was locked, and the window wouldn't go down. Bukhalov was speeding, jumping lights and ignoring give way lines, mounting kerbs and crossing double white lines down the middle of the road. A police siren, approaching from behind, got louder, then morphed into the phone ringing in the hall. Robin stretched open his eyes, slowly recollected the settee, the fireplace, the dining area of the lounge. His head was spinning, and he felt sick. The room was brightly lit, and a column of light had managed to escape from the centre of the still-drawn curtains to stripe the coffee table. Robin stumbled to his feet. His empty glass was on the floor next to a half empty bottle of whiskey. He peered at the clock. 'Shit,' he said, holding his forehead. It was ten-past eight. The meeting would be ten minutes old by now. The phone was still ringing. Unsteadily, he tottered from the room and snatched up the handset. It might be Andrew, going spare because he wasn't there. 'Yes,' he said.

'It's me, Robin.'

'Jenny?'

She sighed.

'Is everything alright?'

He could almost hear her gulping before she said, 'There's been a terrible accident here.'

'Accident? At the farm?'

She mumbled something quietly.

'In the barn?'

'...they were only playing.'

'I can't hear, Jenny, speak up.'

'I can't, she'll hear me in the other room.'

'What's happened?' He pulled his hand through his hair, releasing a few grey ones this time, watching them float to the floor. 'Jenny, tell me.'

'They'd climbed to the top of the bales and Joel was throwing her a ball...'

'Oh God no, what's he done to her?' He suddenly felt numb, saw Ellie in her unicorn T shirt and sparkly jeans with her favourite pink sneakers.

'He didn't do it deliberately; it was only a game. He was throwing the ball from the bales and kept on climbing up, thinking she'd be able to jump from a height like Biscuit did from that tree.'

He clenched his teeth. 'What game are you talking about?'

'She jumped off...!' She was covering the speaker now, talking to someone. His ear hurt, pressed hard against the handset. 'He threw it, to get her to catch it, to see how high she could jump...but she stumbled and fell.'

'Has she broken any bones? Her leg?'

'Not her leg.' She started to cry.

'What then? Her arm?' His heart raced. Dread overwhelmed him.

She was sobbing now. 'It was horrible, Robin.'

'I can only just make you out, Jenny. What are you telling me?'

'She's dead. A broken neck.'

He fell back and slid down the wall into a crouched position, wedged in tightly by his knees and his rigid back. 'God almighty!' He lifted his eyes to the ceiling. 'How can you do this?' His shouts filled the house. 'He's dangerous, that kid, he's evil.'

'It was a game, Robin, it got out of hand.'

'He's killed our daughter, Jenny, what's wrong with you?'

'Not Ellie, Robin...it's Pippa.'

Robin closed his eyes and muttered 'Oh, thank God for that.'

'How can you say that? Mum's beside herself.'

He exhaled deeply, re-imagining the black and white terrier. 'I'm sorry. How high did she fall?'

'From the top of the bales.'

'That's the height of a bus. The vet explained to him last week that only cats can jump from a big height, but not dogs, not without doing serious damage. He's not stupid, Jenny. He's seven years old. He's deliberately harmed that dog.'

'What do you not understand about it being a game, Robin?'

'Then why did he do it? Did Alice tell him off? He's not been wetting the bed, again, has he?'

There was silence down the phone, then a click. She'd hung up.

Chapter 14

ONE YEAR LATER

March 2016

'This superbug is a pain,' said Robin. 'The hospital is full of it.'

'They're not going to cancel your operation, are they?' said Jenny. With the phone wedged between her shoulder and her ear, she closed the kitchen door, the one which led into the lounge. Magda and the children were watching TV, the buzz from *Star Wars Rebels* shut out.

'They're hoping to do it tomorrow,' said Robin. 'At least it's benign. That's a weight off my mind.'

'The children are missing you. They can't wait to visit.'

'I certainly miss them, too. I'm keeping my fingers crossed it'll go ahead tomorrow. How's everything at home?'

'Good. I'm coping.' She looked at her watch. 'I'll be over to visit you today. Mum will be over soon. I'm going to ask her to take the children out.'

'What? On her own? You know what happened last time.'

'I'm going to tell Magda to go with them. She is their nanny after all.'

'Well, good luck with that. Alice and Magda don't...oh, a nurse has just come in, Jenny. I'll have to go. See you later. Bye love.'

'Bye. Love you.' Jenny, spotting some unwashed dishes in the sink, went to turn on the tap.

Magda was looking through the French windows. White clouds had made waves in the sky, and though it was sunny, March was reluctant to take off its winter coat.

Snowdrops are shivering...shiver? Shivering? Shiver under...naked bushes?

Sounds good, Magda thought. She counted out the syllables on her fingers. Ten. Silver cobwebs wrap a...what is that word? What did Jenny call that tree? She flicked down a list of words she'd stored on her phone. It ended in green, something green. It wasn't there. Silver cobwebs wrap a...Christmas tree? She checked the syllables again. Nine. Silvery? Ten. Perfect.

Snowdrops shiver under naked bushes.

Silvery cobwebs wrap a Christmas tree.

Magda was pleased. Writing was an escape for her, snatched on free afternoons before she fetched the children from school. Once, she'd let Robin read some poems she'd written on her phone. He said her English was very good, better than some of the journalists he knew.

'Can you take the children out for the day?'

She turned to see Jenny coming out of the kitchen, looking as if she'd just got out of bed.

'What about the zoo?' said Jenny.

'Yes, of course but...don't you want them to see Robin?'

Jenny, yawning, shook her head. 'I need a child-free day.' She slumped on a dining room chair.

'Just me and the children?'

'I don't see why not.'

'Cool. We can take the Tube.'

'No...Mum'll take you.'

'I would prefer...to take them myself ac-'

'Magda,' cried Joel. A bundle of energy burst into the room. He flung his arms around her, rammed his body against hers so that she had to catch her breath.

'Good morning, little man. How are you today?' Magda stroked the hair from his forehead. 'Mummy has got a surprise for you.'

'What surprise?' said Joel, hugging her, looking up into her face.

Magda was drawn by the bewitching blueness of his eyes.

'I'm going to visit Daddy, Joel,' said Jenny. 'So...Magda's taking you and Ellie to the zoo.'

'Yes,' he said, pumping the air. 'Can we see the reptiles first?'

'We'll see.' Magda unwrapped his hands from around her waist. 'Go and get ready. Rucksacks, coats. Go.' They high fived before he sped out, chicaning around the furniture. Ellie followed her big brother out.

Jenny turned. The children had left the room. 'Hopefully Robin's operation will go to plan. Ellie knows Daddy's in hospital, but I've told Joel he's going to have brain surgery...because of his headaches. He is eight after all. More than capable of understanding. I've asked him not to mention it to Ellie.'

'I'm sure he won't.' Magda gave herself a little shrug and smiled.

'What's the plan for the day?' said Alice, entering the room.

Magda recoiled on hearing that upper-crust voice.

'They're going to the zoo. With *Magda*,' said Jenny.

The stress on her name made Magda smile. Kew Gardens came to mind. And look what happened there? She chuckled inwardly.

'Oh? Then I'm coming, too,' said Alice.

Magda's heart sank. She looked at Jenny, pleadingly, urging her to put her mother off. A thorny silence hung, until Alice thrust out a bunch of keys. 'Take these, Magda. Make sure my shooting stick is in the car.'

Magda took them without giving Alice a second glance and brushed past her, leaving the door ajar. From the hall, she could hear Jenny and Alice talking. She put her ear to the gap.

'...control him this time, Mother...don't want a repeat performance of Kew. Remember? ...Head Gardener threatening legal action?'

'...isn't fair, Jenny. You pay a nanny to look after him.'

'It's a good job I do...hadn't been for Magda, you'd never have got him back. Carving his name on one of their prized specimens...'

Magda had to stop herself from laughing out loud.

'Throwing bits of...at a peacock? It's getting to the point...hate to say it...I don't know whether I can trust you to take them out again.' Jenny sounded cross.

'Them? I hope you're not including Ellie in this threat. She's a sweetheart, unlike...'

'Joel? That's why Magda's going...needs someone on his side.'

'Perhaps *she* can take him. I'll take Ellie somewhere else instead,' she thought she heard Alice say.

'That's not a good idea. If it goes wrong again...'

The door swung open. Jenny loomed in the doorway.

'Forgot my purse,' said Magda, burying her head. She patted her pockets, then rushed out to check the boot.

The stick was there, lying in wait.

Magda was ordered to sit in the back with Joel. She sat behind Alice in the driving seat, could see herself in the rear-view mirror. To make sure she looked just right, she checked her appearance, was smoothing her pink lipstick using both lips, when Alice's eyes met hers. Magda looked away quickly, embarrassed to be caught pouting in the mirror.

She leaned on the sill and sighed. Hyde Park looked busy; people strolling, pushing prams, walking dogs. A Golden Retriever, running with a jogger, reminded her of Azor, the way he used to follow her to school. She'd felt safe with him, overjoyed when he bit their horrible neighbour. Served him right, he was far too touchy.

She noticed a nanny pushing an old-fashioned pram and wondered whether she was treated like a servant, too. Better thought of in her posh brown uniform. Magda was thankful she'd not been made to wear a hat like that. She was imagining having to walk behind Alice around the zoo, when a flash of sunlight stabbed her in the eye, forcing her to look the opposite way. She took a sharp intake of breath; Joel was about to kick the back of Alice's seat.

'I don't think so,' she said, grabbing his foot.

'What's going on?' Alice's sunglasses filled the mirror.

She could feel the force of Joel's strength as he tried to stop her from teasing his trainer, back and forth, each time getting closer with each jut of the foot. 'Stop it, Joel.'

'So, are we going to have to turn around and go back?' declared Alice.

Magda glared at him, widening her eyes to the limit. Her heart ached when she saw him like this. 'You must behave if you want to go to the zoo.'

'What's going on back there?'

Magda placed her hand over his. Gradually, a warmth began to flow between them, and his foot slowed to a stop. 'Everything's fine,' she said. Once again, her magic had done the trick.

Soon the zoo was in sight. In the car park, Alice, kitted out in Barbour blue, took command, giving a pep talk to the troops. 'Stay together and no climbing fences. The exhibits are less forgiving than Kew.' Head down, under the door of the open boot, Magda rolled her eyes whilst extracting anoraks and rucksacks, plus the shooting stick she'd probably end up having to carry. She couldn't help but smile. Alice was out to make amends; that much was obvious. It was judgement day for her. One false move and access to Ellie would be on the line. Her attempts to humour Joel were laughable. At the Africa enclosure, Magda had to stop herself from laughing, at Alice pretending to take an interest in Joel.

'Don't you want to know about hippopotamuses?' Alice said, finding it hard to get Joel's attention, to read the *Did you know?* facts on a board with a map.

He cocked an eye in her direction. 'It's hippopotami. I know about them from school.'

'What about topis, then?' said Alice, 'surely you don't know everything about them? I've never even heard of one.'

'Typical,' said Joel under his breath, then declared, out loud, that he knew all about African mammals and wanted to go to the reptile house.

'But I want to see the giraffes,' said Ellie. Her little face screwed as she looked up into Alice's where a twitch pulsated her lip.

'And that's why we're here, darling, because they're your favourites,' said Alice.

'What about my favourites? She always gets her own way,' said Joel, flicking his head at Ellie.

Magda gave his shoulder a supportive rub.

'But I want to see the giraffes.'

'You can see them from here,' said Joel, irritated. He raised his chin over the fence.

Ellie stood on tiptoe. 'Where?'

'There, you idiot,' he replied, pointing above a small herd of zebra.

'How rude,' said Alice.

'That is not polite, Joel.' Magda could feel his shoulders tense, his muscles getting into a twist.

Alice stood over him. 'I think you should apologise to your sister.'

'No way,' shouted Joel. Then, leaning back, he whipped forward and spat in his grandmother's face.

Jaw-dropped, Magda scrambled in her bag for a wet wipe. A line of glob was clinging to Alice's cheek.

A woman, close by, reversed her buggy away; the look on her face said it all. Alice's hands were shaking as she tried to wipe saliva off her coat. Magda knelt and held Joel's hot and clammy hands. His face was a picture, all creased and blotched. 'This is not good behaviour, Joel. You need to apologise to your grandmother.'

'She deserves it,' he yelled, stamping his foot.

Alice had put her sunglasses on as people were staring, holding up mobiles.

'Where has this come from, Joel?' Magda gently held his hands. 'Your Mummy and Daddy have not taught you to behave like this?'

His lips were pursed, his eyes fixed in anger, but even so, he could not stop from holding back a tear.

Magda drew him towards her. 'I can see you are sorry. You must tell her that. It will show you are strong, not weak.' More tears flowed. Despite what he had done, her heart still melted. 'But why does she deserve it, Joel?'

'She tells me I'm horrible when Mummy isn't there.'

'Let's move on,' said Alice, grabbing Ellie's hand. 'We'll go to the reptile house if that's what your brother wants. There's a show on at twelve.' Turning to Magda, she said, '*you* bring him.'

'I want to see the giraffes,' said Ellie, tugging at Alice's quilted coat.

'You can see them later, darling, they'll still be here. Let's buy you an ice cream. At least one of you deserves it.'

Magda was speechless. She and Joel were left standing there, to watch the two of them walk away. Joel's word-crushed face said it all. 'I'll buy you one,' she said, squeezing his shoulder.

Magda was in no mood to catch them up, deliberately staying ten paces behind, brooding. Although Joel's behaviour was inexcusable, he was still a child. Alice ought to know better than to call an eight-year-old names. She stopped to kneel in front of him. 'What *does* your grandmother call you, Joel? I didn't catch what you said.'

'She calls me names and...,' he gulped, 'then when Mummy comes, she's nice to me, and when I tell Mummy granny says things about me, she says not to be so silly because granny would never do that.'

'But what does she say that upsets you so much?' She was shaking her head in disbelief.

He was silent for a moment, staring into the distance, over her shoulder. 'She says I'm a...'. He sighed, letting his head roll backwards, looking up for inspiration. 'I can't...' and squeezed his eyes tight shut before opening them wide, 'f...ou...fou...' He

shook his head. 'I can't remember. It begins with an 'f.' He scrunched his face. The frustration of not remembering seemed to be causing him more annoyance than being called whatever it was in the first place.

'It's alright, alright,' she said, not wanting a scene. Surely, not that word, Magda thought, getting to her feet and thinking the worst. She felt like having it out with Alice. But, tight-lipped, she knew her place.

Emerging from the tunnel to the main part of the zoo, Magda could see Alice and Ellie standing by Gorilla Kingdom. Ellie was pointing at Kumbuka, covered in straw. It was strange to see this manlike creature playing like a child, whacking a box with one hand, squeezing a melon in the other. Her boyfriend did the same when he couldn't get Sky to work; bash the remote with one hand, crush a can of beer in the other. The flat stunk of Grolsch. There was a brown sticky line of it across the ceiling.

Was he trying to say fow? Magda wondered. She tapped the word into the online dictionary on her phone. A dropped down menu listed 'Fowey' at the top. A Cornish fishing village it was not, so she went to the next — 'fowl'. A chicken? She stared at Joel, his chin on the bamboo fence. Remembering the difficulties, she'd encountered when learning English, the way words could be spelt in different ways, she tapped in 'f-o-u'. It came up Scottish for 'full' or 'drunk'. You're a full boy? You're a drunk boy? She shook her head and tried a different tack entering, 'words beginning with fou'. Not recognising the word 'foundling' at the top of the list, she looked it up in the dictionary. Appearing with its definition, she suddenly went numb, the surrounding hubbub sucked into silence. What the hell was she thinking? She was suddenly snapped out of her state of total disbelief hearing Alice telling Ellie not to climb on the fence.

'You know what happened when somebody did that before?' Alice sent daggers in Joel's direction. 'Can you pick Ellie up?' she asked Magda, curtly, 'she can't see.'

Magda placed the shooting stick against the fence, then hauled up the child so that she straddled her waist. She felt heavy and cumbersome, too old, really, at five, to be carried. Catching a whiff of strawberry soap, she was reminded of Joel's favourite. He refused to wash with anything but choco-orange. Like her, he was a chocoholic. Jenny didn't approve of them having too much; that dark brown streak still haunted her. Despite a deep clean, the settee had never recovered from Joel's over-indulgence on Terry's Chocolate Oranges last Christmas.

Seeing Joel now, sad, watching Kumbuka throwing straw at a baby gorilla, hearing the crowd's laughter with Ellie giggling feverishly, Magda felt sad for him, too. Did Jenny know what was going on, that Alice was telling Joel, behind her back, that he had been abandoned?

'Ice cream, Granny?' said Ellie, unravelling herself to slide down Magda's legs, as Kumbuka, bored with his audience, had now left the stage.

'Yes of course darling. What flavour would you like?' said Alice.

'Strawberry,' replied Ellie with a marked nod of the head.

A black smear on her white jeans had sent Magda bending down to rub off some dirt from Ellie's shoe. But on standing up, Alice and Ellie had gone. Squinting through the crowd, Magda spotted them queuing at an ice cream kiosk near the entrance to the reptile house. Joel was still leaning on the fence, the left side of his face squashed against his arm, the right-side eyeing Magda. She held out her hand for him to take. Warily, he straightened up and accepted it, before they trundled along to the kiosk for a chocolate ice cream with a Flake.

The imposing Greek entrance was an interesting choice for the Reptile House. An art student in her previous life, Magda recognised the pediment, but brick built with an Art Deco window? It was a curious mix.

Although desperate to split from Alice so that her and Joel could go to a different tank-lined room, she knew she had to stick with the woman. Both children were in her care, despite the old bat sabotaging the day. If anything happened to them, it was sure to be the nanny's fault. Joel spitting in Alice's face was probably her fault, and if Ellie happened to fall into the lion's den out of her grandmother's arms, it would be her fault, too.

Joel had his face pressed against a vivarium decked out with lush greenery and bright red flowers, heart-shaped and waxy, each with a yellow stamen protruding upright from the middle. Magda recognised the same plant in the kitchen. Jenny had caught Joel feeding it flies he'd swatted with something resembling a tennis racket. Robin had sent him to his room for using it on Ellie, for hitting her over the head.

Like a tightly wound spring, the fluorescent green body of an Emerald Tree Boa was spiralled around a branch. Joel tapped on the glass. Its head was hidden, tucked inside its coils. 'I wish I could make it bite her,' he said, turning to Magda.

'Bite who, Joel?'

He was staring at Alice. Then, he did something sickening — made his pupils disappear into his head leaving the whites exposed. It was his current party trick, and always came, much to Magda's dismay, with some cutting little comment meant to shock. Horrible, but mesmerising, his eyes momentarily locked her in, until a tugging of her jeans made her jump. It was Ellie. 'Granny said to tell you to get a move on.'

Magda had to bite her tongue. 'Come, Joel, we mustn't upset your grandmother.' She placed her hand in the small of his back to push him, reluctantly, towards a stony-faced Alice standing sentinel by the door to the reptile show.

'Come on, it's about to start, I'm only here because of *you*,' said Alice, making a point of glaring at Joel. 'Actually, I don't know why I am here, I detest snakes.' She sighed heavily. 'Anything to keep the peace I suppose.'

She opened the door to let them into a darkened room crammed with a chattering mix of adults and children. At the front was a low stage, backlit, with the large green lettering of 'Reptilia' on a brown clay wall behind. As all the seats appeared to have been taken, a member of staff beckoned to them, to stand at the front to the side, a short distance from the stage. Alice gestured for the shooting stick. Magda opened it up so that Alice could perch on its leather seat, its spiked end lodged in a crack in the concrete floor.

The presence of a keeper in khaki had the effect of quietening the crowd, except for something tapping the insides of a wooden box he was carrying on to the stage. Through a head set microphone, to the amusement of the audience, he declared that it was just Susie, filing her nails. 'Put your hand up if you can tell me what animal Susie might be?'

Joel's hand shot up.

The keeper pointed to him.

'Comodo dragon,' he bellowed.

People started chuckling.

'Mm...too big for a box like this,' and pointed to a different child.

'Iguana, then,' shouted Joel.

'Well done, young man, but don't shout out, you'll frighten her.'

Joel was invited to join the keeper on the stage, whilst the reptile was retrieved from its box and placed on the palms of his outstretched hands.

Alice covered her eyes. 'Oh, don't drop it. Please. Somewhere else we'll be banned from.' She whispered over her shoulder, so that Magda could hear. 'You know how clumsy he is. Look what he did to Pippa.'

Magda leaned in. 'That was an accident, Mrs Manners.'

'Huh...you think so? I think he's got ADHD. It's just an excuse for being naughty, and goodness knows where he gets it from.' She lowered her voice so that Magda was forced to move nearer her face. 'You do realise he was adopted?'

'And so does he.'

Alice turned and stared. 'And what's that supposed to mean?'

Magda refused to return her look, cast her eyes on Joel still holding the motionless creature.

'Don't tell me you've told him he was adopted?' said Alice.

'No...but you have.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'You call him a...!' She tapped the phone alive. 'Here,' and thrust the screen, starkly lit, in front of her scornful face.

'Ridiculous. He doesn't know what foundling means.'

'Precisely. That's why you say it.'

'Then why get so upset if he doesn't know what it means?'

A woman shushed them.

Magda lowered her voice. 'He said you call him names, including that one.'

Joel was leaping off the stage amidst a round of applause. A door, right next to where they were standing, suddenly opened and in walked a line of keepers carrying a

thick-bodied snake. The audience oohed and aahed, Joel juddered on his toes clapping with excitement, Ellie squirmed between Magda's legs pushing her further into the wall, from where Magda noticed Alice's hand clamped on her heart, a look of horror on her face.

'Do you know who this is, children?' asked the keeper.

Immediately, Joel's hand went up.

'You, again?'

'Big Bertha,' Joel announced. 'Can I stroke her?'

A ripple of laughter from the crowd.

'You've got to be careful; she's getting to be an old lady now...and she's getting rather cranky.'

Not the only one, thought Magda. She looked to the side, let her eyes follow the prominent curve of Alice's back up to her iron-grey hair, and that large diamond stud in her ear. Magda wondered what else she knew, what other shit she'd been spreading.

The keeper seemed to have taken to Joel, had him on the stage helping to hold the Burmese python.

'I wouldn't let Ellie do that,' said Alice. 'I wouldn't want anything to happen to my granddaughter.'

Ellie had dared to inch nearer the stage, kneeling with other children, laughing at something the keeper was saying.

Magda took in a deep breath. 'And what about your grandson?'

'He is not my grandson.'

'But he is...'

'Adopted?' Alice held up an authoritative finger. 'Yes, he may be. But he is not a Manners. He *has no* manners. Spitting at me? Killing my dog? That behaviour does not

come from us. He's from the scum of the earth. He's inherited a nasty, vile trait, an evil gene. No wonder his mother gave him up. She probably saw his horns coming out before the rest of his wretched body app...'

'You fucking bitch.' As soon as she said it, her hands rushed to her face. She hadn't seen Joel standing there. 'Oh God, I'm so sorry, Joel.' The clapping was beginning to fade.

'I don't mind.' He was sneering. 'But shouldn't you apologise to her?'

'I am very sorry for what I said, Joel.' Magda glanced at Alice whose mouth displayed a told-you-so curl.

'You are not fit to be the children's nanny. I will take this up with my daughter as soon as we get back.'

'I didn't mean to say what I said, you forced me.'

The keeper was waving at them, holding up a different snake, sending Joel jumping back on to the stage.

'Spitting? Swearing? You and he are two of a kind.'

'I am good at my job. I take good care of these children.'

'Well, it sounds like it, doesn't it? Now we know where he gets his filthy habits from.'

Magda was shaking. More people were watching them. Now wasn't the time to argue her case. And then she had a satisfying thought. No. She smiled to herself. Jenny would never get rid of her...not if Joel was around.

Joel was coming their way, a long brown snake wrapped around his body. The keeper was guiding him around the room. The boy was in his element, offering the ball python's head to any brave soul who wanted a touch. It was flicking its tongue.

Alice pulled the lapels of her coat together. 'I'll die if he comes near me with that.'

Magda, silent, wished Joel to her, the snake curling its tail around his arm.

'Don't bring that here.' Alice held out her hand.

It was sliding its patchy body around his shoulders.

'It's nonvenomous, madam.'

Then it slipped down Joel's spine.

'I don't care, I don't like them,' she said, shooing them away.

The keeper was herding Joel back towards the audience when, suddenly, boy and snake dipped under the man's outstretched arm and made a beeline for Alice.

'Aargh...' he roared, thrusting the snake's head into her face. The next thing Magda saw was Alice's skull hitting the floor and the keeper pulling Joel and the snake away.

Magda, a whimpering Ellie clamped to her leg, looked down in horror at Alice's deathly-pale face, her terror-stricken eyes fixed in a lifeless stare. Magda's heart raced as she watched the keeper uncurling the snake from Joel's body, then hand it to a woman in ZSL uniform. He bent down to examine Alice with a man who was already feeling her neck with his finger for a pulse.

'What the hell, Joel?' Magda implored.

'It was just a joke,' said Joel, airily.

'This is not a joke.'

People were being encouraged to leave by the staff. Magda felt the eyes of the crowd on them, sensed their disgust, muttering abuse, and sympathy in one breath.

'I can't see any blood,' said the keeper standing up to speak to Magda. 'We've called First Aid. We daren't move her.'

'Is she...alright?'

'She's breathing, if that's what you mean.'

'It must have been terrifying, it being so close. She said she hated snakes.'

'Fortunately, the snake's fine, too,' he said shaking his head, dumbfounded.

'This'll get us some unwanted publicity. All those cameras, stirring up the animal rights brigade.'

'I can only apologise.'

'I think somebody needs to.' The keeper stared at Joel, who, hearing his words, turned up his nose and looked away.

A First Aider was soon on the scene, covering Alice with a blanket, ordering a few people who had stopped to help not to raise her head. 'An ambulance is on its way,' said the girl.

Alice was moaning quietly as Magda leaned over for a closer look. She had mixed feelings, pity, and bitterness at the same time. It almost served her right. That word she had used — foundling. 'Old-fashioned', the dictionary had said — 'abandoned in a public place'.

Two paramedics rushed through the door. One of them knelt by Alice. 'What do we call you, dear?' he said, unzipping his bag.

Alice remained blank-faced, quiet.

Magda stepped forward. 'Mrs Manners. Er...Alice. These are her grandchildren. I am their nanny.'

'Right Alice, can you feel pain anywhere? No?' He slid his hand down her legs tapping two fingers at various points. 'Can you wriggle your toes? Good. Do you feel light-headed or have any pain in your head?'

She did not respond.

'Alice?'

Still no response.

'Alice? Can you hear me?' Her eyes were black, her breathing erratic. 'I think you'd better take the children out,' he said, pulling a mask from his bag.

'I don't want to leave granny,' whined Ellie.

Magda could feel the child shaking.

'She's safe with us, poppet,' said the paramedic. 'We're just checking your granny over.' He was taking her pulse.

'I don't want to go,' said Ellie, her voice raised, panic setting in.

Magda bent down and looked into Ellie's tear-streamed face. The child's sobbing grew louder. Magda had to shush and hug her to stop, as she began to shake violently.

'She's stopped breathing,' Magda heard the paramedic say.

From over Ellie's shoulder Magda saw him pull scissors from his bag to cut away at her blouse, removing her bra to reveal her naked chest. She lay there exposed, a stranger's hands pounding it, up and down, in rhythmical time, one hand on the other, pressing down onto her fragile body. He stopped to place his ear, side on, next to her mouth. 'Nothing yet,' he said. He attached the pads of the defibrillator to her skin. The machine then went into action, speaking out commands, warning people to stand back as it tried to jolt her body back into life.

Magda grabbed the child and stepped away, shielded Ellie's eyes from the sight of her grandmother jumping with a torrent of electric shocks. Alice's body was jerking like a jack-in-the-box. Magda looked round for Joel. There he was, staring, like a statue, not a hint of sorry on his face.

'She's back with us. We'll take her to Bart's,' she heard one of them say.

Magda breathed a sigh of relief, let Ellie slide to the floor. 'Ellie, look at me.' She lifted the little girl's chin. 'They're taking your granny to hospital. They'll make her better there. Like Daddy.'

Ellie's eyes were blood shot, she sniffed intermittently, her sobbing now beginning to fade.

'Let's go to the shop and buy you both something.'

'A giraffe?' perked up Ellie.

'Whatever you like.' She ushered her towards Joel, already at the door.

'Madam, have you forgotten something?'

Magda turned to see the keeper holding up the shooting stick. It had been a nuisance to carry.

Outside, she snapped her eyes shut on the sunlight reflected on the pool in Tiger Territory. Pulling out her phone, she called Jenny. 'It's me, Magda. Erm...your mother has had an accident...She fell off her stick and hit her head...But she seems to be okay now...How?...She fell backwards off the stick...Yes, she's awake...They're taking her to hospital now...She'll soon be there...Bart's...They're taking her now...You're going now...She's had a shock but she seems...I'll get the Tube...No, we'll be fine...Don't worry, they're okay...Bye, bye.'

Following the direction of the eyes of a crowd of bystanders, Magda looked round to see Alice being wheeled towards an ambulance. She moved to the stretcher about to be pushed up a ramp. Alice's eyes were closed, her face washed of colour compared to the clean white sheet tucked up to her chin.

'What are those?' Magda asked the paramedic. She pointed to two red dots on Alice's cheek.

'Puncture marks. From the snake's fangs.'

'Oh my God.' No wonder her heart had stopped. 'Is she going to be, okay? Her eyes are closed.'

'We've given her a sedative, that's why.'

But for her uncovered head, Alice could have been dead for all Magda knew. She went suddenly cold, at the thoughts of Joel on trial, in court, facing a judge in a wig. She was right. This was all her fault. If things had been better from the start...

'Is granny going to be alright?' said Ellie.

'Yes, she'll be fine. She's in good hands.'

They watched the doors close on Alice. The blue lights started to flash, and the sirens started to wail, and the crowd parted for the ambulance to leave the scene. Magda was thoughtful for a moment. What a day. She'd wanted the children to herself, but not in this way. No doubt she would live to annoy her another day. She turned to the children. 'Okay guys? I know it's hard, but let's try and forget what has happened. Your grandmother's being taken care of...so...let's try to enjoy the rest of the day.' She glanced at her watch. 'You must be hungry now. Would you like something to eat before the shop?'

'Yes, please,' said Ellie, beaming.

'No. Shop first,' demanded Joel, 'I know what I want.'

She took their hands and off they went.

The shop was teeming with children, hogging the displays of stationery and cuddly toys.

'A giraffe,' said Ellie, both arms reaching for the soft toy lined up with scores of all types of animals exhibited at the Zoo. She hugged it tightly, stroking its neck.

Joel was stroking a toy Big Bertha, a quarter of the length at a metre.

'I don't think your grandmother would appreciate seeing that in the house,' warned Magda. 'Look for something else instead. Look, over there, at that beautiful tiger.'

'I'm not interested in tigers.'

'But you like cats. What about Biscuit?'

'She's the only cat I do like. She likes to chase mice.'

'Don't you like mice?'

'No, I hate them. So does Daddy. He catches them in traps.'

'That's because they are pests.'

'Isn't that what you do to pests? Kill them.'

Magda frowned.

Joel had come to a standstill, by a shelfful of reptiles. 'These are my favourites,' he said, picking up a large plastic chameleon. He turned it upside down and flicked on a switch. It started to glow, then changed its colours from green to black to brown to turquoise to yellow then back to green. 'People think they change colours for camouflage, but that isn't the main reason. Scientists think it's because it shows their moods. Dark colours mean they're angry. I want this one.' With his finger, Joel traced the ups and downs of the reptile's spikey crest.

'Me this one,' said Ellie, rocking the giraffe like a baby.

They were standing in the queue when her phone rang. It was Jenny. 'I'm sorry I can't hear, it's too noisy,' Magda said, sticking a finger in her ear. 'Don't move, children, stay in the queue, I won't be long, just going outside.'

'Hi again...she's what?' Magda went cold.

Chapter 15

ONE YEAR LATER

March 2017

A tapestry of lush green fields, copses and hedges rushed by as Robin and Joel made their way to George and Alice's farm in the Jag. Oxfordshire was bearing up to its chocolate-box name; pretty stone cottages in spick and span villages around greens with thatch-roofed pubs and little spired churches, all contrasting with the built-up urbanity of London.

'I hope you're going to be alright at the farm, Joel...seeing as your grandfather's not going to there most of the day. Having to visit your grandmother in that nursing home is a pain, it's miles away.' Robin let the steering wheel slip through his hands as he turned a bend on the narrow country lane. 'Joel? Are you listening to me?'

The boy turned to face him. He'd been very quiet all the way from home, staring out of the window for most of the journey. 'I heard you. I won't be alone. You know my friends will be there, as well.'

'That's what worries me. Aren't they a little old for you? Surely, you should be hanging around with boys of your own age.'

'I like them, and they like me, otherwise they wouldn't have accepted my invitation.'

That was true. Jenny had phoned their parents to invite them with the hidden agenda of sussing the boys out.

'What are you hoping to do at the farm anyway?' said Robin.

'We've got something organised, something that will prove I'm worthy of their friendship.'

It sounded a bit fishy. Robin looked askance at Joel.

Joel eyed him innocently. 'Don't worry. Nothing stupid.'

Robin frowned.

They turned through the large iron gates, the Manners's house standing proudly in front, elegantly exhibiting the two sweeping staircases which led down to an expansive gravel drive. Two Range Rovers were already parked. Joel jumped out and raced over, trying to peer through their blacked-out windows. Obviously unoccupied, Robin watched him run up the staircase, press the bell, then press his face to the window of the double-fronted glass doors. George's elderly butler, James, welcomed them in. A real gentleman, he was far too nice when it came to dealing with a gang of rowdy schoolboys. Good job Tom, the herdsman, was going to be around. Although a young chap, he was no-nonsense and sensible, the type you could rely on and used to handling beasts, so that Joel and his acolytes would be no problem when it came to keeping them in check.

Robin and two of the boys' fathers shook hands in the hall, exchanged pleasantries and assured Robin of their sons' best behaviour; George Manners was an influential landowner said one of the fathers, a man Robin recognised as a wealthy housing developer.

Before leaving, Robin looked in on the boys. The noise of their chattering echoed out into the hallway from the drawing room overlooking the drive. They were laughing about something and pointing at Joel who was holding up the bottom of his trousers, seemingly showing them his shoes. A feeling of disquiet stirred in Robin.

'Bye, Joel. Bye boys,' he said, trying to get their attention; but they carried on, four adolescents oblivious to Robin's farewell.

Joel had to stop and bend over, resting his hands on his knees. He spat on the ground, a ball of glob landing on his new Airmax trainers. Oh no! he thought. They're ruined. Filthy already, they showed up the dirt even though they were black. He stretched up and held his side. A sharp stitch was stabbing him. He breathed heavily, in and out, trying to ease the pain. Screwing up his eyes, he could just make out the barn on the hill, with the black and white dots of Grandpa's Jacob sheep in the top field and, in the field below, Grandpa's milking cows lying down. Hugh was nowhere in sight. He and Louis had shot off at the start, were probably miles in front by now. Joel felt dejected. He was desperate to be in the Sacred Sect, to join Hugh and the big boys in their secret club, and here he was, messing up from the start, way behind the others. No way could he keep up with Hugh. He was the best runner in school, captain of the cross-country team and head boy. Joel looked up to Hugh with his cool hair, long on top and shaved below. He jogged on, still holding his side. This initiation was a killer. This hill had never looked so steep, not from Grandpa's tractor. He thought he'd have no probs, would fly up it like Brutus, Grandpa's champion hound.

Marcus was just in front. He was slowing down, his belly wobbling like jelly. Joel caught him up at the gate, the first obstacle.

'Hey, Marcus.'

Marcus turned and sneered. 'Pass me and you're dead, shrimp.'

Joel took a step back, watched the fat boy climb up the gate, lift one leg over at a time before dropping down to land in a slimy green mess. 'Shut it, shit face. Don't say a thing.' He pulled out his feet and grimaced, tried to wipe the remains of the cow pat on the grass. 'Don't run until I tell you.'

Joel was frustrated, was dying to keep going, to close the gap between him and Hugh. But Marcus's blubbery body was in the way. He dared not overtake; Marcus was

a well-known bully. A butchered whale popped up in Joel's mind, the one in a school textbook with its insides spewed across the deck from Moby Dick. Oliver had wretched in class at the sight of it. He was such a wuss. Hugh would never let *him* into the Sacred Sect. If he passed the initiation test, he'd be the youngest boy in the history of the school to join the club; normally, only upper schoolboys were let in. Hugh had scouted him after he'd scored a hat trick against Millfield School, despite not being ten.

Joel was getting nervous. Marcus was halfway across the field and still hadn't signalled him to come. He jogged on the spot. Then, he climbed up the wooden gate, clung to the top bar, squinting into the distance. Hugh was still out of sight, probably in the valley by now with Louis at his heels. Keep on the leader's heels and don't let them get too far ahead. That's what Mr Hughes always said. Joel decided to go for it. He jumped down, over the cow pat, and started a slow jog. It was difficult staying back, like rugby, when you were penalised for running forward and catching the ball. Joel was doing his best to keep one step behind. Mr Hughes said to just keep behind until you can overtake the leader on the bend. But Marcus was no athlete. Joel had to keep stopping, hope that Marcus didn't turn around and see him following; he hadn't been told to run. Hopefully, Marcus would keep on going until he was down the hill and out of sight, wouldn't see him catching him up.

The sky had turned black, and a fat droplet of rain hit Joel's face. He jogged on under the threatening clouds as more rain began to fall, running into his eyes. Wiping them with the back of his hand, he kept on through the wet grass. It had been dry up till now; that's why Grandpa said he'd let out the cows because they were going mad in the shed after a long winter in. The only problem was that it made the grass slippery. Joel was careful where he put his feet. He was used to these fields and knew how muddy they could get, especially when it rained after a long dry spell. Over the rim of the hill,

Joel spied Marcus, not running towards the stream down in the valley, but lying on the grass. He stopped and wondered what to do. This was his chance.

Joel set off at a fast walk. He made sure to skirt Marcus on his right, kept him in sight as he neared the hedge where he walked alongside it, constantly aware of the older boy, now sitting up. Marcus looked to be holding his ankle, propping up his body with one arm, facing the other direction, so that Joel could sneak past on his way towards the gate. That was the problem. The next gate, a squeaky metal thing, was halfway across the field well within Marcus's sight.

The rain was pelting down now, so that Joel could hardly see. He ran towards the hedge and squatted on his haunches in a dip, clutched his knees and tucked his head into his chest to avoid the driving rain. Little particles of hail were stinging his bare skin where his rugby shirt had come loose from his shorts, the green material riding up his back. He held his body more tightly and shivered with the pain from cold.

Then, almost as quickly as it had come, the rain stopped, the sun was out, sparkling in a bright turquoise sky, after suddenly emerging from the blackness of the passing cloud. Joel unfolded himself and stood, to see Marcus sprawled out, his knees bent, his face hidden from view. Joel sprang up and over the gate, ran on down towards the stream. The sun was now warming his back, his fingers beginning to thaw. By the time he reached the water it had overflowed its banks, merged with the marshy ground on either side. He looked for a way to cross. The ground squelched, sludge surged up, sucking his feet into the mud. He strained to release his brand-new trainers, cemented in like concrete. 'Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,' he said, gritting his teeth. No matter how hard he pulled, he could not free himself, so there was nothing else for it but to untie his shoelaces and get out of his shoes. He had to keep going, make sure he wasn't last; how embarrassing to be beaten by a fat slob like Marcus.

Joel ran through the stream in his socks. A sharp pain shot up through his feet as the water was cold and jagged bits of rock dug into his soles. He hopped across, from one carefully chosen stone to another as quickly as he could, continued to stride up the bank on the other side determined not to stop to keep his muscles warm. Mr Hughes said the quicker you ran the warmer you got; something about blood flowing to the surface of the skin. It was getting difficult now. The grass was bumpy, wrecked by the cows. Huge clods of earth stuck up from the ground, islands of green where he balanced in his socks before bounding from one to the other. Up ahead, he could see those very animals, most sunbathing, keeping their patches warm, but others standing and eating. Curious, they looked up. Joel approached them, carefully. He picked his way around the herd, avoiding the Jersey bull who eyed him with suspicion. Then, a couple got to their feet and stood and stared. They were followed by another two who did the same and, before long, more had joined in, mooing loudly, coming in from all directions, their udders swinging as they started to trot. Joel walked faster, towards the style in the corner. Don't run, whatever you do, he could hear his grandpa say. He quickened up, they were now on his heels. He could hear them breathing close behind; it became more rapid as they picked up the pace. He could see the spray on their breaths as a group passed by. Then he was surrounded by more who forced him along in their heavyweight huddle, pushing him in from all sides in their excitable game of follow the leader, a feisty old cow named Clarice. 'Don't fall down,' he told himself. 'Don't...fall...down.' He shoved his hands against their rumps, tried to stop them trampling his stockinged feet, but with one thing on their minds, they ignored his shouts and pleas, refused to move out of the way as Clarice was on a mission, and their only job was to follow. She was the Boss. Only she could lead them in to be milked. They herded Joel to the style

squeezed into a right-angled bend, made up of tall prickly hedge. Standing together, they called and shuffled, refused to let him go.

'I told you not to overtake,' shouted a voice from behind. It was Marcus in a told-you-so tone.

'Fuck,' said Joel to himself. He heard a swishing sound, like a whip in the air, then a thwacking of something hard on flesh. The cows began to part, to peel away from each other as Marcus belted their caramel-coloured hides with a piece of wood.

'Hey!' he shouted. 'Thought you knew all about them didn't you, country boy? It's taken a townie to save you.'

Joel faced Marcus wielding a branch as the cows ran off down the hill, kicking their heels with Clarice leading them on.

'They could have killed you...weakling.' He looked Joel up and down. 'Ha!' He pointed. 'Where the fuck're your shoes? Think you can run faster than me without them?' He laughed out loud, his mouth open-wide, rocked backwards and forwards, held his stomach with both hands. 'What a dickhead. I told Hugh it was a mistake letting you in. You're so up his arse, he's gone soft. Learn to take orders in future...matey.' He pointed the branch like a rifle under Joel's chin. Then, he brushed Joel aside and mounted the style.

Anger seethed through Joel; he snorted like a bull, made fists with his hands, his fingertips squeezed pink in rage. 'I'll show you who's a weakling,' he said, thrusting up a finger at the arsehole on the hill.

By the time Joel finished the race, Hugh, Louis, and Marcus were waiting at the grey stone barn. It overlooked the valley of cows and sheep, with a decent view of the estate farm a couple of miles in the distance. Joel tucked his straggly hair behind his ears, a

stark contrast to Hugh's short clean-cut style, not a hair out of place. He stared up at Hugh, tall and athletic, a smattering of facial hair beginning to sprout on the thirteen-year old's chin. Hugh thrust out his hand for Joel to smack.

'Why the high five?' said Marcus. 'It took him an extra ten minutes from the usual time?'

And whose fault was that? Joel scowled at Marcus, the fat boy's hair dripping with sweat.

'Yeah, I agree with Marcus,' said Louis, all angular and gaunt. 'He's far too slow. I saw him hanging back down there...no motivation whatsoever...lazy if you ask me.'

'He is only nine,' said Hugh.

'Then why invite him in the first place? He sucks up to you, that's what it is. Yes Hugh, no Hugh, three bags full Hugh.'

'Shut it, Marcus. Who's in charge here?' Hugh stabbed the air with a finger. 'He's got potential. More than you've ever shown.'

'Well...I'm with Louis. He needs a tougher task.' Marcus stood right up to Joel, his chest level with the nine-year old's head. He stuck out his jaw. 'One that'll really test him. I know.' His face lit up. 'The country boy's good with cows.' He laughed. 'I've seen it first-hand; I'll show you. Hugh?'

Hugh gave a consensual nod.

Clarice was waiting at the style, backed up by a small group of followers. Joel and the Boss had caught each other's eye when the boys clambered over the top gate, the sheep turning to watch as they made their way down the hill. Louis and Marcus trailed long-striding Hugh, while Joel struggled to stay back. He was desperate to keep on the move, his mudded socks numbing his feet.

'What's he got to do?' said Louis, rubbing his hands.

'Let's see how good a cowboy he really is.' Marcus grinned like a crazed clown. He looked to be in his element, couldn't wait for Joel to fail whatever punishment he had in mind.

Joel looked to Hugh for support, but not a jot of sympathy crossed his idol's face.

'Let's grab hold of her,' said Marcus. 'Bring her to the style.'

The older boys jumped into the field and surrounded Clarice. Marcus grabbed the thick leather strap around her neck. Immediately, she began to resist, shook her head to free herself from his hold. Hugh and Louis tried pushing her into the corner.

'Come on, guys, you can do better than that,' said Marcus using all his might to pull her towards him.

Clarice stood her ground.

'Plan B,' said Marcus. He picked handfuls of grass, the long, lush strands meant to tempt her to move. 'Here, you stubborn old cow.' He held the grass within her reach. She stretched out her neck and nibbled. Marcus moved back a touch. Warily, she stepped forward one pace at a time, just enough to take another mouthful while Marcus continued to move backwards, slowly, inviting her to follow.

Joel knew what was coming.

'Come on dude, get over and get on.'

Joel climbed the style. Marcus wrenched the back of his shirt and hauled him up. He pulled at Joel's shorts and with a huge shove, threw him on to the cow so that Joel balanced on his front across her back. He threw Joel's leg over so that he now straddled her and clung to her strap.

'Now chaps, let her go,' said Marcus with glee.

Hugh and Louis stood back.

Marcus slapped her rear. 'Ride 'em cowboy.'

She looked at him blankly. Then, without warning, set off at a canter down the hill. Joel was holding on as firmly as he could. He was sent forwards and lay down, gripping with his knees. There was a swift passage of green from the corner of his eye as he pressed himself against the cow's spine. She called out to her sisters, began to kick up her hind legs, sending Joel bouncing up and down, his body beginning to slide to one side. Joel gripped harder with his legs. He started to cry, to sob into her neck and shouted for help which no-one could hear; the noise of the herd was terrific. His body wracked with the effort of staying on, it started to slip, further, so that he dug in his heels, but Clarice turned sharply, surprising the herd, the sudden movement sending Joel crashing to the ground. He landed on his back like a sheep, cast, his legs in the air, felt the vibration of their bodies rumbling towards him. Quickly, he rolled into a ball, but his screams were unheard as their hoofs pounded by.

They stood apart from the boys, snorting out steam, their hides glistening with sweat.

'Come on, cowboy, get up, they've gone now,' said Marcus, kicking Joel curled up in survival mode. 'Another test failed. What do you say guys? Give up on him now?'

'Let's give him one last chance,' said Hugh. 'Initiation is a three-part test.'

'Why bother? He's already failed two.'

'But he's younger than most. Any ideas? Guys?'

'I'd say that cow has made an ass of him,' said Marcus. 'Let's see if he can tame her one last time.'

Hugh and Louis shrugged. 'Ok,' said Hugh. Both nodded in agreement.

'Right, back up to the farm,' said Marcus. 'We're giving you one last try...prick.'

Joel was sitting on the farmyard wall overlooking the valley. He rubbed his shoulder from the cow's hind hoof which had clipped him when throwing him free. Now leading the herd, the cows plodded behind her in single file towards the milking parlour. It was instinctive, her internal alarm set off at four each day where she'd wait at the gate for the herdsman to let them in. Suddenly, Joel squirmed in pain as Marcus clamped him on the shoulder.

'We've had a think. We want you to devise a task yourself. Think on your feet. Show some initiative instead of following instructions. One, it's got to be amazing. Two, we want you to cause some serious shit. Three, we want to be impressed, something we wouldn't even do, show how far you're prepared to go to join the Sacred Sect.'

Just then, Clarice walked on to the yard. The boys' and the cow's eyes met. Marcus, Hugh, and Louis looked at one another and smiled.

Instinctively, Joel knew what he had to do.

Joel snuck out of the farmhouse. He wanted to surprise the boys. Diesel splattered his shirt as it spluttered out of the tank when he filled the watering can and a strong acrid smell escaped, polluting the air. Little drops of red fuel still dripped out as the tap was too rusty to close. Along the open side of the barn, the metal bars clinked as the cows stretched their necks into the troughs. At the far end of the building, he hopped over the barrier and hauled over the can. Walking behind the line, he scanned their udders searching for that extra teat; Clarice was the only one with five, a small runt of a thing sticking out at a funny angle just behind her tail. When he found her, in the centre of the

line, he didn't hesitate to dip the tail into the can. Full of fuel, it was hard work holding up the can in one hand and twisting in the tail with the other, until it was fully submerged. Then, he put the can down, let the tail uncoil and struck a match from the box he'd taken from the kitchen. He let the flame touch the bottom of Clarice's tail where the wavy strands took light immediately. Like a fuse to a bomb, the orange tongues licked upwards. She bellowed loudly, alarming the herd, setting them off in a panic. She wafted her tail furiously, was trying to flick off whatever it was. She wriggled backwards pushing the others aside, stepping on their hoofs, kicking out in protest. Hair sizzled as the tail burned like a beacon. She pushed and shoved and finally forced her way free, broncoing backwards so that Joel had to jump out of her way as her heels shot towards his head. Off she went, charging around the barn, kicking up her legs, her tail rotating like a firework, a real-life Catherine wheel. Joel marvelled at the spectacle and grinned. He was entranced by the lights and the smoke and the smell of burning flesh. 'Wow!' he shouted, laughing out loud. 'Now who's the boss?' The cows were frantic, bawling and hollering, running this way and that, crashing into each other with Clarice's tail sweeping the straw as she slipped on the bedding and up it went like a fireball. The cows ran towards the barrier but were held back. They pushed against it with all their might until part of it fell, landing on top of the troughs. They tried to jump over but couldn't as their feet were stuck in the bars. Desperate to get free, they cried for help but were trapped, unable to escape. Joel clambered out of the barn. He stood back, admiring his handiwork. Now the walls and the ceiling had taken light and grey smoke furred upwards. The fire was gobbling up the barn, shooting out flames and spitting out embers, some of which landed on panic-stricken cows, setting off maniacal bellows as the animals crushed into each other, their eyes bulging with fear. The backsides of the

ones on the outside of the herd were already flame-grilled, fire whipping up their sides, fat beginning to crackle. Joel smacked his lips at the whiff of beef.

'What the hell's going on?' shouted Hugh as he ran across the yard towards Joel illuminated in a bright orange glow. As though in a trance, fascinated by the blaze, Joel did not answer, a grin lighting up his face at the devastation he had caused.

'Call the fire brigade, Marcus, I haven't got my phone,' said Hugh.

Marcus stared at the phone he'd pulled out of his pocket. 'There's no signal.'

'Where's the phone in the house?' He punched Joel's shoulder. 'Speak, you idiot?'

But Joel was suspended in his own world, his face lit up in wonder, his eyes alight with fire from the reflection of the blaze.

'Oh, for fuck's sake.'

Hugh banged out 999 on the phone on the kitchen wall. 'Fire, we need the fire brigade quick. I don't know...Where are we?...It's a farm, we're on a farm...I don't know...Where are we Marcus?...It's 01295817405...No not Banbury...Wroxton...That's where we're near...I remember now we passed through it...Please, please come quick the barn's on fire the cows are still in it they can't get out...No, no, his grandfather's out...There's a herdsman here but I don't know where he is, he said he was going out to the field...Okay, okay...Go to the front...Stay there and wait for the fire brigade...Okay but come quickly please.' He banged down the receiver. 'She said we've got to get out and wait on the front drive.'

From where they were standing, the boys could see plumes of smoke streak an orangey-yellow halo that surrounded the house. A loud crash made them jump.

'What the hell's that?' said Louis.

'It's got to be the barn,' said Hugh.

'Should we go and look.' Louis was readying himself to move.

'Are you stupid?' said Hugh pulling his arm. 'Do you want to get killed? She said to wait here, not go anywhere near the fire.'

'But what about Joel? We can't leave him there.'

'If he's got any sense, he'll keep well back, he's not that stupid. It was weird, he looked to be enjoying it. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd started it.'

'*He* started it. Why? Why would he do that, it's his grandparent's farm?' Louis was confused.

'Well, I don't know...he...he seemed to be in his element, like it was...giving him a high...you should've seen the look on his face.'

'I can't believe that!'

'I'm telling you what I saw. You calling me a liar?'

'No...but...' Louis sighed. 'Surely...'

'He was mesmerized by those flames. He wouldn't answer me, he was totally out of it.'

'But surely he's not that stupid.'

'He is,' said Marcus. 'He tried to sneak past me in the race...thought I couldn't see him.'

'Oh, shut up about the blasted race, that's the last thing we need to worry about,' said Hugh. 'This is disastrous. It's going to be us in the shit.'

'Why? What have we done?' said Marcus.

'Just involved a kid from the lower school. Drayton'll expel us when he finds out, he's already banned the club. My father'll do his nut. '

'Well...we'll just say we were here for a weekend...he invited us...don't mention the club.' Marcus was adamant.

'Drayton will never believe that. That tosser'll blab about the initiation...making him ride that cow.' Hugh poked a finger at Marcus. 'Which was your idea actually.'

'And whose idea was it to let him join in the first place?'

'Oh, so it's all my fault, is it?'

'Well...yes, it is.'

'Put the blame on me, would you? We're in this together.'

'I didn't want him in in the first place and Louis just does what you say,' said Marcus.

Hugh grabbed hold of his collar. 'We're in this together, fatty. What do you not understand about that?' He pushed Marcus away so that he wobbled backwards, nearly losing his footing.

The fire blazed, was lighting up the sky like a sunset gone mad. Smoke was billowing out like a volcano erupting, the charcoal smell of burning wood and cattle hanging in the air.

Hugh paced around in circles staring at the ground. 'Where the hell are they? They should be here by now.'

'But do they know where we are?' said Marcus.

'I told them, you idiot...near Wroxton.'

'But we're not in Wroxton,' said Louis.

'Work it out, dimwit. They must be blind if they can't see the fire from the village...and smell it. Can you smell that? It's like a fucking great barbeque.' Hugh was still scuffing the ground, grinding a hole in the gravel.

Louis sidled up to Marcus. 'I'm scared, Marcus, let's go and see if Joel's alright, it'd be terrible if anything happened to him.

'Shut up and listen,' shouted Marcus, holding up a finger. 'Can you hear that?'

All three turned in the direction of an alarm blaring in the distance.

'What did I tell you?' said Hugh. 'Good job I was here to give instructions. You two were hopeless, no help whatsoever.'

Blue flashing lights flickered through the trees and the whoop of alarms heightened the closer they got. Before long, two fire engines swung through the gates and crunched across the drive where the fire fighters were up and at it as soon as they came to a stop.

The remnants of the building smouldered. Charred beams of wood had collapsed in chaotic piles partially covering the burnt-out cadavers of a herd of cows wiped out within minutes of a flick of a tail.

'Here's the culprit,' said the fireman to George Manners. He twisted the tap on the fuel tank so that it shut with a squeak. 'It's been leaking fuel. It's run across the yard straight into the barn.' A sudden crack and a final section crashed to the floor. Joel's grandpa coughed into his hands. Clouds of smoke mushroomed into the air and the remnants of embers lay dying on piles of white ash.

On the front drive, Joel snuggled against his grandpa's chest, nestling under the protection of his large wrinkly hands.

'At least you and your friends are safe, young man. You were very brave trying to put out the fire with a watering can, but you shouldn't have done it Joel, you could've been killed.'

Joel sniffed in repeatedly. 'I was trying to...help, Grandpa.'

'I know you were, but you should have come away when it started, it was a stupid thing to do. The fireman said you watching it when they arrived. Why didn't you stand with the boys? And as for you, Tom, you should have known better than to have left them alone. I asked you to keep an eye on them, I said I wasn't going to be out for long.'

The herdsman was taken aback, was heard to mutter under his breath.

'Yes, it was your fault. If you hadn't left that tap on the fuel tank dripping...'

'I didn't, sir...I'm always...'

'This wouldn't have happened. Look at the devastation. It's taken me years to build up that herd.'

'Sir, I didn't, honest, I'm very careful...'

'Obviously not. You're finished here.'

'What? You're sacking me?' Tom threw his hands in the air. 'I just went to check on that ewe sir. I could hear her; I knew she was in trouble. You gave me strict orders to see to her when she went into lamb. What should I have done? Left a sick ewe and stayed with them. They were alright in the kitchen.'

Joel pushed his cheek further into his grandpa's thick woolly jumper and smiled secretly. He sighed satisfactorily then dared to look up. There were tears in his grandpa's eyes, the rims of his eyelids seemed redder than normal. 'I'm sorry about Clarice, Grandpa,' said Joel, snuffling a fake little cry.

'She was your granny's favourite. She'd be devastated if she knew. Her accident and now this, whatever next. Trouble does seem to follow you, Joel.'

Joel stamped his foot and yelled. 'I didn't do anything, it's not my fault.' His face was hot with rage, he pulled at his hair, continued to scream out that it wasn't his fault over and over again.

George pulled him nearer, pressing the young boy's face towards himself. 'Calm down, Joel,' he said stroking the boy's hair. 'Nobody said it was your fault. You were very brave trying to put out the fire.' He sighed. 'At least no-one's hurt...and you were having such a nice time with your friends. Come on, let's get you all home. I'll phone your parents, let them know you're safe. It won't take long to make the news.' He pulled out his phone and walked a short distance away.

'So, have I passed the test?' said Joel, now out of earshot from his grandpa.

'What do you think?' said Marcus. 'You were last in the race, fell off the cow...'

'Lit a bonfire.' Hugh leaned forward, stared right in Joel's face.

'I tried to put it out.'

'With a watering can? Who are you trying to kid? I'm not your stupid Grandfather, thinks you can do no wrong.'

'It's the truth. We were having tea...I saw smoke coming from the barn...I went out, got some water...but it was too late.' Joel shrugged. 'End of.'

Hugh stared at Joel. 'I don't believe you,' he said shaking his head, 'you're a stunner.'

'I certainly am. Can I join the club now? You challenged me to do something even you wouldn't do.'

'And what was that? Set the barn on fire, kill all the cows.'

'That wasn't my fault. The fireman said it was a leaky tap that started it.'

'Leaky tap my foot. I bet it was you that set it alight. Someone had to and there was only you out there. Was it you Marcus?'

Marcus shook his head. 'Not me boss.'

'Louis?'

'Uh huh.'

'You?'

Joel spoke through gritted teeth. 'It was already on fire. The fireman said it was probably a spark, from an electrical fault. He said that's what usually happens.' Then, after a moment's pause, he tipped his head to one side. 'Why are you trying to blame me? I thought you were on my side, Hugh.'

'I can't forget your face. You were in your element watching those flames. You didn't scream or shout fire or anything...it was though you were pleased with yourself.' Hugh straightened up. 'Why are you smiling now? What's wrong with you?'

'I won't tell if you won't.'

'Won't tell about what?'

'The initiation of course. Making a nine-year old boy ride a cow. That's child abuse.'

'You didn't have to do it.'

'I was forced onto its back. I had no choice. I could have been killed in that field. Stampeded on. If my parents find out how I've been treated, you'll all be expelled.'

Hugh, Marcus, and Louis looked at one another.

'I think that settles it,' said Joel. 'I won't tell what you've done...'

'And we won't tell what you've done,' said Hugh, nodding his head.

Joel grinned.

Chapter 16

ONE YEAR LATER

April 2018

Joel stretched up on tip toe to admire his brand-new hair cut in the bathroom mirror. The baby curls had gone, leaving a shaved number one right up to his pate, where a thick blond layer sat, like a cap, until it rose to a quiff. They'd argued about the style, Joel and his mother. It was far too adult she'd said, quite unfitting for private school standards, only suitable for young men with beards, and the headmaster might well show his displeasure on his return after Easter. Robin had merely shrugged at the sight of it. Joel's persistence had won the day.

'What are these doing in?' Jenny spotted deodorant and aftershave in his holdall on the bathroom floor. 'You're going to scout camp, Joel, not Ibiza. What do you want with aftershave anyway? You're ten years old.' She extracted a bottle from the bag. 'This is Dad's. Does he know you've got it?'

Joel gave mud and bucket showers as good enough reasons for taking the Right Guard and Hugo Boss.

Jenny laughed. 'Bucket showers are nothing to do with washing in buckets, Joel. They're outside showers, overhead containers filled with hot water. They act like a shower head. You'll be perfectly clean. Soap will be fine.'

Even so, Joel took the bottle from her and bagged it.

'I'm going to miss you,' she said, straightening his toggle.

He pushed her hand away.

'Why don't you wear your old sweatshirt? This one's going to get filthy. I've only just bought it.' She looked into the bag and chuckled. 'Aftershave and deodorant. Who are you trying to impress?'

Joel scowled. 'Mummy...we're so done with this discussion.' The doorbell rang, and he ran down the stairs, leaving the bag for his mother to bring.

On the steps, she handed it to Oliver's father who put it in the boot of his Discovery while Joel joined Oliver in the back. Oliver edged nearer the opposite door.

'Bye darling. Enjoy yourself. Don't do anything we wouldn't do.'

From the corner of his eye, Joel caught her blowing a kiss.

In a clearing in Wytham Woods, the tents were arranged in a circle around a smaller inner circle of benches, which themselves surrounded a patch of charred remains where the campfire would be lit that night. In this way, the boys' and girls' tents were segregated, each half of the circle separated by a much bigger tent acting as a dining hall, and, opposite that, another large tent for activities when the weather was bad. The forecast wasn't good. That morning, Joel and his mother had argued about the lambs' wool socks she'd packed for him. He'd said that if she didn't take them out, he'd throw them in the bin.

Oliver was wavering in the doorway of the tent they'd been allocated.

'This bed's mine,' said Joel, dumping his holdall on a sleeping bag. 'And that one's yours.' There was hardly a gap between them. The aftershave was out first. Joel proceeded to splash it on himself, patting his cheeks and rubbing it into his jaw. The scent of sickly pine filled the tent. Oliver could barely breathe. His face grew red and then he was coughing hard on all fours, the spit dripping from his mouth.

'Ugh...that's gross,' said Joel. He tried to pull his sleeping bag away from Oliver's when the flap of the tent opened.

A teenage girl stuck her head through the gap. 'You alright?' She crawled over to Oliver lying on his side, his cough now subsiding.

Joel watched the gentle way her fingertips touched Oliver's arm. With her long blonde hair hanging down and her tight blue jeans tantalisingly close, Joel's face flushed.

'What's that smell?' She turned to Joel.

With the sun shining on her through the tent, Joel was drawn to her full pink lips and with her eyes lined heavily in black, she resembled one of those Egyptian queens he'd been learning about at school.

'Did you hear me?' She looked Joel straight in the eye. 'What's that smell?'

'Nothing.'

'You go' after shave on?'

He shot a look at Oliver who was eyeing him with a frown. 'No. It's just... air freshener. It was smelly when we came in.'

She followed his line of sight back to Oliver who was lying on his bed looking anxious. 'You alright' now?'

Oliver nodded.

She jumped up. 'Must 'ave been that friggin' aftershave he says he hasn't go'. Group talk in ten, the pair of you. Don't be late. You know what Walker's like.'

Joel watched her bend down and leave the tent. The flap fell to. 'Fuck. Not him. I hate him.'

'Why?' said Oliver.

'For telling me off on a trip in Beavers. I only sat on a chair in one of those National Trust houses. He went apeshit coz I went the other side of a rope.'

'What's apeshit?'

'It's what Daddy says...Walker went apeshit. It means mad...he totally lost it. Mummy said he had no right to shout at me because I was only six. She was going to report him to the...' He looked to the roof...'DBS?'

'What's the DBS?'

Joel shrugged. 'Don't you know anything?'

Joel found Mr Walker huge and intimidating. With his thinning hair and a paunch, this big man, in knee-length shorts, his feet planted astride, demanded all the attention of the Cubs, Scouts and Explorers sitting cross-legged or on chairs in the activity tent. Rain could be heard tapping the roof and a strong grassy smell pervaded the air. Oliver started to cough. Sensing the Akala's stare, Joel elbowed Oliver to stop.

Facing them at the front was the girl who'd entered their tent. She was sitting with a few other Explorers on seats behind Mr Walker. Joel couldn't take his eyes off her. She was stroking a strand of her hair before flicking it over her shoulder, then stuck out her chest, filling her sweatshirt, her breasts wobbling like jelly. His mother had told him off for calling them tits.

'Yes!' said Joel under his breath, pumping the air with a fist, after it was announced that the girl, Lauren Scarlett, was in charge of his group of six.

'Now for an important rule,' boomed Mr Walker. 'Team co-operation is vital between girls and boys but going into each other's tents is forbidden.'

There was an all-round flourish of blushing cheeks and hidden smiles accompanied by a low giggling.

'If I catch any girl or boy in the same tent, especially after dark, it'll be instant dismissal. You'll be back home before you know it. Understood?'

'Yes, Mr Walker,' reverberated around the tent.

In a small circle in one corner of the activity tent, Joel was watching Lauren carefully. Captivated by her slender fingers with their polished green nails, he saw her slide the ends of a shiny white rope together, cross the end of the rope in her left hand over the end of the rope in her right, to make an X. Then, she made a shape like a bow, 'like tying a shoelace' she said, entwining the rope so that the right-hand end was now in her left hand and the left-hand end was now in her right. Then, she pulled the ends together, slowly, through a loop.

'That's how you make a reef knot,' she declared, holding up the knot to dangle it in front of Joel. It swayed back and forth nearly touching his nose.

Open-mouthed, Joel licked his lips.

'Now it's your turn,' she said.

Lauren was kneeling in front of Oliver. Her knees, peeping through splits in her jeans, were touching his grazed bony kneecaps. Her hands were holding his thin delicate fingers, guiding them to cross the rope right over left. Joel began to fumble with his rope; he crossed the ends, uncrossed them, then examined the white tapes at either end. He sighed and pulled the two ends apart once more, and sighing more heavily, he held the rope in the air again. He exhaled deeply and thrust the ends together, awkwardly making the X look more like a Y. All the time, he was trying to catch her eye, fixing his gaze upon her, urging her to look his way. Lauren merely ignored him and continued to help Oliver with the simple task of making a bow. Joel watched her fingers grasping Oliver's. He watched her guiding Oliver through the first step of tying the knot. He took

a long deep breath, his chest swelled, and his fists were as tight as a knot. He flung down the rope. She was holding Oliver's hands more firmly now, shooting Joel teasing little glances, bulging her cheek with her tongue. Without giving Joel a second look, she said, 'Keep trying, don't give up.'

'I can't do it.' Joel leant on his knee, pushing his fist into his cheek.

'Yes, you can.' She turned to him. 'Keep...trying,' she said, widening her cool blue eyes.

Joel looked down and covered his groin with both hands.

'Anyone else need help?' she said, scanning the group.

There was a smattering of 'no thanks' with 'this is easy' and 'I'm done' thrown in.

Joel held up his rope.

Lauren shuffled across and sat cross-legged in front of him, then slid back an inch or two, keeping her knees to herself. 'Hold that end in your right and the other in your left,' she said, knitting her fingers together.

Joel shrugged and sighed in one breath. 'Now what do I do?'

'Cross the two ends over each other and make an X.'

Slowly, he made the movement. 'Like this, Lauren?'

She nodded with a smirk. 'Now, take the one on the left and loop it round.'

Joel made a circle.

'No. Not like that.' She took the rope from him. 'Like this.' Then, she undid the knot and handed it back, letting it drop in his lap.

Joel, frowning, started again, doing the movements with ease. 'Now what?'

'Make another X by putting the one on the left under the one on the right.'

Joel thrust the left end in front of the right, behind it, then in front again.

'No. Under.'

'Under what? Show me Lauren. You helped Oliver.'

She snatched it from him. 'Look, it's easy.' She made a point of placing the end of the rope behind the other end, resting the white plastic tip against the fleur-de-lis logo on her left breast. The petals grew and shrunk in time with her breathing.

Joel wriggled on the spot. 'That's too quick,' he whined, jiggling his knees.

'Show me again. Please.'

She went to take the rope, but Joel kept hold of it, held it against himself. 'Why won't you help me? You helped Oliver,' he said, squinting at her.

'You know what to do, that's why.'

'I don't,' he said. His voice quivered, 'I don't.' Then he let the rope go and grabbed her wrists, sticking his nails into her soft tanned skin.

'Ouch, you...weirdo.' She pulled her hands away.

There were gasps all round.

'Look what you've done.' She pointed to a line of little notches digging into her skin.

'But I won't get my badge if I can't do this...and if one of the group doesn't pass, you won't get yours either.'

She pursed her lips and gave him a look. 'Alrigh',' she said, 'get to the part where you make a bow...you can do that...you can tie your shoelace, can't you? Then I might consider helping you...if you don't attack me again.'

He made it look easy up to a point when he came to a stop and raised his eyes to hers.

She lightly touched his hands, guided them to make an X, then inserted the left-hand end through a loop, before pulling both ends of the rope until the knot was tight.

Joel grinned. A round damp patch, seeping from his crotch, appeared on his shorts.

The six boys walked briskly after Lauren, past rain-soaked bushes with leaves glistening from the sunlight now piercing the woodland. Wet patches spotted their khaki shorts and bottle green shirts, from raindrops dripping off overhanging trees and soggy foliage lining their way. They were each carrying a small log, with Lauren holding a spade and a plastic carrier bag full of tinder and kindling. It had been kept in the activity tent out of the rain.

Eventually, after stopping to check out a barer patch of ground where ivy and briar trailed the earth, Lauren stooped to put the bag and spade down near some charcoaled remains. The boys, still gripping their logs, stood watching her, waiting to be told what to do.

'This is where we'll make a campfire. Keep hold of your logs. All except Oliver. Give yours to Joel, Oliver.'

Joel scowled as Oliver, gingerly, placed his log with the log already in Joel's arms. 'Can I put these down?' Joel groaned.

'Well...find a dry spot then. They need to be dry for the fire. All of you, do the same, then find me some large rocks and stones. You stay with me Oliver; I need some help with the kindling.'

Joel stood rigid on the spot, staring at the two now opening the carrier bag, pulling out handfuls of little twigs together.

'Go on,' said Lauren, 'find some stones...for the fire. We can't have one without them.'

'Why do we need stones for a fire?' said Joel. 'Don't we just need wood?'

'No, we need stones as well...you'll see. Go on if you all work as a team you'll get your Backwoods Activity Badge. We need a fire to cook on. Shoo,' she said, flapping her hand.

Scorned, Joel turned away, slowly.

The other boys were picking their way through the bushes, carefully stepping over long spiky briars waiting to catch them out. With a stout stick he'd found, Joel swept aside the overgrown shrubs invading his path, occasionally hacking at the spikes and barbs of intrusive thick stems so that their ends broke to dangle like the plumbs they used in science. He was tracking his way through a thinner part of the wood, scouring the floor for a rock or a stone which, as Lauren had insisted, should be bigger than your hand. Spotting a round grey shape on the side of the path, Joel picked it up to examine. Wavy pink lines threaded the pebble's shiny surface. It easily sat in his palm. He threw it away, into the bushes, a chirruping and a clattering of wings erupting as the stone hit the ground. Joel laughed out loud as he swiped at the blackbird, catching it on the wing where he clouted its fragile body, sending it propelling through the air where it hit a trunk and slid to the ground. 'Ha!' he said, examining the weapon in his hands.

He pressed on, sweeping the stick from side to side of a definite path. Using its jagged end, he flicked away a dried piece of animal dropping, then caught sight of a large piece of rock. Dropping the stick, he scooped the rock up with both hands and surveyed its knobbly surface. It was black and shiny resembling flint, the stuff the Stone Age men had used; he knew that from school. He lugged the rock back towards the tree which the blackbird had struck. At the base of the trunk, the bird was twitching, its little chest pulsating, its beak opening and closing as though gasping for air. Joel hitched up the rock to his waist before straddling the bird with both feet. Then, he let it drop,

sending spurts and specks of blood to splatter the ground, the only sign that the bird was squashed beneath the rock. 'Yes!' he said, pumping the air with a fist.

Joel strode through the bushes, swiping the stick like a Jedi knight. Momentarily, he stopped and turned his face to the sky where he spun on the spot, slashing at the surrounding foliage, squawking like a crow. Spinning faster and faster, he tottered, then fell to the ground releasing his lightsabre. Stretching his limbs to make a star, he brushed his arms up and down across the woodland floor, impressing a green angel into the grassy leaf-strewn path. A beam of sunlight struck his face; Joel closed his eyes and bared his teeth. He rolled on to his front, forcing his elbows into the earth. In the pocket of his shorts his phone was pressing against his thigh. Joel pulled it out. 'No signal' it said. He grinned, then tugged at a wodge of grass and soil and smeared it across the new green sweatshirt his mother had told him not to bring. He lay back, closed his eyes from the splintering sun and wiped his dirty hands across the front of his khaki shorts.

'What the hell are you doing?'

Joel snapped open his eyes to see Lauren standing above him, her arms folded across her breasts. Immediately, he sat up, but continued to rub either side of the zip on his shorts. His eyes were locked on to her as she stood astride, barely inches away.

'You're filthy. Get up,' she said, kicking his foot. 'Walker'll do his nut when he sees what you've been up to.'

Joel stopped his hands from working his groin. 'I was looking for stones...like you said.' He jumped to his feet and jogged to the tree to pick up the flintlike rock. 'Here...this is a good one,' he said, proffering it to her. The blackbird's tail feather was sticking out from the base. Joel tried to blow it off, but it was holding fast.

Lauren screwed up her face. 'Bring it to the fire,' she said, then turned and walked away.

Joel followed her along the briar path. The more he tried to keep up, the more the rock seemed to drag down his arms. It was holding him back, from keeping up with her skinny-jeaned legs and cute behind. For a moment, she disappeared behind a large oak so that he hastened with quick little steps to round the tree, just managing to keep her in view. Through the bushes, not too far away, he spotted her squatting, with a boy looking on. Nearing the two, Joel strode long determined steps, grunting like a tennis player with the effort of holding his flinty weight. Gradually, Oliver's stick insect limbs came into view. With one last effort he slid his fingers together to cup the rock, then let it slip from his hands. Oliver jumped back, the rock narrowly missing his feet.

'Watch it, dude. Put your rock with these,' said Lauren. She was sitting on her haunches, still building the fire.

With his foot, he forced his rock towards a circle of stones she'd arranged around the small pile of logs set alternately one upon the other. The rock scraped a shallow groove in the pine-needled soil, so that Joel was able to trample an earth worm sensing the air.

'We need more tinder to make the log cabin. Can you find some?' She beamed at him. 'Please?'

Joel melted. He ran off into the trees, immersed himself in the task of probing the ferns, kicking down and stamping on their feathery leaves. He saw a branch across the path a short distance ahead. He picked it up to examine. Pitted with lots of tiny holes, it was light but still sturdy, standing taller than himself. He pointed it like a rifle, made machine gun noises at a robin perched nearby. He spotted another potential beam to hold up the cabin roof, managed to scoop it up and tuck each log under each arm.

Another manageable-sized branch lay along the route. It was as long as those he was carrying. Without dropping his load, he crouched, slowly, scooping up this new log with his right hand. Heavier than expected, he lost his balance momentarily and keeled to one side. By now his shoulders were aching and his hands were hurting with the pain of gripping, but he wasn't going to let them go. Lauren needed a fourth post. He shuddered with pleasure; she'd be pleased with his offerings. A log cabin is what she'd ordered, and he'd found the timbers to hold up the walls.

At the base of a birch tree, he spied a broken off branch. Thinner branches pared off the main branch to subdivide into a tangle of twigs. There was a sudden crackling of wood from behind a nearby oak and Oliver came into sight.

'Help me with this,' said Joel. He tried to hitch up his load and nodded to the middle of the fallen branch. 'I only want that thicker piece. Jump on it.'

Oliver did as he was told. It cracked like a whip, scattering birds, their loud twittering disrupting the silence.

'Take this from me and we'll carry two each.' Joel, turning on the spot, swiped at a fungus sticking out from the side of a birch. It had resembled a discus before he'd bashed it, sending an acrid smell to fill the air with an accompanying spewing of dust.

Oliver sneezed loudly. More birds flew.

'Break off those small branches and twigs. We want a nice straight pole for the walls.'

'Aren't they too long?' said Oliver. He looked puzzled. 'It's for the log cabin on the...'

'I know what they're for.'

'But it's not a log cabin you...'

'I've just said, I know what I'm doing...bird brain. Bring those. Lauren said she wanted timber for the log cabin.'

'Timber?' Oliver muttered. He stared in disbelief.

'Go on...get a move on. She's waiting. She won't be happy if we don't do what she says.'

Joel dropped his logs with a thud near the impending campfire. The sun was beginning to break through the treetops now. He kicked at a pheasant lying in a patch of warm sunlight, sending it running and squawking into the undergrowth. Oliver was about to carefully lower the two he was carrying.

'Don't put those down yet. This is what we're going to do.' Joel picked up his logs. 'We want to make a frame like a tent with a log at each corner.' With their bases apart, Joel put the tops of the logs together and held them firmly at the top. 'Put them together like this. Lean your logs against mine so they all come together at the top, but they make a square base...like a pyramid.'

They let go their hands and the logs collapsed to the floor.

'No stupid. Do it again.'

They picked up the logs, this time increasing the size of the base until, on letting them go, they kept their position, held stably at the top. Joel crouched, sat cross-legged in the space between the slanting poles. 'It's just like being in a tent,' he said, beaming, a look of wonder on his face.

'That'll do,' said Joel, shuffling out of the 'tent'. He stood up and wiped his hands. He stood back, grinning, admiring his handiwork.

'What's going on?'

Joel turned to see Lauren standing behind them. She was grinning.

'Making a log cabin.'

'You idiot. You weren't listening, were you?' She looked at Oliver. 'Not you as well?'

'I.' Oliver gulped, 'I tried to tell him but...'

'He wouldn't listen?' She rolled her eyes. 'Typical.' She scanned the woods and shouted. 'Boys, boys. Back here now. Joel's got something to show you.' She turned to Joel. 'Don't take it down, it's priceless.'

The boys gathered around, their arms and hands smeared with dirt from the green mossy wood.

'What do you think's going on here, then?' Lauren asked the boys.

Silenced, frowns and squints creased their faces.

'No-one?'

Tentatively, one boy raised his hand.

Lauren nodded his way.

'It looks like a den,' said the sandy haired, freckled child.

'Warm, very warm. What did I want to build...for the fire?'

Speechless, the boys stared at one another.

'Come on...what did I say I was going to build on the fire?'

Oliver opened his mouth, then stopped.

'Yes, Oliver?'

For a moment, he couldn't get it out. 'A log cabin,' he muttered.

'What was that? Speak up, Oliver.'

'A log cabin,' he trembled.

Some of the boys began to giggle, their eyes widened, their mouths agape.

'Precisely.' She turned to Joel and bending forward, stared in his face. 'I said collect tinder, not timber. The log cabin is where logs are built up on the fire. You weren't listening. Were you?'

Joel felt a blood rush of heat tearing through his veins. His neck was hot and sweaty, his face flushed. He clenched his fingers, tried to block out the stares and chuckles of his fellow scouts. How dare she? As though in a haze, the trees began to drip raindrops. The sky was turning black, an impending storm was brewing. The raindrops bulged and splattered the overhanging branches, splashed their way through clumps of leaves to wet the boys who started to run out of the wood, away from Joel's log cabin and the half-built fire. Moving towards the centre of the oak tree, trying to hug the trunk to avoid getting too wet, he watched Lauren bend down, stared at her soaking jeans and her bra straps visible through her wet polo shirt clinging to her back. She fumbled to pick up the carrier bags with what was left of the kindling and tinder. Under his foot, he felt the hard, wet surface of a log roll. He stooped to pick it up, seeming to do it in a trance. The sounds of the forest went silent, the birdsong was blanked by the blood pumping in his ears pulsating his forehead. Joel felt headachy and squeezed his eyes tight shut, trying to block out the pain. When he opened them, Lauren was squelching away, her white trainers were totally muddied. Before he could stop himself, he was right behind her, holding the log aloft. Pressing his two front teeth under his lower lip, he brought it down, on to the back of her head.

Dropping the bags, she held her head in both hands. 'Ow! What the fuck!'

Joel continued to beat her; the log held like a cricket bat with two hands. A frenzy was running through his body. He couldn't stop it now it had started. Lauren collapsed on the ground with her face down, squirming in a ball, screaming, and holding her head as he pummelled her back. He lodged his foot under her chest and kicked her

over so that she rolled into a ball like a hedgehog and covered her face with her blood-stained hands. Still, he hit her on the shins until one final strike silenced her.

Outstretched on the ground, he splayed her arms and legs and grinned. He shivered as the rain continued to pour, dripping down his face, ruining his new hair cut where the quiff, now dishevelled, had now collapsed. Joel grabbed her shoulders and strained and heaved, but she was too heavy to pull to a drier spot under the tree. It didn't matter, he'd do it there.

Mr Walker waved the ambulance to park next to the activity tent. In the tent, Lauren was lying on a sleeping bag on one of the large PE mats in the dry.

'What's her name?' asked the male paramedic kneeling beside her.

'It's Lauren,' said Mr Walker. 'She's one of our Explorer scouts. I found her in the woods on the ground. She must have had some sort of accident...you can see from the wounds.'

'Do you know what happened?' said the paramedic taking her pulse.

'Not sure. I heard her screaming. When I found her...she was lying there...covered in blood and grazed to high heaven.'

The female paramedic tended to her wounds, was wiping the blood from the cuts on her hands and arms. 'What's happened here?' she said, talking to herself. 'Red marks on her wrists? Looks like bruising. As though someone was holding her.'

Lauren was beginning to come round. She groaned quietly and put her hand to her forehead.

'It's okay, Lauren,' said the male paramedic. 'Claire's just patching you up.'

Claire was busy bandaging her arms.

'Was there anyone with her who could say what happened?'

'She was instructing a group of scouts on making a campfire. It started to rain so the lads must have run for cover, and she's had some sort of accident with no-one around. Perhaps she slipped in the mud and fell over a branch or something. I'll speak to the boys. See if I can get anything out of them.' Mr Walker sighed. 'Lauren's the only one who knows what happened, I'm afraid.'

'We're going to take her to hospital and get her checked over. Her parents need to know.'

'Already done that. I'll ring them again and let them know where you're taking her.' Mr Walker stood up with a creak in his knees and sloped out of the tent.

'You need to clean this wound on her chest, Claire. There's some blood leaking through her T-shirt.'

She pulled up Lauren's polo shirt and gasped. 'Oh my God. Look at this.'

Studded across both breasts were little pink finger marks, each one seeming to denote the location of where fingers and thumbs had delved into her skin. The pressure from sharp nails were visible.

Claire raised her eyes to her colleague. 'She's been assaulted.' She mouthed the last word.

They looked simultaneously at the front of her jeans. The zip was halfway down. There was blood on the crotch.

'Christ. Do you want to examine her?' he whispered.

Claire looked around the tent. She raised her eyebrows and nodded. He went to stand by the door. 'Lauren?'

She was out of it. The sedative was taking effect.

Claire struggled with the zip. It was stuck and wouldn't budge.

'I think we've got a police case here,' she called to her colleague guarding the tent.

He re-joined her and knelt by the girl.

'I can't move the zip. It's a bit odd, blood being in this area. Do you think she's been sexually assaulted? I think we need to get her to hospital quick and phone the police. Looks like it was deliberate. That cut...on the back of her head...someone's bashed her, she goes unconscious then the attacker has a go at her breasts... then this. How old did he say the kids are, nine or ten?'

'It could be an intruder.'

She shook her head. 'Whoever it was needs catching and prosecuting. We're going to have to report this to the police. Are you going to tell the Chief Scout, or shall I?'

Chapter 17

FIVE MONTHS LATER

September 2018

Apple and plum cake; it was one of her favourite recipes, with rum sauce. She'd become quite accomplished at making it, her default pudding when other trying desserts failed miserably. Vanilla was the key ingredient; now that's what she could smell, the essence of vanilla pervading the shampoo. Shamina lay strands of her hair on the aluminium foil before daubing them with colour. Despite this long-winded process, Jenny luxuriated in the attention and took a last sip of latte before surveying herself in the mirror. She chuckled to herself, at the state of her head resembling something alien, the aluminium squares, flat, one on top of the other, like some space age armadillo. The salon was busy for a Tuesday, driers roaring like mini jet engines above the constant chatter of stylists and clients; she just about heard the doorbell jangle. Through the mirror, she spotted a woman in a black coat walk in, and with a sudden break in the din, she heard Anna and the woman greet each other like long lost friends. 'I'm fine...how are *you*?' replied Anna. The woman kissed the receptionist on both cheeks. 'Shamina's just finishing off with a client.' Anna gestured to a bucket seat by the window. The woman sat cross-legged. Jenny eyed her Ugg boots and black leggings. Surely, she was too long in the tooth for that kind of thing. She closed her eyes, pictured herself in that revealing lace dress at her mother's seventieth and the look on her mother's face with the black tie and ball gown set in town, at the invitation of Lady Manners. They hadn't always seen eye to eye, Jenny and her mother. She regretted feeling that way now — with Alice in her present state. When she opened her eyes, the woman was staring at her. Jenny studied her features. Those eyes, there was something familiar about them. The woman looked

as if she was in a permanent state of shock, the black irises surrounded by the whites. A memory was trying to push through. Jenny, puzzled, looked down at the Kindle in her lap. Momentarily, she peeked, sneakily, through the mirror, and the woman was still staring. Jenny looked away quickly, shifting uneasily in her seat.

Shamina lowered the heat panels around her head. 'Just thirty minutes, Mrs Watts. Would you like another coffee and some magazines?'

'No thank you. I'm fine for reading material. I've got this to wade through...for my next book club meeting.' She rolled her eyes and held up the Kindle. 'Although,' she lowered her voice a touch, 'you don't happen to have something stronger, do you? I'd die for a Merlot.'

The stylist nodded and smiled.

Jenny checked on the woman who'd now disappeared. She focused on the Kindle. *Heart of Darkness* was a challenging read. It needed to be finished by tomorrow afternoon and she was barely halfway through. Who on earth had chosen Joseph Conrad? It was probably that literary snob of an English lecturer. Jenny stopped to muse on the words, the part where Marlow's past comes back to him. She allowed herself to wander back to the time before Joel, when there was just the two of them, free from responsibility, enjoying each other's company. Looking down at the book again, she felt a shiver when reading how much Marlow's past life haunted him. Joel's face loomed. She'd been swanning along nicely until the inevitable broodiness had interfered in her life, setting off her biological clock. There was a shuffling sound behind. Jenny spied the woman approaching in the mirror, her hair soaking wet, her baggy suede boots more crinkled than ever. Shamina pulled out the chair but one.

'What are we doing?' Jenny heard Shamina say before some hairdryer whirred into action. She glanced sideways to catch the woman smiling in the mirror, a coffee being placed in her hand. Jenny frowned and beckoned to Shamina.

'Can I help you, Mrs Watts?' she said materialising at her side. She flicked the foils over as though she was flipping through a book. 'I think you're just about done.'

'My wine?' said Jenny.

'It's with Michael. He's waiting for you.'

The woman was still watching her when she moved to the sinks.

'Colour's good,' said Michael. She screwed up her face as he pulled out the foils. The pain didn't stop there; he was just as rough washing her hair, digging his fingers into her scalp, rubbing his hands across her head as though he was scrubbing clothes on a washing board. At last, he came to a stop and, after wrapping her hair in a towel, left her to recover. She closed her eyes, let the tension go and thought about Robin. He used to enjoy washing her hair and she enjoyed him doing it. Often it had led onto sex, him taking advantage of her semi-nudity, undressing what little she had on from bathroom to bed. She felt a deep sense of regret. Robin had threatened to move out if Joel dealt them more surprises. Threatened to go back and live with his mother in that cramped up little terrace, leaving her to put with the kids. He said he needed some space, away from Joel. After the incident with that girl at the camp, the police had reported she'd been sexually assaulted. The details were sickening.

Pieces of broken wood in the pubic region. The labia skin was badly grazed. Splinters around the entrance of the vagina. A short piece of broken off branch, about ten centimetres long and two point five centimetres wide was recovered from the girl's insides. Conclusion: penetration with a stick.

It hadn't taken much for the girl's mother to drop the charges. She worked in Robin's office. Having money came in handy when you needed to get out of a fix.

'How are we, darling?' Michael handed her the long-awaited glass of Merlot. 'I know you've been growing it, but it still needs some shape — a few layers down the sides and around the back. To use your words, my dear, you don't want a longer version of the same old style you've had for years.'

'Yes, that's what I said. I do indeed need a change.' She took a gulp of the wine then held up the glass. 'Just make me look divine, darling.'

He clipped up her hair on both sides and combed out the back. 'Going anywhere nice this evening?'

'Only visiting Mum again.'

'I'm sorry. How is she now?'

'Still in a coma, I'm afraid. '

'How long's it been?'

'Huh...three years.'

'Is there any chance of...'

'Her recovering?' She shrugged. 'There's been no sign so far. Sometimes there seems to be a glimmer of hope. Her eyes are still closed but they move, as though she's dreaming. That's one good reason for keeping the machine on.'

'I've heard it said it's good to talk to them.'

'Oh, I do. All the time and I read to her too.' She chuckled. 'But not this,' and pointed to the book. '*Heart of Darkness* is hardly a bundle of fun. I tell her how everyone is, how well Robin recovered from his op.' She sighed heavily. 'What a day that was...a double whammy. One recovered, one didn't. A life for a life as they say.' She remembered it all as clear as a bell; being told how Joel had thrust a snake at Alice,

her mother falling, cracking her head on the concrete floor. It had seemed like a prank gone wrong. But she'd been having doubts for a while; she was tortured, protective of Joel on the one hand, sickened by him on the other. And now this business with the Scarletts. She was meeting Lauren's mother this afternoon.

Michael slipped his fingers and thumb down a piece of her hair, made sure it was straight so that he could trim the bottom meticulously, make certain it was level.

She beckoned him down to listen. 'Who's that with Shamina? She keeps looking at me...as though she knows me. She's getting on my nerves.'

'Sorry, can't help you there, my love. Perhaps she's an old customer of Jodie.'

'Jodie? Mm.' She stared blankly at the Kindle's screen. 'There's something about her. Where would I know her from? It isn't school.' She sniggered. 'Ugg boots are hardly de rigeur at St. Paul's.'

'How is Joel settling in? I remember you said he was finding it hard.'

'Difficult to mix with other pupils you mean.'

Michael lowered his eyes.

'He's doing better than the last place. They were hopeless. Older boys leading him astray. We had to move him in the end...before it was too late. St Paul's has a much higher class of student.'

'Isn't it a cathedral school? How did...does he have to...'

'Be able to sing? Technically, yes, but there are ways and means. He passed the entrance exam with flying colours. He's an intelligent boy.'

'Takes after his mother then.'

Shamina's hairdryer had stopped. She was fiddling with the switch. She removed the plug then re-plugged it, but all to no avail. 'We'll have to move to this seat,' she said, pulling out the chair next to Jenny.

Jenny stared at Michael in the mirror. Then, suddenly turning to the woman, she said, 'Do I know you?' and Michael dropped his scissors, sending them clattering to the floor. 'Your face is familiar, but I can't place you.'

'Yes, I think the same about you.'

'Where could we have met?' said Jenny, scanning the woman's kohl-lined eyes, her face otherwise plastered in foundation.

'It's not where *we* could have met. It's where I could have met someone you know very well.'

'Look straight in the mirror, darling.' Michael set the hairdryer going. He pulled the brush through her hair, sweeping the hot air, up and down, over her brand-new colour, an ashy blonde, a welcome change from the peroxide hue the sun had bleached it over the summer. Michael tilted up her head, enabling her to turn slightly to her right where she spotted a clutch of deep laughter lines fanning out from the woman's left eye; they weren't the only blemishes showing her age, as a line of dark hairs prominently shadowed her top lip. 'How's that, darling?' he said. He held up a mirror so that she could see the back of her hair.

She swivelled her head to and fro, carefully examined the layered bob, then swept back her fringe and nodded. 'Great,' she said, 'a job well done.' She sensed Michael breathe at last, signalling him to brush off bits of her hair from the overall on to the floor.

'I suppose you leave that for the cleaner,' remarked the woman. 'She is a good friend of mine.'

'By the way, who is this very good friend we have in common?' said Jenny.

'Your husband.'

'Robin?' said Jenny. 'How do you know him?'

'From twenty-four Canorus Square.'

Jenny held her gaze, didn't speak for a moment. 'Who did you say you were? I thought I recognised you.'

'Let us just say we have a common acquaintance. You do not need to know who I am.'

'I think I do. Why would *you* be in my house?' Jenny's voice had grown to a crescendo causing customers and staff to quieten their chat. The woman smirked, sending Jenny to twizzle towards her in her seat. 'I think you'd better enlighten me.'

'Do not, as you English say, get your knickers in a twist.'

'I beg your pardon. I'm asking you a straightforward question — when have you been to my house? I think I have a right to know.'

'You have no right to know what I do.'

'I do if it involves my husband and my home.'

The woman sneered.

'Who are you really? Do that again and I'll...'

'Do what? Do not try to threaten me. I have friends who would not like it if you did.'

'Here we are, darling,' said Michael. He'd rushed over and was holding out Jenny's coat.

'Who on earth are you? You're not the sort of client who usually comes in here. Who is she, Michael?'

'Do not say a thing. I will sue under the Data Protection Act if you do.'

Jenny glared at the woman. 'Don't worry, I'll find out. I have influence around here.'

'So, do I,' the woman snarled.

Like cat and dog, they glowered at each other as Jenny stood and shoved her arms into her coat. She marched to the counter, then opened the door with a final look of defiance.

The rain was washing the pavements, the water surging along the gutters. Jenny was hiding from the turbulent grey skies, her umbrella keeping off the weather. She held the lapels of her coat together and splashed along the puddle-ridden streets on her way to the Angel station. The salon conversation haunted her. She had been itching to question that woman further, probe her for answers regarding her relationship with Robin, but her hair had been done and she hadn't wanted to cause more of a scene. The woman had wound her up and she'd stupidly fallen into her trap. Waiting at the pedestrian lights, she tried her pace breathing technique to keep calm, think rationally. Perhaps she was a colleague of Robin's? Had she been to one of their parties? The house was packed at his fortieth. She hurried across with a stream of others before the bleeps and green man had disappeared, then turned for the station.

At the entrance, she closed the umbrella and shook it over a man who gave her a look and, in her rush to get down the escalator she was given short shrift from a woman whose briefcase she knocked out of her hand.

Finally, on the train, she got out the Kindle. The words were there but she couldn't take them in. Her mind drifted off to that party. It had been one to remember and not always for the good. Robin's boss had got off with his secretary; he'd married her six months later after leaving his wife and kids. She remembered Robin had got a little bit flirty with her sister; he'd always had a soft spot for Catherine, but she mustn't jump to conclusions, she'd never mistrusted Robin, had any occasion to doubt him, never believed he was capable of an affair. Why should he? She was still attractive, despite her upcoming forty-second birthday, and she had no grey hair, not like that vile

woman in the salon whose roots were glaringly white. How dare she spoil her monthly treat? She had a foreign accent, too, harsh and aggressive, not Italian nor French, there'd been no hint of softness in her voice. It was demanding and authoritative, used to giving orders and haggling over prices, the way it was done in north Africa or Turkey or the Middle East. She couldn't be a Muslim either, her clothes were far too tarty. The thoughts of her and Robin in their bed was abhorrent. He couldn't be that desperate, surely. But when were they last intimate? Three, four months ago? It was in the summer, after that barbecue and a little too much to drink. She rang his number, but it went onto voicemail. 'Robin? We need to speak, urgently. Something's happened.'

At Stockwell, she emerged on to the Clapham Road. Her attention was now focused on the task in hand. At least this was something on which her and Robin were complicit. There had been no evidence that Joel had assaulted the girl. The Scarletts had turned up at the house accusing their son, despite the Akela swearing on scout's honour that he'd questioned them all and nobody had seen a thing. Even so, the girl had sworn blind it was Joel. Jenny thought Joel very brave admitting it was probably his blood on her clothes because he'd stayed to help her when the others had run away. That's what he'd claimed. Jenny shivered, and not just from the cold rain splashing her feet. She refused to believe he had done it, committed a sexual assault. It was unthinkable, but still worth every penny paying the Scarlett's rent just to keep them quiet.

Nearing the Costa sign, Jenny glanced at her watch; it was nearly two. She pictured the Scarlett woman in the same seat near the back of the cafe tucked in the same corner, out of earshot and prying eyes. This arrangement was costing them a fortune. They insisted on cash. All one thousand pounds of it, every single month. They could afford it, but it couldn't go on forever. Something had to change.

The café was quiet. Steam was shooting and hissing from the coffee machine, milk was frothing in a metal jug. The smell of Arabica beans, normally satisfying and comforting to Jenny, seemed particularly bitter on this occasion. She peered into the darkness of the shop, towards the back where overhead lamps dimly lit up a couple of tables separated by a solid wooden barrier. A familiar figure was sitting in one of the cubicles next to the loo. Jenny took her skinny latte over to Mrs Scarlett. She guessed they were similar in age, only that Lauren's mother had let herself go. Fat-faced, she could have been ten years older but for the scraped backed ponytail which suggested a younger woman and from a different class. She was still on her phone when Jenny took the seat opposite.

'We meet again,' said Jenny when Mrs Scarlett finally turned it off.

'You go' the money?'

Jenny reached inside her bag to produce an envelope, bulging with cash.

Covered by her hand, she pushed it across the table into an open bag hidden under the rim.

'I think we've more than paid you,' said Jenny. 'Since there's no evidence who attacked your daughter, we can't carry this on. It's got to stop. We're doing you a favour helping you out.'

'And when it does stop, you know wha'll 'appen.'

'It won't come to anything. It's just your word against ours.'

'I've still got Lauren's jeans and 'er tee shirt remember. As an insurance. I told you I've never washed 'em. It's us doing you a favour, no' the other way round. We've kept quiet.' She leaned forward. 'To keep your boy ou' o' trouble.'

Jenny sat back and crossed her arms. 'Joel has told us what happened. The blood on your daughter was Joel's because he tried to help her. How many times do I need to spell it out?'

'Tha's wha' he says, is it?' She laughed. 'Lauren saw 'im standing over 'er. There was no one else there. She's 'undred percen' sure it was 'im.'

'How could she be so sure? According to the Chief Scout she was unconscious when he found her. She was “delirious”, to use his words.'

'Then why are you paying us off then? Because you feel guil'y, tha's wha'. You know he did it.'

'It's to stop people like you going to the press, spreading malicious gossip, playing the poor victim.'

'My Lauren's the poor victim 'ere and you know it. My girl's been scarred for life. There's no DNA because of wha' he used to viola'e 'er with and the fingerprints he left on 'er 'ave well gone. You made sure o' tha' by bribing us into silence all this time.'

'It's us that's being bribed by you. We stop the payments, and you'll shout. Well, we'll see about that. A child's word against a girl who's now an adult? And a promiscuous one at that. What would the police say? She's old enough to be arrested for meddling with an underage child.'

'I don' think so. She was only fifteen a' the time. And how dare you call my daugh'er a slut...because tha's wha' you mean. Tha's slander. I feel sorry for your 'usband, married to the likes o' you. No wonder he always looks pissed off. It doesn't surprise me he's always crying on Aysha's shoulder.'

'And who's Aysha when she's at home?'

'You don't know about tha' do you? I know everything tha' goes on in tha' office. I've seen i' all.' She tapped the side of her nose.

'You only make the tea.'

'I clean as well. After office hours, when everyone's supposed to 'ave gone 'ome.'

Jenny zipped up her bag. 'Crying on Aysha's shoulder? Don't try to wind me up. It won't work. This is the last payment.' She stood up to go. 'And don't try to threaten me with lies about my husband. That won't wash.'

The café had now filled up, a line of customers queuing at the counter. Jenny eased her way around occupied seats, past a buggy with a cranky child and a bulging shopping bag hogging the space between a couple of tables and chairs, until she finally reached the door. Janet Scarlett pushed past. Jenny watched her waddling across the road, her large pink bag in hand, to the bus stop opposite where she carried on past the shelter, before dropping out of sight. Jenny stopped outside the café and took out her phone. There was a missed call from Robin.

'Hello. Are you alright? It sounds urgent.'

'Who's Aysha?'

'Aysha? Do you mean Aysha at the office, one of the reporters? Why?'

'Her name came up today. Janet Scarlett mentioned it.'

'And? What's Janet Scarlett got to do with Aysha?'

'I've just met the bloody woman. Paid her off, again. To quote her, she said you cry on Aysha's shoulder. What have you told her, this Aysha?'

'Nothing. Oh, for goodness' sake, Jenny, I don't tell her anything. I don't do crying on people's shoulders. That woman is telling you a pack of lies. You don't believe her, do you? She's just trying to stir things up, to keep up the payments.'

'What does she look like, this Aysha? She sounds foreign.'

'She is, Egyptian, I think. She's in charge of our middle eastern desk.'

'Is she a middle-aged woman with a viper's tongue?'

'I'd say she's about 50. She doesn't mince her words, but she's a good reporter actually. Very professional.'

'Mm...Is she in today?'

'Erm...doesn't look like it. Why?'

'Because I've just had a very heated conversation with a woman of that description, at the hairdressers. She claims she knows you...has been to our house. She knew our address. What's going on, Robin? Is there something you're not telling me?'

'What did she look like?'

'Mutton dressed as lamb...Robin? Robin?' She checked the screen.

'Yes, I'm still here...I've got to go. Andrew's on my back. We need to talk.

Tonight'

'Where *is* Joel?' said Robin.

'Up in his room, doing his homework — for once.' Jenny topped up her wine, then got up to turn down the pan bubbling on the hob. 'Come on then, spit it out.'

For a second, Robin closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. 'Remember that woman who followed me from work that time?'

'How could I forget? She screwed five hundred pounds out of you.'

'Alright, don't rub it in.' He ran his hands through his hair. 'Do you think it might be her, the woman you met at the hairdressers today?'

'I really don't know. I haven't a clue. You invited her in, not me.'

'I did not invite her in. The cheeky bitch barged her way in.'

'Well remind me what this cheeky bitch looked like, then.'

'Foreign, dark skinned. Scarab tattoo here.' He placed his hand across the neckline of his jumper. 'Arab. Egyptian, I think...the tattoo. She looked as though she

had money. Dressed like a...' he raised his shoulders and grimaced '...twenty-year-old. Not classy in the least.'

'Well, I don't know about the tattoo, but she sounds pretty similar. Then again, how many women of that description are there in London?'

'But why surface now? After four years. I wonder if she's been in prison all this time...for blackmail. She said she'd found a cheque you'd written for half a million quid...'

'That was for the IVF Robin, we've been over that.'

'Okay, okay.' He put up his hands. 'You know my feelings about that...five hundred thousand's a hell of a lot of money for IVF...'

'Just leave it, Robin, I've already explained what happened. It was my mistake. I added too many noughts. I was going through a bad patch. I didn't know what I was doing for fuck's sake.'

'Alright, alright. It's just a good job you hadn't signed it. I wouldn't have put it past the cow to have tried to cash it after what she did to me.' He sighed. 'This woman at the hairdressers. You said you recognised her?'

'Uh...a distant memory. I've seen her in there before. She obviously knew Anna.'

'Anna?'

'The receptionist. It seemed like they hadn't seen each other for a long time. Your prison theory, then?'

'Well, if she is the woman who followed me, I wonder what she's up to? She might have plans to strike again. If that's the case, she's obviously connected the two of us. But how?'

'You've no idea who she was?'

'Absolutely not. I'd never seen her in my life before that night.'

'She doesn't work with you?'

'No, we've already gone over that.'

Jenny drummed her fingertips on the kitchen table. 'It couldn't be this Aysha could it?'

'How would Aysha know you, you've never met her?'

'Robin...haven't you got a photograph of me on your desk? And if you're so friendly with each other, perhaps you told her which hairdressers I use.'

'But why would Aysha behave like that towards you?' He sat back in his chair and folded his arms behind his head. 'I know what you're thinking that this woman you met today was Aysha and that we're having an affair. Don't be silly, Jenny. There's absolutely nothing between me and Aysha. If we were having an affair, she's hardly likely to let on, is she? We all console each other...the pressure, deadlines, not getting a scoop.' He chuckled. 'Tim's the worst, he moans to everyone.' He smiled. 'Listen, Aysha would eat me alive. She might be a bit of a tartar but she's not so unprofessional as to deliberately tease you. What would be the point of it? We've got to work together. She's only two desks away. '

'Well, it's a bit of coincidence them both being Egyptian... and they both sound rather... brash.'

'Well, she certainly sounds like Aysha.' He tittered. 'Aysha's an oddball sometimes. I'll ask her tomorrow if she was in the hairdressers today. It's a bit of a coincidence her being off. But honestly, I can't see it being her. There's no reason it should be. It's more likely to be that bloody stalker again.' Suddenly, he sat up, a light bulb moment switched on. 'I remember now. I know where she knows you from. She recognised your photo from the mantelpiece. That's the connection, isn't it? Then she'd seen you at the hairdressers and put two and two together. The worrying thing is — she

might try it on again. But if she does, we'll be ready for her this time.' He reached across the table and laid his hands over hers.

She raised her eyes. 'Actually, I did suspect you.'

He tutted and shook his head.

'It's Joel. He's getting to me. His behaviour's getting worse.'

'You can say that again. I didn't want to make a fuss about it, but Ellie said he's been in her room...stealing her stuff again. Oh yes, I'd forgotten. Magda said she found something in Ellie's room this morning. She said she's hid it under the bed.'

'What? What's she found?'

'I don't know. Let's go and find out.'

They scraped back their chairs, Jenny remembering to switch off the cooker before going upstairs. On the first-floor landing they listened intently, their eyes trained on Joel's bedroom door. Turning the handle slowly, they slipped into Ellie's room and quietly closed the door behind them. From the curtains to the lampshade, the bedcovers to the walls, it was glowing a girly pink as if the fairy from Ellie's music box had escaped and had swished the room in a rosy tint. Kneeling, Robin felt under the bed, sweeping his arm across the carpet. He pressed himself further onto the floor and peered into the darkness. 'There's something there.' He stretched out his arm. 'Got it,' and slid out the portrait of Ellie they'd had commissioned when she was two.

They both looked at each other aghast, their thoughts mirrored through the crease lines on their foreheads. In the centre of the glass there was a hole, like a bullet had shot it right through, leaving a multitude of cracks to radiate from the hole and tiny shards of glass to puncture her pastel blue dress.

'It could have fallen off the wall?' said Jenny.

'Come on, it looks as though a certain person has hit it with a hammer.'

'We can't just assume that. Magda may have dropped it...cleaning.'

'I don't think so, she would have told us, she's not that dishonest.'

'Well, I don't know, perhaps Ellie's done it. Thrown a ball at it or something?'

'Oh, stop it, Jenny. I've had enough of this. You've been defending him far too long. You know what he's like. Stop deluding yourself.' He stood up and stared, dumbfoundedly, at the picture.

'But why do that?'

'Why? Why steal from her? Why tell lies about her? Why hit her? You tell me.'

His room was dark, the curtains closed, the computer screen providing the only light.

Well, it took me seven years and twelve hundred pages to tell the story... said an old man on the screen.

Standing right behind Joel, Robin held the frame in one hand and tapped him on the shoulder with the other. 'Explanation please.'

It's a wonderful demonstration of the skill and the talents we now have...

'Of what?' said Joel.

'This.'

The story concerns what everyone of us in our life goes through...

Robin grabbed Joel's arm, forcing him to look round at the picture.

'Robin...let me...'

'No, Jenny. This demands zero tolerance.' Robin was shaking. Some of the glass dropped out of the frame. He was still gripping Joel's arm as he turned to face the boy, again. 'It's you, isn't it? You did this?'

'Why would I do that? It's probably fallen off the wall,' said Joel yanking his arm free.

When I discovered Lyra had a demon...

'Turn that off, I'm speaking to you.'

...I could use the demon to signal the difference between being a child...

'Joel!'

...and the demon can change shape and gradually become an adult...

Robin punched the on/off button.

'What are you doing? You're going to ruin my homework...you twat.'

Robin slapped his face.

'You, bastard,' Joel screamed, then bent over to bury his face in his hands.

'Robin...please.' She lunged forward and tried to pull him towards her, but he spun round and glared. 'Let me deal with this in my own way.'

Behind Robin, she saw Joel rise, his hand aloft, something catching the light as it shot through the air towards his father when...

Joel slashed his face.

Chapter 18

SIX MONTHS LATER

2nd March 2019

'Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust: in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.'

Magda watched the coffin being lowered into the ground. The nameplate glinted as the sun winked through a cloud, and a breeze blew the scrawny fingers of an overhanging branch to signpost the grave below. She watched Jenny dabbing her eyes, linking her dad on one side, her arm nestling Ellie on the other. Her sister was close by, with her husband and the twins, equally as tearful. She was surprised that Robin wasn't there. Perhaps he hadn't been invited after he'd left, leaving Jenny in the lurch. And there was Joel, leaning against the church wall, thumbing on his phone while the coffin came to rest. There had been a collective intake of breath when he'd walked down the aisle, dragging his feet. Jeans and a Kanye West T-shirt at a funeral? She had sensed their disbelief.

'If you are a family member or very close friend, you are invited to throw soil on to the coffin, symbolising that man comes from the earth and to where he must return.'

Magda stepped away from the circle of mourners clustered around the grave. She watched them grab handfuls of dirt from the mound, heard soggy clumps tap the coffin as they said their last goodbyes.

'Family members, close friends, you are invited to express your love for the deceased.'

There was a muted response. Magda could hear 'miss you' and 'love you' quietly echo around the small crowd of relatives and close family friends. She felt an outsider,

there out of necessity, feeling neither sadness nor loss, little regret for what might have been prevented.

She watched Joel like a hawk. At least he was quiet, not causing a scene, unlike that morning when he'd screamed at his mother, his veins popping in his neck; it had taken all *her* efforts to calm him. And all because Jenny insisted he attend the funeral. They were on a collision course, she and Joel, his size sevens walking all over her, ruling the roost since Robin had left the family home — gone to live with his mother. He'd had enough of Joel, had had enough of Jenny, the way she let Joel get away with murder. She'd brought it on herself, by giving in to Joel, letting that gang of older boys snare him into smoking in the shed. And those take-away boxes littering the lounge. Jenny had given up on him, leaving *her* to tame him.

'Magda.'

She turned around; a man in a black suit and tie was half-hidden a few metres away, shadowed between two towering yews. It was difficult to make out who he was.

'Our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen,' said the priest, making the sign of the cross.

Amidst a chorus of 'Amens', she heard her name being called again and looked back. The man was waving. As she approached him, his face became recognisable, but the beard was new.

'Come to pay my respects,' said Robin. 'To the old bat.' He chuckled.

Magda glanced around. The mourners were departing.

He moved behind one of the trees and beckoned her to follow.

She homed in on his scar, a red line across his right cheek. 'How is it?' She pointed to her own cheek.

He shrugged. 'Could've been worse. How's things...at home?'

'Jenny's not coping...with Joel...or Ellie.'

'Ellie?'

'You know how brothers and sisters argue.'

'Huh. It's probably him who starts it.'

'It's not always Joel.'

He raised an eyebrow.

'She can take care of herself, I've seen it.'

'Well, good for her. She's been listening to me after all. About time she stood up for herself.'

Magda took a step nearer, took stock of the flecks of grey hairs speckling his beard. 'She can. She admitted breaking her own portrait.'

'What?'

'She told me she'd done it.'

'Why? Why would she do that?'

'To get him into trouble she said. Make it look as though he hated her. He'd been stealing again. She was really upset, thought no-one was listening to her, so, if she smashed the picture, you'd think it was him who'd done it and then he'd get into trouble.'

'Well, it worked. I did think it was him.' He pointed to his cheek. 'And this was the result.'

'I think it was a cry for help. Perhaps she may not have done it if you...'

'Hadn't put her up to it? So, I'm to blame?'

She was about to speak then stopped. She would have loved to have told him they were both to blame; arguing and shouting in front of the children, what did they expect. They'd hardly set a good example.

'People probably think I've left Jenny in the lurch but...this was the last straw,' he said, touching his scar. 'I told her how it would end if she continued to defend him.' He grimaced and shook his head. 'But it fell on deaf ears.'

'I suppose he thought he was just defending himself?'

'By attacking me with a piece of glass? I was trying to discipline him, do what responsible parents do.'

She turned. The mourners were nearing the gate. 'I must go. Did you want to speak to Jenny?'

'Yes. Tell her I'm here. I need a word.'

She picked her way through the daffodils scattered throughout the grass. Joel was still leaning against the wall, tapping on his phone.

'Come, Joel,' she said, reaching for his arm.

He shrugged her off. 'I want to finish this.'

She saw his thumbs going like hammers at a text and drew her eyes away, to his hair, long again, spiralling on to his shoulders. It looked dirty, unwashed, like his neck. His faded black T-shirt was streaked with food, dried curry splattering Kanye West's face. A sudden breeze whipped around her feet. She tapped her foot in frustration until he put his phone away and they followed a procession to the lych gate where the hearse awaited. Magda went to the car behind the hearse. She bent down and looked through the window. Jenny turned to glare at her from the back seat and shook her head, her lips tightly pursed.

'I think we need to get in another car,' said Magda. She pulled his hand away from the window where his upright middle finger was gesturing to Ellie through the glass.

'Don't want to share with her anyway,' he said and pulled his face at his sister who was now snuggling against her mother, Ellie's long brown hair half-hiding a smile.

Magda exhaled deeply and scanned the row of vehicles parked behind. The last of the mourners were getting into cars. She went from one to the next, peeking through their windows for an empty space. They all seemed full. Were people shuffling along their seats, spreading themselves out, making it clear that she and Joel weren't welcome? Or was that her imagination? She felt so conspicuous standing there, alone on the pavement, dappled under the trees.

'Madam.' A funeral director approached. 'The family car is reserved for close relatives. The young man is the deceased's grandson I believe?'

Magda was lost for words. 'Yes,' she said. She screwed up her face. 'It's awkward.'

He smiled, knowingly. 'The other cars are full. It isn't too far,' and he led the way to the front of the queue.

Magda was sure she could feel Jenny's eyes boring into her as she and Joel sat behind the driver's seat, and she could feel little kicks hitting the back of their seat. She imagined Ellie's legs, outstretched, her feet goading Joel to respond. Jenny was, of course, ignoring it. Through the window, Robin was still standing under the trees. Magda sighed. She'd forgotten to pass his message on. Too late now, the driver was getting in. Sitting back, she cringed when Joel's phone started to ping loudly. She looked over her shoulder. 'Jenny, I need...'

'Turn that off. It's disrespectful, Joel. Your grandmother has just been buried.'

'So?' he hissed.

'So, you should show some respect.'

'He doesn't do respect, Mummy,' Ellie piped up.

Magda closed her eyes.

'Why should I respect her? She was a horrible old...bitch.'

'How dare you,' said Jenny prodding his shoulder.

'Get off me.'

'Joel,' said Magda, quietly, 'don't speak to your mother like that.'

'Yes, it's about time you controlled him. I pay you enough.'

'Please Joel.'

'Why should I? She treats me like dirt. Like her...fucking mother did. Thought the sun shone out of *her* arse,' he said, flicking his head at his sister.

'No wonder after what you did,' Ellie whined in his ear.

'Oh, stop it, the pair of you. Dad, I am so sorry.'

'We wouldn't be at Granny's funeral if he hadn't done what he did.'

'It was a joke. She hated me.'

'No, she didn't...'

'Yes, she did...'

'Stop it,' Jenny screamed. 'How rude. How dare you use that foul language in front of your grandfather.'

'He was so cruel, Mummy. He knew Granny hated snakes.'

'Ellie, leave it. I'm sorry, Dad, I'm so ashamed.'

'Never mind, darling. Joel. Please?'

'It isn't you, Grandpa. It's the rest of them. They all hate me.'

'Driver, stop. Get out of the car. Now.'

'A pleasure. Mother,' he said, reaching for the door.

'No Joel, you can't, we're still moving,' said Magda, holding him back.

'Let...me...out.' He leaned across her reaching for the handle, but she caught his hand before he could grab it, sinking her manicured nails into his skin.

He gave her an icy stare. 'Look what you've done.'

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, Joel.'

'Yeah, like I didn't mean to put that bitch into a coma.'

'Just shut up.' Jenny cupped her hands around her cheeks. 'I can't take this anymore.'

By now, they were passing through the gates of Manley Grange. The car circled the drive before coming to a stop. A funeral director opened the door to an almighty scuffle as Joel climbed out over Magda. She dashed after him into the house, chased him up the winding staircase to his bedroom, the one that George had insisted he have when he came to stay for school holidays. Joel slammed the door in her face. She could feel her heart racing. 'Joel?' she said, quietly knocking. A mixture of hurt and anger welled up inside her. Get a grip, she told herself. Don't lose face. 'Joel?' Tentatively, she pushed open the door.

He was lying on the bed staring at the ceiling.

'Joel.'

He turned his gaze upon her. 'What?'

She crossed the room to sit down beside him. 'I know you didn't mean to hurt your grandmother...'

'But she meant to hurt me.'

'I know how you must be feeling.'

'No, you don't.'

'I do. We're very alike, you and I.'

'How can *we* be alike?'

Magda grinned broadly. 'Well...we both like...chocolate?'

'Huh. True,' said Joel hinting a smile.

'We both like...tennis.'

'You're rubbish at tennis.'

She chuckled. 'You don't have to be not good at something to still like it. It's not all about winning. It's about enjoying something for the sake of it...even if you are not very good at it.'

'I like to be good at everything,' he said.

'I know you do my...!' She hung her head low.

'My darling boy? That's what *she* used to call me.'

'She still loves you...we all do.'

'Don't talk crap.'

'Come down. Just for a moment. Show your face.'

'No way.'

'Don't upset your grandpa, Joel.' She took in the richness of the room with its blue velvet curtains, the colour of peacocks, the silk Chinese paper to match. 'This is a beautiful room. It is the best bedroom...and its yours. This whole house will be yours one day.'

He cracked a smile.

'Think about it.' She touched his arm, got up and left.

Jenny was at the bottom of the stairs. 'Ah, there you are. I was wondering where you'd got to. Where is he?'

'In the bedroom, he's...'

'Good. You're needed in the kitchen.'

From the hall, Magda made her way to the back of the house. A couple of staff were pouring tea into cups with their saucers already arranged on large silver trays. 'Can I help?' she said, taking off her coat.

'Can you take this into the dining room, then?' said one of the women dressed like a waitress in black and white. She handed Magda a large cake on a fancy plate and a long-bladed knife. Magda gripped its pearly white handle, was conscious of its sharp serrated edge sticking out in front. She backed out of the room through a door leading straight into the dining room and headed for a table between a pair of floor-to-ceiling windows which overlooked the lawn. The cake, a Victoria sponge, was centre-spread and, apparently, had been Lady Manley's favourite. She placed the knife down. Its blade caught the sun, a stripy mix of dark and light patterning the polished silver. All quiet, the room was empty of people. The dining table had been extended, was draped in a crisp white cloth, and covered with food on the family silver, clearly laid out to impress. Magda leaned over for a closer look at the centrepiece, a multi-tiered affair standing tall in the middle, like a fountain, brimming with baby angels and images of fruit. The double doors swung open, and the mourners trickled in making for the spread. Magda stood by, ready to pour out cups of tea, on hand to cut pieces of cake.

Ellie approached. 'Where is he, then? Hiding?'

'He's upstairs,' said Magda. 'Taking a rest.'

'A rest from what? Annoying me?'

Magda took in a deep breath. 'Would you like something, Ellie? Some cake perhaps?'

Ellie nodded with a look of disdain.

Magda cut her a slice, the jam oozing down the sides.

Jenny appeared, flustered, sweat moistening her forehead. 'We need more tea. Ellie, go to Aunty Catherine, she needs your help, the twins are playing up, you're good with them. Magda, can you fetch more tea.'

In the kitchen, Magda put the kettle on. Used baking bowls were piled up in the sink. She opened the dishwasher drawer, began to stack it from top to bottom.

'I can do that.' Someone was patting her arm. She turned. 'Oh, it's you, good, you're here. Thank you, Joel, that will be helpful. Can you load up the dishwasher while I make the tea?' The kettle started to rumble and spew out steam, until it clicked so that Magda could pour the water into a large metallic pot.

In the dining room, Magda was careful to skirt the guests as the pot was full. Suddenly, the twins rushed by with Ellie in pursuit. 'Be careful,' said Magda. 'Don't run, you're going to cause an accident.' From the corner of her eye, Magda saw Joel circling the table, loading up his plate. 'Milk, sir?...Yes, it's over there, I think...The cabinet, by the window...A little weaker, madam? I'll see what I can do...!' She was keeping her eye on Joel while serving the guests. Ellie seemed to be teasing him, sneaking her arm around his waist, stealing her fingers towards his plate. 'With or without, madam?...Yes, the sugar is over there...'

'Hey, get your own you little thief,' Joel shouted. Magda looked up. He was facing Ellie, holding up an empty plate.

She was standing right up to him. 'Now you know what it feels like, being stolen from.'

People were beginning to stare.

'Sorry, I'll have to sort this out,' said Magda to a waiting guest and placed down the pot. She rounded the table, but Ellie saw her coming and moved away. 'Here, let me Joel,' said Magda, bending down to help him pick a sandwich off the floor. 'Get another

plate. Take your food outside.' She escorted him around the buffet, before following him out, on to the steps, to eat in the sun.

Range Rovers were parked on the drive, and leaning against the bonnet of the familiar green Jag was Robin on his phone. 'Wait here, Joel.' She walked to Robin across the drive. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I forgot to give Jenny your message. Do you still want me to tell her you're here?'

'How's *he* been?' He raised his eyebrows at Joel.

'Ellie's been winding him up.'

'Really?'

She rolled her eyes. 'And he took the bait.'

'Hah! What did she do?'

'Stole his sandwiches when he wasn't looking.'

'Now he knows how it feels.'

'Funny. That's what she said.'

Robin looked away for a moment. 'Tell Jenny I'm here. I need to speak to her.

It's urgent.'

'She's rather stressed in there.'

'It can't wait, I'm afraid. It involves... ' He nodded at Joel.

'Anything I can help with?'

'Thanks, Magda, I don't think you can. It's between me and his mother.'

Magda shivered. A sudden cool breeze set goosebumps pimply on her forearms where she'd pushed up her sleeves.

'Just tell her I'm here.'

She made her way back to Joel who was still sitting on the steps. The front door swept open, and Ellie raced past them. 'Daddy,' she shouted. They watched her run to Robin and jump into his arms.

Magda glanced at Joel. He looked lost and forgotten. She felt nothing but sorrow for him.

She found Jenny in the dining room, collecting empty plates.

'Here. I'll take those,' she said hurrying towards her. 'Robin is outside. He wants to speak to you. He said it's urgent.'

'Now? It's hardly the time.'

'He's waiting on the drive.'

Magda could see them from the hall. A speckled ray of sunlight flashed through the glass door made her squint. They were arguing. Jenny, flinging her arms about, Robin, trying to calm her, being pushed away, then colliding with the bonnet. Magda bit her lip and frowned and on opening the door had to shield her eyes from the glare of the gravel. Robin was leaning towards Jenny, jabbing a finger at her, saying something, then Jenny shouted, 'sort it.' Ellie was standing next to Robin, and there seemed to be more heated words and arm-waving before Jenny swung round and stomped back towards the house with Ellie shouting 'Mummy' in pursuit.

'Not now, Ellie, please,' said Jenny, as the child caught up with her at the steps. 'We need to talk.' She glared at Magda.

'What? Now?'

'Later,' said Jenny going into the house.

Magda watched the dust rising as the Jaguar sped away. Dust and gravel rose nearer. A tussle had broken out. The siblings were kicking stones at one another,

grabbing them in handfuls. This was no childish game, there was hatred in the air, sibling rivalry at its worst. Ellie threw some stones at his head, he grabbed her hair, she slipped and fell, then cried out when she scraped her legs on the ground. Magda ran down the steps. 'Hey, you two, stop it,' she shouted.

'She deserves it. She's just called me a bastard,' cried Joel standing back, wiping his face.

'Here, let me look,' said Magda going to him.

'No, I'm not hurt.'

She peered at him. There was a graze across his cheek. 'It isn't true what she said.'

'She said he called me a real bastard. Why say it if it isn't true?'

'Ignore her.'

'What's happened, darling?' Jenny was running down the steps, pushing past a few people who'd come out to look.

'He attacked me, Mummy,' said Ellie, suddenly perking up. 'He pulled my hair and...' She buried her cries into her mother's chest.

'She called me a bastard,' said Joel, pointing at Ellie. 'Am I? Is it true?'

Magda heard someone gasp. She touched Joel on the shoulder.

'Why won't you answer me?' he said.

Jenny stared, blankly.

Magda held her breath.

'Mother?' said Joel.

Magda looked sideways at Jenny who shook her head, before hanging it low.

'Say it then, say it's not true.'

Still with her eyes clamped on Jenny, Magda noticed that when she raised her head, Jenny looked away, did not face him. Eventually, she turned to him. 'He didn't mean it like that. He shouldn't have called you what he did, but he's angry. What you did last year was inexcusable. I have always been here for you, always taken your side. But what happened has split us apart.'

'I've split you apart? So, it's all my fault then?'

'No. That's just it.' For a moment, silence hung, menacingly. 'None of this is your fault.'

Magda dropped her head.

She went into the dining room. The mourners had left, and the two hired staff had gone as the remains of the wake had been cleared away. Jenny was brushing crumbs off the tablecloth.

'I'll do that,' said Magda.

'No need. Everything's done...apart from this.' Jenny pointed to a brown circular stain on the white tablecloth.

'I'm sorry, it's where I put the teapot. I was distracted by Joel and Ellie arguing. She'd stolen his san...'

'Where is he, now?'

'In the kitchen.'

'Good. Keep him there...out of Ellie's way. I'm trying to keep them separated. She's with her grandpa in the drawing room.'

Magda checked the stain. 'I'll get a cloth.'

'No, leave it. It's got to be washed. I just hope it comes out. It's an expensive piece of linen. A family heirloom belonging to my grandmother.' She picked up the last

piece of crockery to put it away, back into the glass-fronted cabinet with the rest. It stretched the length of one wall, stuffed with Manley memorabilia, including the Royal Worcester tableware they'd been using that day. It was still intact, thank goodness, not a piece cracked or broken; Magda would have known about it otherwise.

'You wanted a word, Jenny?'

Jenny leaned on the table with both hands. 'He let it slip. The fool.'

'Excuse me?'

'He did call Joel a bastard in front of Ellie. Just blurted it out when she was standing there. And she said, 'Isn't that when a baby doesn't have a daddy, Mummy?'

She shook her head. 'I told her not to repeat it to Joel.'

'Well...she did, I'm afraid. That's when the fight started.'

'The stoning more like...'

'They were both as bad as each another...'

'He's older. He should have known better. She's got a nasty graze on her knee.'

'Is that what you wanted to speak to me about?'

Jenny held her forehead. 'No. It's that Scarlett woman again. She's threatening to shout. Apparently, she took Robin aside at the office. Said she had something else on Joel. Is threatening to go to viral...makes me wonder what else she knows. That woman needs sorting out.'

Just then, the door to the drawing room opened and Sir George shuffled in, his walking stick clonking on the shiny wooden floor.

'Dad? Are you alright?'

'I don't know what to do with myself...now that your mother's finally gone.'

'I'm sorry, I've been neglecting you. Come and sit down.' She turned to Magda.

'Can you see to Ellie; she's doing a jigsaw. I need some time with Dad.'

Magda nodded and entered the drawing room next door. The pieces of the unfinished puzzle lay abandoned on the coffee table between the two settees. 'Ellie?' Magda scanned the room. She checked behind the far settee, then opened the door in the corner beyond. It led into the salon, Lady Manners's personal space. She peered through the French windows to a garden laid out in squares of low green hedge. The doors were locked, the key hanging high on a hook. Back in the drawing room, she checked the drive through the window, then hurried into the hall. 'Ellie? Ellie?' she called softly. In the kitchen, Joel was preoccupied, engrossed on his phone. 'Have you seen Ellie? Joel? Have you seen her anywhere?' He had his earphones in. She left the room and went upstairs. 'Ellie? Ellie?' she called, a tremble in her voice. She quickly went from room to room, from floor to floor. It was eerily quiet except for the ticking of the grandfather clock which echoed around the house with its occasional creaks as it sighed in the dying warmth of the sun.

A dog barked. From an upstairs window, she could see into the yard. The shepherd was with his collie, and fussing its pup was Ellie, teaching it to sit. Magda walked briskly along the landing towards the stairs. Jenny and her father were coming up, one slow step at a time. 'Dad's tired,' she said. 'He wants to lie down.'

'Can I help?' said Magda.

'Just keep an eye on those two. Try to keep them away from each other. Oh, there is one thing. Can you clean the silver then put it away? It's still on the table. It goes in that mahogany sideboard in the dining room. And be careful cleaning it, it's antique. I've left you a cloth and some polish.'

Plates, bowls and dishes, salt and pepper pots, candlesticks and the big centrepiece awaited Magda. Polishing such things was tedious. Magda remembered

having to help her mother clean her precious collection of ornamental brass, her mother making sure she cleaned it properly, and the polish on her fingers, smelling like wee.

She held up a small round dish, studied the finely crafted pattern of leaves and berries circling the sides. Lifting out the inner blue bowl, she set to work with the cloth and a dab of foam, smoothing it all over before wiping it clean so that she could see her distorted reflection. A door banged. Claws tip-tapped the kitchen floor, then a heated conversation followed with words she couldn't quite catch. She leapt up and opened the door.

Ellie had the dog in her arms. Joel stopped short on seeing her in the doorway.

'Everything okay in here?' said Magda. 'He's cute.' She nodded at the pup.

'This is Flossie,' said Ellie placing it in the sink. 'She needs a bath.'

Joel scraped back his seat, put his feet on the table. 'Not in here, you're not. Tell her, Magda.'

Ellie was battling with the pup, trying to keep it from jumping out of the sink now filling up fast, its little front claws scratching the wooden worktop.

'Is there anywhere else you can do that, Ellie?' said Magda. 'It doesn't look very...hygienic.'

'There's nowhere else. Grandpa won't mind. *He* loves dogs.'

'Your Mother would prefer it if the two of you had your own space.'

'Is that because I'd kill her coz she gets on my nerves?'

'Joel! Could you...go to another room to use your phone?'

'Why should I? I was here first. I can't get a signal anywhere else. It's shit, this house.'

'Please take your feet off the table, Joel, it's not very hygienic either.'

He sighed, letting his feet drop.

'Well, just stay apart then. Joel stay there, and Ellie, don't move from the sink. Can we agree on that? I've got a job to finish. I'll leave this door open.' She left the door open wide, moved her seat to the kitchen end of the dining room where she could see Joel, his feet propped up back on the table.

The centrepiece beckoned. It stood taller than the rest, right in the middle of the table display. Magda moved some pieces aside; she tried to reach it, but it wouldn't budge, so had to lean across the tabletop, her arms outstretched, to do its polishing justice. She smeared a pair of cherubs with the foam, their chubby little faces smiling innocently out, before buffing them shiny clean. The craftsmanship was exquisite, their wings just like a bird's, each feather appointed in fine detail. She took a closer look. Was that a sardonic smile she could see on one of the faces of these twins?

Just then, the dog burst in. It shook itself then rolled on the carpet before setting off on a frenzied circuit of the room. 'Get it out,' shouted Magda as Ellie grappled with it under the table. 'Your mother will go mad.' Ellie emerged with the panting wet pup. 'Take it out, Ellie. Don't let it come in here, again. I'll have to close this door. Just behave in there, the two of you. Please.'

She eyed the silver, then looked towards the kitchen and waited. There wasn't a sound, so turned her attention to the candlestick. It would be easier than the cherubs, its long smooth cylinder would only take a minute. 'You can do it in a jiffy,' she recalled Jenny say; one of her favourite English sayings.

Magda breathed heavily on the silver, fogging the surface so she could polish away the mist to bring up the shine. She held it up to the light. Tiny dents pitted the yellowing metal obscuring her reflection. She turned it, observed the scratches where it had been handled by hundreds of ancestral Manners's over the years. Perhaps it had been dropped a century or so ago by another Lady Manners, this time in a low-cut dress,

her curls piled high on top, her ringlets brushing her lily-white skin. Magda was getting carried away when the kitchen door began to open, slowly, as though the lady in question had just breezed in. It was sending the proverbial shiver down her spine when, just at that moment, she heard chair legs scrape across the stone tiles, rapid footsteps, a banging followed by a tortuous scream. 'What the hell?' she shouted, jumping up. She made for the kitchen but caught a reflection in the wall mirror on the way. 'Oh my God,' she gasped. The door slammed before she could reach it. She tried to push it open but was stopped by something lodged behind. Through the crack, she could just make out the puppy, shaking and whining. 'What's going on?' she shouted, holding the dog back with her foot whilst pushing the door open.

'Oh my God,' she exclaimed, clamping her hands round her face.

Lying across the dishwasher drawer was Ellie, the long-bladed knife sticking up through her back.

'Joel?'

'She tripped over the dog.'

PART THREE

Chapter 19

5th March 2019, 11.30am

At a rhythmic beat, a dual-screened robot spewed plastic tubing, its mechanical breath was keeping Ellie alive. The doctor had told them the knife had missed her vital organs and somehow bypassed her heart and lungs. She had been stabbed in the centre of her chest, missing the windpipe and gullet by a whisker. Robin squeezed his little girl's fingers, allowed his thumb to find her wrist where grey-blue veins threaded her skin. He traced the scar, the one she'd obtained from the stitches she'd needed after cutting her wrist. It had grown with her since toddlerhood when she'd fallen on glass on the beach. He touched his cheek, ran a finger along the line of his own scar. Robin glanced over at Jenny's face, tear-streaked and strained after two days of intensive watch.

A nurse crept in. She excused herself to attend to Ellie. Robin watched her study the monitor's numbers and wavy lines, record data on a clipboard she then slipped into a folder at the bottom of the bed.

'How's she doing?' said Robin. Ellie's hand was warm to his touch.

'Heart rate stable. Blood pressure fine. She's doing well. She's a very lucky girl. Doctor will be here soon to give you an update.'

'What do you reckon? Will she pull through?'

'She looks like a fighter to me.'

'God, I hope so,' said Jenny holding Ellie's other hand, her arm resting on the bed.

The nurse nodded and smiled, then slipped out.

Jenny laid her head down to rest.

At least he'd managed some sleep last night, at home, with Joel. Joel's voice rang in his ears. 'It was an accident...honest,' he had yelled at the policeman who had interviewed him late on Friday night. That was after the firemen had gone. An image of them dismantling the dishwasher drawer flashed in his mind. 'We can't pull it out,' the paramedic had said. 'We might not be able to stop the bleeding.'

Robin felt sick — at the flashback of his daughter still stuck to the knife being stretchered to the ambulance on the drawer. He started to retch and got up, had to steady himself before making for the bathroom in the corner of the private room. He closed the door and knelt on the floor, lolled his head over the toilet seat. Nausea and dizziness made him feel unsteady and strange. The bathroom dazzled white, the fluorescence forcing him to narrow his eyes. Serenity bathed the room, a capsule of solitude away from that irritating mechanical sound. He lifted his head. His light-headedness was beginning to wane. After a moment, he sat back on his heels, pushed himself up and leaned on the sink, gazing through the mirror. Under this light, every wrinkle and blemish stood out. He pushed his fingers through his thick crop of hair, darker on top, the sides revealing grey. At least that twitch hadn't returned. It always came out under stress, pulsating his bottom lid.

On returning to her bedside, he took Ellie's hand and jiggled it. There was no response. 'You can't wake them up,' the doctor had warned. 'Like you can if they had just fallen asleep.' Robin sat down and mulled the scene, tried to imagine how it had come to this. He pictured the Manners's kitchen from a point by the back door, the light coming in from the window on the right, the dog running around, ducking under the table, knocking chair legs, and Ellie chasing it, giggling excitedly, until, suddenly turning and changing direction, it catches her off-guard and trips her up so that she flies

over its body straight on to the knife. The policeman had asked why the drawer had been left open. 'To let the pots dry,' Joel had said, ever so calmly, and on being pressed further admitted he had left the drawer open because that's what Mum always said to do. 'Can you explain why the knife had been left with its blade sticking up?' Joel had shrugged. He said he'd been playing *Hole Down* on his phone at the time, and it had happened so quick. He'd admitted getting annoyed with Ellie, for disturbing him, had told her to take the dog out. That had been his story, the explanation he had given to the police.

Robin's phone pinged. He placed down her lifeless hand. 'Scarlett' denoted an incoming text. 'Fuck.' He frowned. 'What does *she* want now? As though I've haven't enough on my plate.'

Jenny raised her head. 'What is it?'

'Meet me today or I'll go to the editor got somethin he'd wanna publish tomorz.'

He showed her the screen.

Jenny screwed her eyes. 'She's got something to publish? About what?' She sighed, pulled a hand down the side of her face, uncovering what seemed a faint bruise on her cheekbone.

About what? he tapped.

Ur son!!! came the reply.

'She's got more stuff on Joel,' said Robin. 'I told you at the funeral.'

'What stuff?' said Jenny, frustration in her voice.

'Just going to ask that.' *What about my son?* he tapped. 'What the fuck does she know?'

It pinged.

He held it towards her.

'Your son? Haha - liar LMFAO,' she read. 'What's LMFAO?'

'Laughing my fucking arse off...something like that.'

It pinged again.

Uv got til 4 goin to im if u dont show up. 'Oh fuck.' He showed her the text.

'I told you to sort her, Robin.'

'Fat chance I've had since Friday.'

'Go and see her, see what she wants...get it over and done with...it could be all over the press tomorrow.'

'Ellie's...accident is going to be all over the press. Jesus Christ, if she's going to spill the beans over something else, what could it be?' He shook his head. 'How does *she* know that Joel isn't ours?'

Jenny's worry lines seemed to deepen.

'You haven't let something slip, have you? In one of your meetings...when you were paying her off?'

'Just go, Robin. Silence her for God's sake.'

He took a sharp intake of breath. 'Am I hearing right? You're kidding me...what is it, Jenny? What's going on? How could someone like her know our situation?' He sat up straight, surveyed her face, she was looking away. 'She's not the mother, is she?'

Jenny closed her eyes.

'You know something.' He lowered his voice. 'What the fuck have you got us into? It's got to be something worth blackmailing for. Don't tell me that woman knows something about Joel that even I don't know.'

The door opened. The doctor and a nurse came in.

'Mr and Mrs Watts, would you mind stepping outside please. Nurse will stay with Ellie.'

'Why?' said Jenny.

'Patients in comas can often hear what is going on around them,' the doctor said, quietly.

Robin's heart skipped a beat. 'Is it bad news?'

'We need to talk in private.'

Robin looked back at Ellie before they followed the doctor out into the corridor and into a vacant room a few doors down. The room was clinical and stark, just a couple of plastic chairs this side of a desk in front of a window with what looked like a boiler room view. The doctor took a seat, opposite, and leaned on the table, hands clasped. He looked stern and serious. Robin's heart sank. He placed his hand over Jenny's, clenched on her lap as she hunched on the chair next to him.

'The prognosis is difficult,' he began. 'I have to be honest, chances of survival where thoracic impalement is central is usually fatal, due to location of major vessels and heart in the thoracic cavity which...'

'She's going to die?' said Jenny. 'Why don't you just say it?'

'Jenny?' said Robin taking a deep breath. 'Try to keep calm, let the doctor finish.'

'However, Mrs Watts, Ellie's youth and good health is on her side.'

Robin breathed a sigh of relief and squeezed Jenny's hand tighter. 'What chance has she got?' he said.

'Well, she is stable. She is not getting worse. If this continues then the next step would be to remove the ventilator so that she can breathe on her own...'

'When will that be?'

'Time will tell, Mr Watts. We must give the body time to try and repair itself. It has had a most difficult trauma. But, as I say, she is young...' He widened his hands and attempted a smile. 'We can only hope.'

'So, what happens now?' said Robin. He was stroking Jenny's fingers with his thumb.

'Well, we wait until she is taking in a good amount of oxygen, remove the ventilator and then, hopefully, she will breathe by herself, and we give her time...a lot of time...to recover.'

'And her chances of recovering?' said Robin.

'It could be as high as...' He waved one hand repeatedly. 'Fifty...per cent?'

'You call that high?'

The doctor made a face.

Robin followed the sat nav's quickest route. He had texted the Scarlett woman to tell her he was on his way as soon as he got into his car at the John Radcliffe, before escaping Oxford and making for the M40 and London. The wiper blades cleared an arc of rain intermittently revealing an overcast sky. No break in the cloud, there was no blue in sight to perk up his mood. The rain had set in, the spray from the traffic becoming worse, making it difficult to see by the time he passed High Wycombe where he switched the blades to high and had to slow right down, moving at a snail's pace past Hedgely and Fulmer to the junction of the M25 as it wound its way north of London. Robin knew he was taking a risk using this route, but he'd weighed up the odds, informing Mrs Scarlett of the one hour thirty-eight minutes his Map app had predicted the journey should take. Monday was a good day to travel, he thought, the weekend country escapees back in town on a Sunday, ready for the weekly grind. Approaching the junction to the M25, he came to a stop where a high-sided van blocked his view. He drummed anxiously on the steering wheel and muttered expletives at a silver-haired man in a car in the next lane, frightened of nipping into a bumper-to-bumper line of

incoming traffic from the right. The queue looked ominous. There had to be an accident. He began to sweat. He tailgated the van and cheekily inched his way into the motorway queue. It crawled to meet four lanes approaching from the south and before he knew it, like a tap being turned on, the traffic began to flow. No warning signs heeded delay. Robin exhaled out loud. He overtook the van. Now he could see the road winding its way through the greater London suburbs, a steady line of traffic, at least on the move.

The phone rang. Magda's name appeared on the dashboard's screen.

'Magda?'

'I'm handing my notice in.'

'You're what? I don't understand.'

'It's all my fault, what happened to Ellie, I can't do this anymore, it's all getting to me. I just can...'

'Whoa, whoa, whoa, slow down. What is all your fault?'

'I should have been looking after her. I left them together in the kitchen, alone. I should have been there. Jenny told me not to leave them and I did and look what happened.'

'It's not your fault, Magda. It's a bloody tragic accident, but it...could've happened to anyone.'

'No. I would have been able to stop it...if I had been there. I have problems at home as well, you see. I can't do this anymore. It's too much. I don't want to look after Joel anymore. I can't, I can't st...'

'Listen, listen to me. Just...don't do anything rash.' A BMW undercut him, pulling out in front. 'Fuck you,' he shouted.

'Excuse me?'

'No, I'm not talking to you...some twat's just cut me up.' He dodged into a gap in the outside lane and put his foot down, staring at the driver through the blackened windows as he passed. 'Magda? You still there?'

'Yes, I'm here.'

'We'll talk when I get home. I've got to go to the office first, it's important, then I'll be straight back. Where's Joel?'

'He's uh...in his room.'

'I'll be back as quick as I can. Okay? Bye, bye.'

The traffic began to slow. Robin banged his forehead with his palm. Keeping an eye on the car in front, he brought up Jenny's number. 'Hi, you'll never guess what? Magda wants to quit.'

'Quit? The job? Why?'

'She feels guilty about leaving Joel and Ellie alone. Thinks it's her fault, what's happened to Ellie.'

'Well, it is partly. If she would've done what I'd asked her to do it may never have happened in the first place. I told her not to leave them alone together.'

'You're sounding like me now...blaming Joel, as though he had anything to do with it.'

'I didn't say that.'

'She said she's got problems at home as well. I thought that guy had left.'

'Jan, or whoever it was?'

'Yeah well. She hasn't shacked up with anyone else in the meantime, has she?'

She paused. 'She hasn't mentioned anyone to me.'

The brake lights of the car in front glowed red. 'Shit. We're coming to a standstill. Said I'd talk to her when I get back.'

'And when's that likely to be?'

He shook his head. 'God knows at this rate. I'll keep you posted.' A siren and a blue flashing light in the rear-view mirror were sending his blood pressure up. 'Uh, this is all I need. I've got to go. An ambulance is trying to get through.'

All four lanes had come to a halt. The M25 car park was living up to its name. Robin tapped the screen, again and searched for Andrew's number. At this rate, he'd never get to the office in time. He needed to warn him, before that crazy cleaner got to him first. He needed to make it plain to Andrew to take no notice of her stupid tittle tattle. Whatever she says is untrue, Andrew, believe me. She's lying. She's had it in for me since I caught her nicking paper from the storeroom, and not just a few sheets either, bloody reams of it. She's got no evidence whatsoever on Joel. Evidence, always a necessity for a story, it then struck him that he had no idea what she was going to say, what evidence, if any, she had. It went onto voicemail. 'Andrew, it's Rob. Got an unusual request. If Janet Scarlett, that tea lady in our office, comes to you with something, then, please, turn her away. Can you put her off until I get there? It's important. She's a bit of a troublemaker. I'd rather you didn't speak to her before I see you. Thanks, Andrew, I'd really appreciate your support on this one.'

The traffic started to move. Luckily, his lane was travelling faster than the rest, the black BMW now receding into the distance. That ambulance had already screeched past on the hard shoulder and there was another, on the other carriageway, up in front, where it had come to a stop. Rubber necking, that's what people had been doing. The problem had been on the opposite side after all. He cruised past the scene of the accident, a bump between a car and a van; a nasty one at that, the van's bonnet crushed like a concertina. White van man was probably on his phone. Remembering Magda's call, Robin was puzzled by what she'd said. Something about it all getting to her, but

then the line had broken up, he hadn't caught the rest. Who was getting to her? The job? They'd always treated her well. Not himself, surely? Jenny then? Could be. It had to be Joel. Jenny had dumped him on Magda, ever since the little bastard had struck him with that piece of glass. They'd been on a collision course for the past six months, Joel and Jenny. Her on a rough downhill ride with his twelve-year old self planted firmly at the bottom, unwilling to budge. Perhaps Magda had had enough, although she hadn't said so. She'd always been so patient with Joel, was very tolerant of him, always willing to take his side. 'Huh!' There was only so much one could take.

The rest of the journey ran quite smoothly, apart from a bit of a hitch around Potters Bar where, due to the presence of a police car chugging along, the traffic felt the need to behave itself by slowing right down. Robin checked the time; thirty minutes behind schedule. ETA 2.45pm. He tried Andrew again, but still no joy. He must be in a meeting, Robin thought. That'd be a bonus, as long as he picked up the message as soon as he'd finished. At 2.47pm, he pulled onto the car park in the basement of *The Daily News* then made for the lift.

The lift doors swept open. This floor was like a haven compared to the havoc of the floors below. He walked down the plush-carpeted corridor, past the boardroom to Andrew's office. He put his ear to the door. A woman? He looked at the adjacent door, graced with a sign displaying Editor's Secretary. It was a rare commodity these days, Andrew having the luxury of a personal secretary. But he was the Editor after all. He knocked.

'Enter.'

Robin entered. 'Peta?' he said, hovering in the doorway.

She raised her eyes from the computer's screen. 'One moment please,' and proceeded to shuffle some papers, to tidy things away in a drawer.

Robin exhaled, loudly.

She stopped and stared at him. 'What can I do for you?'

'Has he got company?' He flicked his head in the direction of Andrew's office.

'Yes, he has somebody with him now. Would you like an appointment?'

'Can I ask who it is?'

'Well, not really...'

'It's not Janet Scarlett, is it?'

'Janet Scarlett?'

'The cleaner-cum-tea lady from the newsroom.'

She chuckled. 'I don't think so.'

'Thank goodness for that,' he muttered. 'Can you let me know when he's finished?'

'He actually has...' she began flicking through a diary, 'an appointment...at...'

'Peta.' He stepped forward. 'I'm imploring you. This is urgent. I need to see him before she does.'

'Sounds ominous. I'll do what I can. He's a very busy man.'

'Aren't we all.'

'I'm not trying to put you off, but it's my job to keep the wolves at bay.' She was living up to her reputation, protecting her boss like a guard dog. Suddenly, she opened her mouth, clapped her hand across it. 'Oh, I'm so sorry,' she said. 'I really am...I should have been more thoughtful.'

'You've heard then?' he said raising an eyebrow.

'God yes, how is she?'

'Battling on.'

'I'll go and disturb him,' she said getting up.

'It's not about Ellie,' he said, then left the room.

Robin stepped into the familiar atmosphere of ringing phones and chattering reporters, tapping on keyboards, taking stock of overhead screens showing television news. He acknowledged Tim with a nod, busy on the phone. Tim held up his hand and mouthed something like 'talk soon', the cue to send Robin to his desk at the far end of the room. It was a hike from the lift to his cubicle, tucked away in a corner from the window. That fluorescent light was still flickering over his place, and, from this end of the office, everything seemed blurrier than normal. He felt the eyes of the world upon him. Were they really watching him, pointing their accusatory fingers? He dipped his head, scurried on, and rubbed his eye, picked out an imaginary fleck of gunge, yawned distractedly. On looking up, he stopped short, was surprised to see somebody at his desk. Screwing his eyes, he watched the woman, her back towards him, rummaging around the surface, fiddling with his personal things. When he caught her closing the top drawer of his desk, he decided to quicken the pace.

'Found anything interesting?' he said, standing right behind her.

She turned, then slapped her hand across her chest. 'You frightened me.'

'Jeez, what's happened to you?' he said. 'What are you doing?'

'What does it look like? Tidying your desk.'

'By going through my drawers?'

Her dark eyes were sunk into her head, her cheeks, like hamster pouches, puffed out her face.

'I'm on steroids,' Janet Scarlett said, 'if that's what you're thinking. Been diagnosed with MS.'

'Sorry to hear it,' he said. He was mesmerised by her lips, bulged into an unnatural pout. 'Is that why you're blackmailing us...to pay for cannabis off the street? Can't get it on the NHS?' He had tried to sound sincere.

She opened her mouth to speak, her smile distorted by flesh.

'Sorry,' he said, shaking his head. 'That was uncalled for. I take it you haven't been to Andrew.'

'Not yet,' she said, emphatically.

His eyes were drawn to a pocket in her overall where she shoved her hand to make a fist, to grip something tight.

'Come on, spit it out,' he said, then winced at the thought of someone so afflicted spraying his face.

He noticed her eyes ranging the room and looked over his shoulder. The reporters were still at it, lost in their newshound worlds. 'Do we need to go somewhere private?' he said, turning back. 'Is this information so exclusive?'

She pulled out a piece of paper — official-looking velum, newly creased, in two.

'What's that, then? What dirt have you been digging this time?'

'No more than you're used to...in your line of work.'

He took a step towards her. 'You've had enough from us already,' he said, a quiet quivering in his voice.

'This is extra.'

'Where's it from...this information? How do I know it's kosher?' He'd caught a glimpse of a red line, a border perhaps, as she opened the paper, keeping the printed

side to herself. It was long and horizontal, the paper, and crackled between her fingers.

He was curious. 'Is that what I think it is?'

Her beady eyes turned away from his and she attempted to hide the paper when a hand clamped him on the shoulder from behind. 'Rob, mate...so sorry to hear about Ellie,' said Tim.

Robin turned so that he and Tim were standing face to face.

'How's she doing?'

'Hanging on. We're keeping our fingers crossed.'

'Terrible accident. Andrew has asked me to write a piece...for tomorrow's edition. Is that okay with you?' He looked at his watch then sighed. 'I need to ask you about it urgently. Could you do it, now? Have you got time?'

Robin, tipping back his head, rolled his eyes in a sideways glance.

'Okay?' said Tim frowning. 'It's got to be done by five, mate?'

Robin turned to her. He checked his watch.

'My shift finishes at four. Got to pick my grandson up from school,' said Janet Scarlett, making no bones.

'I'll be with you in two ticks, Tim.' He stared at her. 'Out with it. What have you got?'

Slowly, she smoothed the paper against her body and ironed out the crease in the fold before handing it to him. Robin turned it the right way up. *Certificate Copy of an Entry of Birth* was printed top left. He scanned the form. 'Whose is this?'

'So...you haven't seen this before?'

'What's it to do with me?'

She tapped on a name in a box.

'And?'

'Look again. You know who tha' is.' She ran her finger along the paper until it settled on another name and a date of birth. 'Bi' of a coincidence, innit?'

It was all becoming clear. He was lost for words.

'It'd make a bloody good story,' she said. 'Do you want your dir'y linen washing in public?'

'What do you want?'

'A pay rise.'

'I need to speak to my wife.'

'Well, when she's filled you in, you know where I am.' She brushed past him, leaving him standing there, to read the certificate again.

In a room not much bigger than a cupboard, Robin wrestled with his top button, then pulled open the flaps of his collar to cool himself down.

Tim came in with two mugs and closed the door. He sat in a bucket seat opposite, crossed his leg then started to scribble on a pad. 'Where shall we start?' he said, looking up.

Tim's face began to blur.

'You alright, Rob? You look a bit hot.' He scanned the room. 'Pity there's no window to open. I can open the door?'

'No, no, just let's get on with it, I've got to get home.'

'Where do you want to start?'

Robin leaned back in his seat and looked up at the ceiling. 'Where should I start?' he said, holding his chin in both hands. 'Alice's funeral, Friday.'

'Alice? Lady Manners? Jenny's Mother?'

Robin nodded. 'Apparently, Jenny was busy running around at the funeral, seeing to people, serving tea, mingling. She left M...Magda...' He leaned on his knees, covered his face in his hands.

Tim leaned over and touched his arm. 'Take your time. I know it's hard.'

'Jenny left...Magda in charge of the kids at the funeral.'

'Magda's the nanny.'

'From what Joel said to the police, she was busy most of the time.' He rolled his eyes. 'Helping out, washing up. She was in the dining room when Ellie let the dog into the kitchen. Ellie bathed it first in the sink. That really annoyed Joel, he said, the water going everywhere, making a mess. Then the puppy started running around, tried to dry itself against his leg and Ellie started chasing it. At one point, it escaped into the dining room next door and that's when...Magda shut the door to stop it going in. Joel said she was doing a job in there for his... then she...tripped over the dog and...' He closed his eyes tight shut, tried to squeeze back the tears. 'Fell on the knife. The blade went...

'Okay, mate, you don't have to say anymore, I've got enough...'

'Then Magda rang me and told me what happened.'

'What? You weren't there?'

Robin shook his head. 'No...don't ask.'

'So, who saw it happen?'

'Joel. He's the only witness.'

On his phone, lying on the front seat of his car, there were five missed calls from Jenny.

'Fuck,' he said then tapped her number. The ring tone kept fading in and out and when she answered, her voice was crackly.

'Where've you been, Robin? I b... trying to get hold of you.'

'Sorry? Are you driving?'

'Yes .. m. wa. home.'

'What? You're going home? Why?' He gulped. 'What's happened?'

'The doctor's said...'

'What? I'm losing the signal.'

'...tak...vent...o...'

'I can't hear you properly. You said something about the ventilator? Oh God, what's happened? Is Ellie, okay?'

'Hang on, I'll p... o... I'm los... ... sig...'

Robin wound down the window. The car was hot and stuffy. He stared at the phone, willing it not to disconnect.

'They're taking her off the ventilator,' said Jenny.

'I can hear you, now. Off it? Why? What do you mean?'

'They say she's improving. She doesn't need it anymore.'

Robin breathed a sigh of relief.

Chapter 20

Monday, 5th March 2019 at 4.30pm

'Mystery solved.' Robin threw his keys onto the kitchen table.

Jenny was washing dishes at the sink. 'What are you talking about?' she said. She continued to scour a pan. Robin caught a whiff of something burning in the air. A faint haze of smoke, hanging above the Aga, was seeping through the open door, the one which led into the garden. He thought it was chilly when he came in. Hearing footsteps, Robin turned to see Joel tripping down the hall. The boy stopped dead in the doorway.

'Why the long face?' said Robin to him.

'We've had some good news, Joel.' Jenny had turned, was peeling off her rubber gloves. 'Ellie's getting better. She's out of the danger zone, now.'

Joel grimaced and shrugged.

She put down the gloves and went to him. 'That's good, isn't it?' she said, reaching out with both hands.

'What's good?' he said, knocking her hands away.

'That Ellie's on the mend.'

Joel stepped back as she moved towards him.

'We can celebrate. Get your favourite pizza in.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'You haven't got a temperature, have you? You look rather flushed,' she said attempting to touch his forehead.

Joel blocked her with his hands.

'What's wrong with *you*?' said Robin.

'Nothing,' said Joel, scowling.

'Your sister is going to live, and you've got a face like a wet weekend?'

Joel grabbed the handle and pulled the door towards him, slamming it in their faces.

The magnets, holding up a drawing Ellie had done of Mummy and Daddy with sticky-out limbs, fell off the notice board next to the door. Robin caught the crayoned picture as it wafted to the floor. 'Do you think he knows?' he said, stretching up.

'About what?'

'Take a look at this.' Reaching inside his jacket pocket, he took out the birth certificate and handed it to her.

'What's this?' she said, opening it up.

'Read it.'

He watched her examine the certificate, noticed the way she pursed her lips like she always did when she was fraught.

She turned her back on him. 'Where did you get this?'

'Janet Scarlett, of all people.'

She pulled out a chair and lowered herself onto the seat. Resting her elbows on the table, she held her head in her hands, letting her hair fall across her face.

'Janet Scarlett,' he heard her say.

'How come *she* had his birth certificate?'

'I don't know. This is a copy. You can tell. Anyone can get a copy.' The colour seemed to have drained from her face.

'I'm confused. Why would *she* want a copy?' He was testing her, seeing how long she could hold out with this game of pretence.

Calmly, he said, 'Is this who we think it is?' He pointed to a name.

She spread her fingers to slowly iron out the creases.

'Jenny?'

She tucked a wodge of hair behind one ear.

He tapped on a different name. 'And who do you think this is?'

Scraping back the chair, she hauled herself up and began to pace the room.

Robin picked up the certificate and thrust it under her nose. 'Jenny? You've gone quiet.'

She was trembling on the spot.

'Have *you* seen this before?'

Her hands started to shake.

'You have, haven't you?' he said, a seed of anger growing in his voice. It was difficult holding it back.

She nodded; her face screwed up as though about to cry.

'Magdalena Wis...niew...ska? Huh! MW.' He was on his high horse, now. 'Our nanny? Joel's real mother? It was her, sending him cards and, us, emails.' Robin shook his head. 'And Jozef. You'd wanted to call him Joseph. It was too biblical for me. Mary and Joseph. This is...unbelievable. How long have you known about this?'

She sighed, heavily.

'How long?'

'Years.'

'How many? Look at me. Say it to my face.'

Her mascara was smudged. 'Thirteen years.'

He became rooted to the spot, felt the tension rising until it ran through his body like an electric shock, morphing him into an oddity. His fingers were set, like claws, as though about to strangle someone and he had to stretch them out, so that he could run

them through his hair. He held his head as though in pain. 'You were expecting him that day. From the very start. The moment we found him in the kitchen.'

She pushed her fist against her mouth. Both cheeks were streaked black.

Welling up, he could only see her face through a blur. He didn't recognise this woman anymore. Betrayal was not strong enough a word. 'It's pointless holding back, now. I want to know everything. I can't believe you've kept this a secret from me all this time. I'll give you this much, I don't know how the hell you managed it. Is Magda still here?'

'Upstairs.'

'I'll go and get her. See what *she's* got to say for herself.'

He leapt up the stairs, two at a time, calling for Magda on the way. Turning the corner at the top, he didn't have far to go as she was there, perhaps in expectation, standing with her back to the window, the one which looked over the square.

'We need to talk,' he said approaching her, shadowed against the light. He stopped in mid track, her eyes red-rimmed, grey patches below. 'Magdalena Wisniewska, hey? *You've* got some explaining to do.'

She tried to hide, both hands pressed around her face. 'How did you find out? Did Jenny tell you?'

'No, she did *not*. That's just it, she's been hiding it from day one. I'm only her husband, why not tell *me* that our...son belongs to our nanny?'

'It's a long story.'

'However long, it's got to come out...'
Robin heard a creak on the stairs. He leaned over the banister. Joel's hand was on the newel post before disappearing out of sight. 'Does *he* know? Have *you* told him?' he said, jabbing a curled thumb.

'No. No. I haven't said a thing. I may have given birth to him but he's not my responsibility. I gave that up long ago. If it wasn't Jenny, then who told you?'

'A woman at the office.' He took a step closer and jutted his jaw. 'A mere cleaner would you believe.'

'A cleaner?'

'Don't tell me you don't know,' he said, shaking his head. 'She presented me with his birth certificate this afternoon. Magdalena Wiesniewska? Is that how you pronounce it? Mother of Jozef Wiesniewska. You and him. You're the mysterious Mary Watts. The one who stalked us from the beginning...until we employed her and then puff.' He clicked his fingers. 'She disappears. How convenient. Why use Watts?'

For a moment, she covered her face with both hands, before sliding them away. 'It was just an, how do you say, alias. It was hard...giving up my baby. I needed to be near him. It was a way of connecting with him. I used your name... to make you think I was a relative of yours, so that you'd keep him and then I could always be around him and watch him.'

'What do you mean you could always be around him?'

'Jenny and I agreed that...when I gave him up, she would employ me as a nanny. I wasn't prepared to do it otherwise.'

Robin shook his head. 'Fucking hell, you're like partners in crime. You worked it all out beforehand.'

'I'm sorry you didn't know.'

'Is this why you're quitting the job? You don't want him to find out who you are?'

'I'm leaving,' she said, wiping her eyes, 'because...I don't want to do this anymore. I've told you; I've had a terrible shock.'

'What kind of shock?'

'I can't, I can't...'

He looked at her askance. 'What's happened?'

'I've let you all down, leaving the children alone in that kitchen. If I hadn't have left them, this might not have happened to Ellie.'

'This is the shock then...of seeing her on the knife?'

'It was horrible. I can't get it out of my mind. I'm not capable of looking after them anymore. That's why I want to leave. I've failed as a nanny and...as a mother.'

He was drawn to the chandelier; its glass-reflected light speckled the ceiling with a sudden burst of sun. 'I see it clearly, now. You've been dropping clues all along. You were always on his side, chivvying him up, being kind to him, even though he was a little shit. I thought you were just doing your job, being a good employee. You and Jenny...you were so convincing. You deserve Oscars, the pair of you...the way you kept it up...the deception.' He ran his hands through his hair again. 'I feel so humiliated. I'm supposed to be an investigator and I just didn't see it. You'd better come down. We need to thrash this out, the three of us...and then there's Joel; he'll need to know the truth. And if this doesn't send him off the rails, I don't know what will.'

The kitchen took on a courtroom vibe. The two defendants sat either end of the table whilst he propped himself against the sink, holding his chin, flicking his gaze between his wife and their nanny who were avoiding each other. Jenny looked set for a fight, digging her nails into her jeans whilst Magda, hunched on the seat, looked defeated already. They'd been caught on the hop, no time to prepare a story.

Breaking the silence, the grandfather clock chimed five through a slit in the door.

'So, who's going to start then? Magda? Jenny?' He batted from one to the other.

'Don't treat us like kids,' Jenny sneered.

'Ha! You haven't exactly been acting like sensible adults. Keeping a secret like this. Deceiving me all these years. I don't know who you are, Jenny? Not the woman I married. Go on,' he continued, raising his voice, 'tell me about this...arrangement? I'm right, aren't I? It was an arrangement between the two of you?'

'You knew nothing,' Jenny said, banging on the table, 'about how I felt at the time. You had no comprehension of what it was to be childless...to know that you could never have children. What that can do to a woman. How desperate I was to be a mother, to have a child of my own...'

'Of course, I knew. We'd been through IVF, contacted adoption agencies, had meeting after meeting with them. But you...dismissed the idea of adoption.' He threw his hands in the air.

'That's because there weren't any newborns to adopt...except from abroad. It was too much of a hassle...the vetting process...the wait. I wanted a baby quicker than that. And...I wanted a white newborn.'

'Huh! Your mother...'

'My mother what? Why bring her into it?'

'Bringing someone with a...I won't go there. She made it quite clear she was against adoption. What did she call Joel? A foundling? Corrupting the family tree? There was no way she was going to let a stranger get their hands on the family fortune.'

'You didn't want him either.'

'Yep, hands up,' he said, holding up his hands. 'I didn't. He wasn't ours to have.'

'I was desperate for a baby. This was a way of quickening up the process...'

'And she had one going spare?' he said, nodding at Magda.

'I had no money,' said Magda.

'And *she* provided you with some?'

'And why not?' said Jenny. 'I was helping you, wasn't I, Magda? I was getting what I desperately wanted...'

'Like you always do. That's what the rich do, isn't it? Pay for what they want.'

'She was a...kind of surrogate. She was already here in this country. I didn't have to go abroad. And you needed the money, didn't you?' She eyed Magda, her lank blonde fringe partially covering her face. 'You did, didn't you?'

Magda nodded.

'Ahh. I remember now.' He held up a finger. 'That cheque. The one for half a million quid, the one you dropped in the hairdressers.'

'It wasn't that much,' said Jenny.

'Five hundred thousand sounds a lot to me.'

'I meant that I didn't pay that much. I dropped it by accident. It was a stupid to do. I had to write out another...for expenses, not a payment.'

'Expenses my foot. That's why you didn't tell me, isn't it? You bought a baby. How much did you pay in the end? That's a crime. You could go to jail for that.' He turned to Magda. 'How much did she pay you?'

'I...I don't know,' said Magda, flustered.

'What do you mean you don't know?'

'I didn't see any of the money.'

'Well, who had it then?' He turned to Jenny. 'Who did you give it to?'

'Leave it. It doesn't matter. What matters is that I was helping her out. She was in a predicament. We both were.'

'What do you mean, Magda? That you didn't see any of the money? Who took it? Some middleman? Someone dodgy? Is that why you kept it a secret?' He took a deep

breath. 'You took me in from the start, Jenny, and I believed you. You said the cheque was for IVF, but it wasn't, was it? We'd already tried IVF...'

'And it didn't work. You wouldn't have agreed to paying somebody who...'

'Who what? Too right I wouldn't, especially if it was illegal...which is what it seems to have been.'

'You would've said no. You, on your moral high horse.'

'I have spent my entire career exposing fraud and corruption and yes, I do have morals. But that's how the upper classes get on, isn't it? Why your breed has all the money? The land, the houses. This house?' he said, scanning the room. 'Is this part of some fraud, too?'

'Oh, shut up. Don't talk rubbish. Mummy and Daddy bought this house. It was a legitimate wedding present, you know that. They have never been involved with anything fraudulent in their lives.'

'Not until they produced you. I didn't realise what a fraud I'd married.'

'You're criticising me for taking on a helpless child from...!' She waved a hand at Magda. 'Someone in need.'

'I never wanted to give him up. I had no choice.' Tears were rolling down Magda's cheeks.

He turned to her. 'Were you forced into handing him over?' He looked at Jenny then back at Magda. 'Why didn't you go through the proper channels?'

'I would have done it properly, but I was here, illegally. I would have been found out. It was so hard, giving up my own flesh and blood.'

'Illegally? Were you trafficked? Is this middleman some sort of criminal? A gang leader?'

Magda looked sideways at him.

'Ohh, Jesus Christ.' He pulled his hands over his face. 'I can't believe this, it's straight out of some bloody...thriller. You were so convincing the pair of you. Where on earth did *you* two meet?' He looked from one to the next.

Jenny covered her mouth with her hands in a prayer-like pose. 'At the hairdressers,' she said, eventually. 'It was Jodie who told me about Magda's situation. We met and agreed on... expenses,' she said, emphatically.

'On a fucking huge price tag, you mean.'

'Rashida Ahmed overheard us talking...'

'Who?'

'The Egyptian woman...the one who followed you here that time and blackmailed you. She works at the same hairdressers. She must have overheard Jodie and me talking, put two and two together after she found the bloody cheque and...'

'Don't tell me. Blackmailed you?'

She nodded. '*Her* and Janet Scarlett.'

'Now, I am confused.' He started to pace the room.

'They know each other. They both work at the hairdressers. And Scarlett's the same bitch who just happens to work in your office, too.'

'So...they worked out you bought Joel and wanted their cut?' He stopped to lean on the table. 'How much have they got out of us? We've already paid Scarlett off to keep schtum about Joel and her daughter.'

Jenny pursed her lips again, shook her head.

'How much?' He held his face close to hers.

'Does it matter? It's been keeping them quiet, that's all that matters.'

'And now it's out in the open.' He started to pace again. 'I knew I should have reported him the very minute we found him. But you were so taken by him, and I know

what you're like when you want your own way. You were so natural with him. You knew we were going to find him that night. You were so utterly convincing.' He stopped and stared at the floor, rubbed his shoe on the tiles. 'You planned it all...deceiving me in the process. That's the worst betrayal of all.'

'I couldn't tell you. We've already been over that.'

He snatched up the certificate. 'So why did Scarlett wait until now to bring this out into the open?'

'I don't know why she did that.'

'Are you sure? Has she been demanding even more money from you? And if you don't pay up, she'll go to Andrew?' He brandished the certificate. 'More money would stop this being aired in public. The thing is, she knows the whole damn story, now. This is evidence.'

'Surely, he wouldn't listen to her, some bloody jumped-up cleaner. He'd check his facts first — that's what you always say.'

'He's got facts here,' he said, waving the certificate. 'This is a legal document.' He looked at it again. 'Is it legal? If Jakob Watracz is the father, is Joel a UK citizen? Is he entitled to a birth certificate? His parents weren't born in the UK.'

'Yes, he is.' Jenny rolled her eyes. 'We researched it...before Joel was born. His father has permanent residence. Joel has a right to a UK birth certificate.'

'Do you have permanent residence, Magda?'

Magda looked up at the ceiling.

Robin sighed and momentarily closed his eyes. 'Janet Scarlett could easily get another copy. It wasn't difficult getting this one. And if Andrew won't listen, she'll just go to another paper instead. Some rookie journalist would have a field day with this. I can just imagine the headlines.' Palms out, he wiped the air with both hands. 'Journalist

investigating child exploitation pays out half a million for a baby. And the next minute, the police come knocking at the door.'

'Don't go on.' She bit her lip. 'We'll keep paying her. Get her off our backs.'

He stopped to think. 'There *is* something we can do. I've got something *on her*.'

'And what would that be?'

The door to the hall squeaked open a touch. Robin frowned and placed a warning finger to his lips. He crept across the kitchen and pulled it open.

Joel's face was a picture, blood red, a mix of sweat and tears. 'Is all this true?' he blurted.

Robin wiped Joel's spit off his cheek.

'It is, isn't it?' shouted Joel.

The next minute Robin was reeling against the door before landing on the floor. Joel's fist had come at him out of the blue. A dull pain was now searing Robin's cheek.

'For goodness' sake, Joel, what was that for?' said Jenny.

Robin braced himself as Joel brought up his foot — and stepped over him before kicking a chair out of the way and storming out of the kitchen through the door to the lounge.

Robin felt blood on his cheek. He wiped it then examined his nose. It hurt like hell. Jenny was hovering over him, dabbing his face with a tissue. Prostrate on the tiles, the punch had set off a nosebleed. He was seeing stars.

'Keep your head back,' he could hear Jenny say. She helped him to his feet.

He slumped over the table and arched his neck, stuck his nose in the air to stop the blood from dripping on the table. From this angle, he could just make out Magda in the dining room — and him, shouting his head off.

'Go and see what he's doing...he's bloody mad.'

Before she could reach the door, the shouting had stopped, a door banged then footsteps could be heard running up the stairs.

'I didn't realise his strength,' said Robin, inspecting the damage on the tissue Jenny had handed him.

'You haven't exactly been around to see how aggressive he's become,' said Jenny. 'And it's not the first time.'

'The first time for what?'

'For hitting out.'

'Don't I know it.' He pointed to his scar.

'I mean recently. Hanging around with older boys. Getting into fights at school. In fact, starting the fights. I seem to have been called in every week. And it's not just at school.'

'What do you mean?' said Robin.

'Here, let me,' she said, dabbing his nose.

He noticed something on her cheek. 'So, it *was* him? That *is* a bruise?'

She ignored the question.

He winced at the salt on the wet tissue. The bastard. He hadn't learnt this behaviour from them. They'd never laid a finger on him. Robin's head was thumping. It hadn't ached this bad since before his operation.

'Joel!' Magda shouted.

Hearing a thud, they flew into the lounge where a dining room chair was upended and there was Joel — holding a knife at Magda's throat.

'What the hell?' said Robin.

'Don't come near.' Joel spat like a mad dog; he was slathering at the mouth.

Robin recognised the same blueness uniting the eyes of mother and son. 'Put it down Joel,' he said, calmly. 'We can talk about this.' He took a step forward.

'Get back,' shouted Joel. He held the knife closer to Magda's throat.

Robin put out a hand, like a detective persuading someone not to jump. 'Put it down, Joel. You don't mean this.' He was trying to sound in control.

'You've been giving me shit...all of you,' screamed Joel. His face was contorted, seething with anger.

A blood-stained smear on the blade sent alarm bells ringing. Robin could see Joel's hand shaking, the blade grazing her chin. 'Come on, Joel. We can talk about this.'

'What? Now? After all this time...you've left it till now?' He jabbed the knife at Robin, then swung it round to Jenny. 'Everyone's been telling me lies. I hate you. I hate you all. And especially *you*.'

Magda yelped as he appeared to be strangling her.

Robin was beginning to sweat but knew he had to stay calm, stop himself from running his hands through his hair.

'You gave me up.' He squeezed Magda's neck again, then prodded the blade at Jenny. 'And you paid for me like...something from a shop. And you,' he said, growling into Magda's ear, 'you let her.'

'It wasn't just for money, Joel. I was desperate for you, I wanted you so much,' said Jenny.

'My real mother sold me,' he cried.

'No Joel, it wasn't like that,' said Magda, trying to back off from the knife.

'We just wanted to give you the best.' Jenny was welling up again. 'You've wanted for nothing, Joel. We've always loved you. We've given you everything.'

'Not everything. You haven't given me the truth.' Joel juttled the blade nearer Magda's neck. A droplet of blood appeared.

'Please, Joel. I am so sorry,' said Magda, 'Please let me go — you're hurting me.'

'And you haven't been hurting me?' He squeezed his arm tighter.

Robin spotted a faint red line where the knife had touched her skin. He wiped the perspiration from his brow. 'Just tell us what you want, Joel?' he said.

'Anything? Anything I want? I want the truth. Now.' He pulled her closer.

'I have something to tell you...' Magda gasped.

'Well tell me then — it's about fucking time.' The veins were bulging in his neck.

Magda flinched at his grasp.

'Let her speak, Joel,' said Robin. He licked his lips as his mouth was dry. 'You're holding her too tight. She can't speak unless you do.'

Joel relaxed his grip, lowered the knife a touch.

'Your father,' Magda began, 'your real father...'

'Who is he? I want to meet him.'

'He's at my flat with...'

Joel jerked the knife back under her chin. 'What? He's been around all this time? Living with you? My real father? And I've had to put with *him*?'

Huh, Robin thought, the feeling mutual.

'Take me to him. That's what I want. I want to go to him. You said you'd do what I want. Take me — now.'

'Hold still,' said Jenny after lifting Magda's chin. An elongated pinkish-reddy bruise had already begun to form. The blade had skimmed the flesh, catching the skin like a

shaving nick, so that a tiny speck of blood bubbled on the surface. Jenny pressed it with a tissue and held it on the spot before releasing the paper to check the bleed had begun to slow. Magda was still shaking; she hadn't stopped, not since Joel had agreed to drop the knife after demanding Robin drive him to the Hackney flat. Magda had gasped out the address in spurts amidst a raft of panting little breaths.

Jenny examined Magda's face. The colour had drained from her; not that she had a rosy complexion in the first place, something she and Joel obviously did not share. He would turn red at the slightest opportunity, especially during tantrums which didn't take much to spark. 'How are you feeling?' said Jenny. 'Here, sit down.' She'd righted the chair from the floor.

'Not good,' said Magda, sitting. 'I'm still in shock. I can't believe he could turn on me like that. But then again...I don't know why I'm so surprised.'

Jenny pulled up another chair to place it next to Magda. 'What do you mean?' said Jenny, hugging Magda's shoulder.

'I think you need to know what I saw...at the funeral...with my own eyes. What really happened in the kitchen.'

'I thought you weren't in the kitchen when it happened?'

'That's right...I was in the dining room...'

'Then how could you know? It was an accident. Ellie tripped over the dog.'

Magda looked at Jenny, tears brewing. She shook her head. 'It wasn't like that.' She clenched her hands, her knuckles white. 'I was in the dining room...but the door to the kitchen was open and through the mirror, the one in the dining room near to the kitchen...' She closed her eyes and gulped. 'I saw what happened through the mirror. I saw everything...as plain as could be.' She dropped her head.

Jenny squeezed her shoulder. 'Go on. Tell me. What did you see?'

'She didn't trip over the dog. It wasn't an accident. Yes, I did leave her playing with it and I shouldn't have done that, I blame myself for...'

'Sh sh sh. Stay calm, just tell me what happened.'

'She was chasing it round...I could hear it, the dog barking, her laughing, getting excited. The next thing, I heard him telling her to stop. He was getting angrier and angrier, I could hear it in his voice, and I thought...oh no...here we go again, and I was just about to get up to see what was going on when I saw him, through the mirror. He forced her onto the knife. He had her from behind, gripping her elbows. I'll never forget the look on his face. He was enjoying it. He knew what he was doing. I ran into the kitchen but by the time I got there he was already sitting down, looking all innocent and calm...showing no emotion whatsoever. Oh God.' She buried her face in her hands.

Jenny was stunned. She stared into the kitchen, at the table, where it had all begun. She was looking but not seeing. Her mind was in a whirl. She was trying to picture the scene Magda had just described. It was shocking. 'Are you sure that's what happened?'

'Why would I make it up? Why would I confess to something that makes us both so unhappy? Why would I want to do that?'

Jenny knew it was true; there was no point disputing the fact. How wicked and evil could it get? A gruesome bond linked them. She had raised the killer that Magda had produced.

Robin was on the King's Road by now, thankful they were on the move. Only the traffic hummed as Joel had put himself on mute. He'd asked Joel about a tattoo on the boy's neck when he'd climbed into the car. He'd tried to be reasonable, asking if Jenny knew about it. But Joel had taken the humph. At this rate, half an hour of the cold shoulder

couldn't end too soon. He recalled the tattoo, a snake, its forked tongue licking the bony bulge of his top vertebrae, the rest of its body hidden beneath his scruffy black hoodie. The choice of tattoo was rather pointed in the circumstances — a sneaky, slimy little beast. Alice came to mind — brain-damaged — in a coma. Surely, he'd had no intention of hurting Magda, too? His own mother. Bloody hell. What a fucking mess.

A red traffic light brought them to a stop. He took a sly look at Joel, gripping the knife's black handle. In the house, Joel had threatened Robin with it, had backed him into a corner of the lounge, insisting the knife came too. A flick knife perhaps, or was it? Not the penknife he'd had in the scouts, the one which Jenny had bought following his persistent pestering where she'd finally given in. Not a good gift for a child of ten, and a deranged one at that. Robin dared to probe. 'Where did you get it? The knife?'

'This?' said Joel, suddenly swinging round to brandish it at Robin who had to back away from the blade nearly touching his cheek. 'Fuck,' exclaimed Robin. A grin like a demented Cheshire Cat was spread across the boy's face.

The car behind then blasted its horn at the now green light. Robin thumped on the pedal; the Jag shot forward just missing a van. 'What the hell, Joel?'

The boy laughed, swaying backwards and forwards like a hysterical clown.

'Please, Joel, calm down.'

'You should have seen the look on your face.' Joel guffawed. 'It was mint.'

'You could have killed me. What were you thinking of?'

'What were *you* thinking of, not telling me the truth? Lies, lies, lies, that's all I've ever had.'

Robin turned away, from Joel's dirty, black look. He peered through the driver's window where St James's Park was now fading as darkness closed in around them, and

Green Park, opposite, was just as dim. 'We were just doing the best for you. Magda couldn't keep you. *She* wanted the best for you, too.'

'But my real father may have wanted me.'

'Well, we'll find out soon enough.' For all Robin knew, he could be as devastated as Joel. Did he know he had this child? From the pit of his stomach, acid was churning, indigestion beginning to strike. His mobile rang. 'Scarlett' came up on the hands-free. Reluctant to speak in front of Joel, he erred for a moment on whether to take the call or not, but there was no time like the present. He tapped the green spot. 'I'm driving. Got Joel in the car.' He waded in first. 'Before you do anything rash, I've got something important to say...'

'Have you spoken to your missus?' said Janet Scarlett.

'Never mind about that. There's no point in you going to the boss — you won't be believed. I'll make it clear he'll be dealing with a thief.'

Joel turned to him, all ears.

'You calling me a thief?' she went on. 'I was given that money...'

'Especially when I report you to the police...'

'What have *I* done? It's you and your missus who should be reported...'

'No paper will touch your story; I'll make sure of that. They won't deal with the likes of you.'

'I've been keeping the rozzers off your backs...'

'Tell me what's going on?' interrupted Joel.

'It's nothing, it's work, Joel.' Robin was sweating.

'It's all about you, Joel. We know everything...'

Robin could hear the provocation in her voice.

'You've been caught stealing, office stationery...'

'What? A few pens? Everyone's guilty of that.'

'Paper. Reams of it...amongst other things. I've seen you walk out of that storeroom with piles of stuff.'

'That's your word against mine,' she hissed.

He decided to up the ante, to take a punt on her not knowing whether a camera existed in the storeroom or not. There could be one, they were so discreet these days, bugging lights and switches. 'You've been caught on camera — you and your criminal activities...'

'And what about Joel's criminal activities...'

'You've been busted, Scarlett.' He finished the call.

'What does *she* know about *me*?'

'Nothing, Joel. She's just trying to wind me up.'

'I don't believe you,' screamed Joel, undoing his seat belt.

'What are you doing?'

'Getting out,' said Joel reaching for the door handle.

Robin clicked the child lock.

'Let me out, you fucking cunt.'

'Watch your language!'

Joel wound down the window. 'Help me, help me,' Joel yelled, at protesters in Trafalgar Square.

As well as avoiding the crowd blocking the road, Robin yanked at Joel's arm to prevent him from banging on the side of the car as people were beginning to point and stare. Caught in a swathe of EU stars and placards demanding that they 'Stop Brexit Now', Robin inched his way through the throng, fearful of grubby handprints on his car, of metal flag poles scratching its immaculate silver paint.

Robin was relieved to get away, and it wasn't long before they were passing his old stomping ground. He looked longingly down Fleet Street, the old building now a conglomeration of ground floor restaurants with offices piled on top. He tapped nervously on the steering wheel, still reeling from his fight through the demonstration with the added problem of a demented teenager on board, intent at escape. It had taken all his efforts to keep Joel calm, placating him, promising the Earth. 'Yes, Joel, yes, you *can* live with your father — that won't be a problem — I'm sure he'll agree.' It had seemed the only way to stop a major meltdown where Joel had threatened to slash his wrist if he wasn't let out. Robin wouldn't have put it past him; his behaviour had gone to the dogs; worse than any animal he could recall. With his arms crossed and his face set to rage, he glared silently ahead.

To his left, the lights of The Gherkin spiralled in the distance and beyond that, at his office in Wapping; Robin knew his colleagues would still be there; punching out the news. 'That bloody woman,' he muttered, reminding himself of the way he'd caught her sneaking around his desk.

'I'm hungry,' declared Joel.

Robin rolled his eyes, remembering the pizza Jenny had offered. They were passing Smithfield Market, its impressive classical entrance devoid of life at this hour. 'It's not easy to park,' he said as they approached that fancy Russian restaurant he'd taken Jenny — to propose. A black cloud suddenly descended at an image of them holding hands across the table.

He spied the clock on the dashboard glowing 6.20. 'We'll be there soon. Can't you wait?'

'Wait for what?'

'For your father to feed you. It's about time he did his bit.'

'He would have done if you hadn't kept him a secret.'

'I didn't know about him either. I've only just found out myself. I've been kept in the dark just as much as you have. It's your mother who's to blame.'

'Which one?'

'Both. I'm sorry, Joel. You shouldn't have had to find out this way. And in that, I am partly to blame. I was complicit.' He took a peep at Joel. Tears were rolling down Joel's cheeks. Robin felt a rare pang of sympathy. An image of a tiny baby in a dirty blue blanket came to mind. 'There's a Co-op up ahead. Do you want me to stop?'

'I feel sick,' said Joel.

'Do you want me to stop?'

Joel shook his head and sniffed repeatedly as though he had a cold. He wiped his nose on his sleeve, the snot glistening like a slug's trail. His nearly-six-foot frame seemed to shrink in the seat, his head bowed allowing his unkempt curls to hide his face.

'We can't be more than ten minutes away.' Robin shivered at the thoughts of knocking on a stranger's door. *'Hello, I'm... This is... We're here...'* What the hell would this guy think? His phone pinged. A message from Jenny.

'Watch out...' he began to read when Joel suddenly lurched forward holding his stomach. 'You're not going to be sick are you, because I can stop.' It was then that he saw the tip of the knife poking out of Joel's clenched fist. 'You've got blood on your hand. Do you know its bleeding?' Robin pulled up on a wide bit of pavement metres down from a chemist's shop. 'Let me see your hand.' Amazingly, Joel sat up. The knife was still in his hand. Was that a wound where he'd gripped the blade? Should he make a grab for it, risking more injury, or take it, carefully, avoiding any unwanted reaction? 'There are some tissues in the glove compartment. Let me get one out.'

'Leave it, I'm fine,' snarled Joel. 'What do you care if I've cut myself? It isn't the first time. Not that you've ever noticed.'

Even so, Robin reached across to open the glove compartment. Slowly but surely, he took the knife and placed it in the driver's side door. Then he patted the wound with the tissue, pressing it on what little blood there was as the cut was not deep. 'Here, hold this on it,' instructed Robin, directing Joel to the tissue, spotted red, before reading the rest of Jenny's text.

He forced Ellie on the knife. Magda saw him do it, said Jenny's text.

Robin was hit like a ton of bricks. An image of Ellie shot to mind — his little girl impaled. He stared at Joel, imagined throttling him, dumping him on Hackney Downs. The quicker they got to Magda's flat the better.

Robin followed the sat nav on automatic pilot, all the way to Amhurst Road. The flats were square utilitarian blocks like something out of the Gulag. He cut the engine and ran his eye along the rows of identical rectangular windows, his blood boiling. Up there, in one of those boxes, was a man, perhaps with his tea on his lap, glued to the telly, utterly unaware of what was to come. He was welcome to the evil little bastard. 'Are *you* ready?'

Joel held his head down low.

'We're here now. This is what you wanted, and I've delivered.'

'What happens if he doesn't want me?' said Joel into his chest.

'Let's go and find out, then,' said Robin, unstrapping the seat belt with gusto. The place stunk of pee. Beer cans, coffee cups and pizza boxes littered the stairwell. A pile of old needles had been left in one corner of the filthy concrete floor. According to a sign taped to the doors by the London Borough of Hackney, the lift was out of order, leaving no option but to use the stairs, past graffitied walls to Magda's flat on the sixth

floor. With determined steps, Robin climbed the stairs pondering what he might say to this unsuspecting father of a child killer. Before he'd got Jenny's text, he'd been worrying about what he would say. Now he didn't care. He rehearsed his words which would get straight to the point. *'Is this Magda's flat? I'm her employer and this is...your son!'* He winced at the thought. In all his years of dealing with undesirables, he'd never had to face a challenge like this. He imagined the guy telling him where to go, the air turning blue, the door being slammed in their faces, leaving him with Joel — forever. *Not a chance*, Robin thought as he kept his finger on the doorbell determined not to be ignored. Eventually, it opened. Robin had to look twice. The boy in the doorway was as tall as Joel and about the same age with blond curly hair and piercing blue eyes and a hint of goatee stubble — a virtual clone of his evil little son.

* * * *

Critical Exegesis:

Does evil exist in realistic child characterisation in literature? To explore this question, by writing a novel, I took the opportunity to explore my thoughts on what a possible evil child would be like. My thoughts were evolving throughout the writing process which forced me to question my instinctive knowledge of nature/nurture and how that might affect Joel's behaviour. I would have free rein over his thoughts, his behaviour, his interactions with others. That isn't to say I agree with what he does, but through fictional writing I could portray him as I liked. To assess whether Joel's deviant behaviour could be classed as evil, an exploration into the concept of evil was paramount. By capturing different views of evil from Singer (2004), De Witjze (2002), Formosa (2007) and Calder (2015), I constructed a test of evil (based upon their tests of evil) which would determine whether my 'evil' child, Joel, and the other fictional characters in the trope of the Evil Child, were, in fact, evil.

At the beginning of this project, and prior to the application of my test to a sample of children in the trope of the Evil Child in Literature, I was convinced that, as literature can reflect real-life, evil could exist in realistic child characterisation in literature. There were enough real-life examples (Listverse, 2007). As well as Thompson and Venables, other boys listed include seventeen and sixteen-year olds Bryan and David Freeman who bludgeoned their parents and younger brother to death; fifteen-year old Edmund Kemper who shot his grandparents, killing them both; fourteen-year old Joshua Phillips who bludgeoned his eight-year old neighbour to death before hiding her body under his bed; plus numerous school shootings in the United States by boys aged between eleven years and eighteen years old. Girls appear to be less common when it comes to child killers, but exceptions include Mary Bell, the ten-year old who strangled a three-year old boy, and sixteen-year old Brenda Ann Spencer who

used a rifle to wound eight children and a police officer and who, when asked why she did it, answered 'I don't like Mondays', subsequently used in a song by the Boomtown Rats. The fact that they are mostly male is significant.

Black (1999) contends that individuals with antisocial personality disorder (which is most commonly diagnosed in men) have the potential to act in an evil way due to them being primarily concerned with personal desires and wishes, without having an ability to reflect inward on their actions and choice (Black, 1999, in Bickett, 2023).

Indeed, the higher proportion of real-life boys to girls in Listverse is reflected in the evil children of my literature survey. These include Jack Merridew, Niles Perry, Ben Lovatt, Frank Cauldhame, Kevin Katchadorian (and Joel Watts) compared to females, Rhoda Penmark and Merricat Blackwood. Frank Cauldhame is an anomaly as the character is female but was given male hormones in her early years to be raised as a boy. This emphasis on the malevolence of boys may derive from the notion that 'violent women are seen as exceptional, unnatural and “doubly deviant” [where] women's use of lethal violence is especially rare' (Berrington and Honkatukia, 2002, p.1).

Following the application of my test of evil, the result was not what I had expected as most of the characters in the trope of the Evil Child in Literature, including Joel, turned out not to be truly evil because they had a defence, even though they had carried out abhorrent acts of violence and/or murder; immaturity and mental illness being two prominent examples of a defence. When creating Joel, I wanted to explore the complexities of childhood behaviour in a realistic context and in so doing recognised that there was a defence. The application of my test of evil to Joel confirmed to me that he could not be truly evil as his immaturity and mental health condition of Conduct Disorder would clear him of evilness. Therefore, I discovered that true evil is, indeed, rare in the children I have explored.

When seeking an explanation for the actions of the evil children in my literature survey (including Joel), it was clear that the reasons originated from several causes including genetic transmission of an evil gene, the transmission of Original Sin, factors in the environment, hereditarianism and/or poor parenting — the nature/nurture debate. 'And/or' is significant as it will be shown that nature and nurture work together, which was my hypothesis from the start, and are not in opposition to each other and where a portmanteau word such as 'ambinature', which incorporates a combination of 'nature' and 'nurture', could better define the origin of behaviour.

The Origin of the Research

At the turn of the millennium, I switched schools to one in a challenging and more deprived area of Staffordshire. From those days, I have a distinct memory of one of our pupils killing a duck on a local pond. Staff room chat became less of a pleasant interaction at break time to one of shock and disbelief. The pupil who had committed such a wicked act continued with his disruptive behaviour throughout his primary school life. This happening, whereby a child could display such disturbing behaviour, had a lasting effect on my sensibilities, where my initial reaction was to reflect on such a phenomenon and to explore the reason why. As a writer and researcher, when reflecting on my creative practice, I have come to realise that I take a phenomenological approach to writing whether in short stories or a novel. According to Webb (2015), 'phenomenology is a philosophical approach to making sense of the world, its phenomena, and how human beings experience and make meaning from those' (Webb, 2015, p.153); for me, it is the physicality of experiencing through the senses. The duck scenario blew my mind. It seemed unreal that one of our pupils could do such a thing. In my head, I imagined the poor creature being battered with a club, the relentless beating

of a defenceless animal, blood-splattered on the ground, the image replaying in my mind. Joel would do the same to the blackbird, the horror of the scene caught in the readers' minds, their stomachs turning, just like mine. The relationship between the novel and being in the world are concerned with feelings and experiences and the need 'to pay close attention to good intellectual habits...[including] reflective practice...[to] build synergies that shed new light on our investigations of people' (Webb, 2015, p.152). My interest in creating an Evil Child in Literature evolved from my close observation of children in my teaching role, by analysing and processing what I saw, before making notes on what went on, to later making meanings about it. As I write, I read the world around me, meaning that I am interpreting what I see in the real world. By reading a book I can also interpret the content to make meanings and to have an emotional response by seeing images in my head, but by being in the world, by seeing and hearing at first hand, then the emotional response is raw. I recall a situation where I had to record for evidence the playground behaviour of a particular troublesome child. In the classroom, the pupil showed little disruptiveness, but outside, in the world of the playground with the opportunity to let off steam, he would punch and kick others without good reason. The physical experience of witnessing the child's violent behaviour towards his peers, the damage and hurt felt by the victim, produced in me an emotional response where I winced at the effect of the blows.

I chose to use a creative methodology to translate that emotional response from experiencing a real-life event, to processing what I had witnessed by conducting research, with the intention of creating a fictional 'evil' child. The research involved exploring the concept of evil and the subsequent construction of a test of evil, based on prior tests, to assess the extent of evilness in the children in my literature survey (including Joel). Significant to the research was an examination of psychological

theories and how they could be used to underpin Joel's behaviour by showing the effects of nature and nurture upon him. And by the application of literary writing techniques, including the Snowflake method and the use of Scene Analysis Templates, I had a means of creating realistic characterisation which helped to develop the plot. As Webb states, research gives 'writers the means to develop their own understandings of the world, of themselves as human beings, in that world, and of the creative, practical and ethical ways in which to live better' (Webb, 2015, p.3).

Writing an 'evil' child incurred my experiential 'reading' of the world where 'reading' involves 'examining meaning' - 'it relates to receiving and [...] comprehending. It can mean to gain knowledge from something, to examine and decide upon intention. It's about discerning, attempting to grasp, interpreting' (Harper, 2010, p.25). From this reading of the world, my thoughts were processed and translated into a story that explores the nature of 'evil' and the 'evil' child. To rely solely on reading the fiction of fellow authors which incorporate evil children would be to consider only the product of other writers grappling with such complex ideas, whereas I wanted to explore these issues within my own social and cultural contexts and through an examination of the difficulties facing a writer taking on such a difficult and contentious topic. In this respect, I wanted to explore the concept of evil and to trial it in the writing of a novel to see if I could challenge the tradition of the Evil Child in Literature.

Regarding the playground incident from my teaching days, the physical discomfort of seeing real-life children being attacked and then me having to deal with the perpetrator was one of anger and bewilderment. This experience led me to question the origin of such behaviour and what had caused it. Was it something in the child's nature or had he been influenced by something or someone in his environment, even told to 'hit back', a not uncommon parental instruction in the environs of that school?

When writing *The Cuckoo's Nest*, I was able to explore my feelings of horror through Joel and my concerns about the origins and uncertainty of violence, like the killing of the class pet mouse and Joel's dominance over his best friend, George, whom he is quite prepared to sacrifice at his birthday party. I used my real-life experiences of teaching children and of interacting with parents to shape the characterisation of Joel. When chastised, Joel's reactions are not entirely typical, as in the interview between Robin, Joel and the headteacher regarding the death of the mouse:

'No, I didn't kill him.' Joel began to cry. He turned to Robin and pummelled his chest with his hands tightly clenched. 'I want to go home, I want to go home,' he screamed at the top of his voice, and kicked Robin's legs repeatedly (p.121).

Just because another pupil, Holly, also wanted to take care of the mouse, Joel is prepared to kill it, so that she is deprived of the job. This is a vital scene related to the core concepts and ideas of the research; namely, it shows the beginning of Joel's challenging, atypical behaviour where he begins to deliberately harm, practising his abusive skills on animals initially.

Studies have shown that violent and aggressive criminals are more likely to have abused animals as children than criminals who are considered non-aggressive (Haden and Scarpa, 2005). Often demonstrating anti-social personality traits, they can show a lack of empathy, remorse, and guilt. I wanted the reader to make the link between Joel's disturbing behaviour and the possibility of him becoming a violent offender. Beginning with the killing of a small animal, the mouse, he then attempts to kill a larger animal, the dog, until he ventures to kill even larger animals, the cows. From there, he graduates on to harming humans. His sexual assault of an Explorer Girl Scout and his slashing of Robin's face foreshadows the scene where he pushes Ellie on to the knife. These scenes cause discomfort in the reader. From my emotional experience of observing troublesome children as described above, I was cognisant, through self-reflective

awareness, of how Joel's disturbing behaviour could impact on the reader. It is not just a case of merely observing, but with 'creative writing it is possible to produce work from which audiences can infer the sensation of sun on skin, the experience of viewing someone else's torment' (Webb, 2015, p.155); all phenomenological instances are concerned with feelings and experiences.

I apply 'showing not telling' in my writing as part of a phenomenological approach. It is a standard writerly technique requiring the art of good observational and representational skills. For example, Robin has a habit of running his hands through his hair when stressed indicating the stress he feels within himself and with those around him. Even such a seemingly small characteristic has resonance in the text. Not only may the reader pick up on this clear sign of stress, but so does the family, including Joel, thus subtly reinforcing Robin's 'otherness' or the effects Joel's behaviour has on people by, for example, pushing Robin out of the familial home. Robin's habit is evident from the start. In this extract, his stress is visible:

'Mum and dad are coming tonight...you hadn't forgotten, had you?' She was eyeing him through the hall mirror, with that schoolmarmish look she had perfected. He leaned forward on the desk and ran both hands through his hair (p.10).

For the phenomenological researcher it is not possible to totally detach yourself from your culture and, therefore, the writer is at the mercy of his/her own background, drawn to people's speech and gestures in their particular realm (Webb, 2015). My working-class origins and my achievement at being one of the first people in my family to get a degree equates with Robin's situation. Seeing that it is Robin's story, I use him as the main source of focalisation in the novel to explore my concerns and feelings. I chose to write in what Jeremy Scott calls Free Indirect Discourse which 'gives the reader an

impression of both a character and narrator speaking simultaneously' (Scott, 2023, p.124).

It was tipping it down, the water splashing around his feet. Peering over the railings to the basement, a miniature waterfall was cascading down the steps flooding the yard below. The drainage still needed sorting. He'd promised Jenny he'd sort it a while ago. Finding a plumber in London, and one who wouldn't rip you off for living in Chelsea, was difficult. He tried the key once more, and with a bit of brute force managed to loosen the door, shouldering his way in. From inside the house, and now unjammed, the door closed more easily. Funny, really; it had never stuck in the wet before (p.8).

Choosing to write the novel from a close third person perspective gave me the advantage of having access to the characters' internal thoughts, allowing them to perceive surrounding characters through their eyes. The authorial voice in *The Cuckoo's Nest* denotes my writing style where I like to use idioms and informal language which is casual and spontaneous. Therefore, Robin would, too. My writing reflects his working-class roots and his grammar school/university education where he speaks with a choice of vocabulary reflecting this socio/cultural mix:

He was washed out. He ran his tongue over his teeth. They felt furry and unclean, that odd salty taste still in his mouth, a side-effect, he figured, of the sleeping tablets his doctor had prescribed for him, until he regained his equilibrium. During the consultation, the doctor had used that very word — equilibrium. Pressure from work had been driving him nuts. Perhaps the glasses he was wearing at the time, the ones he wore to avoid computer-strained eyes, made him look intelligent. Equilibrium, a calm and normal state of mind (p.29).

Even so, however successful Robin has made it in the world, in his career and social standing, it remains that his 'otherness' is a significant theme of the novel. His 'otherness' can be explained by the way his working-class background differs from Jenny's upper-class roots, reflected in the higher social circles in which they move, by the way Joel favours Jenny over Robin, by the way Robin is pushed out of the family home by Joel which all leads to the fact that Robin does not fit in — rather like my childhood self, studious and bookish, living in a working-class family and at odds with

the people around me. To ensure Robin's voice and perspective is the dominant force in the novel, the focalisation, the character who sees the story happening, is mainly through Robin's eyes, evident from the start of the novel exemplified above. By using Free Indirect Discourse, though, I could also show the perspectives of other characters who might have contrasting value judgements towards Joel's behaviour, thereby translating a different emotional response in the reader. However, developing the character of Jenny was more problematical for me, owing to her aristocratic background as I had to step out of my comfort zone into an unfamiliar world. To access her world, I sought out plays, watched television programmes and films and delved into social media. With the use of close observation, a phenomenological approach helped me to be aware of her world enabling me to build meanings from it, understanding and knowledge so that my experience could then be translated into a believable rounded character with strengths and weaknesses. One minute she plays a leading role at work, can show dominance in their marriage, the next:

He had witnessed her reactions to the most innocuous of things — like a spider in the bath or a mouse in the kitchen, the one which forced her to stand on a chair as it skittered across the room (p.39).

In the novel, I have, therefore, blended research of the aristocratic world with myself, as some of what Jenny is, is based upon me. Webb argues that 'it is valid to say that phenomenology is focused on the 'me'' (Webb, 2015, p.155). It was my body and my moods which produced the ideas for my novel; however, I am not the subject of my novel, it is not about me, but about characters created by me who I have thrust into an unusual set of circumstances from which they find it difficult to escape.

As already noted, my intention was for the story to be Robin's, from his point of view. However, following feedback from an agent where she found that she could not root for any of the characters, I reflected on this issue and with guided supervision I

incorporated him into more scenes so that his presence was manifest throughout the novel. When Robin is forced to quit the family, he leaves a void so that the reader loses some connection with him. In this respect, the reader is then able to experience Robin's perspective from the outside. Robin is synonymous with the young reed warbler in the nest, pushed out, on the periphery, even at his mother-in-law's funeral, set apart from his family.

Whilst writing the novel I had to be wary of my biases. Although aspects of my life equated with Robin's — our working-class roots, our schooling, our lives as professionals — I also shared commonality with Jenny as a strong woman, often confident to be taking the lead in her marriage, but at the same time secure in the relationship where she is reliant on her husband to sometimes take control. This extract from early in the novel describes Joel's breathing difficulties as a tiny baby:

'Robin, he's choking,' she cried.
'Give him to me,' Robin demanded, taking the baby from her without her protesting, placing him chest down along his thighs (p.25).

Even when he has left the family home, Robin still returns to support Jenny after Ellie's injury, reflecting the complexities of relationships:

The doctor took a seat, opposite, and leaned on the table, hands clasped. He looked stern and serious. Robin's heart sank. He placed his hand over Jenny's, clenched on her lap as she hunched on the chair next to him (p.261).

During readings of the novel with my writing group, it was pointed out to me that I was portraying Joel in a bad light for much of the time; it was one terrible deed after another. Recent mentoring highlighted the same fault. Nobody is entirely bad, not even Tommy Lee Royce in Sally Wainwright's television drama, *Happy Valley*. He may be a psychopath who has committed horrendous acts of sexual violence against women, but his experience of being reared in a dysfunctional family engenders a grain of sympathy,

however minute. Similarly, in the farm scene in Chapter 15 of *The Cuckoo's Nest*, beta readers have commented on the sympathy they felt for Joel after he is bullied by the upper schoolboys in the race and in the way they bully Joel into carrying out an act worthy of his admission to their secret sect. However, Joel's reactions to this challenge would not apply to most children, and that is, the manner of his revenge — by setting fire to the cows in the barn. Although this behaviour is extreme — some may even say evil — it could be considered the result of an emotional response to feeling pushed into a corner. Does he possess an innate sense of not belonging, forcing him to prove himself? Although Joel is unaware of his 'adoption' until he is twelve years-old, his different physical appearance from that of his 'parents' may well have given rise in him to a feeling of not belonging. The fact that he is an identical twin reared apart from his twin brother (although he is unaware of this until the final chapter) may be significant in this respect. In the Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart (MISTRA) which ran from 1979 for twenty years, a selection of identical twins, who had been raised in separate families and who met for the first time after many years, were observed by scientists to have formed the same uncanny behavioural traits even though they had never known each other until meeting years later. Jim Lewis and Jim Springer were a pair of thirty-nine-year-old reared apart identical twins who 'both spoke of emptiness in their lives that disappeared after meeting one another' (Segal, 2012, p.28). Perhaps this real-life example might help to explain why Joel feels that he does not belong.

A phenomenological approach requires the need for feedback from other writers, supervisors, beta readers and panellists. 'Knowledge-makers rely not on the sensate alone but on reflection and reason' (Webb, 2015, p.196). The creative practitioner, therefore, cannot edit themselves alone, otherwise without editorial opinion, the writer cannot be confident they are not seeing the problems. That is not to say the creative

practitioner should readily adopt all suggestions but should process and take comments on board to recognise the advantages of a critical friend in the reflective process.

According to NAWÉ, 'there should be a way in which critical reflection feeds into practice and vice versa, and there should be some form of reflective work and writing throughout' the exegesis of the PhD (Neale et al, 2018, Appendix 1). One of my beta readers did not like the ending; it was too abrupt in her view with which I agree.

However, I favoured the twist of Joel meeting his identical twin in the novel's last line, the twin unmentioned until that point. As a thriller, it makes a promise to the reader that there is a sequel on the way.

The idea of twins separated at birth is not new; Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* and Willy Russell's *Blood Brothers* are notable examples. Although fraternal twins Mickey and Eddie in *Blood Brothers* are raised in similar contrasting situations to Joel and his twin, what is new in *The Cuckoo's Nest* is the exploration of the potentiality of evilness in one of the twins and whether Joel is another Evil Child in Literature. Something not evident to the reader in *The Cuckoo's Nest* but revealed in a sequel where the working title is *The Evil Other?* is the fact that the twins' natural father is in prison for murder. My intention is for Miki, Joel's twin, not to be evil. This suggests that Joel's disturbing behaviour is a product of ambiguous parenting through the mixed messages Joel receives from Robin and Jenny, therefore rendering the nurture side of the argument significant in Joel's development.

The Concept of Evil

Before exploring whether evil child characters are evil and/or doing evil things, it is, therefore, important to explore a definition of evil, the nature of it, and whether such a thing as evil actually exists.

Since ancient times, philosophers have been debating the nature and origins of evil (Calder, 2020). However, for the purposes of this project, the following examination focuses on articles from the year 2000 onwards in order to narrow the debate to contemporary perspectives, and which are in line with the connection of evil to crime and deviance in particular.

Despite a seemingly deliberate intention in the twentieth century for social scientists to exclude a concept of evil as a means of explaining crime and deviance (Edgley, 2000), there is still much public interest in evil when defining behaviour. A cursory internet search provides a wide variety of websites denoting real-life evil children including 'Top Ten Evil Children' (Listverse, 2007). However, despite the common use of the word 'evil' amongst the general public, there is no mention of 'evil' in connection with serious crime in English Law, and in American Law heinous crimes which could be considered evil are referred to as moral turpitude.

Nevertheless, websites such as 'Revealed: The most evil child book characters of all time' (Furness, 2015) show that evil is of interest in the popular imagination. In her book, *Evil in the Popular Imagination*, Renner (2016) reels out a cohort of books, TV programmes, films and video games which incorporate evil children, including Amma Crellin in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* (2006), Tom Riddle in the film version of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (2002) and from a video game called *Alice: Madness Returns* there is a knife-wielding Alice, of Wonderland fame (2011). During the early 2000s there seemed to be a glut of evil children in this respect, but even up to 2019 an evil child was evident in the form of Joffrey Baratheon from the television series, *Game of Thrones*.

As noted by Edgley (2000), the concept of evil used to account for crime and deviance has been ignored by social scientists due to its religious connotations. In its

place sociological, psychological, biological and economic theories have been used to explain the underlying causes of crime and deviance. However, biological theories which once described criminals as being driven by instinct and hormones eventually displaced evil for a tendency to medicalise human deviance by treating it as an illness. Regarding economic theories, Edgley mentions the work of Gary Becker (1968) who proposed that crime could be expressed in mathematical terms which are a function of consumer demand, allocation of resources and the likelihood of being caught and punished. Sociologists and psychologists have taken a scientific approach to crime and deviance attributing mental illness, cultural differences, consumer demand and society itself as catalysts for criminal behaviour.

These different approaches to what evil might be include a sociological approach where, according to Lemert (1997) "evil is a product of social interaction".

He goes on to say:

The specific conditions under which evil develops include a fragmented political organization, rapid shifts in political alliances, and the frequency of competitive rituals, all of which combine to produce conditions that favor the development of a whole culture that celebrates forms of animosity and violence (Lemert, 1997 in Edgley, 2000, p.160).

The Holocaust is an example of 'human beings' ' collective potential for creating monstrous structures of evil' (Edgley, 2000, p.160). There is still an inclination to link a concept of evil to the most horrendous acts committed by some individuals and organisations. Singer (2004) includes examples of evil which are evil beyond all reasonable doubt. He does this in order to give clear examples which define the concept and nature of evil, for example, 'large scale actions, such as holocausts and genocides and pogroms' (Scarre, 2004, p. 191). Here is an example he quotes from Iris Chang's book, *The Rape of Nanking*:

The Rape of Nanking should be remembered not only for the number of people slaughtered but for the cruel manner in which many met their deaths. Chinese

men were used for bayonet practice and decapitation contests. An estimated 20,000-80,000 Chinese women were raped. Many soldiers went beyond rape to disembowel women, slice off their breasts, nail them alive to walls.... Not only did live burials, castration, the carving of organs, and the roasting of people become routine, but more diabolical tortures were practiced, such as hanging people by their tongues on iron hooks or burying people to their waists and watching them get torn apart by German shepherds (Chang, 1998, cited in Singer, 2004, p.199).

However, for the purpose of this project, I concentrate on a philosophical approach when defining evil. This entails considering ideas from a selection of philosophers who, by rational argument, propose answers to what evil might be. It may be said, however, that sociological reasons, as in the case of the examples above, are a feature of a philosophical approach by default. Following an exploration into the concept of evil from a philosophical perspective, I produced a test of evil, based upon former philosophical tests on the concept of evil, which helped me to determine whether realistic evil child characters in literature were actually evil.

The Concept of Evil: A Philosophical Approach

What is evil? In this section I am deliberating the concept of evil, ideas of what evil might be, based on philosophical debate since the year 2000.

Since 2002, some philosophers have concurred on a qualitative approach when defining evil. Haybron, (2002), Formosa, (2007) and Calder, (2013) suggest that evil is something more than very bad or very wrong; it contains an extra quality of wrongdoing that cannot be compared to something (or someone) that is merely very wrong or very bad. It begs the question, what constitutes something being wrong or very bad from something which is evil? Calder (2013) argues that evil is not just very, very wrong; it sits alone on a spectrum of wrongness/badness, not sharing any of the essential qualities of what is wrong or just plain bad. For Haybron 'evil is an all-or-nothing affair' (Haybron, 2002, p.261), you are either evil or not. However, he does say that there is

still a broad category of evilness, despite its position at the far end of wrongness, in total opposition to saintliness, and makes it clear that evil is entirely distinct from anything merely bad. Singer (2004) is clear on the positioning of the constituent parts on a spectrum:

bad→mean→spiteful→cruel→vicious→malicious→wicked→malevolent→evil

Many arguments on the nature of evil put emphasis on the harm suffered as a means of understanding what constitutes an evil act. It ranges from acts with a qualitative difference causing 'roughly serious unjustified harm intentionally' (Scarre, 2012, p.1), to acts with a quantitative difference where the number of people affected in a harmful way is great. Is there a qualitative difference in the type of harm suffered for it to be evil? The philosopher Scarre takes issue with Formosa when the latter says an evil act normally involves "a life-ending or wrecking harm" (Formosa, 2008, p.230 in Scarre, 2012, p.21). Scarre says there are examples of evil on a lesser scale. Garrard provides an example of a small-scale act which would also cause a huge amount of suffering, like slowly torturing a cat; this could be considered evil.

Evil can be defined in something other than extreme suffering if, as Garrard states, that it is not sufficient for huge amounts of suffering to be included in a definition of an evil act, as World War Two caused huge amounts of suffering but its defensive acts were morally justified and, therefore, not necessarily evil. Scarre states that Garrard points to a perpetrator approach where it is not the amount of harm caused for an act to be considered evil, but the particular nastiness of that act (Garrard, 1998, in Scarre, 2012).

To clarify what evil might be, some philosophers have provided examples of events which may constitute evil. Russell says 'it is despots and war criminals...along with adult serial killers, who constitute the best testcases for whether a person is evil'

(Russell, 2010, p. 57). Singer uses the example of the Rape of Nanking which he calls malignant evil, the worst type in his estimation, committed for evil's sake. He refers to Chang's (1998) book where 'the Rape of Nanking should be remembered not only for the number of people slaughtered but for the cruel manner in which many met their deaths' (Chang, 1998, cited in Singer, 2004, p.199). For Singer, malignant evil is the worst type as exemplified in Figure 1.

(Figure 1)

My interpretation of Singer's gradations of evil

Type of Evil	Description of Evil	Example
Malignant evil	Knowing it to be evil because it is evil	The Rape of Nanking
Ruthless evil	Knowing it to be evil but not caring	Myra Hindley
Fanatical evil	Judging it to be evil if inflicted on those they are concerned about, but not evil if inflicted on those they are not concerned about	ISIL/Ku Klux Klan
Egoistic evil	Knowing it to be evil, but done for other reasons, such as their own convenience	Henry VIII

There is a subjectivity to what might be considered evil. What one person says is evil may be different to another's point of view. Therefore, Singer's attempt to compartmentalise evil is like a test, a way of assessing the level of evilness in individuals or organisations. In this way, Singer has made the intuition process a little less fraught.

A test proposed by De Witjze (2002) includes one or more conditions needed to fulfil an act of evilness. These would include (A) a deliberate violation to dehumanize, denying the basic rights of an individual powerless to retaliate; (B) an action

propounding one or more of 'The Great Harms' which includes 'humiliation, denigration, physical suffering and death' (De Witjze, 2002, p.217); and (C) a desire to annihilate the "moral landscape" in which the views held by a society to uphold dignity and respect and to advocate the unacceptability of suffering. He applies this test to real life and fictional scenarios. An example is Christian Wirth's actions in the Clothing Works incident in Poland during the Nazi regime. One of Wirth's atrocities included his act of forcing a Jewish boy to dress in Nazi uniform and then, whilst riding amongst the prisoners on a pony, ordered him to shoot his parents as he passed them by. As De Witjze notes: 'here we have an intentional act to dehumanize, a deliberate inflicting of "The Great Harms" and the obliteration of the "moral landscape" (De Witjze, 2002, p.223). The act under consideration would, therefore, be classed as evil.

Other philosophers have also developed a test for evil. Calder (2015) suggests that a test for evil causing harm must have three components. Firstly, it must have a harm component where the harm is significant. Calder defines 'significant' as 'extreme' harm, with damaging prolonged psychological effects. Harm can be physical, psychological or emotional or be the deprivation of a person's basic needs for life. Secondly, he says there must be a reason component where the reason is inappropriate, befitting an unworthy goal and if brought to fruition would not make for a better outcome than if it was never begun in the first place. Thirdly, there must be a belief component whereby the evil-doer believes that he/she must cause significant harm for an unworthy goal. To sum up, "when an evil action is performed, the doer does not have good reason to believe that the action she performs does not cause significant harm for an unworthy goal" (Calder, 2015, p.121). Calder presents scenarios to find out if certain acts are evil by using his three-part test. For example, where the Holocaust is tested, Calder says that in Hitler's case, he believed that the carrying out of his act was worthy,

but he used self-deception to convince himself that this was so. The evildoer has a false belief, uses self-deception, is blind, or as Garrard would say, silenced from their evil act.

We do have a choice to prevent such wrongdoings (Russell, 2010), whereas Cole says that sometimes we do not as in the case of those who "perform such actions only out of madness or necessity" (Cole, 2006, in Russell, 2010, p.56). Formosa (2007) adds to this by setting out the conditions which take into account a person's state of mind when performing an act. The conditions include those people who are in a *state* of mental illness, such as schizophrenia; holding a different set of *beliefs* from our own; in a particular *situation*, like when they find themselves in war zones, poverty, with lack of opportunity etc; in possession of a particular *biography*, like an abused childhood; *conditioned*, like when they get used to violence or they identify with others in their group; in possession of a naturally vicious *character*; in particular states due to other *psychological factors*. Formosa argues that such factors would help remove some of the puzzlement/misunderstanding as to why evil acts are carried out; this would help us to explain why some people do evil. Why should we want to understand this? As Formosa says, to try to pre-empt evilness occurring so that it does not happen again (Formosa, 2007).

This project is justified, therefore, in using a test to detect the presence of evil in realistic child characters in literature, including the 'evil' child in *The Cuckoo's Nest*. For the purposes of this exercise, based on former argument, I incorporated different understandings of evil from Singer (2004), De Witjze (2002), Formosa (2007) and Calder (2015) to construct my own test which would determine whether my 'evil' child, Joel, and the other fictional characters in the trope of the Evil Child, were, in fact, evil. The following test is intended to help to establish a character's evilness and/or act(s).

Evil concerns:

- an *abomination* — something more than wrong/bad with an added element which is over and above ordinary wrongness/badness — something completely unacceptable to the general views of a society.
- a *maltreatment* — where a perpetrator must have the intention of seeing someone/something suffer significant harm by bad, cruel or violent treatment. 'Maltreatment' can be physical, psychological or emotional or be the deprivation of a person's/animal's basic needs for life — where the person/animal is powerless to retaliate.
- *inappropriateness* — where an inappropriate reason befits an unworthy goal and, if brought to fruition, would not make for a better outcome than if it was never begun in the first place.
- *annihilation* of the moral landscape — a total destruction of the general views that a society holds where suffering is an unacceptable state of affairs, and where dignity and respect are part of the morals engendered by that society.

It will be assumed that a character's evilness will be established if an *abomination* has been committed, incurring some form of *maltreatment* and *inappropriateness* of action. *Annihilation* of the moral landscape may or may not be requisite.

However, there are *defences* which may counteract the results of the test. These include situations when the individual is:

- in a state of mental illness, such as schizophrenia or has other psychological issues.
- conditioned, such as when they get used to violence or they identify with others in their group — they know no better — as in evil-encouraging beliefs.

- in an evil-encouraging situation eg a war zone, has lack of opportunity, in poverty — a person who is threatened/forced into a particular situation to carry out an abhorrent act — there is seemingly no way out for themselves otherwise.
- a child in their early years of development — for the purposes of this exercise I will uphold that:

'Seven has traditionally been considered the age of reason, a rough turning point in moral development. For more than a century, English common law has held that children under seven cannot commit crimes' (Cloud, 1998).

Cloud's statement is in line with my experience of teaching primary school-aged children where pupils under seven did not really show the requisite moral sense to tell right from wrong. Legally, 'the age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is 10 years of age. This means that children under 10 cannot be arrested or charged with a crime' (Crown Prosecution Service, 2020). In my experience, eight-and-nine-year-olds would generally have a better understanding of what is right and of what is wrong. Interestingly, in the US, 'many states have no minimum age for prosecuting children' (National Juvenile Justice Network, 2023).

Although a defence may exist, the act can still be considered evil even if the intention was not to carry out an evil act. However, for the purposes of this exercise, true evil incorporates evil intention in collaboration with an evil act for an unworthy goal. The question is — are these Evil Children in Literature, including my own character, Joel, really evil? (It is important to note that the robustness of my test of evil may be challenged and that more work could be done in the future to examine the test's efficacy and utility.)

A Literature Survey of the Trope of the Evil Child and the Context for *The Cuckoo's Nest*

The trope of the Evil Child is immanent in post war literature where, according to Renner (2013), there was an attempt to portray the darker side of children in fiction with more regularity than in previous decades. Renner claims that the 1950s saw a proliferation of inherently evil children beginning to dominate literature. Jerome Bixby's short story, 'It's a Good Life' (1953), was one of the first narratives to explore genetic transmission as a source of evilness in child characterisation. William March's *The Bad Seed* (1954) is also included in this category as is William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) but where, in this case, evil is perceived as an Original Sin — where humans are born into a state of sinfulness due to the sins of Adam and Eve — and the underlying cause of the boys' deviant behaviour. Interest in the evil child continued into the 1960s where there was less interest in children being born bad and more interest in children who had been made to be bad. These include Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) where social conditions and adult influence through poor parenting helped to produce a child with a tendency to murder. However, in that novel, a hereditary psychological condition, schizophrenia, underlies her bizarre behaviour. While many stories in the 1960s dealt with familial dysfunction as the reason behind the antics of the evil child, the 1970s produced the demonically possessed evil child and the following, are, therefore, not discussed in the literature survey. These include William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971), Richard Donner's *The Omen* (1971), Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974) and the *The Shining* (1977). The same decade also connected the source of evil to hereditary dysfunctionality; consequently, Thomas Tryon's *The Other* (1971) will be discussed because it focuses on insanity rather than demonic possession. The evil child narrative continued into the 1980s with, for

example, Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory* (1984), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1988) and on into the 2000s with Lionel Shriver's school shooting classic *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003). All of these novels blame deviant behaviour on outside influence and/or hereditarianism — a school of thought that emphasises the influence of hereditary in the determination of human behaviour. As Joel follows in the footsteps of the figurative trope of the Evil Child, a careful consideration of a selection of such evil child characters via a literature survey helped to establish the possible source of their evil behaviour.

The Bad Seed (1954)

According to Gurel (2010), Joyce Carol Oates says that 1954 was a watershed year between the angelic portrayal of children and the portrayal of their demonic capabilities thereafter. William March's 1954 novel, *The Bad Seed*, is the story of Rhoda Penmark, an eight-year-old child murderer who inherits an evil gene from her grandmother. March's decision to blame congenital factors for Rhoda's murder of three people did not sit well with contemporary ideas permeating American society at the time. Its controversial aspects involved March's pro-naturalist stance in the novel — his commitment to biological determinism and the unpopularity of genetic explanations for juvenile crime. Eugenics had become unacceptable following the atrocities of World War Two where, post-war, environmental explanations for human deviancy began to prevail. Early theories in psychotherapy from the time of Freud 'did not recognise how much parents/caregivers influenced the developing child. Post-World War Two, psychotherapists shifted their emphasis to the interactions between people and focused, therefore, on the links between parenting and later emotional difficulties' (Gerhardt, 2002, p.68).

In *The Bad Seed*, Christine Penmark, Rhoda's mother, sees herself as the carrier of a bad seed as an explanation for the source of Rhoda's deeds. Showalter (1997) says that the main theme of the novel concerns the responsibility that the mother must take due to the heritability of an evil gene. This idea, of passing evil on genetically, was disapproved of at the time. The story of an eight-year-old child murderer was considered too controversial for children to view the film version produced two years after publication of the book, where *The New York Times* announced "'Bad Seed' Barred to Children" (July 24, 1956). It was the first time a Hollywood movie had featured a murderous child. However, despite the book's opposition to populist ideology, it was an immediate success with the American public. 'The novel's notoriety had much to do with its thrilling and unusual plot' (Gurel, 2010, p.136). It incorporates actual murder cases and was written in a clinical style, giving a sense of realism to the story. For the reader, Rhoda's killings can, thus, be equated to true life dramas, indicating the realistic characterisation of Rhoda Penmark. This is one of the reasons why the novel was so compelling.

In *The Bad Seed*, Rhoda Penmark murders three people and kills her pet dog. To take someone's life intentionally is an act of *abomination*, the worst kind of wrong possible causing the greatest *maltreatment* — death. And when the reason is inappropriate, befitting an unworthy goal, and in Rhoda's case, for the sake of possessing a couple of trinkets from the victims, a grave *inappropriateness* has occurred. Psychologists may argue that, as she was only eight-years old, she may not have been in possession of a full understanding of the consequences of her deeds. However, March paints a picture of an abnormal eight-year old. Calculating and precocious, she is intelligent beyond her years: manipulatively charming and polite in

order to wrap adults around her little finger; willing to harm and kill to get what she wants, then to lie compulsively in a heartless defence:

They had questioned her at length after the tragedy, and she had denied everything with a straight face; she'd denied harassing the boy in the bus, she'd denied trying to take the medal in the woods; she'd denied being on the old wharf at any time (March, 1954, p.68).

Her intentions and acts are beyond the pale of what a regular eight-year old would do.

March decrees that compared to the lies of normal children, like lying if they had stolen fruit from orchards or flowers, when discussing Rhoda, Christine and Kenneth Penmark thought that:

Rhoda was interested in material things for their own sake, and the lies she told were the hard, objectives lies of an adult whose purpose was to confound and mislead (March, 1954, p.69).

Rhoda satisfies the test of evil — she is a thoroughly bad seed.

Lord of the Flies (1954)

The nineteen fifties produced another novel in which inherited evil prevailed. William Golding's 1954 novel, *Lord of the Flies*, relies on the idea that the sinfulness inherent in human nature can influence human behaviour. The dark side of humanity encompassed in this novel can be explained through Golding's belief in the theology of Original Sin and Fallen Man (Baker, 2000). Original Sin stems from Adam and Eve's disobedience to God and teaches that all human beings are born sinful with an innate desire to do bad things. This idea appears to be paramount to the message in the book, played out through a group of boys who find themselves abandoned after a plane crash on a fictional island during a time of war. The story tells of the fear which grows within them, leading to their need for security in a group led by twelve-year old Jack Merridew. Eventually, by abandoning the rules of society, the boys come to accept

sadistic bullying and violence into their social structure. By the end of the book, Jack has permitted the terrorisation of the younger ones by the hunters of the group, has overseen the violent murder of Simon, the torture of Wilfred, and the killing of Piggy. Golding believed that man's cruelty and selfishness was innate, and 'that man produces evil as a bee produces honey' (Golding, 1962, p.252). He aimed to demonstrate the existence of the devil in each and every one of us (Burgess, 1963). The beautiful island takes on a dystopian form as it turns into a bad place where desire for power takes possession of Jack. Firchow (2007) states that utopian and dystopian literature puts human beings to the test by exploring human reaction to given situations and poses the question whether we are innately good or bad.

The idea of an innate bad seed, evident in Rhoda Penmark, contrasts with Jack Merridew in *Lord of the Flies* where, due to his natural instinct to get what he wants and without the constraints of civilization, he resorts to fear tactics and bullying. Twelve-year old Jack, the eventual leader of the group stranded on an island is considered by Martin (1969) to be a facet of human personality representing pride. But more than that, he is obsessed with power and maintains a climate of fear to keep the boys in check. He is, according to Diken and Bagge Lausten (2006), an allegory for the downside of human nature. He is the leader of a group which undergoes, at his behest, a gradual decivilisation process, set against a background of normalcy where an innocent game turns malicious. An example of what Formosa (2007) refers to as 'minor evil-encouraging situations' escalate into an unruly game of sadistic bullying and violence where such behaviour becomes the norm and not an exception to the rule. An 'alien consciousness' (Baker, p.322), what Golding called the 'beast', gradually creeps in — it is Beelzebub, the devil, evil, symbolized by the pig's head, the lord of the flies. Unlike *Coral Island*, where evil came from the outside world (Golding, 1962), in *Lord of the*

Flies evil comes from within. It takes the form of the dead parachutist who is mistaken as a beast to the boys representing death and decay, a symbol for the end of adult supervision, 'an allegory of a society in fear seeing security as paramount' (Diken and Bagge Lausten, 2006, p.438). It is a fear which is generated in the boys' minds by the fear of being left on an island, soon escalating into an irrational fear of the 'beast'. For Golding, the events of World War Two were significant. In a lecture he gave in 1962, he asked, 'How could the political and philosophical idealism of Germany produce as its ultimate fruit the rule of Adolf Hitler?' (Golding, 1962, p.252). Jack is synonymous with Hitler. Jack, too, relies on control to maintain power by engendering fear, by using a scapegoat as an excuse for such fear, by preying on the vulnerability of the outsider (Simon) and the younger ones, who he is quite prepared to sacrifice.

Is Jack evil, though? Jack realises he has the power to decide on life and death at his first serious sign of violence, by killing the first pig:

...they had outwitted a living thing, imposed their will upon it, taken away its life like a long, satisfying drink' (Golding, 1954, p.74).

The act, carried out through bloodlust, causes significant harm — it is *maltreatment* of a living creature — a malicious attack. Excited by the same blood lust, Jack denies Piggy's right to speak and assaults Piggy, causing his glasses to fall and break. Piggy is physically, psychologically and emotionally harmed. Not only is Jack's behaviour a form of *maltreatment*, but it satisfies the test of *inappropriateness*, too; it is a totally reckless act as it is difficult to make fire without Piggy's glasses. They cannot survive without fire, but the *inappropriateness* of Jack lighting a fire deliberately to flush out Simon is thoughtless and pernicious; Jack knows that the fire, if out of control, is a danger to them all, at the expense of their own survival.

Diken and Bagge Lausten (2006) call the evil in *Lord of the Flies* a radical evil where there is no turning back from evil once established, where it reduces humanity to the level of a brute. This is what happens to the boys by accepting the exception as the norm, symbolized in their nakedness, their ritualistic chanting, their desire to please the 'beast' in exchange for security, like selling their souls to the devil. This is an *annihilation* of the moral landscape of society as we know it. Jack hides behind the identity of the crowd to strengthen his power. If the crowd accepts events which are exceptional to the rule and he promotes this, he becomes even stronger, establishing evil as the norm. As an allegory of man's capability for evilness against a backdrop of the events of World War Two, then the group, with Jack at the helm, have created a state of *abomination* — something which is more than very wrong or bad. Jack is like the pig's head with flies (the boys) buzzing around it. According to Diken and Bagge Lausten (2006) he is the lord of the flies, a symbol of the beast, of evil.

In *The Cuckoo's Nest*, Joel's desire to alienate Robin from the family equates with Jack's desire to marginalize Simon and Piggy. As in my novel, in Golding's book the first creature to die at the hands of the 'evil' child is an animal — the mouse in *The Cuckoo's Nest* and the pig in *Lord of the Flies*. Although these similarities are present, there was never an intention for me to create another Jack (or Rhoda) where evilness is inherent. I believe that human life begins with a sensate being born with inherited behavioural traits. These include intelligence, personality and IQ (Pinker, 2002). A person is, also, affected by their shared environment; namely, what and who impinges on that person and his/her siblings, like their parents, home life and neighbourhood. A person is, also, affected by their unique environment; namely, anything that happens to that person that does not necessarily happen to a sibling, like peer pressure, for example.

Pre-birth factors like smoking and drugs/alcohol are contributory factors, too (Gerhardt, 2004).

We Have Always Lived in the Castle (1962)

During the 1960s, there was a shift away from the inherent evil gene idea towards a socio/cultural point of view, as a means of explaining delinquency. In Shirley Jackson's 1962 novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Merricat Blackwood kills at the age of twelve. She poisons her mother as well as other members of her family by administering arsenic in a sugar bowl at the dinner table. Matricide is a common theme in Jackson's novels. According to her biographer, Ruth Franklin (2016), this was not surprising as Jackson's mother, Geraldine, appeared to do little to help her daughter's mental state, showing her little affection.

Constance and Merricat Blackwood, the two main protagonists of the book, are not unlike Jackson's other heroines in not having a mother. It has been suggested by Oates (2009) that Merricat's murder of most of her family could be the result of the strict regime of discipline upheld by the Blackwood parents. Harmful nurturing may well have contributed to Merricat's mental state. Oates describes Merricat's condition as paranoid schizophrenia.

Social isolation is a significant theme in this novel. During the 1950s, in the US in particular, there was a cultural desire to keep women in the home (Franklin, 2016). Men returning from war required work and once married, the woman's role was purely one of wife and mother. The entrapment of domesticity seems to have caused much anguish for Jackson. McGrath (2016) claims that she seemed tormented throughout her private life with feelings of loneliness, in line with the experience of many American housewives of the time. Isolation and agoraphobia infiltrate this, her final novel,

through the behaviour of the motherless Blackwood sisters and, in particular, of Constance who refuses to stray further than the boundaries of the property. Their hostility towards the neighbouring villagers may be representative of the difficulties Jackson had with her own neighbours in Vermont where, Oates affirms, Jackson and her husband, Stanley Hyman, aroused resentment in their anti-Semitic neighbours because he was a Jew. Franklin suggests that the distancing of the Blackwood sisters from outsiders was based upon Jackson's own experience where, McGrath claims, she felt very much like an outsider within the community in which she and her family lived. The theme of not fitting in is played out in the novel by Constance and Merricat who look down upon the villagers where the sisters keep themselves to themselves. On the last page of the novel, Constance and Merricat say of the village children who stray on to their property:

"I wonder if I could eat a child if I had the chance."
"I doubt if I could cook one," said Constance" (Jackson, 1962, p.146).

This an example of their questionable mental states. One way of protecting themselves from the villagers is through Merricat's magic rituals which is in line with a diagnosis of schizophrenia in Merricat, the sixteen-year old narrator, who is childlike and believes in fairy tales whilst fantasising out of all proportion. She buries objects around the property and uses ritualistic words as a means of magically protecting themselves from the outside world:

...a box of silver dollars I buried by the creek, and the doll buried in the long field, and the book nailed to the tree in the pine woods; as long as they were where I had put them nothing could get in to harm us' (Jackson, 1962. p.41 in Oates, 2009, p.150).

According to Franklin, Jackson had an interest in witchcraft, inherited from her grandmother. Although she does not mention whether Jackson actually practised

witchcraft, she proclaims that she saw witchcraft as symbolic of female strength, a way of providing themselves with power at a time when many women felt powerless in their housewifely role. However, despite their attempts to protect themselves by magic rituals and by isolating themselves within their Gothic mansion, the Blackwood sisters fail to keep intruders out: their cousin Charles worms his way into their lives in order to steal their father's money; the villagers loot the remains of the house after it is destroyed by fire.

In Hattenhauer's view, another influential story for Jackson was *Robinson Crusoe*; like the boys in *Lord of the Flies*, Constance and Merricat are isolated on their own island. Another connection to Golding is through his belief in original sin. Hattenhauer suggests that the Blackwood garden compares to the Garden of Eden; their garden appears to make the sisters self-sufficient, a place in which evil is allowed to infiltrate through the invasion of Charles and the villagers. Like the island in *Lord of the Flies*, this is another example of a utopia turning dystopic. Jackson, in line with Hawthorne, Poe and James was 'preoccupied with inner evil in the human soul' (McGrath, 2016, p.2).

Throughout the novel, Constance is assumed to be the killer, but it is only near the end of Chapter 9 where it is confirmed that Merricat is the real culprit who put poison in the sugar. What is evident, is that Merricat did the deed.

When applying the test of evil, Merricat's heinous crime against her family is an *abomination*, murder being something more than wrong/bad. She clearly intended *maltreatment* of her family — she put poison in the sugar in the knowledge that the consequences would most probably be fatal. Was the reason inappropriate befitting an unworthy goal? In Oates's Afterword of the novel, a suggested reason for the killings may have been the strict regime of discipline upheld by the Blackwood parents on their

daughters. Nevertheless, the novel fails to provide enough direct background information — the strict parental regime argument is circumstantial. With *inappropriateness* of reason excluded, Merricat cannot be considered truly evil, despite the deliberate act of murder as, more than Rhoda Penmark and Jack Merridew, Merricat has a clear defence — that of being in a state of mental illness. Hattenhauer suggests that Merricat is obsessive and compulsive with a fear of dirt — she 'neatens' the house, regards the village as dirty, objects to the firemen bringing dirty hoses into the burning house. He identifies how her perception of reality is overridden by what he calls 'paranoid ideation' making her delusional; for example, she thinks her left eye works better by day, believes Charles to be a demonic ghost and performs rituals to rid him, listens to the cat's stories, thinks the river won't be there if she doesn't see it, likes to think she can go to the moon, and, surprisingly, given the crime, believes her mother and father thought her wonderful — she is narcissistic, thinks she is better than she is. As a result, Hattenhauer believes such delusions of grandeur allow her the right to kill.

In conclusion, for the twelve-year old Merricat to intentionally cause significant harm in the knowledge that the victims would most probably die is more than merely wrong and, according to the test, equates with evilness — she commits an *abomination* causing *maltreatment*. However, her defence appears to clear her of out-and-out evil due to her possible state of mental illness which could be paranoid schizophrenia.

The Other (1971)

Schizophrenia resonates with Niles Perry, the thirteen-year old killer of Thomas Tryon's 1971 novel, *The Other*. In the book, Niles tells the story of his life and that of his identical twin, Holland, in a farming community in New England. Although the novel begins as the everyday tale of twin brothers, the story becomes increasingly

embroidered with a sense of unease as a series of inexplicable deaths occur on the farm. Tryon uses the word, 'legerdemain' in the novel, meaning sleight of hand, cunning or trickery; this perfectly conjures up a sense of things not being quite what they seem. The author uses legerdemain to trick the reader into thinking that Holland is alive:

"Listen! Somebody's up there. Do you hear? Listen"
"You're crazy."
"Holland — listen!" he insisted (Tryon, 1971, p.11).

It is not until the end of Part Two that the reader realises that this is not the case, and that Niles has been communicating with his dead twin all along. Chaon (1971) questions whether Niles is demonically possessed by Holland or whether he is suffering from some form of psychosis. He points out that the novel was published at a time when demonic possession and the occult reigned in popular culture, especially in film, for example, *The Exorcist* and *The Omen*. Niles's description of his thirteen-year old self, just after losing his twin, embodies a sense of loss inherent throughout the story, due mainly to Holland's death. Chaon argues that the story is about loss and that Niles is an adolescent going through that often-difficult transition between childhood and adulthood when the idiosyncrasies of childhood, like the belief in imaginary worlds, begins to fade. Niles continues to see, speak to and hear Holland after his twin's death where he fell down a well. On seeing Holland in his coffin, Niles asks him:

"Are you comfortable?"
"Yes; quite comfortable" (Tryon, 1971, p.185).

Through these hallucinations, both visual and auditory, there is the sense that something psychological has happened to Niles. Hallucinations and delusions are significant symptoms of psychosis (Brown and Bagley, 2012; Finding et al, 2001; Laroi, Van der Linden and Goeb, 2006; Stevens, 2013). There is sufficient evidence in the novel to show that the psychosis Niles has developed is early onset/adolescent schizophrenia

which, according to Brown and Bagley (2012) affects children between thirteen and eighteen years of age. According to Stevens (2013) hallucinations are 'false perceptions involving any sensory modality' (Stevens, 2013, p.3) and can be 'auditory, visual, olfactory, gustatory or tactile' (Findling et al, 2001, p.16). However, auditory (hearing voices in the head or outside of the body) appears to be the most prevalent in this novel. This is exactly what Niles experiences; although, according to Kelleher et al (2012), hallucinations can exist in children of this age in the general population and 'most children with hallucinations do not have schizophrenia' (Brown and Bagley, 2012, p.4).

Nevertheless, Niles presents other symptoms common to schizophrenia, including delusions which are a 'false implausible belief' (Stevens, 2013, p.3). Over the course of the narrative, Niles gradually comes to believe that he is Holland and the two become interchangeable in the book.

Niles's delusionary belief that he and Holland are one and the same is used by Tryon to blame the Holland part of Niles for the killings of a neighbour and his sister Torrie's baby. According to Clare, Bailey and Clark (2000), adolescents with psychosis can show a tendency for destructive behaviour leading to violence. Holland is Niles's bad angel. When looking at their sister's baby:

Holland sniffed. "...Look at that stupid little face, how can you stand looking at it?" However: 'Niles held the baby carefully, as lovingly, he laid it in the cradle... (Tryon, 1971, p.207-8).

Schizotypal disorders also incorporate some form of eccentric behaviour, disordered thinking and a general decline in overall function; for example, odd beliefs and bizarre fantasies may prevail (Brown and Bagley, 2012). An individual may behave with inappropriate effect, such as laughing at a funeral or crying at a comic event or presenting abnormal mannerisms like grimacing, posturing and catatonia (Findling et al,

2001). Such gesturing, representative of schizophrenia, is present on the very first page of the novel:

"No sir!" Niles retorted, grimacing with suspense' (Tryon, 1971, p.11)

It is generally accepted that genetics is a significant cause of schizophrenia (Brown and Bagley, 2012; Stevens et al, 2013; Stevens, 2014), and that it can run in families, especially in monozygotic twins (Findling et al, 2001). In the book, there is much to suggest that schizophrenia manifests itself in the Perry family. Niles's mother shows all the signs:

Her mouth moving in nervous disjointed sentences, her mind veering from subject to subject (Tryon, 1971, p.29).

Schizophrenia can be brought on by the death of a close family member (Laroi, Van der Linden and Goeb, 2006), and from experiencing childhood trauma (Jardri et al, 2014). The trauma Niles experiences after losing his identical twin goes a long way in helping to explain why Niles behaves as he does. According to Clare, Bailey and Clark (2000), loss at an early age has consequences for future violent behaviour.

Social isolation is another symptom of early-onset schizophrenia; it is common in young people with psychosis who develop the syndrome (Findling et al, 2001; Brown and Bagley, 2012; Stevens, 2014). Niles is socially withdrawn; he has no friends. The only friend that Niles has or wants to have is his long-lost brother who he misses terribly:

Holland. He needed him - they needed each other...He was...dependent on him. Without Holland, he felt some unidentifiable part of him had been lost. (Tryon, 1971, p.84)

In that case, is Niles Perry evil as the argument for his early-onset adolescent schizophrenia is strong? According to the test of evil, has Niles satisfied an *abomination* showing that he has committed an act more than wrong/bad? He brings about the killing

of his cousin, Russell, in the barn by deliberately leaving a pitchfork in the hay. He is also responsible for killing their neighbour, Mrs Rowe. Tryon has him dressed in a conjuror's outfit to carry out the deed. In this way, the author provides an air of suspense and menace, where Niles invites Mrs Rowe to join him in a card trick:

...performing abracadabra and hocus-pocus...moving adroitly beneath the cape...his grin ever-widening...he stepped briskly forward one more step and, without further ado, performed his trick (Tryon, 1971, p.136)

which involves him pulling a very large rat out of a hat, instead of a rabbit, causing Mrs Rowe's death. He knows she has a phobia of rats resulting in her dropping dead from a heart attack. What the cunning and scheming Niles undertakes to deliberately kill is nothing short of murder, the worst type of wrong. Niles's killing of Torrie's baby by drowning it in a keg of wine is the ultimate proof that an *abomination* has been committed — it is an added element which is over and above ordinary wrongness. To see 'the little face that floated in the dark red wine, so like the baby in the bottle, hair waving, the eyes staring up at the ceiling, the mouth parted in a silent scream' (Tryon, 1971, p.239), is truly shocking, constituting an evil act. *Maltreatment* is satisfied. Niles is too scheming not to know that impaling someone on a pitchfork and drowning a baby would cause significant harm. Maltreatment is not just physical, but psychological or emotional — something which causes harm to Torrie, bringing out her own schizophrenia or at least some form of mental illness.

Does the killing of Russell and of Torrie's baby satisfy the test of *inappropriateness*?

Agreed, Russell was no angel:

He stabbed Holland's finger with a pencil...and in February bit Niles's hand so badly that stitches were required (Tryon, 1971, p.16).

It could be argued that as Russell was fifteen-years of age he should have known better. Here Russell displays criminal behaviour and could go one step further next time. Was Niles right to teach him this fatal lesson, therefore? Two wrongs don't make a right. Even if Niles had argued that it would make for a better outcome as Russell would be incapable of doing further harm, the manner of Russell's death is horrific. The twins clearly hated Russell and Niles/Holland wanted rid of this molly-coddled interloper into the lives of the family at the farm. But had the twins provoked him? Holland has a reputation for violence; he killed the pet cat by throwing it down the well and was responsible for their father's death when he pushed him down the cellar stairs. To report Russell's deed would have been the more obvious, sensible option. It could be argued that *inappropriateness* of action is satisfied as Russell's killing, for revenge, is extreme — not what the average thirteen-year old would think of.

As a result of the application of the test of evil, *abomination*, *maltreatment* and *inappropriateness* apply. Niles should, therefore, be considered evil. However, he has a defence, where the individual is in a state of mental illness, such as early-onset/adolescent schizophrenia. Although Niles has carried out evil acts, his schizophrenia has been the driving force behind them. Therefore, he cannot be totally responsible for his actions, and cannot be classified as truly evil.

There are some notable examples in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* and *The Other* which tally with *The Cuckoo's Nest*. Firstly, alienation and invasion are themes in all three novels. As Robin becomes isolated from his family, so does Constance and Merricat from the village; the sisters' 'otherness' becomes apparent until they are invaded by the villagers and by their cousin, Charles. And in *The Cuckoo's Nest*, it is Joel, as well as cats and foxes, who invade the Watts's family, turning Robin and Jenny's life upside down. Regarding schizophrenia, I did not want Joel to have the

same mental illness as Niles. Although parallels exist with Niles's furtive killings and Joel's so-called 'accidental' ones, Joel was to be a troubled boy, and not influenced by the 1970s appetite for demonic possession, as Chaon (1971) argues for Niles's condition.

The Wasp Factory (1984)

During the 1980s, poor parenting helped to explain the deviant behaviour occurring in *The Wasp Factory* (1984) by Iain Banks. This is where sixteen-year old Frank Cauldhame is drawn to bizarre acts of violence following tumultuous family life. Frank is brought up on a Scottish island by his father, Angus. He spends his time exploring the island, building dams, collecting animal skulls and making things, such as a giant kite and an ingenious construction in the attic which he calls the Wasp Factory. He plays war games and emulates just what soldiers do; all things Banks says he did when he was young. Bank states that 'Frank would too, though alone and with a more determinedly harm-minded intensity' (Banks, 1984, p.xi). After rejection after rejection of his sci-fi works, Banks, in *The Wasp Factory*, wrote about what he knew, excavating his 'own past for exaggerateable experiences'. However, in Frank, Banks creates a brutal and violent child, challenging the ideal of childhood innocence. Banks said, "I constructed big home-made kites; so would Frank", but the difference is that Frank would "use one as a murder weapon" (Banks, 1984, p.xi). Frank makes catapults and bombs to kill animals, his younger brother and two cousins. His atrocities are disturbing and, as a result, the book has been viewed as a horror story (Alegre, 2000), much to Banks's chagrin. He said that people compared it to "the literary equivalent of a video nasty" (Banks in Metcalfe in Alegre, 2000, p.200), completely misreading the book.

Frank's situation is not an easy one. He is the victim of a dysfunctional upbringing at the hands of his father. No thanks to Angus, Frank has no birth certificate, no official identity and, on his visits to the mainland, Angus tells Frank to say that he was the orphaned son of his long-lost brother. Angus brainwashes Frank into hating women; Frank's mother, Agnes, deserted them when he was born. Years later, after returning to give birth to another man's child, Agnes leaves the baby, Paul, for Angus to rear, then abandons them all, permanently injuring Angus's leg in the process when she runs him down with her motorbike. As a result, Frank is encouraged by Angus to spurn the female sex. In chapter three, Frank says:

My greatest enemies are Women and the Sea. These things I hate. Women because they are weak and stupid and live in the shadow of men and are nothing compared to them... (Banks, 1984, p.50).

Indeed, something even more bizarre takes place when it is revealed that Angus, a one-time scientist, had conducted an experiment on the young Frank to make the child more masculine by hiding male hormones in his food, causing Frank to assume a more masculine appearance. The reason is that Frank was actually born a girl, called Frances. In his hatred for women, Angus forces his daughter to reject her congenital sex. This startling revelation is made near the end of the book, a *legerdemain* moment for the reader. A key feature of Banks's writing is to shock (Colebrook, 2010). Throughout the book, Frank becomes the re-embodiment of his father's fears against women; to truly emphasise his sex he becomes overly masculine to firmly establish masculinity in himself and towards others. In this way, he maims and kills in an attempt to exaggerate his masculine prowess.

The Wasp Factory provides a bizarre oddity where a scientist undertakes a terrible experiment by attempting to turn a girl into a boy, a monstrous creation 'by his Frankensteinian father' (Schoene-Harwood, 1999, p.132). It is comparable to R.L.

Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Colebrook, 2010), and a link to Tryon's novel where there exists a disunity of the self. However, in Banks's case, Novak (2011) links this disunity of the self to the Gothic form adopted by the author in his novel — in the combination of horror with the grotesque. The subversion of gender roles and the novel's focus on dark family secrets are typical of the Scottish Gothic, where the doubling idea is especially prevalent in men's writing, showing the Scottish male's fear of the feminine (Schoene-Harwood, 1999). Angus is shown to be weak compared to Agnes after she dominates him; therefore, he must prove his masculinity by instilling fear of the feminine into Frank.

Whereas ritualism is part and parcel of the decivilisation of the boys in *Lord of the Flies*, and where Jackson's use of ritual in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* enables Merricat to protect herself from outsiders, in *The Wasp Factory*, ritualism plays a prominent religious role. Frank uses ritual to answer questions and to predict the future via the Wasp Factory itself. The contraption consists of a clock face with twelve corridors leading to numbers on the clock. A wasp is inserted into the face and depending on which corridor it takes, then that number will determine the future:

Death by fire has always been at Twelve...I have signified Fire as Paul's death; that happened near to midday, just as Blyth's exit by venom is represented by the Spider's Parlour at Four. Esmerelda probably died by drawing (the Gents) and I put her time of death arbitrarily at Eight, to keep things symmetrical (Banks, 1984, p.161).

However, the Sacrificial Poles, and the altar with its skulls and his repetition of catechisms are reminiscent of Jackson and witchcraft. Ritual helps Frank in everyday life; it offers him answers, consolation and a sense of order. On the island, Frank acts like a deity, thinking he is in control of everything around him; in this way, he is transported into the realms of fantasy and, like the boys in *Lord of the Flies*, there is a sense of Frank being distanced from civilisation represented by the mainland.

As Merricat Blackwood is a victim of parental dysfunctionality, so too is Frank. Frank's assertion that the killings he commits was just a phase he was going through is a classic example of Banks's use of black comedy. Frank's methods of murder are shocking but devious as he makes them appear accidental. Because his cousin, Blyth, kills one of his and his brother Eric's pet rabbit, the six-year old Frank, when no-one is watching, inserts an adder into Blyth's artificial leg causing his cousin's death.

According to Frank, Blyth's death:

was the first time I killed, because of what my cousin Blyth Cauldhame had done to our rabbits...he lit the thrower and sprayed out two hutches with flame, incinerating all our beauties (Banks, 1984, p.43).

Perhaps Blyth deserved to be punished, but in such a way as putting a snake into his artificial leg is rather extreme. At the age of eight, Frank persuades his younger brother, Paul, to touch a ship's bell they find on the beach. What he fails to mention is that the bell is really an unexploded wartime bomb. Frank makes a giant kite for another cousin, Esmerelda; he gets her to hold the strings and loops them over her wrists. As the kite begins to fly, Esmerelda takes off with it and is blown out to sea, never to be seen again. These murders are intentional; there can be nothing more serious than the deliberate taking of another's life.

In that case, is Frank evil? The ease with which he carries out these deaths and the satisfaction he gains from them is disturbing. His killings of humans and animals is an *abomination*. He has the intention of seeing someone/something suffer *maltreatment* where the person/animal is powerless to retaliate. As soon as Frank spots the adder on the beach and Blyth lying there without his artificial leg, he knows what he is going to do. After luring the snake into Blyth's unattached prosthetic and after seeing his cousin screaming and jumping and tugging at it, Frank is nonplussed, admitting that:

A death is always exciting, always makes you realise how alive you are, how vulnerable but so-far-lucky; but the death of somebody close gives you a good excuse to go a bit crazy for a while and do things that would otherwise be inexcusable. What delight to behave really badly and still get loads of sympathy! (Banks, 1984, p.48).

Here, there is a link with the decivilization which takes place in *Lord of the Flies* where acts of deviancy become the norm. Frank's intentions to kill shout total indifference and *inappropriateness*:

My brother Paul was five when I killed him. I was eight. It was two years after I had subtracted Blyth with an adder that I found an opportunity to get rid of Paul. Not that I bore him any personal ill-will; it was simply that I knew he couldn't stay (Banks, 1984, p.83).

Frank thinks he is doing Paul a favour. By killing Paul, he believes he is preventing the spirit of Old Saul (their dog) from entering Paul's soul and possessing him. In line with Banks's satirisation of religion in the book, his death is meaningless as, according to Banks, through Frank, religion is pointless. The reasons underlying Esmerelda's death is fraught with *inappropriateness*, too:

I killed Esmerelda because I felt I owed it to myself and to the world in general. I had, after all, accounted for two male children and thus done womankind something of a statistical favour...[even though he]...bore her no personal ill-will (Banks, 1984, p.111).

Although these acts of murder and violence are *abominations* of *maltreatment* whose reasons equate with *inappropriateness*, Frank has defences. He killed Blyth when he was six-years old and, according to Cloud (1998), English Common Law has held that children under seven cannot commit crimes (but those over seven can) and maintains that seven has traditionally been considered the age of reason, a rough turning point in moral development. He was conditioned by his father to assume masculinity after being born female and to hate all things feminine. He shows signs of possessive compulsive disorder, a mental illness; for example, when shaving, he 'takes the same number of

strokes of the same length in the same sequence each morning' (Banks, 1984, p.52), and if he scuffs one shoe, he must scuff the other. Frank becomes an unusual sixteen-year old displaying a childish imagination at play: pretending to be a soldier, building dams and giving inanimate objects names (he calls his catapult the Black Destroyer) and could, therefore, be considered mentally immature for his age due to his dysfunctional background. Nevertheless, Banks makes him capable of rational thought with an added element of sympathy, especially towards his brother, Eric, who he secretly protects.

In the end, despite his terrible exploits, Frank cannot be described as evil. His upbringing destroys his very self; he is a victim of his father's sickening deeds, raised in an evil-encouraging situation where his attempts to prove his masculinity are extreme. He is damaged beyond repair.

The Fifth Child (1988)

Staying with the 1980s, Ben Lovatt, in Doris Lessing's 1988 novel *The Fifth Child*, is portrayed as odd and an outsider, who is ultimately rejected by his family due to a combination of his looks and behaviour. After raising four children in their suburban idyll, Harriet and David's life is turned upside down by the birth of Ben, the eponymous fifth child. Portrayed as monstrous from the start, Ben, even in the foetal stage 'seemed to be trying to tear its way out of her stomach' (Lessing, 1988, p.49). When he was born, 'heavy-shouldered, hunched' with 'greeny-yellow eyes', Ben 'did not look like a baby at all' (Lessing, 1988, p.60). Harriet says that he reminds her of a fictional character, like a goblin or troll.

Just as Harriet and David are anomalies of their time (the swinging sixties), old-fashioned, eccentric, looking back longingly to the years of large families before birth control (Clark, 2011), Ben is also out of sync, but with those around him (Robbins,

2009). Harriet calls him a Neanderthal baby and wonders whether he is a 'throwback to earlier eons' (Rubinstein, 1988, p.22).

Following Ben's return to the family after a period of institutionalisation in a mental hospital, Lovatt family life is effectively destroyed. His animalistic behaviour (eating raw meat), violence (killing a dog) and total lack of remorse, help to drive the family apart. Ben's siblings grow to detest their youngest brother. He is like a 'cultural Other' (Sullivan and Greenberg, 2011) and, according to Kristevan theory, the 'Other' which is repelled due to its abjection, like body excrement. Kristevan theory 'provides a useful framework for understanding *The Fifth Child*' (Sullivan and Greenberg, 2011, p.49) in trying to explain our abhorrence of Ben. In this instance, Ben could be interpreted as an example of Kristeva's abjection theory in that he represents a form which does not "respect borders, positions, rules..." (Kristeva in Creed, 1993, p.68). According to Creed, Kristeva explores abjection as a source of horror by showing how we attempt to separate the human from the non-human to explain that which we find difficult to understand and ultimately fear. There is a sense of the non-human about Ben:

His forehead sloped from his eyes to his crown. His hair grew in an unusual pattern from the double crown where started a wedge or triangle that came low on the forehead, the hair lying forward in a thick yellowish stubble, while the side and back hair grew downwards. His hands were thick and heavy, with pads of muscle in the palms (Lessing, 1988, p.60).

Lessing could almost be describing the whorls on the head of a tabby cat and the thick, heavy pads on his hands which appear not unlike those of the large paws of a wild creature.

Sullivan and Greenberg offer psychological analysis of Ben through Terror Management Theory, a means of explaining the reader's fear of Ben as he will pass on

his animalistic genes which would problematize Harriet and David's desire to see good genes passed on to future generations following their deaths.

We are horrified by Ben's animalistic antics where Lessing's use of 'snarl', 'grunt' and 'tear' compare him to a dog. Because of his threatening behaviour, he is made to inhabit his room like an animal in a cage. There is a barred window and bars around his cot through which he pulls his brother, Paul, whose arm is bent 'deliberately backwards' (Lessing, 1988, p.71). At eighteen months he physically hurts his grandmother, although it is unclear how. At the end of his first year at school, Harriet catches him in the act of, what she believes, attempting to kill Paul by strangulation and at the age of six he attacks a girl at school, breaking her arm in the process. It is also assumed he strangles a dog and kills a cat.

Is Ben, as proposed by Yelin in Clark, 'an eruption of unmediated evil'? (Yelin in Clark, 2011, p.179). Does he pass the test of evil? A typical baby would not understand the consequences of pulling another child's arm through the bars of a cot to cause intentional hurt. However, the deliberateness of the act is disturbing. Lessing could be intimating that Ben is in possession of physical and mental powers outside the realm of the average baby. His stalking and apparent strangulation of the dog at the end of his first year at school (making him four or five-years-old) is shocking. His actions are suggestive of some kind of primeval hunting behaviour — an act over which he has little self-control. Significantly, the stalking of the dog is one of those rare occasions when he acts on his own initiative, instead of copying his siblings. The intention to strangle his brother and to attack and break another child's arm at the age of six must surely present rare, atypical behaviour. Do these violent acts constitute an *abomination*? The killing of an animal for what seems to be for no apparent reason (not in defence or

for food) is indicative of an added element which is over and above ordinary wrongness/badness and, as such, constitutes an evil act:

Towards the end of the holidays, someone came bringing a dog, a little terrier. Ben could not leave it alone. Wherever the dog was, Ben followed. He did not pet it, or stroke it; he stood staring (Lessing, 1988, p.75).

Here, the subtext suggests that Ben is responsible for its death with no explanation of motive necessary. It could be argued that an *inappropriateness* has taken place as the killing of the dog and the cat befit unworthy goals. Ben's attack of the girl and the breaking of her arm shows an unnatural propensity for violence, going far beyond the 'normal' behaviour of a young child. Whether he was attacked or provoked in the first place is not clear and, given the benefit of the doubt, he may have broken her arm unintentionally due to his overwhelming strength. However, given his history, some intention of *maltreatment* is assumed. Despite this apparent satisfaction of evilness, his age is significant as children under seven cannot commit crimes (Cloud, 1998). It is assumed that children under seven would not be mature enough to fully understand the consequences of their acts and would, therefore, be incapable of committing a crime in legal terms. That does not mean to say he cannot be evil. He could still commit a crime but not be considered evil. Interestingly, from this age on to his pubescence at the end of the book, Ben presents no further examples of overtly violent behaviour. Although he becomes an unpleasant, disobedient young teen, he is unexceptional in this respect, as it is not unusual for adolescents to test the boundaries of parental rule. Nevertheless, there is, still, an oddness about Ben, an inexplicable difference which sets him apart. Ben Lovatt may have some kind of psychological issue, too. He finds it difficult to communicate with his siblings, cannot relate to or show affection for those around him, is at odds with the world:

He watched the children...all the time. He studied how they moved, sat down, stood up; copied how they ate...When the children watched television, he squatted near them and looked from the screen to their faces, for he needed to know what reactions were appropriate (Lessing, 1988, p.83).

This difference could be explained through 'the difference of disability' (Thomson cited in Clark, 2011, p.179). Ben's unresponsiveness to his siblings and parents, lack of empathy to those around him, his desire to copy the actions of others rather than invoking his own is, according to Clark, typical of some of the characteristics of autism. A reading of *The Fifth Child* replicates this sentiment of Ben, born at a time when there may have been less understanding or societal acceptance of this neurodiversity, when asylums, before Care in the Community, were still in use. In this respect, Ben provides a strong defence against the accusation of evilness and, therefore, cannot be considered evil.

We Need to Talk About Kevin (2003)

There is a correlation between *The Fifth Child* and Lionel Shriver's 2003 novel, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. Robbins (2003) compares the books in *(Not Such) Great Expectations* where she expounds Ben Lovatt's and Kevin Katchadorian's portrayal as monsters. Both books explore the difference between the idealistic perception of the birth of a child, as proclaimed in Wordsworth's *Intimations* where from "trailing clouds of glory do we come/From God who is our home" (Wordsworth in Robbins, 2009, p.92). Wordsworth's work is a patriarchal view of motherhood where the mother's ordeal — the blood, fluid and pain she experiences — is overlooked and repressed by individual women and by society (Robbins, 2009). According to Slobodin (2018) in Western culture today, women are expected to carry out the good motherhood role.

However, in her book, Shriver challenges such 'idealizations of maternity' (Jeremiah cited in Flegel and Parkes, 2018, p.216). Shriver claimed that:

It is still out of bounds to say that you do not like your own kids, that the sacrifices they have demanded are unbearable, or that, perish the thought, you wish you had never had them (Shriver cited in Webb, 2009, *The Guardian*).

Shriver gives voice to Kevin's mother, Eva, choosing to portray the events and characters through a first-person narrator in the form of letters where she writes to her husband, Franklin, after the latter's death at the hands of their murderous son. Harriet, in *The Fifth Child*, does speak out, too, but comes from a different perspective; she likes children even though she admits child-rearing is hard. Harriet is contented by multiple pregnancies whereas Eva is resistant to having children. According to Robbins (2009) Eva is discouraged from becoming a mother by the mothers in her life, such as her own mother who is mentally ill, her mother-in-law who epitomises the typical efficient American mother, her sister-in-law who has varicose veins due to childbirth and her friend's baby talk to a newborn.

O'Reilly (2016) affirms that the novel is an attack on mothering according to patriarchal ideas of essentialization (that all women want to become mothers), naturalization (that mothering comes naturally to women) and idealization (that motherhood brings joy and a feeling of accomplishment). But for Shriver it was an examination of 'what it might be like for motherhood to go fatally, catastrophically wrong' (Shriver, 2005, *The Guardian*). Indeed, it does go catastrophically wrong, as at the age of fifteen Kevin uses a crossbow to murder his father and sister in the garden, as well as nine people at his high school. According to an interview in 2017, Shriver reported that 'I wrote *We Need to Talk About Kevin*...as I was trying to decide if I'd ever have a child. Meanwhile, there were all these school shootings in the US' (Shriver, 2017, p.1).

Fifteen years after Kevin's murderous acts, Eva finally pours out her heart. In the book, Eva finds it difficult to speak out about her fear of having children, a subject equally troubling to Shriver. The author 'recalls how, as a successful writer, she was terrified of having a child' (Donovan, 2003, p.1582), and in a *Guardian* article says that 'one of the things that has put me off having children is motherhood's unwritten gag law' (Shriver in Webb, 2009, p.2) which she translates through Eva.

When considering whether she should have a child, Eva lets go and is often rude with no holding back. Her tone is reflected in her relationship with Kevin. "'What's your problem you little shit?'" she asks of her baby son (Shriver, 2003, p.105). Throughout his growing up, Kevin appears to adopt her impertinence. Later in the book, Eva says to an imprisoned teenage Kevin:

"Whenever I see fat people, they're eating...They're fat because they eat the wrong food, too much of it and all the time."
"You know, you can be kind of harsh." [Kevin]
"You're the one to talk." [Eva]
"Yeah. I am. Wonder where I got it from." [Kevin]
(Shriver, 2003, p.273).

Kevin's behaviour could be a consequence of bad mothering. Shriver is not alone when she thinks that defective mothering is the cause of bad behaviour, a default position perpetuated by society and patriarchal structures. Slobodin (2018) concurs with this view as does Ziolkowski who blames mothers for bringing 'evil into the world' (Ziolkowski in Miller, 2019, p.5). Here, there is a link to *The Bad Seed*, where Rhoda inherits her murderous traits from her grandmother and in *The Fifth Child*, the question of whether Ben turns out as he does due to Harriet's avariciousness for desiring lots of children is posed. Kevin may have turned out as he does because Eva never wanted him in the first place. So, 'was it for revenge then that from the moment of his birth Kevin was the archetypal difficult child?' (Donovan, 2003, p.1582). Eva admits she is not

maternal. She lists ten reasons why not to have them including the 'hassle', 'dementing boredom', 'social demotion', a 'worthless social life', all reasons, she admits were 'selfish, and mean and small-minded' (Shriver, 2003, p.25-6). Eventually, she agrees to have a child for Franklin's sake as she recognised his yearning to have children whereas she did not. Despite the fact that she goes along with the pregnancy, from what Eva recalls, the mother-child bond was doomed even after his birth. After being handed the baby, she says:

The expression on his twisted face was disgruntled. His body was inert...with his mouth right at my enlarged brown nipple, his head lolled in distaste..."He's beautiful," I mumbled; I had reached from a line from TV (Shriver, 2003, p.76).

Although she says she tries to be a good mother, she recognizes her failings, and that motherhood left her totally unmoved. Eva is unhappy and resentful of being a stay-at-home mum; stuck in all day, in the same few rooms with 'hell in a basket' while Franklin 'tooled merrily off' (Shriver, 2003, p.91).

Throughout his childhood, Eva and Franklin are at odds when it comes to rearing Kevin. Eva's attempts to discipline the child contrast with Franklin's criticism of what he sees as her unnatural motherliness. Kevin, therefore, receives mixed messages from his parents. In the house moving scene, after Eva takes a water pistol from Kevin following his barrage on the removal men, Kevin climbs on the kitchen worktop to retrieve it. Eva does not have Franklin's support:

"Kevin's been very, very bad!" I sputtered...
"Aw, he's earned it, haven't you, kiddo? Man, that climb took guts. Real little monkey, aren't you?" (Shriver, 2003, p.152).

According to Gerhardt (2004), inconsistency in parental attitude and behaviour towards offspring can result in a resistant attachment where the child keeps his/her feelings close to the surface until finding an opportunity to let off steam (Gerhardt, 2003). Kevin goes

through a phase of answering back by proclaiming 'nyeh nyeh nyeh nyeh nyeh' and on one occasion screams it so loudly Eva slaps him. When he is around six-years old, she throws him halfway across the nursery, inadvertently breaking his arm because she believes he shits himself repeatedly to deliberately annoy her. Gerhardt asserts that 'anti-social behaviour is a learned response to anti-social parenting' (Gerhardt, 2004, p.174).

Whether it is ambivalence on Eva's part and/or progressive parenting on Franklin's, Kevin is allowed to watch violent videos containing 'decapitations, disembowelments, didmemberments, flayings, impalements, deoculations and cruxifictions' (Shriver, 2003, p.146).

Kevin's behaviour deteriorates. He becomes a school bully, scaring other kids into following his lead:

Kevin hoisted his cup by its tiny handle in a salutary toast — and dropped it on the floor...In rapid succession all eleven of his fellow tea-sippers followed suit (Shriver, 2003, p.178-9).

However, it could be argued that his behaviour mirrors that of a grumpy teenager:

Kevin was slumped in the easy chair, eyes at half-mast. "Whatever" [he says] (Shriver, 2003, p.308).

Of course, this is all according to a first-person unreliable narrator reflecting after a serious and horrific event. Her desire to unpick the way and how of her son's crimes is directing her perspective. She is also shouldering the blame as patriarchal societal norms demand.

When Celia, his younger sister is born, Kevin is jealous, not unnatural first-born behaviour. Sibling rivalry transpires as the two grow up, but with Eva and Franklin plying their favourite's cause — Eva with Celia versus Franklin with Kevin. Celia is bullied into submission by Kevin via seemingly childish games like playing kidnapping

where he ties up his sister with a rope. His devious acts worsen when, in bathing Celia's injured eye, he deliberately uses bleach, causing her to lose the eye. His ultimate act of hatred towards her is her death, by crossbow, at his hands. At a time of mass school shootings by pupils in the real America (the late 1990s/early 2000s) the crossbow is an unusual choice. Kevin finally crosses the boundary of what is accepted, like the boys in *Lord of the Flies* (Miller, 2019).

Almond in O'Reilly (2016) reflects — 'How does a child get to be this way (malevolent, resentful, vengeful)? Is initial ambivalence that destructive?' (O'Reilly, 2016, p.71). Can we just blame Eva? Her maternal ambivalence? Poor parenting? Mixed messages? Eva does blame herself but says it is not all her fault:

I'm determined to accept due responsibility for every wayward thought, every petulance, every selfish moment, not in order to gather all the blame myself but to admit 'this' is my fault and 'that' is my fault but 'there, there' precisely 'there' is where I draw the line and on the other side, 'that, that,' Franklin, is not (Shriver, 2003, p.71).

Eva ponders why else he might have done it as:

He wasn't a member of a satanic cult...He wasn't picked on...he hadn't posted a homicidal website or written essays about blowing up the school... (Shriver, 2003, p.362).

She considers his craving for celebrity status:

If in high school he was disaffected, he had too much competition; scores of other boys batted for the role of surly punk slumped in the back of the class. Now he has carved himself a niche (Shriver, 2003, p.68).

Or is it something innate? Does Eva blame Kevin's inherent badness? Eva perceives him in this role, equating his birth to horror films, like *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist*, seeing him as a 'bad seed' when she refers to him as a 'voodoo doll in diapers' (Shriver cited in Flegel and Parkes, 2018, p.220). Miller (2019) concurs when she says:

'the suggestion of a genetic basis for evil is a dominant trope of monstrous child narratives' (Miller, 2019, p.5).

Is Kevin evil? The killings were pre-planned, a prerequisite for murder. Kevin's careful planning of the crimes to kill by crossbow is staggering, according to Eva:

By ordering his Kryptonites, stealing his stationery, loading those chains into his backpack one by one....the logistics...were impeccably worked out (Shriver, 2003, p.366 and p.372).

He has committed an *abomination*. Celia's body was fixed to the target by five arrows, the students, in the school gym, picked off one by one. After the event Kevin 'was pleased with himself' (Shriver, 2003, p.382), he 'knew exactly what [he] was doing...And [he'd] do it again' (Shriver, 2003, p.43). Eva notes that after the deed, when he is arrested:

Kevin's expression was placid. It still displayed remnants of resolution, but determination was already sliding to the quiet self-satisfied complacency of a job well done (Shriver, 2003, p.382).

He caused a *maltreatment* — had the intention of seeing someone suffer significant harm. The reason is inappropriate; in prison, Eva asks him why:

"I didn't like them" he replies. Denny was a "ham", Greer Ulanov had "buck teeth"... "like a horse" (Shriver, 2003, p.240-1).

And why kill Franklin? Kevin does not say. Eva can only assume that his father's 'chumminess' towards his son was too much. According to her, Franklin tried too hard, cajoling him into father-son bonding sessions, like museum visits and sports events which Kevin hated because, to echo Eva, he had no interest in anything much. When pressed by a reporter, Kevin's reasons are consistent with an *inappropriateness*:

"The people...got on my nerves. I mean, if you were planning a major operation like this, wouldn't you go for the priss-pots and faggots and eyesores you couldn't stand?" (Shriver, 2003, p.355).

Finally, Eva asks him why: "I used to think I knew," he said glumly. "Now I'm not so sure" (Shriver, 2003, p.397).

After all these horrendous deaths, should a defence of Kevin be even considered? Is Kevin mentally ill? To commit such a horrific crime for no reason is reprehensible, beyond what is imaginable to the reasonable person. Comparison lies with Ben Lovatt. During toddlerhood, Kevin would:

sit in his playpen or on the floor, for hours, his unlit eyes stirring with an unfocused disaffection...He did not play (Shriver, 2003, p.112).

According to Robbins (2009), Ben and Kevin share an emotional detachment. His lack of empathy mimics Ben. When watching a violent video showing a disembowelment, Kevin is unmoved, his expression blasé. He is developmentally slow, barely talking at three, forming scrawling jagged scribble at five, still in nappies at six, under-socialised at school where he spends:

his first two months sitting slack on a stool in the middle of the room, gazing dully at his puttering classmates (Shriver, 2003, p.177).

However, Kevin turns out to be far too smart not to understand the consequences of his actions; he is scheming, manipulative, cruel. Eva admits she wasn't the best of mothers, but not all children with inadequate mothering turn out to be as abhorrent as Kevin. As Shriver once said, it is not just the parents to blame, children should be given 'partial responsibility for how they turn out' (Shriver in *The Guardian*, 2005). Does Eva have a point when reflecting on Kevin's deeds — that he is 'Evil Incarnate'? (Shriver, 2003, p.245).

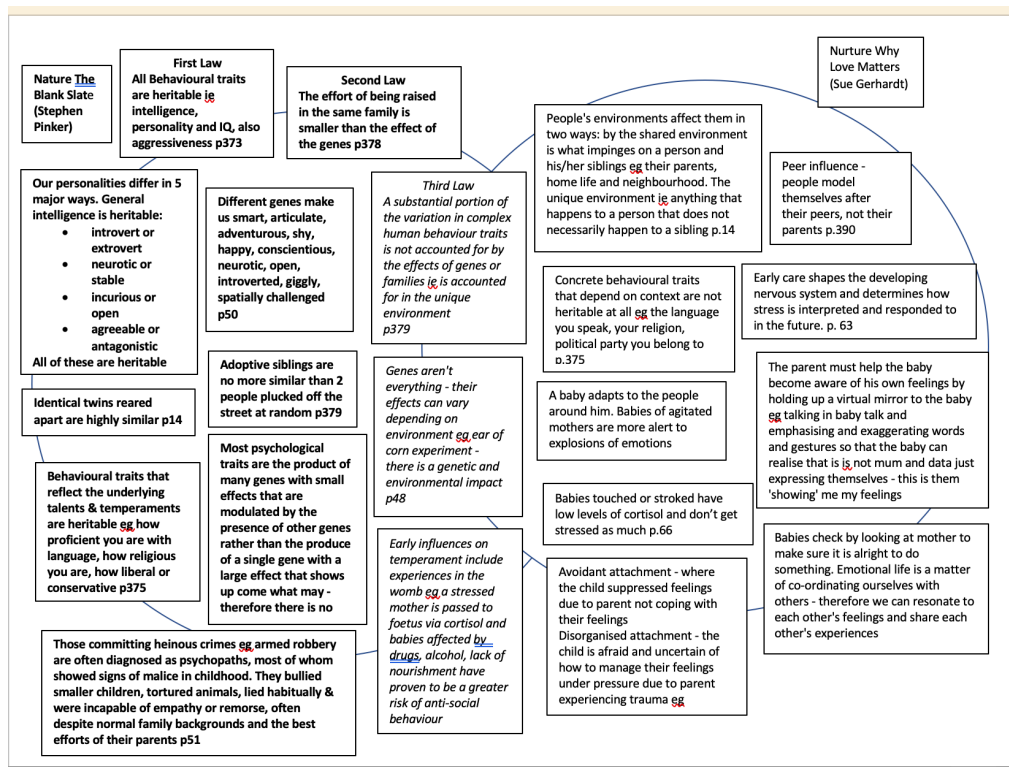
Writing Evil: From a Psychological Perspective

When writing *The Cuckoo's Nest*, my intention was not to create another Kevin Katchadorian. Joel would not deliberately plan to kill his classmates or to lure them to a place where they would be taken en masse in a killing spree. Joel's wicked deeds would be spontaneous, arising out of confrontation with others. What is noticeable in the above analyses of the trope of the Evil Child is the blame placed upon mothers when things go wrong. In the majority of these examples, it boils down to it being the mother's fault, when a child turns out not to be the person expected. In *The Fifth Child* Harriet seems to take most of the blame for Ben's atypical behaviour. However, I had no intention of blaming Jenny, alone, for Joel's awful deeds. So, from where else might Joel's bad behaviour originate? In order to create a realistic child 'it [was] vital to do some research into the topic' (Webb, 2015, p.3) and, in my case, into psychology.

Research, pre-construction of the novel, involved an exploration of object relations via *An Introduction to Object Relations* where Lavinia Gomez (1997) traces the progression of object relations from Freud to Klein, Fairbairn, Winnicott, Balint, Guntrip and Bowlby. However, the use of texts by Pinker and Gerhardt, two popular psychologists, were seminal in exploring the origin of Joel's behaviour proving pivotal to the psychology underlying the book. Pinker's *The Blank Slate* (2002) promotes nature, the way in which genes shape children more than parenting practices, while Sue Gerhardt's *Why Love Matters* (2004) champions nurture, how affection shapes a baby's brain. From these texts, I created a Venn diagram as exemplified in Figure 2.

This details a selection of Pinker and Gerhardt's key points, Pinker's in bold on the left and Gerhardt's on the right. Despite their preference for either nature or nurture, a crossover of their ideas (italicised) is apparent where the concentric circles overlap.

(Figure 2)



In order to create a realistic child, Keenan and Evans (2009) was used as a guide to track child development from early childhood (2 to 5 years) through middle childhood (6 to 12 years) to adolescence (12 to 18). However, since Joel was going to display atypical behaviour, Eric Mash's *Abnormal Child Psychology* (2013) was instrumental in showing that much of what Joel does is opposite to what is considered normal behaviour.

These texts helped to drive the story, the formation of characters, their subsequent behaviour and the way in which their behaviour impacts upon others. The intention was to produce a main protagonist who would carry out such acts of deviancy that it could be questioned as to whether he was evil and whether his acts were deemed to be evil. In this respect, my test of evil was devised to determine the presence of evil in the character and his acts. However, through the writing process which took place simultaneously with research into psychology and child development, I concluded that

Joel's behaviour would be subject to a defence as from reading Mash (2013) he would show all the signs of Conduct Disorder.

When planning the novel, I used the *Snowflake Method of Designing a Novel* (Ingermanson, 2014). This method of how to write a novel, developed by Randy Ingermanson, begins with the writer having a simple idea which is gradually built upon by adding layers of complexity until a plan for a novel is produced. It advocates a ten-step approach where Step One proposes the author writes a one sentence summary of the novel in fewer than fifteen words. This is the big picture. In the case of *The Cuckoo's Nest*:

A baby, mysteriously abandoned with a wealthy London couple, causes death and destruction.

Step Two advocates the writer use the traditional three-act form which states that story structure has three disasters plus an ending. I followed this method with some revision, exchanging 'disaster' for 'dilemma' as the novel would not be a 'disaster' in the thriller sense but in the sense of a difficult situation causing a life-changing or disturbing event requiring choices to be made. However, this changed to a certain extent over the course of writing the novel which is normal practice in creative writing. The metaphor of the layering of snowflake upon snowflake occurs in the novel through the building up of Joel's deviant behaviour from the age of five to pre-adolescence. He begins his 'evil' deeds by killing animals — the mouse, the dog and the cows in Part Two of the novel — then moves on to harming people as he gets older which includes his grandmother, the Explorer Scout and his father when he slashes his face, until his ultimate act of violence, the attempted killing of his sister. Just as a snowflake is fragile, it takes little to destabilise the family, like Alice dying from what appears to be a schoolboy prank,

up to Robin leaving the family home due to the conflict between himself and Jenny as she dismisses Joel's deviant behaviour.

In line with the essential building blocks of story commonly used in the commercial fiction-writing world, the protagonist (Robin) has an antagonist; this can be external (Jenny and eventually Joel) or internal (submission to Jenny). With this traditional approach Robin is involved in an inciting incident (finding the baby in the kitchen) where he has a desire (to discover the baby's origins). Consequently, he goes on a journey (his investigation into Joel's origins) where the action rises (Robin and Jenny argue about Joel) until a crisis point is reached (Robin leaves home) followed by the climax (Ellie's impalement) and on to the resolution which ends the story (the mystery of who Joel is and how he came to be left with them).

The plausibility of them finding a baby in their kitchen and not reporting it to the authorities troubled me at first, as anyone finding themselves in that position in real life would report finding the baby. I solved this problem by allowing Jenny to arrange the abandonment with Magda before the beginning of the novel; something of which the reader is unaware until the denouement in Chapter 20. This is the reason why Jenny accepts the abandoned baby, as opposed to Robin who is keen to report him to the police. Therefore, it had to be Robin's story and not Jenny's, otherwise the secret would be apparent from the start.

Before writing a scene, I planned each chapter using a scene analysis template (McKee, 1999), exemplified below in Figure 3.

(Figure 3)

Scene Analysis Template

Chapter 14

Step 1 Define conflict

Who drives the scene, motivates it, makes it happen?

Magda

What does he/she want? (What is he/she's desire?)

Take children to the zoo

What forces of antagonism block this desire?

Alice

Identify the source of antagonism

Alice insists on taking over

Step 2 Note opening value

Identify the value at stake in the scene and note its

Alice has muscled in

value at the opening of the scene

Negative value

Step 3 Break the scene into beats

A beat is an exchange of action/reaction in character behaviour.

1st beat

Look at what the character is doing outwardly

Magda has to hold back her thoughts

Look at what the character is doing beneath the surface

Magda is annoyed

Give the subtextual action a phrase eg pleading/grovelling

Angry

2nd beat

Look at what the character is doing outwardly

Magda speaks her mind

Look at what the character is doing beneath the surface

She's pleased with herself

Give the subtextual action a phrase

Courageous

Turning point

Alice hits Joel

Step 4 Note closing value and compare with opening

Positive - Magda has stood up to Alice

In this way, the character begins with either a positive or negative value and by the end of the chapter the value must change to the opposite state; otherwise, it is a non-event. It is imperative that rounded characters have flaws. This enables a character to change, an essential element in fictional characterisation (Yorke, 2014).

When starting to write the novel child development theory was a good starting point. For example, seeing that assertiveness and dominance is part of a five-year-old's social development (Keenan and Evans, 2009), I engendered Joel's frustration with his father, Robin, in the following way:

'Uncle Hugh?' frowned Robin, 'he's not a stranger, mate.'
'Not him — her,' said the boy, straining his outstretched arm' (p.110).

The same was true regarding Joel's aggression where he:

turned to Robin and pummelled his chest with his hands tightly clenched...[he] kicked Robin's legs repeatedly (p.120).

I used Pinker's claim that aggression, as well as IQ, intelligence, and personality, is heritable and, in particular, in identical twins who become separated at birth where they 'share all of their genes and none of their environment [so that] any correlation between them must be the effect of their genes' (Pinker, 2002, p.374). Genetic influence was high for Joel as 'adoption and twin studies indicate that 50% or more of the variance in antisocial behaviour is attributable to hereditary factors for males and females' (Mash, 2013, p.182). However, Mash also states that 'both genetic and environmental factors contribute to antisocial behaviour' (Mash, 2013, p.182). Joel was to be intelligent and manipulative where he learns to play one parent off against the other; he would take advantage of his mother, Jenny, and her over-protectiveness towards him:

Enraged, Joel punched him in the stomach.
'Ow!' cried Robin winded by the blow.
'That hurt, you little...!' and he grabbed Joel's wrists to restrain him.
'Stop it, Robin. Take your hands off him, you're going to hurt him,' said Jenny.

He's excited. Can't you see that?' (p.129).

Gerhardt states that aggressive behaviour can be the result of a resistant attachment in a child where it is possible that 'inconsistent rearing enables the child to learn to exaggerate their feelings manifested in overt fears causing them to weaken their independence, making them clingy' (Gerhardt, 2004, p.26). As a result, Gerhardt states that a child will cry loudly, is overly demanding of others, and in the case of *The Cuckoo's Nest* causes Jenny to give in to Joel, often excusing his unacceptable behaviour. 'Many aspects of...emotional behaviour are shaped by social interaction' (Gerhardt, 2004, p.15). She goes on to state that the orbitofrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for what happens in our emotional life develops postnatally. It is not surprising that inconsistencies in parental child-rearing can result in a child developing a poor orbitofrontal cortex and hence the development of poor emotional intelligence (Coleman, 1996, cited in Gerhardt, 2004). Joel would also find it difficult to regulate his emotions and is left with poor social responses, lack of empathy and self-control, as exemplified in the game of *Exploding Kittens* where his desire to be in charge is a natural part of social development in early childhood (Keenan and Evans, 2009):

'You should've exploded Oliver,' bellowed Joel suddenly, and he heaved himself off his mother by ramming her in the stomach, then leapt into the circle, missing Oliver's head by a whisker, to land on the cards scattering the pack.
'No, he shouldn't,' said George, 'he can use his Defuse card and put the Exploding Kitten card back' (p.133).

In the game, Joel's frustration is evident when challenged by George:

'It's too boring that way...nobody blows up then,' said Joel.
'Yes, they will. They will if they don't have any Defuse cards.'
'Well I'm changing the rules. I'm going to make sure nobody has Defuse cards. I'm taking them all out. It makes it more dangerous then.'
'But that isn't fair,' said George, 'it doesn't give anyone a chance.'
'Exactly,' said Joel. 'You've got more chance of being exploded up then' (p.133).

I used Tallichet (2009) to show Joel practising his deviant behaviour on animals and learning his craft before starting on humans. According to Tallichet, the link between animal cruelty is predictive of violence in later life. This is evident in the farm scene:

He let the flame touch the bottom of Clarice's tail where the wavy strands took light immediately. Like a fuse to a bomb, the orange tongues licked upwards. She bellowed loudly, alarming the herd, setting them off in a panic. She wafted her tail furiously, trying to flick off whatever it was. She wriggled backwards pushing the others aside, stepping on their hoofs, kicking out in protest (p.194)

The psychology underpinning Joel's fire setting and animal cruelty is significant in The Macdonald Triad, a theory 'first coined by John Macdonald (1963) to refer to the presence of three behaviours in childhood as an indicator of later aggressive behaviour' (Parfitt and Alleyne, 2018, p.2). According to this theory, a combination of at least two of the factors of the Macdonald Triad, namely bedwetting, fire setting and animal cruelty are predictive of violent behaviour in later life.

Parallels exist between the mixed messages Kevin Katchadorian receives from his parents in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and those received by Joel in *The Cuckoo's Nest*. By using Gerhardt's theory of resistant/ambivalent attachment where parental feelings are inconsistent, I created a child who may keep their feelings close to the surface until they finally let off steam. I included numerous examples of the tension that arises between Robin and Jenny where they appear to be on different wavelengths when it comes to child-rearing:

Robin grabbed Joel's arm, forcing him to look round at the picture.
'Robin...let me...' [Jenny]
'No Jenny. This demands zero tolerance.' Robin was shaking. Some of the glass dropped out of the frame. He was still gripping Joel's arm as he turned to face the boy again' (p.236).

By the end of Part Two, I engineered Joel's establishment of a catalogue of violence. By being aggressive to people and animals, by bullying, threatening and intimidating

others, by initiating fights, by using weapons in the form of a stick and a knife to physically harm people and animals, by forcing someone into sexual activity and destroying property by deliberately engaging in fire setting with the intention of causing serious damage, Joel's behaviour would be synonymous with Conduct Disorder (CD) according to the criteria shown by Mash from the DSM-IV-TR of the American Psychiatric Association. At least three out of the fifteen criteria in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* were satisfied within twelve months of violated rules which in Joel's case included his attempted killing of Ellie. A key reason behind CD is marital discord (Kazdin, 1995 in Mash, 2013); hence the argument for nurture.

Robin tells us that he and Jenny did not use harsh punishment on Joel which contradicts DSM-IV-TR where harsh punishment contributes to a diagnosis of CD in a child (Kazdin, 1995, cited in Mash, 2013). However, another symptom of CD involves parents who feel their offspring are out of control; something that cannot be denied with Joel.

As well as parental influence and genetics, from where else might Joel's behaviour originate? Pre-birth factors, like a mother's alcoholic intake, can affect the foetus/unborn child where cortisol levels are raised leading to 'an overreactive stress response that lasts into adulthood' (Wand et al, 2001 cited in Gerhardt, 2004, p.67). During her employment as a nanny in the Watts's household I ensured that Robin suspects Magda maybe leading an unsavoury life, including a tendency to drink, where Mash was influential in this case. 'The greater amount of alcohol consumed, the greater risk of child conduct problems' (Mash, 2013, p. 183). Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (Rose, S. Typical and Atypical Development Lecture 2 Prenatal and Neonatal Development, Slide 15) was used to help explain Joel's difficulty in self-control. According to Gerhardt a mother's heavy drinking habit during pregnancy can be the cause of a baby's

short, upturned nose, flat mid face and small widely spaced eyes, facial abnormalities which could be linked to the overindulgence of alcohol and that babies affected in this way can be difficult from the start — some, more temperamentally demanding (Gerhardt, 2004). As a baby I ensured that Joel would prove to be a very unsettled child and often prone to loud outbursts of crying.

Birth order is another way of determining childhood behaviour. According to Pinker (2002) and with no other siblings around, the first born can have the full attention of his/her parents. However, when later borns arrive, Pinker states that the first born can be 'dethroned' by the birth of the next sibling...If firstborns are unable to regain parental favour, they sometimes rebel' (Adler cited in Sulloway, 1996, p.55). As stated on a website designed to inform parents:

Sibling rivalry starts even before the second child is born and continues as the kids grow and compete for everything from toys to attention. As kids reach different stages of development, their evolving needs can significantly affect how they relate to one another ('Sibling Rivalry' in Kidshealth.org, p.1).

I weaved this into the story by showing Joel's jealousy towards his younger sibling:

'Biscuuuuuit,' shouted Joel with delight, and he ran towards it, trampling Ellie's favourite teddy on the way' (p.124).

Once establishing his jealousy towards his sister, I had to make sure it intensified until, when in Chapter 18, he gets his final chance to exert his authority by deliberately pushing her onto the knife.

As well as sibling rivalry, peer pressure can be instrumental in influencing a child's behaviour. According to Harris in Pinker 'people model themselves after their peers, not their parents' (Harris cited in Pinker, 2002, p.390). Harris calls this Group Socialization Theory where children model themselves on how their peers speak and behave. Consequently, Joel would try to gain acceptance from his peers by, for example, fulfilling tasks to satisfy his membership of the school's Sacred Sect. No

matter how hard he tries, Joel was going to be humiliated by Marcus and would be forced to raise the stakes by resorting to extreme behaviour in order to prove his worth:

He let the flame touch the bottom of Clarice's tail where the wavy strands took light immediately. Like a fuse to a bomb, the orange tongues licked upwards...Hair sizzled as the tail burned like a beacon...Off she went, charging around the barn, kicking up her legs, her tail rotating like a firework, a real-life Catherine wheel. Joel marvelled at the spectacle and he shouted, laughing out loud (p.194).

Such cruel behaviour could be considered evil.

Applying the Test of Evil to Joel

Had Joel committed an *abomination* — something more than wrong/bad with an added element which is over and above ordinary wrongness/badness? According to Magda, the only witness to the event, he appears to deliberately force Ellie onto the knife. Her crime was to bathe the puppy in the sink, and then to chase the excitable dog around the room skimming Joel's legs and wetting his jeans in the process. Joel's response, the inclination to kill, is extreme. This sounds like attempted murder, but it could be interpreted as a quick irrational response to an argument. Grievous bodily harm with intent may be more applicable as Ellie does not die. However, such a criminal act deserves no less justice than murder and, in this respect, Joel commits a grave *maltreatment* where the perpetrator has the intention of seeing someone suffer significant harm. From what Magda says, he seemed to enjoy it. Is such maltreatment over an argument about a dog making a mess in the kitchen justifiable? The reason seems most inappropriate. *Inappropriateness* of action is surely satisfied. With an abomination incurring maltreatment and inappropriateness of action being satisfied, can Joel be considered evil? Maybe not if Joel is diagnosed with Conduct Disorder; he then has a suitable defence, as such psychological disorder would counteract the result of the

test. Although there may be a defence, the act can still be considered evil even if the original intention was not to carry out an evil act. However, for the purposes of this exercise, true evil incorporates evil intention in collaboration with an evil act. This may be true when at the age of five Joel kills the mouse so that nobody else can look after it and at the age of six when he throws the dog the ball from a great height. However, according to English common law a child under seven cannot commit crimes (Cloud, 1998) as they cannot make a sophisticated moral judgement. This is confirmed by the Crown Prosecution Service who state on their website that 'the age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is 10 years old. This means that children under 10 cannot be arrested or charged with a crime.' Therefore, Joel's actions cannot be deemed evil. And when he commits more animal cruelty at the age of nine, he was forced into the situation by the older boys who should have known better. It may be said that he was cajoled by them. They were older than him and humiliated him, forcing him to act under pressure in an evil-encouraging situation.

Joel is ten-years old when he commits a sexual assault on a girl scout. Ten is the age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales where 'we consider that as soon as they have their tenth birthday a child can not only tell that something is wrong but can make a sophisticated moral judgement about what is worse than something else' (Crook cited in Jerom, 2010, p.22). However, in that scene I did not want the reader to know what truly happens between the two. There is only the girl's word against his with no witnesses to prove his intent. It was not obvious when writing the book that a link exists with Frank Cauldhame and Joel in the way in which both make their crimes look like accidents. It is only when at the age of eleven that Joel, in a rage, openly assaults his father, injuring him with a piece of glass do we see Joel's true colours even if it is a

sudden expression of temper. Joel is malevolent, on the cusp of what might be called 'evil'.

The engineering of Joel's deeds from my part was for Joel to be a very troublesome child, where his actions would be deemed to be abnormal and for the reader to not only be appalled by his actions but to sympathise with him as well. I wanted him to be seen as unwanted by one 'parent' and over-protected by another, a child caught in the middle of an unusual arrangement and one that, in the end, sends him off the rails when he discovers that he has been 'adopted', lied to by his parents and his natural mother. One theme of the novel is that secrets and lies do not pay. It was cruel to keep him in the dark regarding his true parentage, where adults are guilty of moulding a little boy to satisfy their own demands. However, he does appear to have a naturally cruel streak. His biological father (background information unknown to the reader) was a gangster and a murderer. Does he, therefore, carry an evil gene? I do not think so. What he inherits is a propensity for aggression which when triggered or pushed can lead to appalling acts of violence — nature and nurture at work together.

A Summing Up

At the beginning of this project, I firmly believed that evil would be more prevalent in realistic fictional children than it has proved to be. However, when I began to analyse the fictional characters within the trope of the Evil Child, I realised that the majority had a defence as to why they carried out their deviant acts. This was confirmed by my test of evil. It is rather like when a judge applies the equation for murder to a defendant in court — Actus Reus + Mens Rea - Defence = Murder. In other words, the perpetrator commits a guilty act and has a guilty mind without a defence equalling murder, or evil in this project's case. In this way I could determine whether these so-called evil

characters were evil or not; nearly all of them had a defence, including Joel. The only character who came anywhere near to committing out-and-out evil was Kevin Katchadorian.

On reflection, I have come to realise that evil is rare and that the flippant use of the word 'evil' is misleading. During the writing of the novel, I always knew that Joel would not be classed as out-and-out evil, even though he fatally injures animals and people which could be viewed as evil acts, as I wanted to portray him as a very troubled child from the beginning, influenced by social factors combined with a natural tendency for aggression. Nature and nurture at work together.

In line with Jacques Derrida, I have found, in this project, that there are no true binary opposites like good or evil, nature or nurture. Derrida challenged western philosophy's desire to find Truth by opening up the tradition of the inside and the outside. Derrida upholds that:

There is therefore a good and a bad writing: good and natural, divine inscription in the heart and soul; the perverse and deceitful, technique exiled in the exteriority of the body (Derrida, 2016, p.17-18).

According to him, good writing, metaphorical writing, comes from the interiority of the heart and soul, whilst bad writing, literal writing, is artificial, exiled in the exteriority of the body; therefore, good and bad writing are opposed.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida put the case for deconstructing the system of hierarchically oriented metaphysical opposites by using writing as a lever to open up the idea that the spoken word, traditionally thought to have higher status over writing since it represented inner thoughts, is actually in the space of the inside (the mind) and the outside (the body) at the same time. Thus, with Derrida's blurring of the metaphorical inside and outside, there can be no binary opposites. As a result, there can be neither good versus evil, neither nature versus nurture. Poststructuralists like Derrida sought to

challenge the idea of the first word of a binary opposition being more desirable than the other. As such, nature is not necessarily better than nurture. Gerhardt would agree when she says that whatever the temperament, good parenting can compensate.

In this respect, good and evil are not binary opposites. This can be exemplified with Singer's previously mentioned gradation of words from 'bad' to 'evil', for example:

bad › mean › spiteful › cruel › vicious › malicious › wicked › malevolent › evil

A similar exercise with 'good' at one end of a spectrum and with 'evil' at the other becomes tricky as 'good' could be construed as being little better than satisfactory according to context, like OFSTED reports, with which I became very familiar. When referring to a child, then, it could look something like this:

perfect › angelic › good › mischievous › naughty › bad › malicious › evil

'Good' and 'evil' are, therefore, not binary opposites. Nancy Segal, in her book on the Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart (MISTRA), states that:

In my first article, "The Nature vs. Nurture Laboratory," I described our work with separated twins. I would phrase the title differently today, either as Nature-Nurture or Nature and Nurture because it is now widely appreciated that the two effects work together and are separable only in a statistical sense (Segal, 2012, p.96).

To produce a spectrum on which 'nature' and 'nurture' sit could be even more testing. So, was there a portmanteau word which combines the two, like 'Brexit'? With similar phonetic constructions in 'nature' and 'nurture', the word 'nature' fits the brief. As the word 'nature' may be too much written into our psyches to mean both 'nature' and 'nurture' together, then 'ambinature' (meaning both nature and nurture) better suits the liminal space between the two words. That intermediate space was there right at the start of this project in the Venn diagram in Figure 2.

To sum up, excepting Rhoda Penmark and Jack Merridew, who were intentionally created to be naturally evil by authorial intent, the other characters in the

literature survey are neither truly good nor truly evil. Merricat, although killing members of her family, is not an evil person as she was treated badly as a child and has schizophrenia with false beliefs. Niles does bad things by killing, too, but as with Merricat his schizophrenia absolves him of blame. Ben Lovatt's developmental disorder causes his disturbing behaviour, his misunderstanding of the world. Frank Cauldhame's killings are a result of his cruel dysfunctional upbringing. Even Kevin Katchadorian's horrific murders could well result from parental strife and a reluctant mother in combination with a natural predisposition towards perversion. Joel Watts's natural aggression with a measure of parental mixed messages produces a very mixed-up child. Neither nature nor nurture alone is to blame. There are too many factors affecting human make-up to say it is either one thing or the other. It is not nature or nurture but nature and nurture. Both genetics and environment work together to create an 'ambinatural' effect.

Does evil exist in realistic child characterisation in literature? I agree with Singer when he states that 'evil...though widespread, is happily not as widespread as that' (Singer, 2004, p. 204). Evil is, indeed, rare.

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