

The Suitcase

Volume 1: Major creative work

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Abstract

The Suitcase and ‘Slicing Through Noir Fiction’.

The Suitcase

In the cold of New York City, the Gramercy Park Hotel stands over a dead man concealed in a private park, his stiff hands grasping a suitcase filled with millions of dollars. Five strangers linked by their pasts converge - coincidence for some, planned for others – and together they stumble across the money, the dead man and a decision.

‘Slicing Through Noir Fiction’

Dr. Gregson, serial killer from *The Suitcase*, steps out of the pages of the novel and into the world where he kills a journalist whose next job was an interview with the author of *The Suitcase*, H J Nash. Dr. Gregson goes on a journey of discovery, knowledge, darkness and violence, to discover an allusive term fervently discussed by critics and academics, and yet shrouded in confusion and subjectivity: noir.

Through Dr. Gregson, I analyze two primary works of noir fiction, Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country For Old Men* and Iain Banks’ *The Wasp Factory*, and then conduct a faux interview of myself, the author, contextualizing *The Suitcase* and its creation in the vast world of fiction.

Statement of Originality

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge or belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Heath Nash

November, 2014.

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The Suitcase

Chapter 1

Gavin

Gavin had left when Bernie put on their dead father's hat: when the ritual commenced. He'd walked across the Williamsburg Bridge down to Lower East Side for a pint of Guinness to wash back a few red *Advils*. It had been an hour since the man had spilled the name: Alex Ramirez of the Ramirez gang, and it had been an hour since Bernie first spilled the man's blood, but at least they had a lead.

Gavin wandered through Williamsburg, through the light rain, through the puddles that glistened like dimples on a flat lifeless face. The cigarette made him feel better, but the queasiness in his stomach had been a tumour that grew with each passing day, with each passing kill. Information and leads had been slow. There was no tracking device on the suitcase: that was a mistake that Rupert often made; the only true Yank bastard in the crew, and the only one who continually made mistakes. He's dead now, along with the rest of them, the fool shot himself in the face, trying to fix that old Smith & Wesson gun of his. Bernie's got the gun now, he loves the way it looks: retro being the new school. That left the young O'Doughertys working the street now: Gavin and Bernie O'Dougherty, a surname their father had made infamous to all in the business.

The Williamsburg apartment was small, and shaded by an almost-complete warehouse apartment block that perhaps was once a factory of sorts: a gradual gentrification marked by scaffolding and empty paint buckets. As Gavin approached the house he stopped at the gate, took one last drag of the cigarette and dropped it into

the puddle by his feet. At this hour of the morning there was a New York silence here like no other: the crashing of the East River was like a coming together of cold hands attempting to find warmth, the benign traffic echoed softly off the waters, and if you listened hard enough you could hear the brief screech of the L-train intermittently underfoot.

Gavin didn't want to enter the house; he knew what awaited him there: mutilation, death, and an inflamed sickness riddled on his brother's face. He pulled out another cigarette from a small red and white packet that he always kept in the left pocket of his black leather jacket. His wife had given him that jacket for his birthday; apart from the cheap ring on his finger, the jacket was the only piece of Kathleen, and Dublin, to survive the journey to America and still live on today. He withdrew a lighter of solid gold from the same pocket, and attempted to light the cigarette that hung rigid through the black whiskers that surrounding his lips. It took a handful of attempts and he cursed under his breath until it finally lit. He should've gotten rid of the lighter a long time ago, but it was a gift from the Boss, the man known to those in the business as The Devil, and such gifts were rare and expected to be used, like the 9mm gun that was concealed between his jeans and right hip. The gun was more a tool, like safety glasses or gloves for a scientist: an uncomfortable necessity that came with the job. The red glow brightened as he sucked hard on the cigarette. The smoke drifted from his lungs and into the cold early morning air, and he stood lost in thought. His face showed the effects the last years had left on him. He smoked more, he ate less. He drank more, he slept less. He looked gaunt like a marathon runner having just finished a race, only he was still running forward, in the violent direction that his father had taken him. The Suitcase was the end of the race, and then there was his wife Kathleen and his daughter Abbey and his home Dublin. But there was Bernie

too. He couldn't leave his kid brother like this – a killer, a monster – something had to be done.

The cigarette burned his fingers as the glow approached the filter. He flicked it into the garden that was no more than weeds and discarded possessions: a rusted bike, a flat and faded basketball, a garbage bag full of rotting clothes, an old television.

The hip-high gate screeched as he entered, that would be enough to startle Bernie – he was good at his job, a professional, just like their late father. Sure enough the front door opened before Gavin reached the second of four steps that lead up to the house. Gavin felt relieved.

‘Is it done?’

Bernie shrugged and walked back inside.

Gavin reached for another cigarette, but refrained. He shuffled forward, following his brother into the house. He didn't have to wait long to see his brother's work. Gavin looked at the mess: a huge slit at the young man's throat had caused blood to spray outward, covering most of the sofa, the solitary piece of furniture in a room now red with blood. But there was no body.

Bernie walked into the room from the kitchen, carrying a bowl of Cheerios and a kitchen chair. He put the chair next to the bloody sofa, carefully put down his hat on the floor, beside him, and sat down and began eating.

Gavin vomited, and, before his stomach cheated him again, hit the bowl of cereal out from his brother's hands, sending it across the room. ‘No more,’ demanded Gavin. ‘This shite has gone far enough, Bernie. What the fuck is wrong with you?’

Bernie stood up, walked back into the kitchen and started preparing himself another bowl of cereal.

Gavin reached into his jacket pocket, took out his *Marlboros*, grabbed a cigarette and his gold lighter, and walked out into the cool Brooklyn air.

Chapter 2

Amy – 1 week earlier

The beginning of summer was intolerable. A dry northerly Australian wind had come sprinting off the inland desert to settle on the streets of Adelaide, sucking moisture from every living thing that dared stray from the cool indoors. Amy stood, hunched over a desk in her guitar shop, with a fan swirling torrid air and the smell of once varnished wood around the room. The air-conditioner down-stairs had broken months ago, but she could no longer afford to have it fixed. Like the peace lily next to the computer, Amy had wilted. Her mousy brown hair was stuck to her flushed cheeks, and the vitality she had once possessed in her green eyes had dulled and abandoned her. She wanted nothing more than to pick up her father's old Martin D28 acoustic guitar, play some Elliott Smith and let the heat take her away, to despair, to death: a suicide ticket to hell like the one her father had taken. Was it this shop (doomed to failure) that drove her father to a packet of pills and a long cold sleep? Or was it the loss of her mother and his fear of a life without her? Amy would never find the answer to those questions, but one thing she did know was that the bank would soon take away her beloved guitar store, sell all the guitars and the amps and her apartment on the second floor, and turn it into another fucking coffee shop. Perhaps a packet of pills was a good end to a shitty existence?

The jingle of the door awoke her from her melancholy, and she quickly looked up.

'Amy, you look terrible,' said a familiar voice.

Amy smiled. ‘Nice to see you too, big sis. Or should I call you *Dr.* Stacey Winston now?’

‘You’ll be coming to see me in the surgery soon if you don’t do something about that bloody air-conditioner,’ said Stacey, shrugging off Amy’s jest. ‘Guess what? It’s done.’ Stacy grinned.

‘So you got the ticket for me?’ asked Amy.

‘Yep, and I’ve reluctantly paid for six months accommodation for you too.’ She handed over the computer-printed plane ticket. Amy studied it just the once, folded it as perfectly as she could, and then quickly put it in her purse. She then ran around to the customer side of the desk and gave her older sister a hug.

‘Thanks, Stace! Thank you, thank you, thank you,’ Amy let her go; it was too hot to hold anyone. ‘Where am I staying?’

‘You know Eloise, mum’s old French friend from work?’ Amy looked confused. ‘You know, the old French teacher from Nuri’ High?’

Amy finally nodded her head. ‘Oh, yeah.’

‘Well her cousin owns this hostel in Gramercy, so she got you a good deal – really cheap. It’s a decent little place, just above East Village, called the *American Dream Hostel*.’ Stacey smiled.

Amy crossed her arms. ‘*American Dream*? Is that meant to be a joke?’

‘Honestly, that’s what it’s called.’

‘Really?’ Amy walked over to the wall of acoustic guitars and picked one up.

‘Yes. I thought it was a fitting name: the ‘American dream’. You know, leaving all this behind to finally try and follow your dream of singing in New York.’

Amy gave the cheap acoustic a quick tune by ear and then started playing *Old Man* by Neil Young. It was one of the covers she played most nights she was on stage, which wasn't very often in a shitty little Australian city like Adelaide.

'If you decide it's too much and come home,' Stacey continued, 'maybe you can find a rich and cute professional, you know a lawyer, or accountant, or doctor, and marry him, so you can get out of this debt and leave all of this behind.'

Amy stopped playing. 'I don't want to leave this behind. This was Dad's shop.'

'This shop is what killed both mum and dad, Amy. You should just let it go.'

The heat was getting to Amy. 'I need to sit down.'

'Here let me take that,' Stacey offered, taking the guitar and delicately placing it back on the wall. 'Are you okay, Amy? I'm sorry if I - '

'It's fine. I'm okay.' She sculled a glass of tepid water and sat down. 'Just feeling the heat.'

Stacey smiled and looked around the room. 'Which one are you taking with you?'

'The D28. It's down here.' She looked at the old tweed case by her feet.

'That's my favourite. It was Dad's favourite too. Mum bought it for him for his twenty-first. Remember the story?'

Stacey gave her that look again. A look that few humans could pull off: one eyebrow raised high, the other squinted low. It was a discerning glance that reeked of criticism. 'Stop it Amy, you can't do this to yourself. They're - ' Stacey began, but was cut off.

'Yes, yes I know. They're dead, okay.' She couldn't tell Stacey what really happened; Stacey would never forgive her.

‘You need to move on. New York will be good for you. It’s been a tough couple of years for both of us. And it’s much worse for you in this stupid shop.’

‘Yeah, I know. I get it. Why do you think I’m leaving?’ Amy stood up to walk away from her sister, towards the guitars that lined the walls, until the door jingled open again. Hot air was exchanged with an even warmer breeze that wafted in with the smell of the late morning traffic from the city street. A man in a shirt and tie walked in and closed the door behind him. The two sisters watched as he walked over to the electric guitars.

‘He’s cute,’ whispered Stacey with a mischievous smile. Amy couldn’t help but smile too. ‘Okay, little sis,’ said Stacey, ‘I’ll let you go, and I’ll see you tonight then, right?’

‘Tonight at 7pm, you’re still picking me up and dropping me off to the airport, right?’

‘Of course, then my little sis’ is off to New York!’

They hugged one last time, and Stacey vanished into the heat outside. Amy walked up to the man who had just picked up a *Fender Thinline Telecaster* and was admiring it. ‘That’s a nice axe,’ said Amy.

He looked at the price. ‘Too nice for me,’ he said putting it back on the wall.

‘Just starting?’

‘Nah, I’ve been playing for a few years, but I’m not very good.’

‘Once you have the right set-up you’ll want to play all the time,’ she assured him. ‘Having a sweet guitar and amp, or nice acoustic, makes you *want* to play more guitar. If you have a terrible sounding guitar or amp then you never want to play because no matter how good you are, it will always sound shit.’

He gave a light chuckle. 'Maybe I should think about an upgrade then.' He turned around and looked at her, as if just noticing her for the first time. He stood staring like an inanimate dummy, modelling the latest Hugo Boss outfit.

'Are you okay?' she asked.

'You look just like someone I knew,' he said. 'I'm sorry.'

'That's cool. Do you want me to plug in the guitar?' Before he had a chance to reply she'd taken the guitar off the wall and turned on an amp. 'The thing that's cool about the *Thinline* is its versatility, and it's light for the stage, good for jazz and still has that *Tele*' twang.' She played a simple lick from the minor pentatonic scale.

'It sounds great, but it's too rich for me at the moment. I just blew my Christmas bonus on a trip to the United States.'

'Yeah, where you heading?' She played another lick, more interested in the guitar than him.

'New York.'

She stopped playing and looked up at him. 'Me too! I leave tonight.'

Before he had a chance to reply his mobile phone rang. He walked over to the corner and started talking. The call ended abruptly. 'Sorry about that.'

'That's cool.'

'And thanks for showing me the guitar,' he brushed his hands through his wavy blonde hair. 'I gotta go, but maybe I'll see you in New York.' He stood there looking at her with his grey eyes as if he'd looked at her one thousand times before.

'You sure you're okay?' she asked.

'Yeah, it's just this heat.' He smiled. 'Maybe I'll see you in the Big Apple,' he waved, and hurried out of the shop.

She closed the shop early, locked the front door, went upstairs to her apartment and spent the rest of the afternoon packing for her trip to New York. The phone across the room sat ominously. All day she had stared at the phone as if it were a hand grenade that had just rolled into her shop. She had been dreading a phone call from her bank's lawyer. Her father had taken out a loan to open the store, but the repayments were more than her takings and, with her living expenses, she'd been getting deeper into debt for the past eight months. The thought of facing a phone call made her feel lightheaded; at least she had air-conditioning upstairs.

The rest of the day went by and the phone didn't explode, which was rare, considering the lawyer had been on her case for the past three months. The business was going down, that much was clear. And by the time she got home from New York, she'd have nothing. But she didn't care about that now: she was going to New York. 'Should I take my ukulele?' she asked herself. She picked it up and gave it a light strum.

The phone rang. She stopped strumming the ukulele. Her eyes shifted left watching the small green LCD light up with each ring.

She crept over and picked up the handset, the ukulele still in her other hand.

'Hello, Amy speaking.'

'Amy Winston?'

'Yeah.'

'Hi Amy, it's Andrew Green here again from Hales and Co, sorry to call you so late, but I'm still in the office so I thought I'd try you.' There was a pause, as if Andrew was waiting for Amy to say something, but she didn't. 'I've been instructed that the Bank's not willing to allow you any further deferrals or extensions of time, but is looking to move forward with taking possession of the shop –'

She threw the phone across the room, ripping the phone line from the wall. She walked downstairs, and saw her life hanging on the walls; she wanted to smash something; she wanted to see wood splinter.

The doorbell rang before she could send the ukulele flying. She saw the outline of a man outside, and thudded across the room and opened the door.

‘We’re closed!’ she declared. ‘Can’t you read the fucking sign?’ The man dressed in simple jeans and a black T-shirt took a step back, but he didn’t leave.

‘Amy Winston?’

Amy squeezed the ukulele in her hand.

‘Amy Winston?’ he asked again.

She nodded her head.

He withdrew a letter from his pocket. ‘I have a default and sale notice to serve on you in relation to your dealings with Bank South –’

The ukulele came crashing down on his head. He fell hard. Amy looked left and right and across the street. A car idled on the other side of the road, but she didn’t notice. She dragged the body inside and closed the door.

Chapter 3

Andrew

An empty bottle of red wine sat on Andrew's desk, leaving a maroon ring on Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Nick Drake was playing, and playing loud. Whenever he got in these moods he listened to Nick Drake, his dead wife's favourite singer songwriter. She watched on through a small rectangle of glass and bordered oak as he drank himself to stupor. Two years he had mourned. For two long years he had drunk the Barossa Valley dry. He had to drink whenever he indulged in his cyber-relationship with Stephanie Gregson; there was no other way he could go through with it. She was like a clone of his wife ten years on, that's why he did it, that's why he couldn't resist her constant messaging, her nude photos, and her invitation to a Christmas holiday in New York City. She'd bought the tickets, paid for the accommodation, but he was not excited; he was ashamed and confused.

His initial meeting with Stephanie had been chance. He was in Sydney with his brother for a corporate fundraiser, and Stephanie had been the event organizer. His brother spied her by the punch, looking spectacular in a forest green dress that accentuated her eyes: 'Andrew, have a look, over there. It's incredible,' he said. Stephanie's mousy brown hair was tied up in a bun, as his wife's had so often been. Andrew looked up as his brother continued: 'Over there, she looks exactly like –' Before his brother could finish, Andrew was gone. That night Andrew and Stephanie talked, kissed, and fucked each other stupid in Stephanie's hotel room. Stephanie

returned to London the next morning, and their internet relationship started soon after – an artificial progression; a cold exchange of data, words, and images.

The haunting voice of Nick Drake reverberated off the white walls and polished pine floors. Between the bookcase and fireplace was her guitar, his wife's guitar, broken but beautiful. A few months after she died, Andrew bought another guitar, exactly like hers. He tried to play like she had: with a soft certainness and clarity that had complemented her haunting voice, but he couldn't. She had been Nick Drake in a dress, Jeff Buckley in a tutu; he was a lawyer whose creative flair was in following precedents and procedures – no use reinventing the wheel.

The way she held the guitar, closing her eyes as her painted nails plucked the strings, was an indelible image in his mind; an image that he thought could never be repeated. That was until today, at 12.34pm, in a dingy little guitar shop; a shop that he was in the process of repossessing for the bank. He didn't know why he'd gone down there. He did that sometimes: went to the residence and met the person he was about to dispossess or bankrupt. Somehow it made it easier. He was supposed to let her know that afternoon, after he returned from court, but he couldn't do it. His hand was forced later that evening when the process server had popped by the office. Andrew was just on his way home, having thought he'd escaped the phone call, but when his process server had said that he was leaving for a Christmas holiday with the family he was forced to do it tonight. On the way home in his car he stopped outside her shop, hoping to get one last glimpse of Amy Winston, but all he saw was the back of the process server. When Andrew saw the ukulele come crashing down on his colleague's skull and the limp body get dragged into the house, he had guessed Amy's mood. It was too familiar. He had seen it before. It was dark, just as his wife's had been before she killed herself.

Chapter 4

Dr. David Gregson

The emails had been on David's mind for the past three days. *We can fuck like reindeers all month long.* He didn't want to believe it, but he knew it to be true. He had dreamt that a hungry leech had crawled between himself and his wife, sucking all the warmth from their marriage. And now the leech had a name: Andrew Green.

David had thought that his wife might have found a young lover, someone who didn't spend his last bundle of energy at work dealing with patients that couldn't be cured. He would've leapt that hurdle with a talk, like the talks he had given his clients over and over again, trying to find the holes in a loveless marriage and fill them with whatever was missing. But he never would have guessed that an internet affair would pull them apart. What had the world come to? It made no sense to him: the logic was askew. Who would give up a seven-year steady marriage for a stranger who was only a voice and image on the other side of the world?

It had been over a year since he had last made love to his wife. David acknowledged that this wasn't healthy for an attractive couple in their late thirties without the burden of children. But David's love had been his patients and his clinic, and his wife's love had been her *Kenya Famine* charity. Neither of them wanted children, as far as he knew.

He walked along the Thames, the cool river wind kissing his cheek. He loved London, had grown up here, always lived here; he wanted to breathe in the London air and smile, but he couldn't. *I want you to fill me up with snow this Christmas.* His

wife's emails were sickening. Over time the words had nibbled at his brain like a deadly amoeba, eating away at the pieces of soft tissue that had made him content, weak, and blind. The inner change had come for the better; this much he knew. Now was the chance to become someone new: someone different with a mental vigour and awareness that his wife would come to love again. He had been too attached to work and money – society's burdens – and now it was time to live a little, to indulge in his wife like they had when they were young lovers without a care.

Just up on his left was Paul's, the patisserie he visited every morning for a croissant and coffee before work. He opened the door and paused in the doorway before taking half a step inside. The chill from outside swept into the shop. A man looked up from his newspaper. The young girl behind the counter felt the cool air and looked up too.

'Good morning Dr. Gregson,' she yelled over the clatter. 'Latté with one, and a ham and cheese croissant?'

David stared at her blankly. A man in a Burberry scarf wanted to pass, so David took two steps back out of the shop and onto the stone path. The man pushed past him, shaking his head. The door to Paul's closed; he was outside in the cold. He turned away from Paul's.

As he walked toward work he felt the wind cut through his jacket. London's love was cold, and Costa's Café just up on the left was sure to warm him. He stepped inside and could smell burnt toast. The line up was non-existent.

'Can I help you, dude?' asked a young man who had more piercings than Dennis Rodman.

David ordered something different: a cheese and tomato focaccia, and a chocolate mocha. He waited longer than he should have, and when he got his coffee it

was burnt and almost too sweet to drink. But he forced himself to drink it: change was good. He left the shop and continued his walk along the Thames. There was a small park bench outside his clinic and his first client wasn't due to arrive for another hour so he sat down. He felt cold water seep through his pants, his underpants, and onto his skin. He wanted to stand up, but he didn't. He placed the coffee on the bench next to him, and unwrapped his focaccia. He swallowed a mouthful of saliva before taking a bite: the tomato was soggy and the cheese wasn't melted. He ate the whole thing.

The door to his clinic was unlocked. His secretary, Joanna, was always early. He smiled as he walked in. 'Good Morning, Jo,' he said merrily.

'Good Morning, Dr Gregson,' she said surprised. 'You never call me Jo. Are you okay? You look a bit pale, if you don't mind me saying, doctor.'

'For Christ's sakes I'm fine, Joanna,' he threw his breakfast rubbish into the bin. 'Who is my 9am?'

'Ahh,' her eyes scanned the diary, 'Matilda Hackney. Yes, Matilda Hackney, 9am. She's the rich one, isn't she?'

'All my patients are wealthy nowadays, even the serial killers,' he chuckled and walked down the corridor and into his office.

9am came quicker than he would've liked. He had wanted nothing more than to cancel the entire day, the entire week, perhaps even a year, but letting go of this life wasn't that simple: some minds stuck with him, a constant clash of voices asking to be helped.

Matilda Hackney sat across the room crying. Every session it was the same: she cried when she sat down, and then she blew her nose and cried some more. David looked at her file, he knew it off by heart, but looking at papers of a drunk child abuser was better than looking at her: she was a disgusting human being; her eyes

bled mascara, the snot from her nose had diluted the rose-red lipstick on the top of her lip.

Matilda Hackney's husband had died, hit by a car, when her daughter, Jane (six at the time), had run across a busy road; Matilda blamed Jane for the death, but that was almost twenty years ago. Everything was 'perfect' before then. She said she was a great mother, but ever since the day of her husband's death everything had changed: two decades ago Matilda had begun what turned into years of abuse of her daughter. When her daughter was eighteen she was fifty and she softened as she aged, and she tried to bridge the chasm between them by giving Jane free access to her trust fund, hoping that all the abuse would be forgotten. Twenty years after her husband's death, with millions and millions of dollars sitting in her trust account, and a daughter with everything that she ever needed, Matilda was in the same position she had been all those years ago; if anything the gap had gotten larger.

Dr Gregson grabbed her hand. She sat up. He had never touched her before and his cold hands surprised her. 'Matilda,' he said softly.

She sagged back in her seat. 'I'm sorry Dr. Gregson.' She rubbed her eyes, letting the mascara smear across her face like ink across powdered paper.

'There is nothing to be sorry about. What's upsetting you today, Matilda?' He saw her twice a week, and he always asked the same questions.

'My daughter hates me,' she said finally. She always had the same answers.

'She doesn't hate you, Matilda. You are her mother.' He ran his hands through his curly brown hair.

'Then why's she going to New York for Christmas again? We never spend Christmas together anymore. We never spend any time together anymore. It's been years since we've talked face to face. My daughter...'

He put down his pen and his notebook. 'I have a solution for your problem that will eventually bring her closer to you. Would you like to hear it, Matilda?'

'What?' she asked, surprised.

'Cut off her funds.'

'Why, w-w-why would I do that?'

'So she can grow up and learn to live without your help. With time, she will respect you for it. Don't talk to her, don't reply to her calls. Wait for her to come to you in person. She will eventually see you. You want to see your daughter, don't you?' Matilda nodded. 'Then cut off her funds.'

'But she's already paid for her trip to New York.'

'Yes, that doesn't matter,' David replied, releasing his hand from hers, picking up his pen again and writing in her patient file. 'Leave her enough money for the week and enough money to return home.' He paused in consideration. 'No, I take that back. Leave her nothing at all.'

'Nothing?'

'Nothing, leave her stockings empty this Christmas. It will be the best gift you can give her. Then she will come to you, that I promise.'

'But she hasn't seen me for seven years. Why will this work?'

'Because she has to face her fears eventually, we all do, we must realize who we are to become whole again. From all that I have heard from you I'd say this: your daughter is frail and lacks the courage to do anything but spend and spend and spend. Why? As a means to forget. She wants to forget about all the beatings, all the swearing, all the abuse, she wants to forget the person you used to be. But she can't. If you take away her money you will make her remember, and she will have to face her fears. Don't you see, Matilda? You are what she fears most. She needs to find the

courage to face you. This could lead to the first step. She might confront another issue, something smaller. Once she has conquered that small step, her courage will build. And then Matilda, she will come for you. You will see your daughter again, I promise.'

Later that afternoon he cancelled the rest of his appointments, leaving Joanna in the office on her own, and he met with his wife for a surprise lunch. He told her that he knew about it: the internet relationship, the photos, everything.

They had never been to this restaurant, Le Gavroche, before, it was too expensive, but she'd always wanted to try it. The restaurant had been just as he had imagined: decadent suede furniture, art work on every green wall, a pristine white table cloth draped down to his feet, with a candle and a golden decorative animal on each small circular table. Unfortunately the food was unpleasant and the portions were too small, but it didn't matter. He looked to his wife. 'I want to come to New York with you,' he said, holding her hand.

'Why?' She retracted her hand from his. 'After years of me offering for you to accompany me, and years of you refusing because of *work*, why now?' she asked. A mouthful of pink salmon stroked her equally pink lips; her teeth lightly grazed the fork and the sound made him hard. She swallowed and sliced delicately across the pungent flesh, as David studied her with his dark brown eyes. 'I don't understand where all this is coming from, David. I will be busy. I have a charity ball to organize. I'll barely have a spare moment.'

'It doesn't matter if you're busy. Any time is better than none. Let me come to New York with you. I love you, Stephanie, and I don't want to lose you, whatever you have or haven't done.'

‘What I’ve done?’ she put down her knife and fork. ‘You fucked this all up, David. Don’t tell me you love me; you don’t. You haven’t loved me for years. All you care about are those fucking psychos you see everyday at work instead of me. You even see that fucking serial killer more than me. The fucking hair collector!’

‘His name is Derek Chambers,’ he replied. ‘He is a curious one: a strong man who knows what he wants. But he’s in prison for now, I turned him over as soon as I discovered he was abusing women, remember? He can’t catch any more of his little birds.’

‘His little birds? I can’t talk to you like we used to. You are so insular; so work focused. This whole internet thing: I did it because I needed something different, someone I could talk to, someone who wasn’t obsessed with work. I needed that, David. I needed it to survive, so don’t blame me. This is all your fault. You messed everything up.’

We can fuck like reindeers all month long? The recollection of her words had become a small stab every time he thought about it. *Shove your long red nose inside me. Empty your sack and fill me full of little presents. I want to feel your fresh hot snow on my face.* She’d even sent him a photo: one of his favourites that he had taken of them on their honeymoon in the Maldives. She had wanted to make a video to remember their first week together as husband and wife – a video to watch and remember when they were old – but he’d accidentally set the camera to auto shoot instead of video, so as they started having sex, the camera took a sequence of images instead. They were all blurred but one. One was a keeper. They had laughed so much that night. They were in love. Now the image had been *Photoshopped*: Andrew Green had been added, a naked man in her face, a threesome on their honeymoon.

His index finger stroked the silver knife, as he watched the burning candlelight wiggle. 'I've changed, Steph,' he said. 'I can forget about it all. For you. For us.'

She laughed. 'Changed? You think you've changed, David?' She swallowed a big mouthful of wine. 'You *have* changed. You are *not* the man I married. I don't know who you are anymore. What happened to you? What happened to us?'

He could feel the heat of the flame radiate upward onto his face. 'One last chance, Stephanie. Let me become the man I want to be. Let me be your husband again. The man you fell in love with ten years ago. He is still in here somewhere, and I will find him again. I'll take a year away from work if I have to.'

'Even the serial killer case?'

'Yes, even Derek Chambers.'

She flicked her mousy brown hair over her bare shoulders; she'd taken to wearing it down more often than not now, letting it fall between her breasts, twisting it through her fingers like she used to when she was eighteen. She took a few deep breaths before she brought her green eyes to his. 'One last chance?' she asked.

'One last chance.'

'Okay. I'll give you one chance.'

David smiled and kissed his wife. 'I've changed, Steph, I promise.'

Her phone started vibrating. She wiped her face with her serviette. 'Excuse me, a minute.'

David didn't watch her leave, his eyes were focused on the candle. He held his hand over the flame, closer and closer. Waxy smoke drifted up. He looked at his hand – red, tight, burned – and smiled. He was alive again. His wife, however, would be dead before nightfall.

Chapter 5

Jane

Jane scrolled through her phone, checking her bank account as she bumped up and down on her seat in the back of the cab. \$21,732. ‘You can’t come in today, miss,’ Joanna, the shrink’s secretary, had said over the phone early yesterday morning. ‘Dr Gregson is fully booked. And then he’s off on holiday in a couple of days. You’ll have to wait until January, miss.’ Appointment or not, she was on her way to see him.

It had taken guts to make the phone call, to hop in the taxi, and make her way into the city to confront her thief. If not for her old nanny, Sarah, she would still be crying beneath the shade of her bed sheets. And then she would’ve called her mother’s bluff and hoped that the old crone would have the heart to change her mind. ‘Your mother is not going to change her mind, Jane. You need to go down there and talk to this Dr Gregson,’ Sarah had said. ‘If you don’t, I will.’

She hated these London cabs, but they were everywhere; beacons of travel for those who didn’t like the claustrophobia of the Tube. The cab that had arrived outside her home in Highgate was splattered with the union jack, blue and red and white, Vodafone branded on the door, mud on the tires. She had stepped in reluctantly.

The rain had finally come. London had been without rain for almost a week now, and her life had been good. She’d shopped with her friends, drank coffee, went clubbing, met a young engineer and had a week of bliss. Life had been good before the rain had come. ‘I’m cutting you off.’ She had listened to that voicemail over and

over, but she didn't have the courage to speak with her, it had been almost eight years. 'I'm cutting you off,' her mother's words were an echo in a sewer that was full of the shrink's festering bodily fluids. They hit a bump and she dropped her new Calvin Klein jacket on the floor of the taxi.

'Sorry 'bout that, love,' said the cabby, looking back in his rear view mirror. She picked it up, and felt mud on her fingers.

The cabby could see the dirt. 'Sorry, love. My last fare was from Kent. You know, muddy boots an' all,' he smiled, trying to make light of the mess.

She ignored him. The jacket was soiled, as if the filthy cockney cabby had decided to wipe himself with it. She took a small circular mirror from her handbag and looked at her reflection. Her blue eyes were ringed red, and the mascara had already streaked like black wax spilling down a white candle. A strand of her chocolate brown hair had stuck to her face beneath her eyes. It was all too much. She felt like she was a child again, her mother's wine-stained mouth cursing her as wrinkled fists came crashing down. 'It's your fault he's dead, you little bitch.' Jane hunched in the cab, groping her long hair, expecting to feel a patch missing where her mother's hands had pulled and torn hair and skin.

'This is your stop, love,' said the cabby, as the car came to a halt.

She looked outside. The rain was coming down hard. She handed over the money, left the muddy but warm cab, and made for the clinic; her heels splashing in the puddles as she ran for cover. She stood under the shelter and looked back, but the cab was gone.

The clinic was on the ground floor of the ten-story building. She opened the door, took a left where a sign read 'Clinical Psychiatrist', and walked straight past the receptionist.

‘You can’t go in there, miss,’ she heard, as she continued down the grey carpet, along the white-walled corridor. She stopped at a door where a name was engraved black into a golden plaque: *Dr David Gregson*.

‘Miss, you can’t go in there, he’s not here – ’ Jane ignored the receptionist and pushed the door open, the receptionist’s words silenced as the door closed behind her. The room was empty until the receptionist joined her.

‘Where is he?’ asked Jane. ‘I need to speak with him. It’s urgent.’ She was crying, her voice a whimper.

The receptionist ignored her and walked over to his desk. There was a note. She read it in silence.

Jane walked up to the receptionist and snatched it out of her hands. It read:

Joanna,

I’ve ducked out. I’m sorry but I couldn’t face those people waiting for me in the foyer: it’s been a big week. I’m off to New York tomorrow with Stephanie, my Little Bird, so you can cancel my appointments and take the rest of the week off. Have an early Christmas. I’m staying at the Gramercy Park Hotel if you should need to contact me in an emergency.

Yours,

David.

‘I’m guessing you’re Joanna,’ said Jane.

Joanna nodded her head, with silent contempt; perhaps afraid that Jane’s tears might worsen if she were to curse at her. Jane glanced around the room through

watery eyes. The navy blue wall behind his desk was covered in certificates of graduations, achievements, and other miscellaneous awards. There was a single photo on his desk. She picked up the metal frame, getting mud on the glass, and saw a man, a George Clooney lookalike but not quite so handsome, with a woman whose eyes were green and lively.

‘Is this him?’ asked Jane, sniffing.

‘Yes, that’s Dr Gregson and his wife,’ she replied, taking the photo from Jane’s hand, wiping off the mud with a tissue and placing it carefully back on his desk. ‘Now you have to go, miss. You’ve got no right to be in here.’

‘I’m sorry,’ replied Jane, rushing for the door. ‘I’ll see the thief soon.’ She slammed the door, headed down the corridor, and out into the rain.

Chapter 6

Gavin

Dear Kathleen

I love you. I can't tell you how much I miss you. It's lonely here in New York without you, without Abbey. How long has it been now? Twelve years? I can't believe it. I'll be home soon. But Bernie's been getting worse, more distant. So I have to stay here for him. At least for awhile longer. I can't leave him here with dad. He's still a kid, my kid brother, and I love him dearly. But I'll be home soon, I promise, Kathleen. Next year. I'll come home next year. And then I'll be home forever, and I'll never leave you again...

Beneath the shade his hat, Bernie had been polishing the blade of their father's hunting knife for almost an hour.

Gavin checked his watch. He needed a cigarette. 'Can you put that fuckin thing away?'

In the darkness, the cloth moved against the blade over and over. Gavin looked back at his watch. He pushed his long black hair out of his eyes and took a deep breath of the frigid air. America had left him haggard, emotionally distraught. He wanted the stony streets beneath his feet again and the smell of the stinky River Liffey in his nose. He wanted Dublin. He wanted his wife and his daughter. He wanted home. Instead he had New York City, and he had lost his appetite for the Big

Apple and all it had to offer a very long time ago. He had more than enough money to fly home and retire, but he had one last job to do, he had sworn as much to his boss, so he couldn't pull out now.

In the gloomy East Village backstreet, a light rain sprinkled into dirty puddles that littered the concrete ground. They were out of the rain, concealed in the shadows beneath the entrance to a broken-down shop front that was once a sex shop. To Gavin's left, cheap Christmas lights climbed a young tree like a neon vein pulsating on an erect penis, generating a shadow that left them completely unseen by the few who trudged by. Last December Gavin and Bernie had spent Christmas with their dying father in Montana, isolated in a small house that smelt of death. He remembered the inescapable snow that had covered the lands, which made a two-day trip extend into two weeks. They were confined until their father's end, which came sooner than nature had dictated. It was the stink of him that had forced their hand: the stink of his past, hidden from Bernie for so long.

This December was different. In New York City isolation was a disease that could never fester. Gavin had hoped that being surrounded by strangers would return his brother to normality, but it had just made things worse: to Bernie the prey had become more abundant and the hunting a requirement.

Footsteps clapped softly in the distance. Gavin's blue eyes flashed left. There he was: in a hooded sweat shirt with an orange beanie, one of the Rodriguez crew who went by the name of Alex, the baby brother of Ricardo, the one they were looking for. Gavin nudged his brother who was already looking at the boy; the cloth tucked away and knife ready. The creaking of Alex's leather sneakers became louder, and then it all happened fast. Alex was on the ground, the knife edged against his

throat and Bernie's free arm wrapped around his body. Gavin crouched down and looked into the fearful eyes of their catch. He was just a boy, not even twenty-one.

'Nice to meet you, Alex.'

'What the fuck is this all about?' yelled Alex. The knife eased against his windpipe, as he looked up at Gavin.

'Shh, shh, shh, shh, shh,' Gavin pressed his index fingers against his lips. 'Quiet now, or Bernie might slit your throat. You don't want a bloody Christmas instead of a merry one do you, Alex?' The game was lost to Gavin, the emphasis of his words were cold and implacable.

'Your ass won't make it to motherfuckin Christmas, man,' whispered Alex. 'You know who the fuck I am? You know who my bro is?' Alex spat at Gavin's feet.

'No, of course we don't you stupid boy; I just refer to everyone as Alex, don't I Bernie?' Bernie licked his lips. Gavin shivered and looked back to Alex. 'We know all about you and your little gang, Alex. But would you like to know something about us?' Alex went to speak, but was cut off. 'My name's Gavin O'Dougherty. This is my younger brother, Bernard O'Dougherty.'

'Devil's men?' said Alex. 'We don't have the money. My bro is looking for it, man. You'll be fucked when he finds you. It's our fuckin money.'

Gavin looked up, into the youthful brown eyes of Alex. He was barely twenty, still a boy, too young for this game. 'Look lad, don't talk rubbish and all that, we're after Ricardo. He has questions to answer about the money and the deal we had. We didn't get the drugs and we don't have our fuckin money neither. Now what we want from you is to tell us where your brother is so we can get our money back. Do you hear me, lad?' Bernie pressed the knife against Alex's neck, enough to draw blood and to send fear into the young boy's eyes.

‘Okay, okay. I’ll tell you what I know. But then you’ll let me go, right?’

Gavin nodded.

‘I don’t know where my bro is, man,’ said Alex. ‘He’s out looking for the case too. But I was there, man, at the exchange.’ He looked proud of that. ‘One of your men took the motherfuckin case, man. I followed him for a bit and then he started firing shots at me, and I lost my fuckin piece so I bailed. I’ve been looking for Ricky ever since to tell him, man. But he’s nowhere, man.’

Gavin pulled off the orange beanie and shoved it into Alex’s mouth. ‘We were there too. We didn’t see any one of ours make off with a case. As for your Ricky -’

Before Gavin could finish, Bernie slashed with the knife and took off two of Alex’s fingers. Gavin shoved the beanie in Alex’s mouth before he could scream.

Muffled moans pushed through the orange cotton.

Gavin looked at his younger brother. ‘What’s wrong with you?’

Alex clutched at his bloody hand.

‘Listen to me, Bernie. I want to be a rich man and a free man, not locked up in a fuckin room with three walls, iron bars, and a man to warm my bed at night. Money, Bernie. That’s why we do this: for the fuckin money. So we can retire; go back home to Dublin, to my wife and my daughter.’

‘Your wife and daughter?’

‘Yes my fuckin wife and daughter,’ replied Gavin.

Bernie stared at Gavin, but said nothing. He looked down at the knife; at the blood, and moved his tongue across the flat of the blade.

Gavin looked away, down at Alex who clutched his bloodied hand. Gavin took a deep breath and pulled the beanie out of Alex’s mouth, who knew better than to cry out. ‘Let’s get this over with. Now, lad, I’ll ask you again: where might your brother

be? No more lying, lad. Tell us what you might know. Where might your brother be, where's the case?'

From his seat on the wet concrete, Alex looked up through the dark braided hair that hung across his face. 'I swear to you man, I haven't seen Ricky. I saw some big white motherfucker with the case, man.' Alex was crying, wincing. 'He had a purple shirt on.'

Gavin looked to Bernie. 'It must have been Davey,' he said. 'He had the fuckin case. He always had the fuckin case.'

Bernie nodded. 'He's dead. It's clear. We need to find him.'

Gavin looked back to the boy and the two little stumps that leaked blood. 'Come now lad, what else might you know? Where'd he go?'

'He was limping and bleeding. I think he took a bullet, man. I haven't seen my bro Ricky, I swear, man.'

'Come now, lad. You've seen your brother, don't be stupid. And if you saw one of ours with the case, then I want to know where exactly. The fuckin direction? The fuckin street? Were there people following him? Detail. Tell me the truth now, lad.'

Alex paused. 'He was heading to 3rd Avenue, same direction as me, man. He started shooting his piece when we was at some fuckin park.' Alex took a deep breath, squeezing his crippled hand, rocking back and forth. He clenched his jaws. He looked up at Bernie. 'Ricky will kill you for this motherfucker.'

'What fuckin park: what's it called?'

'Fuck you, motherfucker.' Alex spat in Gavin's face.

Gavin casually wiped off the saliva with his scarf, and intended to ask Alex another question, but it was too late: Bernie held the hatchet, brought it down fast, and

it sliced through Alex's wrist. The ring of steel against concrete made Gavin shiver. He clenched his fists, stared hard at his younger brother. But Bernie didn't notice: his eyes were fixed downward like an eagle ready to feast from the land below. Bernie put down the hatchet, pulled out the pincers and his father's favourite hunting knife.

Gavin took a deep breath and turned away; he didn't want to see that again but he couldn't move. He stood there, too tired to walk away. Beneath the lights and the buildings, he felt small and weak and useless. He reached for his cigarettes, withdrew a single smoke and placed it in his mouth.

The boy cried.

Gavin fumbled until he felt the lighter at the bottom of his jacket pocket and when his skin touched the gold he squeezed it tight. After a few attempts the tip flared and he inhaled hard, briefly closing his eyes as he felt the smoke fill his lungs. He moved away from the knife and the axe, heading straight for Molly's and a pint of Guinness that would calm him. He passed the Christmas decorations, shielding his eyes from the flashing green and red lights.

A final moan pierced through the wind and the rain and he stopped.

Gavin drew deep on the smoke, holding his breath and closing his eyes. He clenched his fists, crushing the cigarette, feeling it burn the palm of his hand. He breathed out. His hands grew limp and he stepped out onto the road, into the puddles, and felt the cold New York rain wash the tears from his eyes.

Chapter 7

Amy

The American Dream Hostel was perfect. Her room was a nice size; a desk in the corner, a double bed to sprawl out on, a closet for her clothes, and an empty corner for her guitar; the only downfall was the shared bathroom and shower. It kind of reminded her of her outhouse when she lived with her family in the Barossa Valley, except out this window the earth was not pregnant with vineyards; all life was encapsulated in a big grey concrete pill that was Manhattan.

Everything in her room floated on an ocean blue carpet, which, during the day, made the white walls seem a cold opaque stone colour like a cheap bathroom wall made for graffiti and coded puerile love messages. She had played her guitar, which was now packed away in its case in the corner of the room, played until her fingers stung, and now what little sunlight that made it onto 24th Street had faded into darkness. She lay in bed, still jet lagged from the east-west twenty-three hour flight, and had thought that sleep would come easily, but she couldn't sit still. There was a feeling in her belly that reminded her of walking into a school exam: she had a gig tonight.

She got out of bed, and felt the cool air turn her body to stone. She dressed hurriedly, not bothering to turn on the room's heat. She grabbed her key-card. Condensed mist ran down her room's window like tears, as if New York itself was crying for its first winter snow. She looked out the window: a United States Post

Office made the street seem empty and lifeless and reminded her of a mid-week winter night in Adelaide.

Two men in black coats walked beneath the only two trees on the street, heading toward 3rd Avenue. She'd eaten a big lunch at a small Irish pub called Molly's, a two-minute walk uptown on 3rd Avenue, and she could have sworn she'd seen them there; two Irishmen: one in his late thirties, dark hair, pale skin, sickly-thin with a worn look in his Daphne blue eyes; the other looked a decade younger, with the same hair and skin colour, but built like an ox: his blue eyes had darted around the bar, aware and full of life. She had listened to them, drawn to their accents, and it had made her feel better knowing that she wasn't the only English-speaking foreigner in a city dominated by the east coast American twang. She couldn't make out exactly what they were saying, but she listened and she smiled and she ate the best hamburger she'd ever eaten. Like all meals she'd experienced thus far in New York, the serving size was huge, so dinner could wait until later.

The Cake Shop, a bar in Lower East Side, had offered her a gig at 8pm tonight to warm up the crowd who would gather around the warmth of glowing valves and halogen lights. It was only a rookie gig before the major acts arrived, but she still felt a little nervous. It was now 6pm.

She eventually left her one-room apartment and walked across the small common room, smiling at the friendly French receptionist, who reminded her of Audrey Tatou in *Amelie*. She hopped down the blue stairs and pushed the door open; the cold cut through her inadequate clothing. She'd been in New York for three days now and still hadn't purchased a jacket suitable for a New York winter. She tightened her scarf that was as ratty and faded as her black skinny jeans. The wind picked up as she walked further down 24th Street, and she realized her woollen jumper wasn't

warm enough and decided she'd blow money on a cab, considering she was getting paid tonight. Her father had bought her the jumper for her 18th birthday – she had picked it out as it reminded of the light green cardigan that Kurt Cobain wore in *Unplugged in New York* – it was the last thing he had ever given her.

She put down her guitar case and put her headphones on, the least she could do to escape the cold was to keep her ears warm, and she selected Nick Drake's *Bryter Later: Hazy Jane* would pick her up and get her excited for tonight's gig. She'd decided to perform three originals and *Man in a Shed* by Nick Drake. She reached Park Avenue and hailed a cab. The driver got out and put her guitar in the boot, being less careful than she would've liked.

'Thanks.' She hopped in the back of the cab, and closed the door quickly. The warmth was a relief, and, after a few moments, she could feel her fingers tingle and regain feeling. A small LCD screen, perched on the rear of a clear plastic wall that separated the driver from his passengers, was playing the CNN news.

'Where you off to?'

'Cakeshop, on Ludlow.'

The cabby didn't reply, obviously knowing where Ludlow Street was, and immediately started driving down Park Avenue, turning up the volume on the small LCD as if it would entertain her so he didn't have to. She put her headphones back on.

The drive took almost three-times as long as it would have taken to travel the same distance in Adelaide, and by the time they reached Ludlow, she had listened to a couple songs on her iPod, and heard the driver use his horn twice as often. She paid her fare and a tip, and the cabby got her guitar. She voiced her thanks once again, but the driver seemed baffled by her gratitude and merely nodded his head and drove away.

The wind molested her with icy hands, and she stood – a statue on the pavement – looking at her future. The Cakeshop sign glowed; light shining through hollow oak. A wooden sign stood rigid on the ground and announced the Cakeshop's intentions:

CAKESHOP

Cafe, Records and CDS

Bar and Music Venue.

A painted picture of a black record made it clear to anyone who couldn't read. The small music venue lived at the bottom of a newly renovated grey building that was squished between antiquated apartment blocks that cried Lower East Side. Fake holly hung beneath the glowing sign, obscure records and CDs faced outward enticing equally obscure Lower East Siders to enter. There were flyers stuck on the storefront window: various gigs at a cheap entry. She looked through the glass: everything inside was wooden and retro – a log cabin decorated for an 80s porn movie – with a modern grey exterior. A little no-name ATM, ramshackle and dated, was the only other thing that stood out the front; there were no bouncers, no security: this wasn't Adelaide. She took a deep breath and made for the door.

The metal and glass door screeched closed behind her. It was warm inside, but she still shook: a nervous shiver of dread and anticipation. A lingering scent of coffee, herbal tea, and stale beer found her nose, an unusual olfactory experience for one born and raised in South Australia. Adelaide was a conservative city where the concept of a bar/cafe was yet to manifest itself in the minds of those who walk the straight streets at night, where wannabe-hipster locals and suburban bimbos (whose overconsumption

of 'pre-drinks' has resulted in an inability to walk and think straight) prowl the local Hindley street pubs for the next hip hangout. Adelaide was a city divided by what's cool and what's not: a shirt with the top button done up speaks words to those who know the hipster code – those who talk loving words about every 'other' city and dread the monotony of the normal Adelaide life. In her three days she had learned that everyone in New York City was accepted, or at least tolerated, unless you were from Boston.

Within the glass counter she saw an assortment of vegan cakes: perhaps the only thing hippy in the otherwise hipster venue. Feeling the weight of the guitar she reluctantly stepped away and headed for the stage down in the basement, expecting watchful eyes to raise from conversation, drinks, and iPhones, but nobody looked twice. From the roof hung small fairy lights, and painted pseudo record players. If you walked to the back of the store you could buy records for a dollar.

Her father used to take her record shopping. That thrift-store smell, like a library only with rotting fruit hidden away in the walls, always reminded her of him: the way his eyes used to light up when he found a rare score, an original Neil Young being the ultimate. She never got too old for it, and up until her father's last days they still used to sift through the junk in the hope of finding a gem. He was blind in his taste, a chasm that stretched from the 80s to the present, and she tried to fill that void starting with The Smiths and ending with The National, but that darkness only grew. She couldn't browse anymore, lest the memory wither and fade into regularity like a song from a moment from a memory that gets lost in a maze of synapses every time it is heard.

She headed for the giant red arrow that pointed down, a white sign beneath it read 'Bar'. When she hit the bottom of the mint-green steps, she looked at the stage

and paused. She would be up there soon, beneath the ceiling of fairy lights and red tinsel, on a New York City stage – guitar in hand, microphone in face, crowd below watching and judging, and she would be at their mercy – an unknown fate. She breathed deeply and moved toward the smiling man standing by the dingy little stage moving knobs on the house's PA.

When the clock hit 8pm, she would live on stage or experience an artist's death in the city where a queue of indie sheep waited for their shot to live or die. It was an unknown fate, like the one she dealt the serving agent who she'd left unconscious behind the counter when she left Adelaide. Was he living or dying? That was a question the clock had not let her answer, but time would soon answer hers. She'd called an ambulance just before her sister had picked her up to take her to the airport, and she'd shivered tensely as she'd heard the sirens cry in the distance. It was only a ukulele, he was still breathing: surely he was alive.

She headed to the bar and leaned her guitar up against the stool next to her.

The bartender looked at her smiling. He knew a rookie when he saw one.

'First gig in New York huh?' he asked, handing her a beer that he'd poured for her.

She had a sip before answering: 'Yeah, first gig in New York.'

'Nervous?' he smiled.

'A little.'

She looked down the bar: there were only two others drinking, and when she heard them chatting she thought they were Aussies too.

'Looks like you're up,' said the bartender, looking up at the stage.

The sound dude stepped down and headed toward her. She took a big swig of her beer, a deep breath and turned around.

'Let's mic you up and do a sound check.'

Amy smiled, grabbed her father's guitar, and followed him up to the stage.

After a few minutes of tweaking both her guitars volume and the mic levels on the mixing desk, the sound engineer waved his hand and acknowledged that he was content, and Amy stepped down from the stage, back to the bar and the beer that waited for her there. One of the girls motioned for her to come and drink with them.

'I thought you guys were from Australia, when I first heard you,' said Amy.

'No, we're from London,' one replied. 'You're an Aussie then?' Amy nodded.

'You sounded good up there.'

'Thanks. Are you here to see The Spanish Harlots? Or just down for Christmas?'

'Yeah, they're my friend's band. They're starting to get a bit of a following. But we come here every Christmas.'

'Cool,' replied Amy. 'Oh, I'm Amy by the way.'

'Hey, Amy, I'm Lisa.' There was a pause. 'And this is grumpy Jane.' Lisa smiled.

The one called Jane gave Lisa a daring look.

'Jane's in a bit of a down at the moment,' continued Lisa. 'Her mum just cut her off from her trust account.'

'You know you don't need to tell that to everyone we meet, Lisa.' Jane hid behind her drink, what looked to be a gin and tonic, the lime a dead give away.

'Okay, okay,' replied Lisa, turning back to Amy. 'But we're on the lookout for her mum's shrink, he's called Dr. Gregson. He's got questions to answer.'

'Stop it, Lisa. This girl doesn't need to know this.'

'What are you gonna do?' asked Amy, curious.

‘Kill the bastard,’ said Lisa, smiling.

Amy almost choked on her beer. Jane stood up and walked away.

‘What? Janey it was a joke! I’m sorry.’ Lisa looked at the bartender. ‘Can I get another wine?’ The bartender nodded his head. ‘Sorry about that, Amy was it?’ Amy nodded. ‘Janey’s a bit fragile at the moment. She’s always been fragile. Where are you staying? How long for?’

‘The American Dream Hostel. I’ve paid for six months.’

‘Hostel? Really?’ she paid the bartender in cash and smiles. ‘He’s cute.’ Amy shrugged, looking at her father’s old guitar on stage. It would be in her hands soon. ‘You should come and pop by ours for a drink some night or we can take you shopping or something. We’ve got a penthouse suite at the Gramercy.’

‘The Gramercy?’

‘Yeah, the Gramercy Park Hotel’

‘The Gramercy Park Hotel?! That’s where David Bowie and The Clash and all sorts of famous musicians used to stay.’

‘Yeah, it’s pretty popular with the celebs. We’ll have to get a drink at the Rose Bar. I saw Mickey Rourke there last night. He’s so cute.’

‘You know, I heard that David Bowie once played his acoustic guitar in the park just near there.’

‘It’s not just a park,’ she said. ‘It’s the only private park in the whole of New York City.’ She bragged, as Amy looked disappointed. ‘I can get you in, you know. I’ve got a key.’

‘You promise?’

‘Sure. You got a phone? I’ll give you my number.’

‘No, I’ve only got my iPod.’

‘Well, you can come back to our penthouse for a drink after the Spanish Harlots if you like? Then I can get the receptionist to write it down for you.’

‘Done!’

‘If your hostel is in Gramercy then it’s not far,’ she continued. ‘I’ve got an apartment in Brooklyn, but we’re scoping out the Gramercy for a week or two, as that’s where this Dr. Gregson is staying. He must be cashed up.’

‘Seems as though everyone is.’

Lisa ignored her. ‘I bet she won’t do it. She’s too fragile at the moment,’ declared Lisa.

‘Do what, kill him?’ Amy leered.

‘Something like that.’ She sculled her wine. ‘Let’s get pissed.’

Chapter 8

Andrew

There was a cold wind circling the gated garden where Andrew stood looking in. His wife had always wanted to come here, to the only private garden in New York City, where only patrons of the Gramercy Park Hotel and residents of the surrounding apartments were allowed to enter. Almost two years ago she had held his arm tightly on a plane that brought them from LAX to JFK, excited by everything that America and New York City had to offer. But this park was just another place they never went, one failure of so many.

He walked away from the almost leafless garden, turned the corner onto Lexington Avenue, and saw the entrance. Even from the outside, the Gramercy Park Hotel exuded opulence. Restored and rejuvenated from the cocaine and cum-stained carpets where rock stars used to lie and snort and fuck. That was once the attraction, now a filthy past that the owners tried to hide with a new façade: a gaudy silk shirt hiding a stab wound beneath. Andrew approached the hundreds of light bulbs that lit the portico, and stepped into the revolving doors with his luggage, with his apprehension. It had been six months since he had seen Stephanie Gregson – a fleeting fuck from a fleeting memory that had been nourished: fed by nudity and promises – and he didn't want to see her now, but another Christmas alone with time to think could have meant his death.

The interior was garish but beautiful: a combination of Renaissance and modern, like the Moulin Rouge with life-size erotic artwork instead of dancers and

tassels. The floor was black and white tiled like the kitchen floor of his apartment in Adelaide, but this was a chessboard that only the rich and the lucky could play. Feeling like a pawn, he walked down a giant red rug that was laid out between square-shaped wooden poles that reached up to the twenty-foot ceiling, a leafless wooden canopy. His luggage wheeled behind him, kicking at his heels. A chandelier hung down in the centre of the room like a glistening scrotum, vulgar and unavoidable to the eye. A ten-foot Christmas tree made the plastic one he had boxed away at home seem cheap. It had been boxed up for two years now and he hadn't found the courage to get it out. The tree was like a gravestone of a life forever gone. She would smile and laugh as she hung the lights and angels and stars on plastic branches, before running around the tree with gold and silver and red tinsel. Unwrapping her presents with a dextrous touch, she spoke of the children that would one day tear through the wrapping paper that she delicately de-taped and folded. There never were any children. There never could be. The doctor had said they were incompatible.

At the end of the lobby was a white stone mantelpiece where a fire kept warm the guests who waited, sitting on red antique chairs made for kings and queens. There looked to be a bar or two on his right. The concierge desk was on his left; a cave of computers and phones and staff.

'How are you today, sir? Checking in?' said a young, Asian-American woman.

'Yeah, Andrew Green.' He handed her his passport, she typed something into her computer and handed it back.

'Here you go, sir. You're room number 516,' she said, handing him a key card.

'Do you need my credit card or something?'

‘No sir, your room is fully paid for. This is for you too.’ She handed him a key-card and an envelope.

He headed for the elevator; his steps lethargic and indifferent. The ding of the elevator opened the door to a red hallway. There was red everywhere: a tomb of blood and memories. He walked down the red hall and felt like a foreign cell in a vein that would never be his. He searched the floor: 516 was stamped white into the red carpet. He got out his key-card and the door clicked open.

His room was red and blue. Red carpets, blue walls. Red curtains, blue furniture. He dropped his luggage and sat on the blue velvet blanket that was draped over the white bed like an ornate clean up rag. He opened the envelope.

Andrew,

Unfortunately I couldn't make it. I was dead sick and the doctor said that this little bird was not fit to fly. I hope you're thinking of me. I'm thinking of you. Enjoy your stay, even if I can't keep you warm.

Steph.

He lay back on the bed and smiled. The first relief since defecating on the plane. But the smile was gone as soon as it had come. He smelled the blanket, dreaming it would smell like her, his wife. She loved the colour blue, she would have loved this room. The scent cheated him and he got off the bed. He inspected the rest of his room and found the liquor. He removed his medication from his pocket, drugs that helped him sleep and made him feel better, and he knocked a few back with a shot of gin. He went to his luggage and got out his iPod and selected Nick Drake and

then *Pink Moon* and then *Road*. He lay back on the bed and smelled the blue blanket again, and reached for the bottle of gin and his medication.

Chapter 9

Dr. Gregson

I didn't think it would be that easy, the first kill. As she lay dead beside me, I had never felt more alive in my life. My own little bird, broken, dead. It was her fault – is what I would have once said – she is to blame for it all, for bringing me to this point. But today I cast no blame, I cast only gratitude: the best thing she ever did to me was to not love me. It made me realize who I was, or more importantly who I wasn't. I wasn't that man, a psychologist working twelve-hour days to satisfy an income. An income to spend on what? A house in Woldingham, a Tag Heuer watch, an Armani suit? None of those possessions had any meaning – they were a cancer. The only meaning in life is in death. And now that my wife is dead, I can finally love her and realize that her life once had meaning. I can remember all her loveable traits: the way she used to try to catch falling leaves whenever one swayed overhead, the way she used to give all the money in my wallet to a homeless person lying in the streets, the way she used to sing when she washed the dishes, the way she used to take my hand and kiss me for no reason, the way those light green eyes of hers used to sparkle. I remember who she used to be, not what she had become – a promiscuous, cheating little slag who cared about decorating the house, decorating her face, decorating her body, decorating her erogenous parts – I remember who she was: loving, caring, free as a bird: my little bird.

She was the person we all used to be when we were young and in our early 20s, with that thirst for life, for difference, for change, for knowing that if we take the

right path, we could be a part of that change. We were dreamers. All of us. We always were, and will always be: selfish. Yes, we have fleeting moments of pity, of regret, of hope, but it is only fleeting. As the palm oil in our toast burns we forget about deforestation, as we tie our laces each morning and put on our leather shoes we forget about the loss of another species, we think about work on Monday, work on Tuesday, work on Wednesday. Work, work, work: insufferable work. We grow complacent with our purposeless occupation – most likely providing money to investors who don't even know your insignificant name – and in doing so we suck the life out of those people who have true purpose, not in work but in life: to find food, to stay warm, to stay alive.

My reason for being in New York City, for wasting \$1200 per night at the Gramercy Park Hotel, sits drinking on his own at the Jade Bar. Andrew Green. But he thinks more than he drinks. A deep sombre place is where he lives. A cave with only darkness. How could she have been attracted to him? Was there ever light in his eyes? Did they ever sparkle like mine do now? Do I need to rethink my second kill? No. He has that look: melancholy, pre-suicide. But he can't do it, he can't take that jump of freedom. They never can. I will give that freedom to him as thanks, as a gift.

I will kill you Andrew Green.

I will give you purpose.

But not yet.

I have much to learn about you, Andy. Can I call you that?

I take a seat in the corner, by the window facing out onto Lexington Avenue. There were always cabbies outside hoping to catch a celebrity on the way out of the hotel and score a tip that might allow them a week off from their meaningless existence. People walk by, draped in the hides of dead animals, pressing their necks

into what was once a living, breathing creature. How are we so different? Why shouldn't we wear others to keep warm?

'Would you like a drink, sir?'

A young woman stood over me smiling, a silver serving plate in hand, a red silky towel draped over her arm, her breasts spilling out of a low-cut top. I licked my lips and imagined slicing a knife into her, watching the breast tissue part like slicing into a plate of jelly.

'Whiskey. Single malt,' I replied. 'None of that cheap stuff. I want the best. Your most expensive.' I enjoy pretending to be like the rest of them. Having that inhuman feeling of self-worth, knowing that I can afford a drink from a bottle that costs more than enough food to feed an entire family for a number of years in some dying, inconsequential third world country. I can be that person if I want to be: a spend thrift, a consumer. I smile as I sit, knowing how every sip I take is destroying humanity, while others smile and sit knowing nothing but a love for themselves.

It is true, but none of us want to believe it: we *are* consumers, destroyers of life. If that is our destiny then why not live it? Why not take a life when we so choose, that is what we are already doing, right? We might as well just hack someone to pieces, slice up a breast or two. Every time whiskey touches my lips my self-worth is killing someone else, and I smile. We are all killers, murders, but I, unlike you, have succumbed to that realization. I know what I am, what you are: a pocket full of death notes. The green pieces of paper that stop us killing each other in the streets eat away at the stomachs of those sleepless people who cannot afford to buy food, as we lie peacefully and warm and soft against the family of dead geese that are squished between our quilts. To hell with those people, right? We are all dead anyway.

But the whiskey does taste good, and as I drink I think about how I am going to kill Andrew Green. Still he sits on a stool facing the bar, in his grey suit, staring into his red wine, not even able to find the motivation to have a sip. Killing him will be fun, but it will be less fun than the other. Would you look at that? I've almost forgotten her name already. I laugh into my whiskey. And for some reason this wakes Andrew Green from his slumber. He sits up a little straighter and reaches for his wine. He takes a large gulp, and empties the glass.

'Another?' The young bartender asks, already holding the bottle of wine above the glass as if the question was rhetorical: have another drink or leave, asshole.

Andrew Green looks up at the man, in his twenties, good-looking perhaps half Latino, and replies: 'Yeah, thanks mate, that'd be great.' As the wine falls into his glass, a sparkle returns to his eyes and he asks: 'Hey, do you guys have music here? You know a band or anything on tonight?'

'Yes, in the Rose Bar next door we have a DJ who is quite talented. Celebrities galore rock up after 10pm. Have you made a booking?'

The sparkle leaves Andrew Green. He shakes his head and takes a reluctant sip of his wine. 'DJ's aren't musicians.'

'If musicians are what you prefer, bands and the like, then go down to LES and have a look on Ludlow, there are some talented musicians down there.'

The sparkle returns. 'LES?'

'Yes, Lower East Side. On Ludlow Street there's The Living Room, The Cakeshop and a few others. They always have bands playing. Mostly alternative or hipster, but very much worth a look. Or you can go onto Bowery: there's The Mercury Lounge and the Bowery Ballroom.'

‘Thanks.’ Andrew looks at his watch, drops a death note or two on the bar, sculls his wine and heads for the door.

I put up my hand and call the waitress over. She smiles, and before she can open her stupid mouth I say: ‘I’m in room 515.’ I shake my key-card in her face. ‘Put it on my tab.’ I watch Andrew Green walk beneath the giant archway and out into the lobby. I stand up and follow him, and as I pass the waitress I take one last look at her breasts. I might kill her tonight. Jelly for dessert.

Chapter 10

Jane

She'd been upstairs for a couple of hours. The ground below her shook, like a subway of vibrating instruments, flooding music and warm air up from the stairs, but that didn't entice her. She sat at a table facing the back of the shop, so no one could see her tears. The peanut butter whoopie cake didn't help. Nothing could. She was on her own in this. It was up to her. Confronting a complete stranger was better than flying home and talking to her mother, but somehow it didn't feel right.

She took a tissue out of her bag and wiped away the fresh tears. Then she got out the powdered ingredients to make her face – mascara, blush, lipstick – a familiar face that her cousin knew and loved. She wanted to make something different one day, clear away the powdery make-up, try something else, something for her, maybe nothing, but she didn't have the courage.

She took a deep breath and wandered toward the stairs, toward the music, toward the heat, toward her cousin who would be drunk and flirting with her next one-week catch. People clapped as she hit the basement; the Australian girl walked off stage, beaming. Jane spied her cousin at the bar with a man. The basement was crammed full of hipsters, moving around like hipster ants, and she stood in the middle of their path standing still, like the dead ant that every other ant stops to inspect before passing, except nobody was inspecting her.

'Janey! Janey!' her cousin yelled. 'Janey, over here.' Lisa was standing on the bar now. Jane hurried over before she fell and broke her neck.

‘Come on, get down, Lisa.’

Lisa fell down, but the man with her caught her and then sat her back on the stool.

‘Where the hell you been, cuz?’ asked Lisa.

Jane turned to the bar and waited until the bartender saw her and she ordered a drink.

‘Hey, Janey, this is Adam. He’s from London too.’ Adam turned around, but Jane was looking in her purse. ‘We were chatting to Amy before she went up on stage.’ Lisa hiccupped. ‘Did you hear her? She was great. I said I’d buy her a drink after the show.’

Jane smiled, ‘That’s nice.’ She handed the bartender some money. She picked up the glass, brought it to her red lips, and the lime touched her mouth forcing her eyes closed. ‘When do they get on?’ she asked, looking at the bottom of her glass as she mashed the lime beneath the ice with the mini-straw. She wanted to leave; to go back to her hotel; to go to the private garden; to enjoy the fresh air, the quiet. She wanted to think. Besides, Lisa could use the fresh air too.

‘They’re setting up now.’ Lisa pointed at the stage.

Jane turned toward the stage and something caught her eye. Not the band moving knobs on their amps or saying ‘check’ into the mics, not the ants that grew restless waiting for the group of junkies to start their set, but it was a man in his late 20s, or perhaps early 30s, sitting alone. He wasn’t dressed like the rest of them. He was different somehow, sombre like her.

‘Where you going?’ asked Lisa.

Jane didn’t answer. She squished between two guys in suffocating shirts and moved in. The man looked up from his drink.

‘Hey, I’m Jane.’ She held out her hand.

The man, dressed in a grey suit with a simple white shirt, ran his hand through his blonde hair. He looked up at the stage before turning back to Jane. ‘Hey, I’m Andrew, but I prefer my middle name... John.’ They shook hands. It was a light touch.

‘Both J’s.’

‘Yeah, I guess that’s true.’

‘You’re Australian?’

‘I guess I am. And you’re British.’ His eyes had already left her.

‘Yeah, I’m from London.’ She took a sip of her drink, as he looked up on stage. ‘Do you know the band?’

‘No.’

The Australian girl had gone back on stage, and was packing away her guitar.

‘Do you know the Aussie girl then?’

‘Oh, um, yeah. She’s from my home town.’ Jane dropped her straw in her drink. Her hand went limp. ‘She looks like someone I used to know.’ He spoke fondly. A loving memory. ‘I’ve run into her a few times, but that’s not why I’m here. It’s just a coincidence really.’

Jane smiled and continued crushing the lime with the straw. ‘Then why are you at this place, of all the places you can go in New York City? No offence, but you don’t look like you fit in here.’

‘Um.’ He looked at the bottles of liquor that lined the shelves behind bar as if there were answers there, a voice to share its secrets. ‘Dunno, chance I guess. The bartender at my hotel told me to come down to Ludlow if I wanted to see a band.’

‘Oh yeah, where are you staying?’

‘Ah, just at the Gramercy Park Hotel.’

‘Hey, that’s where I’m staying too.’ She wiggled her straw about, the plastic tube chasing the lime, until the straw almost fell from her hand.

‘Hey there you are Janey,’ said a drunken voice. ‘I thought I’d lost you.’ Lisa was all over that same man she was with before, who was now holding her up until she found the bar to balance herself.

Jane turned to John. ‘Sorry, John, I’d better take my cousin home. Maybe I’ll see you at the Rose Bar or the Jade Bar?’

‘Sure, why not.’

Lisa grabbed John by the arm. ‘Nice to meet you, John.’ She swayed a little. ‘This is Adam.’ She groped his face. ‘Don’t you think he’s cute?’, and then discarded him just as quickly. ‘Amy!’ Lisa molested Amy with a drunken hug, before awkwardly falling back against the bar.

‘Hey,’ said Amy. Jane watched the young singer’s eyes glue to John. ‘Hey. Do I know you? You, you came into my store right? Fender Thinline.’

‘Yeah, I did,’ replied John. ‘I should’ve bought that guitar.’

Her eyes were so green. She was beautiful. The lime was dead.

‘Let’s go, Lisa.’ Jane pulled her cousin to her feet.

‘Here’s her bag, Jane. She dropped it just before.’ The man, Adam, finally spoke. His voice friendly, educated and British.

‘Thank you,’ she looked at him for the first time, her eyes squinted as if to find greater focus in the basement gloom.

‘Lisa’s told me all about you,’ his voice was emotionless, ‘about your troubles with your mother and her psychologist.’

The stage light beamed across Adam, the flash of his face the clone of an image in her mind. Her eyes began to cheat her. The tears came. She looked at the others. Amy was talking to John. Lisa was leaning half against the bar and half against Amy. Nobody was listening. Nobody could hear them. The ants were screaming.

Adam leaned in. His breath smelled sickly and sweet, she could feel his heat against her ear as he spoke softly: 'I am happy to talk about it. I am a good listener.'

Jane moved away. She slapped her cousin awake. 'Come on, we're leaving.' Jane pushed through the insects, up the stairs, and out the front door.

Lisa escaped her grasp. 'Hey, hey, what are you doing?' she stumbled. 'Why are we leaving? Adam, he was cute. I was gonna fuck him. He looked just like George Clooney.'

Chapter 11

Amy

Amy's father would've hated this music. It was grunge, heavy grunge. Anything heavier than Zeppelin was garbage, he would say as he smoked. He was always smoking, lying down on the sofa, staring at the ceiling, blindly flicking the ash into an empty beer glass that had left numerous rings on the fine blackwood table that he had once built for her mother and cared for. That was his record listening position. Nothing mattered but the music. I will teach your kids guitar one day, he had said. I will go to all their gigs. Liar.

She took her emerald eyes away from the stage. 'I wonder why they left in such a hurry? I didn't even get to say goodbye to them,' she yelled to John and Adam, barely getting over the music.

John shrugged. He stared at the stage with vacant eyes.

'Lisa was very drunk,' shouted Adam.

'Yeah, I guess,' Amy agreed. 'I mean Lisa was wasted, but still. It was abrupt. Don't you think?'

'You seem disappointed.'

'She promised to take me to the private garden at the Gramercy Park Hotel.'

She looked at the bartender, and reached for her handbag, but had only two dollars in her purse.

She looked at John, the one her sister had cried handsome. And he was just that: handsome and muscular and nice. He reminded her of the Swedish guy in the vampire TV show, *True Blood* – her one disgusting addiction – but she couldn't remember his name, and John seemed like the kind of guy who wouldn't find any mention of such a TV show as an endearing quality.

'I can take you there,' said Adam.

She looked back at Adam. He looked like someone famous too, but she couldn't quite pin it. His wavy hair was as grey as it was dark brown, and he had this jaw that was just small enough not to be considered too large. 'You can take me there? To the garden? How?'

'That's where I'm staying too,' replied Adam. 'And unless I'm mistaken, I overheard your Australian friend say that he was staying there too.'

Amy nudged John; he was falling asleep. 'Shall we go then? Share a cab?' she screamed the question. John said nothing, but motioned his agreement with a sleepy bob of his head.

Amy led the way, pushing past the sweaty grungers. There was a mist coming off them, like you see on idiot joggers who run in the freezing cold, only this air had no sky to get lost in. There was no ventilation but for the staircase out, the atmosphere like a tropical prison full of inmates yelling at the four on stage who were murdering her friend, music. She stopped and turned to Adam. 'I'll meet you guys upstairs, I gotta get my guitar.'

They were waiting outside in the cold when she pushed open the door to the Cakeshop. 'Here, let me take that,' offered Adam as the door to her first New York gig closed behind her.

'Nah, it's cool, I got it.'

‘It wasn’t a question,’ he said smiling. He leaned toward her and took the guitar from her hands. He paused for a minute, looking downward. ‘You need gloves, or those delicate musician’s hands of yours will freeze. This isn’t Australia. Here, take mine.’ He handed her some black gloves, smiled again and walked away with her guitar. Amy stood and watched him walk ahead: there was something odd about him that she couldn’t quite make out. It reminded her of a man that used to frequent the dog park in the Barossa where everyone used to gather after 5pm with their dogs. This unusual man was there every night, but he didn’t have a dog of his own. He knew the names of all the dogs, and used to bring treats for them all. He used to laugh – too loud, eyes wider than usual, and his laugh was forced, like a dog barking and waiting for a ball to be thrown. He was weird, and she had always waited for the day that he rocked up to the park with a gun, or perhaps left the park with the dog he liked best and had his way with it – he was too nice. Nobody was that nice. What was someone like Adam doing at the Cakeshop? Surely he wasn’t there for the music. Was he vegan? Some people are just weird.

She followed Adam who was leading them toward East Houston Street where the yellow plague of New York City flowed through the concrete veins of Manhattan. She caught up to John, who was just shuffling along at his own pace. ‘Hey,’ she said.

He looked down at her and smiled. ‘Hey.’ He was taller than she remembered from that day in her guitar store. A place that would now be getting cleared out: an evocation of finer times; times before the recession; times when her father was still a living, walking human. Now his footsteps were just an echo in her mind. She shivered, and then looked at John.

‘Not as hot as the last time we met, hey?’ she said.

‘No. It’s fucking cold.’

He was shivering excessively, more than her. ‘You okay?’ she asked. ‘You look really tired.’ He didn’t reply to that. ‘Still jetlagged?’

‘Yeah, I guess so.’

They crossed Stanton Street. A lamp pole hunched over on the street corner, the glow illuminating the green metal bin beneath. Its contents had spilled over, and a homeless man was sifting through, trying to find a score or food or something warm to keep the cold from his bones. They passed a hat restaurant, a strange concept she had never heard of, an idea perhaps trying to give equality to the bald community in Lower East Side. Most shopfronts were caged up with metal roller doors that were covered in graffiti.

It was a cold winter night, but there were still people on the streets, silent, but for those groups who spoke in whispers so the cold not hear them. Above the stores – closed for the Holidays – were red-bricked apartment blocks. Fire-stairs hanging to their sides, metal ropes in the concrete jungle. They passed beneath a web of scaffolding. She could hear the waterfall of traffic ahead on East Houston Street. On the corner of Ludlow and East Houston was a red and white sign, a glowing vertical word taken from a giant scrabble board that spelled KATZ’S. The smell that came from the restaurant was of smoke and pork. She salivated. It was after midnight on a Monday night and it was still open and there were still patrons. Before she could suggest an early morning snack, Adam was putting her guitar in the boot of a cab on the other side of East Houston. He waved his hands for John and her to hurry. She made a note in her head of things to do tomorrow. KATZ’S.

It was a tight fit in the cab: Adam to her right, John to her left, and a driver who hadn’t showered or invested in cologne in the front. She didn’t get to see much of New York from the middle, except through the windscreen that was no more than

flashing red brake lights, and on the inside an LED cab fare counter that slowly crept up. The driver, middle-eastern of sorts, was talking to his wife or girlfriend or mother on speaker phone so they could all hear. They were birds on the back of a buffalo, eating ticks and lice, so that he could live comfortably and they could get a ride. So close, but still a world apart.

Adam spoke the first words of English in the cab since ‘the Gramercy Park Hotel, thank you.’

‘So, what do you do with yourself ... John wasn’t it?’ asked Adam. ‘I’m not too good with names.’

John wound down the window, and pollution and rubber replaced the musty smell of sweat. ‘I’m a lawyer,’ he said, looking out the window, the cold wind petting his face, and waving his blonde hair about.

‘What area?’

‘Insolvency and dispute resolution.’

Amy was stuck in the middle of a boring conversation. Her iPod was in her guitar case. She watched the flashing red lights, and hoped that the private garden in the darkness was worth the cab ride.

‘So what do you do? Mostly repossession stuff I’d assume?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Businesses? Houses?’

‘Both.’

‘What was your latest repossession for the bank? I’m guessing that banks are your chief clients?’

Amy was suddenly interested.

‘I’d rather not talk about it,’ replied John, still looking outside.

‘Okay,’ Adam conceded.

‘Can you wind the window up? It’s freezing,’ said Amy. John flicked a switch and the window shut. ‘You don’t work for Bank South do you?’ she asked.

‘We work for lots of banks.’

‘You don’t work for Hales and Co. do you?’

The cab came to a stop before John had time to answer. John removed his wallet, but by the time he had it in his hands, Adam had already paid. Amy hopped out on John’s side. Adam took her guitar out of the boot.

‘So, you don’t work for Hales and Co. do you?’ Amy asked again.

‘Yes. I do.’

‘Did you know that you were trying to repossess my father’s guitar store? Is that why you were there last week?’

‘No.’

‘No what?’

‘No, that’s not why I was there.’

‘Then why were you there?’

‘To remember her ... before she’s gone completely.’ The words crackled from his mouth.

‘Gone? Who? Is your name Andrew, Andrew Green?’ asked Amy. John said nothing, and just kept walking.

‘Got any change?’ a homeless man looked up at them, holding out a hat that was frayed and brown. A shopping cart stood next to him that was overflowing with miscellaneous things that Amy couldn’t make out in the dark.

‘Um,’ Amy rustled around in her pockets, ‘here you go.’ She handed him two notes. ‘That’s my last two dollars until I get paid tomorrow.’

‘Thank you. Thank you so much. Happy holidays. You have yourself a nice Christmas.’

They caught up to Adam who was waiting for them. ‘Why did you do that?’ he asked.

‘Why not? He needed it.’

‘More than you? You said they were your last dollars.’

‘They were. I may not have money, but at least I’ve got a place to sleep for six months.’ That seemed to please him. ‘And the Cake Shop are paying me tomorrow too.’

‘If you need money, you can always sell the guitar,’ said Adam.

‘Not a chance in hell,’ declared Amy. ‘That’s my dad’s guitar. He used to play songs to me when I was little, and sing. He was such a good singer.’

‘Was?’

‘Yeah, dad passed away last year.’

‘I’m so sorry, Amy,’ he smiled. ‘Well, here we are.’ They stopped next to two lamps that sat atop the wrought-iron spiked gate on ornate posts like two glowing skulls that dared anyone to enter uninvited. A neighbouring sign indicated a \$350 penalty, more than Amy had in her savings account that she planned to use for emergencies only. Adam removed a key from his coat pocket and put it into the steel lock and twisted. The iron gate was silent as it opened, a sign of maintenance and care.

Ahead was a giant Christmas tree covered in blue and red lights with touches of green and yellow. There was a giant white star on top. ‘Oh my God, that’s huge,’ said Amy. It stood to the left of a statue, and a little behind.

Adam walked in without commenting on the grandeur of the tree. Amy and John followed Adam into the garden, and for a second, in his black coat holding the guitar, with the light hiding his face, Amy imagined it was Bob Dylan or David Bowie about to entertain her at a private concert. But Adam was no entertainer. He was just like everyone else.

‘How did you get one of these keys?’ asked Amy.

‘I applied for one three weeks before I got to the hotel. They have twelve of them, and I’ve only got it for another day.’

The ass-end of a statue, the centrepiece of the park, greeted them and shat on everyone who stood on Gramercy Park North behind the chained iron front gates and key-locked entrance to the right where they had entered. Mist floated about the air, through the skeletal branches of the tall leafless trees overhead; their clashing wooden fingers could occasionally be heard over the perpetual cry of car brakes: the New York City traffic was a constant melody no matter where on Manhattan you were. But it was peaceful in here. The night sky was layered. Golden streetlights at the bottom made silhouettes of the tree branches. Buildings tall and black, with lights pimped sporadically on their faces. The night sky an endless illuminated grey, the ubiquitous city lights generating a sheen over the entire city.

Each step on the pebbled path leading to another section of the well-ordered garden was a step of hope. She was here, in New York City, doing what she loved best, living her dream. Her father’s dream dug up from a grave of hopelessness and cowardice. She wasn’t a coward. The guitar was, to her, more than just a love: it was a weapon. Her voice a breathy song. Her dad would be proud. The cool air filled her lungs and she smiled.

They followed the path around geometric gardens, beneath naked chestnut, maple and plane trees. There were green benches facing inward, one after the other - all were vacant but for one.

‘You know, Janey,’ a drunken voice broke the serenity of the garden, ‘Alberto is going to be so pissed that we didn’t stay and see them play. And as for – ’

‘Just shut up, Lisa. Shut up, shut up, shut up.’

Adam and John were a long way behind her now, somewhere amongst the trees unseen. Her pace must have quickened as she became lost in the thought-provoking darkness. ‘Lisa? Is that you.’ The two women looked toward her. She moved forward. ‘Lisa?’

‘Great, it’s the Aussie girl,’ said Jane. She sighed. ‘How did you get in?’

‘Adam and John. Adam has a key.’

‘Adam?’ asked Jane. ‘Where is he now?’

‘Amy!’ Lisa gave her a drunken hug and then let go.

Amy looked at Lisa. ‘He and John are somewhere in the garden, I guess.’

Jane pulled Lisa away from Amy. ‘Come on Lisa, we have to go.’

‘No, not again,’ Lisa ran in the other direction toward a shrubby section of the garden that hugged the fence.

‘Jane?’ asked Amy. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Adam. It’s Adam, he’s the one.’

‘The one?’

‘The psychiatrist who told my fucking mother to cut me off. It’s him. He’s the one. His name isn’t Adam.’ She tried to yell, but it was more a cry, the wail of a small child. She took a few steps back and slumped onto the park bench, and put her face into her hands. Amy sat down next to her. She put her arms around her.

‘Hey. Hey. It’s okay, Jane,’ said Amy. Jane’s head leaned over and buried into her breast where the English girl began to cry. ‘It’s okay, we’ll talk to him. Everything will be fine.’

There was a high-pitched scream behind them. Jane sat up. ‘Lisa?’

They got up off the park bench and rushed toward the screaming. Lisa lay in the garden, pointing a shaking finger toward the bush. The sounds of hurried footsteps came from behind them.

‘What’s going on?’ Adam still held Amy’s guitar.

Lisa pointed again, Jane and Amy approached her, looking in the shrub that had not lost its leaves. There was a suitcase, that much she could see. They got closer. It was ajar. There was a hand attached to it. Adam put the guitar on the path and pushed past them and pulled the suitcase and the hand out from the bush. There was a man, cold and bloody and dead.

Lisa squeezed her cousin tighter, snuggling into her like a child looking for protection. John stood next to Amy. Amy moved her hand up to John’s and squeezed. He pulled it away as soon as her silk hands touched his.

Adam was kneeling over the body. Amy had seen CSI enough times to realize that rigor mortis had set in. Adam was unperturbed, clinically unwrapping the fingers from the suitcase. The case broke free. He left the body as it lay: torso beneath the dull park light, feet still nestled into the shrub. Adam turned around, suitcase in hand.

‘Curious?’ he asked, leering. ‘The buckle is already broken.’ He opened the suitcase. There were bundles, line upon line, of US dollars, some spilling over the edges of an otherwise simple black leather suitcase.

‘So much money,’ said Amy. She took a step forward to get a closer look. ‘There must be thousands.’

‘Millions,’ replied Adam.

Jane pulled Lisa up to her feet. ‘What should we do?’ asked Jane.

Lisa was pointing at the dead man. ‘There are insects in his eyes.’

‘It’s simple,’ declared Adam. ‘We go to the police.’

‘No,’ said Jane. ‘We split it. Split it between the five of us.’

Amy looked at them: Adam, eyes fixed on Jane; Jane, eyes fixed on the money; Lisa, eyes closed and oozing mascara. ‘Where’s John?’ asked Amy.

They turned around, but John was gone.

Chapter 12

Andrew

The Rose Bar was red, as red as an organ still heavy with blood. Red lights, red curtains, red rugs, red velvet chairs, a red pool table, pale red beating walls. The music was insufferable. The warmth of the glowing fire and the cool, sweating beer glass in his hands were all that he almost enjoyed in this ritzy excuse for a bar. He didn't care for a suitcase filled with money. He wanted his wife. To be with her. To see her. To hold her. To smell her summer hair. But she was like the man in the park: cold and dead. Everyone here was alive and full of smiles and jubilation, laughing sacks squeezed empty and re-filled with alcohol to sustain the resonant euphoria that bounced across the black and white tiled floor up to the wooden pirate ship-like roof. He hated it. He hated New York. He hated life. The hate was a fluid so viscous that his emotions got stuck until he almost felt nothing, nothing at all. New York City sucked the life out of him, and his apathy grew with each winter hour.

'There you are,' said Amy.

Andrew turned around. All four of them were there, five if you included the suitcase. He wished they had left with the money then and there; he wanted no part of it. He wanted no part of them, of anyone. Just his thoughts and his body: that's all he wanted.

'Why did you go?' asked Jane.

He shrugged his shoulders, in no mood to talk. The only movement his lips made were to caress the glass in his hand as he drank more alcohol. He wanted to sleep; to sleep and wake up with his wife next to him again.

‘We’re thinking of splitting it,’ said Amy. ‘You interested?’

Silence wouldn’t shoo them away. ‘Not really,’ he said. ‘I just want to relax. That thing in the park wasn’t relaxing.’ His eyelids were heavy. He felt himself shaking. ‘I need to relax. I’m on holiday, not at a funeral. I want to relax.’

Adam cleared his throat and took a seat beside Andrew. ‘You appear quite relaxed already. Why the disinterest?’ he asked. ‘It really is a lot of money.’

Andrew shrugged, and looked at them. They were so alive. Money did that to some people, to most people. Death did something to others. ‘Money’s not everything,’ Andrew said. ‘You can’t buy everything.’ He couldn’t knock on death’s door and buy his wife back.

‘I would prefer to report it to the police,’ continued Adam, ‘but I thought it was worth a discussion, as such an opportunity, for such young people, rarely -,’

‘Then discuss it,’ Andrew interrupted. ‘You don’t need me. Do what you want with it. Like I said ... I’m not interested. I ... I just wanted to listen to this ... this music. That’s all I want. That’s what she would’ve wanted ... To listen and to dance.’

‘Are you okay?’ asked Amy reaching for Andrew’s shoulder.

Andrew looked up at Amy; those eyes, that hair. He imagined her singing in Adelaide, in that guitar store, the heat clinging to her skin like glad wrap, the music trying to escape; he imagined his wife. Amy wasn’t to blame for his apathy. She was lost too, seeking escape, searching for a way to forget: just like him. She deserved more than his reticence. Perhaps she deserved this chance; perhaps the music wasn’t enough for her, as it wasn’t for his wife. Perhaps all of them deserved a chance.

‘Okay ... I can talk about it, if it means you’ll leave me alone,’ said Andrew.

‘Well,’ said Adam, ‘it’s getting late, and we can’t talk here, it’s too loud. We should convene again tomorrow.’ He looked at Andrew. ‘You should take the case. You’re the only one who appears not to care about its worth.’

Her eyes were so green, so beautiful. Amy smiled at Andrew. He shrugged. ‘That’s fine. Just leave it ... leave it here with me, if that’s what you want. I’m not going anywhere.’

‘Are you sure we should leave it with him?’ asked Jane, squeezing her gloves. ‘No, I want my share now, and Lisa wants hers.’

‘Lisa doesn’t know what she wants,’ said Adam. ‘She’s too drunk to stand, let alone make a decision, and this must be a decision we all make together. We all found the case, not you, not me, all of us.’

‘Sorry Jane, I agree with Adam on this,’ said Amy. ‘Let’s leave it with John and sleep on it. You never know, the money might not be worth the baggage. It might be best calling the police. We should all sleep on it.’

Andrew looked up from his glass to Jane’s face, shielded in make-up. She looked like a China doll that need only take a short fall to break.

‘Okay, tomorrow at 10am at the Alfresco café up stairs,’ said Jane. She looked Andrew in the eyes. ‘We’re trusting you. If you don’t show, I’m calling the police and telling them everything.’

‘Okay,’ he replied. ‘I’ll be there.’

Andrew watched them all leave; all of them, even Amy. Perhaps he should leave too.

Leave all of them behind. Even Amy.

Chapter 13

Dr. Gregson

I'm tired on this cold winter morning. More tired than I have ever been in my life, and yet I feel invigorated. This patient file is better than any novel I have ever read. Derek Chambers: sociopath, murderer of women, scalper of human heads – genius. A man with such mental vigour, such self-assurance that my member throbs with each line that passes my eyes. To think he was my patient for all these years, when I should have been his. Such a simple powerful notion of life and death and God:

D. Chambers. 3rd March, 2011. 3:03am. Nothing but darkness. No stars, no distractions.

ON ALTRUISM:

Why live a meaningless existence balancing virtue on the opinions of others – through reflections of the past and the present? Are we really weaker than dogs? Dogs live in the present: what is currently around them is all that matters, nothing in the past or future is of any consequence. We, however, see the world differently. We see the world as a network of decisions; each branch is a choice with a consequence. That choice is always itself a decision and a question: self-preservation or self-sacrifice? The chief consequence of self-preservation is an often ignored perception of our narcissistic self, which, if not recognized, leads us deeper into the burdens of consumerism. Why? Purely to manifest a self that is worthy of our social circle. The other choice is self-sacrifice, which is a seemingly altruistic decision made purely for

the benefit of others, showing complete disregard for oneself. The consequence of sacrifice is a reflection of one's self as good and honourable, which leads to a greater love for oneself, which in turn enhances the narcissistic self. This false altruistic nature is itself narcissism. The real problem in life is human nature. The solution is in death. True altruism is bodily sacrifice. True altruism is death. To deal death is to give life by removing another consumer. The only way to live life is without thought, without grievance or reflection, without looking back, but rather looking around like a dog. We must revert back to impulse, to the beast within, or see the world crumble before our narcissistic eyes. Death is all that matters in life. Death is the true sacrifice to God. Only death can bring us closer to God.

My wife was a gift to God. I have given life via her death. I have kept her ring finger as a keepsake, a reminder of my service to God. I will keep Andrew's finger too. Should I take all of their fingers? Every finger that has ever touched the suitcase? How many gifts will send me to the heavens? Perhaps I can write to Derek Chambers and ask.

These people make me sick, but I do have a certain fondness for Amy, I must admit. She seems different: impulsive, looking mostly to the present, but still slightly caught up in the past. She has almost climbed out. Will she make it up, out of that hole? Will New York give her the opportunity to forget? Or will she turn into Andrew, a balloon of self-pity, waiting to burst? No, there is hope for her yet. As for the others, Lisa is a drunk who would better serve in death than life, and Jane will never be able to escape her past. She will continue to look back to the abuse, to her mother. Death would be a gift for both of them and a gift for God and his earth.

The alfresco meeting is in less than an hour, and still Andy is yet to leave his room. Perhaps his time has come? Perhaps I will kill him now? This morning was

invigorating. Chinatown was a place for the impulsive. I stole a jade bracelet, and then a fish knife, and I stabbed an obese man too. Invigorating. Before stabbing the obese man, I had a coffee and watched him eat. I felt both disgusted and inspired, as if I was watching the devil's work, so I decided to pen a story, which I am thinking of submitting to the Paris Review:

ADDICTION

By David Gregson

The Arrival

He hobbles to his seat, as his eyes hover across the table. He wants to squeeze through a human-sized gap between two adjacent tables, to the chair that faces outward toward humanity, but he knows that such an action would have broken consequence. He balances himself as he manoeuvres to sit: a heavy weight seeking ground. The chair holds. He tilts his head down to his newspaper; hiding croaky short breaths, gargling lungs, his thumping heart; the walk from the counter to his seat was a mammalian battle suffocated by gluttony. He leans back into his seat, breathing deeply. The buzzer lights up, begins its dance: his drink is ready. His sweaty hands clutch at the red plastic arms of his chair. The arms bow as he pushes himself up. He stands, composes himself, three shallow breaths follow. He waddles off, reaching for the rotund waist of his cotton trousers, an action that prevents his guts from gradually pushing them down with each baby step, each wobble of adipose. Minutes pass. He returns to his table with a coffee, which he places at the opposite end of the table,

readying himself for landing. He plunges downward, a test of engineering. The chair falters slightly, a moment of panic grips his pink clammy face. His feet touch the ground; and he is safe. He looks at the coffee, wanting to reach for it, wanting to drink it, to consume it, but he needs air; his heart needs a rest. Stumpy fingers tear a small red sugar packet. He licks his lips as the crystals submerge into the frothy milk. His eyes cheat him, turning left before he can take a sip. The waiter is coming with his food. He smiles. He salivates. He ejaculates.

Eating

Note: the intake of food was far too gruesome for words.

Leaving.

He takes small diagonal steps that travel further outward from left to right than forwards. As he pulls up his pants, this time a little too high, a network of varicose veins at the base of his calf become sickeningly obvious. He barely crosses the road before the cars shift into gear and pull forward. He stops, leans against the pole, catching his breath, readying his heart for the slow dance away, but the fast dance toward death is in motion and he's too addicted to know it.

Doctor David Theodore Gregson

December 2011.

The dance toward death was fast: I put him closer to the heavens after bloodying my fish knife. I gave him a gift. I gave the world a gift, one less gluttonous creature polluting God's world.

There are all kinds of gluttony, recipes for gluttony. A suitcase filled with money is just that. I wonder how far they will go to get the money? I wonder what will happen when it's gone, when I'm gone? Will they think that I have taken it? Of course they will, but then what? One thing that none of them have thought about is whose money it is. A dead body and a suitcase filled with money is something that won't be left alone. There will be people watching. People waiting. Gangsters, most likely blacks or Mexicans, wanting their money for their drugs. Or will they be Italian or Irish or Russians or Polacks? The dead man was white, Caucasian. The thought of finding them, of meeting these gangsters excites me. Perhaps I will spend the rest of the day at the park. See if I can find some faces lurking around the iron gates, trying to get in. They will wait for darkness, I'd imagine. But I'm happy to wait too.

The noise of a closing door takes me away from my musing. Andrew has left his room; finally. I thought he might have slit his wrists, taken a handful of anti-depressants and sent himself to sleep. He will die soon enough, but not from a pill. I must give him my knife. I look down at the bed. There it is, bloodied with blobs of congealed fat that have glued themselves to the blade like little pink leaches. I should have stuck around and watched the fat man bleed out. I kicked him in the face a few times so he wouldn't be crying out anytime soon. That was fun. Alas, I should have taken one of his fat little fingers for my necklace. Maybe it's not too late? Hmm. I might have to revisit squinty town. But not yet.

I reach into my pocket. The key card for Andrew's room is where I left it. I stand up, take a deep breath and a smile catches my face. The first authentic smile to have taken me since I saw the skyline of New York City, and the opportunity that waited for me here. I am changing for the better. Becoming stronger, a soldier for God. I straighten my back and tighten my tie. I enter the corridor. A red chasm of

consumerism at its finest. The Gramercy Park Hotel is like the beating heart of decadent Manhattan. And here I am, a virus, passing through one of its arteries, about to grasp onto receptor number 516, Andrew Green's room. I slide the card into the cold slot, and it gives me a euphoric beep. Enter me. Enter me. It cries to me. The door clicks open. And I enter.

The room gives me insight into my next victim, Andrew Green, my next gift to God. His luggage has been sprawled across the floor, seaweed washed up on the shore of his self-induced pity. The alcohol cupboard has all of its throbbing parts removed, colourful and shiny, enticing my mouth to wrap around and swallow. On his bedside table Xanax sits beside a bottle of Gin. And there it is, tossed into the corner, the suitcase. I move toward it and accidentally step into a smaller luggage bag that is covered in clothes, and I hear something break underfoot. The smell catches my nose: Issey Miyake cologne; like my wife once bought me. I've broken it, and spilled its poison onto his rags. I lick my lips as I imagine what blood and Issey Miyake would taste like together. Perhaps I can make a soup? Two steps further and I bend over to pick up the suitcase. The latch is still broken, money has spilled out. I leave a small amount of money behind and attempt to clamp the case together with the single brass latch that is still working. The open door back to the corridor startles me: I hear a couple giggling as they pass receptor 516. Saliva wells in my mouth and I can feel my stomach turn. I spit onto the carpet and take a deep breath, tempted to follow them into their room and kill them both. The thought makes me hungry. I haven't eaten all morning. And I need to kill again. I walk around the mess, hugging the blue walls until a breath of fresh air from the corridor brushes up against me. I continue to hug the wall before opening the door to my own room, and slip in unnoticed. Is this a game to me? Am I beginning to enjoy this more than I should? Work is supposed to

be fun, isn't it? I flick the brassy latch of the suitcase open, and then flip the suitcase upside down. Money falls onto the floor. Money falls everywhere. The green bills of death have polluted my carpet. My heart is beating so fast, as my hands flail about for the money, throwing it around the room.

I flop back onto the floor, onto my back, and I smile and I laugh and writhe around on the ground like a worm in joy. I can't wait to play this game. The suitcase game. And I can't wait to make my necklace of fingers too. No, God's necklace of fingers. God's necklace of virtue.

An idea hits me. My smile grows wider as I reach for my phone. Let's get them involved. Let's make it interesting.

Chapter 14

Jane

It had been a difficult sleep. Alcohol and stress had left Jane's mind awake when her body needed rest. It was the thought of money, or, more specifically, the thought of a life without money that had kept her awake. And there was her mother tapping away at her skull, ripping out her hair, and her father too, accompanied by the screeching of brakes and a vicious thud followed by a screaming cry and rain, always the rain.

It was almost 10am and she was feeling the effects of another sleepless night. Lisa, for all her antics last night, had pulled up okay. She'd had her 'drinking boots on' for the past week, she had said, so a night that 'didn't include cocaine' was always a good following morning as far as she was concerned, apparently even if that night included a dead guy.

The view from the Gramercy Terrace, 17 stories up, was a view of rain and cloud. And beneath were apartment buildings, roads, and a geometric garden: Gramercy Park. Even with the windows closed she could still hear the wail of New York City, like a greedy dog with a twisted stomach having eaten more than it's fill. The Big Apple was a place where you could become gluttonous with wealth or where the cold winter wind could cripple a man or woman who couldn't afford a decent meal and winter coat. She had never thought like that before: she'd always ignored the poor; seen them as the native animal of the big city. But on this trip, she thought of them all the time; and she thought of them as human, the same as her, but with less

funds. What would befall her if John didn't turn up with the suitcase, or if they decided to go to the police and turn it in? There was one thing that she did know: she couldn't face her mother. That idea was scarier than the thought of being huddled beneath an abandoned building; she'd rather die on the street, starving in the cold, than have to speak to her mother again. New York City's cold was warmer than her mother's love, that was for sure: she was a crinkled old woman, smothered in make up and gaudy clothes and jewellery that hung from her leathery powdered skin; she was a loveless creature. The only love she ever gave was to her father and to herself. Maybe that's what Jane herself had been like too, only younger and more beautiful and less violent. The thought twisted her stomach: she would never be like her mother; she'd sooner kill herself.

She was staring outside, just staring. It was grey and wet and miserable, just like her life. She could never look at the rain. It scared her, reminded her of her father's death. And yet, here she was staring outside. The tears came, rolling down her face, bleeding her mascara.

'Hey, hey, it's okay Janey,' said Lisa. 'They'll come, and we can talk to the shrink together. It will be fine.'

Jane took the luxurious Egyptian cotton serviette to her face and dabbed away the tears. 'It's not just that, Lisa,' she said, 'what do we do if they don't show up with the case? I've got no money left. I've got nothing. I'm a nobody: a fucking loser.'

'You're not a loser, Janey, don't be silly. And, anyway, you've got your own house in Highgate, that's yours not your mum's. And you've still got more money than me. I need the case way more than you.'

'That's not true. You have a family that loves you and they have enough money to support you. What do I have? An abusive mother who won't support me.'

Lisa didn't reply. Instead she grabs the bottle that has been sitting on the table, and fills up one of the three empty glasses with water, and then takes a long sip.

'You're wealthy,' continued Jane. 'Not rich like I was, but wealthy. You're studying. And you're free. I'm trapped. Stuck in a corner behind all the money I've spent, with no way to get out, and I've got no money to buy my way out anymore. I can't live without money. That's all I've got. That's all I've ever had.' She reached for the serviette.

Lisa sculled her water and put down her glass. 'Hey, hey.' Lisa stroked her cousin's arm. 'I was going to wait to give you this, but if it will make you stop crying I'll show you now.' She paused. 'Will you stop crying?'

Jane's tears were silent, but they still came.

Lisa smiled and then pulled out a bundle of one hundred dollar notes and threw them on the table.

'Wh-, what, where, where did you get that?'

'Well, I found it in my bra when I woke up this morning. And then I thought about it, about last night, and before I saw the dead guy, well, I saw this bundle of money, and I must have shoved it down my top and then I saw another bundle,' she threw that on the table too, 'and shoved it next to my other tit, and, well, then I saw the dead guy. So I kind of forgot about the money; a dead guy will do that to you.'

'My god, there must be at least ten thousand there.'

'I know, It's about twenty k. I was gonna wait –'

'Hi guys,' a voice interrupted them.

'Amy!' Lisa stood up and gave her a big hug. 'I'm glad they let you up, I gave the concierge a hundred quid and said that if he saw a hot Aussie girl milling around

to send her up to the Terrace!’ Lisa let her go. ‘Here, have a seat.’ Lisa pulled out a chair for her. ‘Do you want some breakfast?’

‘No I’m okay. Did you guys happen to see my guitar? I left it with Adam.’

Jane shook her head. And reached for her serviette again and brushed it across her face, beneath her eyes.

‘I haven’t seen it,’ said Lisa.

‘Where’s Adam?’ asked Amy. She was focussed on Lisa. Jane tried to hide her face by staring outside, down at the park.

‘Not sure,’ said Lisa. ‘He and John haven’t shown yet.’

‘Shit,’ replied Amy, ‘I’m stuffed without that, I’ve got nothing.’ She looked down at the money between them. ‘Is that from ...’ she paused. ‘Is that yours? They haven’t ... been and gone already?’

‘No,’ said Lisa, ‘you’re the first to show.’

There was nothing for Jane outside. She took a deep breath, put down the serviette and looked up at Amy. ‘Hi Amy,’ Jane managed to squeeze it out.

Jane turned away from Lisa. ‘Are you okay, Jane?’ asked Amy. ‘Is everything alright? What’s going on? Are you sure you guys are okay?’

Jane scratched delicately at her eyelids. ‘Yeah, I’m okay. I’m just a little worried that’s all.’

‘About the money?’ asked Amy. ‘That money?’ Amy looked closer at the two bundles, two filthy blocks of paper on the table. ‘Is that blood?’

Jane followed Amy’s eyes to the money on the table. The notes on top were covered in reddish-black dots. It must have been blood. ‘Lisa found this in the park before she saw the body. I think we should split it between the three of us now before the others come. What do you say, Lisa?’

Lisa gave Jane an awkward look of disagreement, but it was too late for her to say no now. She nodded her head.

‘What about you, Amy?’ asked Lisa, her voice was a little flat.

‘As long as I don’t have that note with the shit on it,’ Amy replied and laughed.

Jane smiled, while Lisa gave a high-pitched giggle. ‘Shit, there’s more of this to come so we may as well get a little extra now.’ Lisa had changed her tune completely. ‘Sit, come on have a seat,’ said Lisa. ‘Let’s split it before the men arrive. We’ve still got quarter of an hour right? Those idiots don’t have to know shit.’

Amy laughed again and took a seat next to them, while Lisa counted the notes ten at a time, splitting them into three piles. ‘So, where did you get this money from, again?’ asked Amy.

Lisa was too busy counting, so Jane answered: ‘Lisa found it in the park last night. That’s what led her to the body and the suitcase in the first place. She said that she was so wasted last night that she didn’t remember until she woke up this morning with sore boobs.’

Amy chuckled. ‘You know, I like poms,’ she said. ‘You remind me of home. You know, you’ve got that same sense of humour. Yanks are too bloody serious.’

Jane smiled. ‘I’m sorry about last night, but this whole week has been an absolute mess.’

‘That’s okay, I’m just glad I’ve found some people to talk to. Will you be staying much longer?’

‘Maybe, it depends what happens after this meeting I guess. But I think I should go home. New York’s not good for me at the moment. It’s too much.’

‘New York is pretty full on. There are people everywhere and there’s no quiet and everyone’s just running around buying stuff. It’s pretty cool though, and exciting, but mad too I guess. I’ve been freaking out all morning, worried about my guitar, and that Adam guy seemed a bit weird.’ Amy looked down at the three piles of money. ‘But I’m okay now that I can buy another guitar, I guess. Then I’ll be poor again. But there’s nothing wrong with that, as long as I’ve got my guitar and a place to sleep, and a bite to eat, then I’ll be happy.’

Jane smiled, while Lisa continued to count out the cash. Amy started tapping her fingers against the table, watching Lisa count the money. Jane’s eyes were drawn outside again. Maybe she could be happy and be poor like Amy. She was a good enough painter, or so her Godfather had said. He’d sold one of her paintings once for five thousand pounds, which she had painted when she was sixteen, and that had been the happiest day of her life since her father had died. She could be a painter, make a living in her house in Highgate. Nothing more, just painting, and going down to the coffee shop and flirting with Diego, who still had the cutest smile and made the best coffees in London. And then she could forget about her mother. About money and just be happy like Amy. Maybe it would make her stronger, she thought.

She just sat there for a while. Staring. She couldn’t hear the coffee machine frothing milk, or the chatter of people, or the clashing of cutlery. She didn’t hear any of it. She just stared outside. There wasn’t a bird in the sky. Nothing. Just grey. And rain. She’d lived with rain her whole life, and had ignored it, had feared it, looked away to something better, a coffee shop, a dress shop, somewhere she could walk in and buy something, so she didn’t have to think about the rain. But whenever a thought-provoking mood found her and the rain splashed down, she always came back to that day, when she was a young girl: she ran across the street following a

duck, and her father ran across the street following her. The car. The noise. Her father vanishing metres down the road with the car that squealed and slid on the wet road, until her father came out from beneath the wheels. Her mother screamed. The duck flew away. And her life changed.

Jane sat there, looking outside, watching the rain roll down the windows. She'd never looked at the rain for so long. She was chewing her nails, her pristine freshly manicured nails. She just stood there like that, for a few minutes, until her breath quickened. She looked down at the money. She looked ahead to a door a few steps away. Then back down to the money. She chewed her nails harder now. The clicking of her teeth pecked away at her thoughts like a bird on her shoulder trying to wake her up. This wasn't her. She couldn't just change. She stood up. Her chair screeched back. She walked away from the table.

'Jane, Janey, where are you off to? Janey?'

She didn't reply, and just headed for the bathroom door. She pushed it open, took a few steps inside until she found the sink and the mirror. She looked into the mirror. Her eyes didn't tear up, but the old tears and mascara had already left black marks around them. She turned on the tap. The cold tap. And dunked her hands beneath the icy water. She looked at the mirror, at her reflection. She let the water pool in her closed hands, and quickly threw it over her face, dragging her nail bitten hands around her eyes. She looked again at her smudged reflection. More water. She turned the tap on faster. Her breath was shallow and quick. Her hands filled with water. She tossed it over her face. She wiped her eyes again and looked at her reflection. 'You own a house,' she said to herself. 'You still have nearly twenty thousand pounds. Go home, Jane. Away from New York. Dad wouldn't have taken the money. Dad didn't love his money.' The bathroom door opened and an old

woman entered. Jane left her reflection and reached for a white cotton face washer that was rolled up, piled neatly on a brass tray and dried her face. She must have looked like quite the fool, with her face still wet with water. ‘Your appearance is everything, Jane,’ her mother once said. ‘The first impression can be the last impression. I do not want people to think poorly of you, as your looks reflect my name. And our name means wealth. Do you understand?’

She threw the towel in the bin and pushed through the bathroom door. She stopped. Everyone in Gramercy Terrace was looking outside, out the window. They were standing up. Talking to one another. Some with excited faces. Some with worried faces. She walked over to Lisa and Amy. ‘What’s going on,’ she asked as she moved closer to the window. She pushed the leaves of a pot plant to the side and looked outside, down onto the street. There were police cars everywhere with flashing lights. A crowd of umbrellas looked through the gates of Gramercy Park. Policemen were pushing them away. The road had been blocked. Yellow tape was being put up. People were being ushered away. It sounded as if a woman screamed, but they were too high up to tell.

Lisa turned to her. ‘It looks like they found the dead guy.’

Chapter 15

Gavin

...It's been too long. I miss your smell. I want to see Abbey. How tall is she now? I hope she looks like her mother. Do you remember the day we first met? I do. You looked beautiful back then, I bet you still do now. We snuck away together, to the cottage, you remember the first time ever? I didn't know the cottage existed until I followed dad there for that job. You brought picnic ingredients, and you put down the mat, and we laughed, and we spoke about running away ...

Still no snow. The rain had come down, two days in a row. Softly. Like a whisper. Gavin had slept for an hour at most, head against the table of a blue-lit booth of a late night donut shop. The night's travel was cold and unsuccessful. If the Devil had listened to him in the first place he would be home in Dublin, away from the lights and the noise and the filth.

Two nights ago, beneath the Brooklyn Bridge just off of Delancey Street, the deal had taken place. It was a different place every time, and each time getting closer and closer to Manhattan, until finally, much to Gavin's disgust, this deal was on Manhattan. Gavin had complained, 'Brooklyn's far enough for me. Too many cops and that on Manhattan. Too many fuckin places to get caught if things go bad. You know the fuckin Mexicans have just gotten a tad bit lazy.'

Things did go bad.

Gavin made it out when the cops crashed the party and the guns started firing. Gavin always had a plan, a way out. He was smart like that, his father had taught him that much at least. This time it was in the basement of a neighbouring building. The cops never found him there. The next morning he went back to New Jersey to see the Devil. Gavin had been grateful when he saw Bernie, but he didn't see any others. The rest of the street crew were dead; slowly rotting bodies in bags, kept cool for prodding and poking. But there was Henry too. Henry was the Devil's right hand man. Small Silent Henry they called him. If you got a call from Henry and he wanted to meet, then you were meeting the Devil, as Henry's words were the Devil's words; everyone knew that. But Gavin didn't want to speak to Henry or the Devil then, he was too angry at them for letting the Cartel dictate terms.

It would have been easier if Gavin had just died then with the rest of them; all of his troubles would have been left behind and he could sleep forever. But he was alive and he was grateful: he had a wife and a daughter; reason enough to push through, to keep running. But now he'd run through every public park, south of Central Park and east of Broadway, and had found nothing. No suitcase, no Davey, only the rain and the cold and the wind. And the lights. There were always lights in New York City; even in the darkest of places there was the faintest parcel of light. Bernie would have said it was God watching over them. But Gavin knew it was death watching over them: they were trapped in a giant cave, light seeping through the cracks where the water dripped from the ceiling, guiding them through the darkness, away from the black cloaked figure of death, who slowly crept behind them, waiting for them to stumble and fall into darkness. There was a suitcase somewhere in the cave, and in that suitcase was a key to Ireland and Kathleen and Abbey.

Bernie was wrong in his beliefs, there was no God. But Gavin knew that if there was a god, he would've sunk Manhattan and all its problems a long time ago.

It was almost 7.15am, Gavin was alone and waiting for Bernie, hoping that the West Side had been more fruitful for his younger brother. His brother turned psycho. He could not stop thinking of the boy, Alex: he was too young to die. And he died for nothing. They got no useful information from him; the little they had learned from Alex was that Davey and the suitcase should be somewhere uptown from LES. That meant Davey, dead or alive, could be anywhere, and he may have turned around and headed back downtown for all he knew. Gavin had started his hunt from Battery Park, just in case, and had worked his way uptown. If Bernie hadn't killed the poor boy, he might have had more answers for them. Instead they had nothing, but a slight possibility that Davey had the suitcase, last seen bloody and limping through a park, firing his gun.

Considering Davey hadn't been found, it was fair for Gavin to assume that he was dead. But a fucking park? He might have cut through a park, and then died in the middle of the street. He could be anywhere. Chances are he'd been found by now, that someone had found his body and called the cops.

Then there was the second option: the Mexicans had found Davey and the money, but that seemed unlikely considering Alex said Ricardo's crew were still looking for the case. And the Mexicans didn't bluff. If the Rodriguez Cartel had the case Alex would've sung it true and bragged about it before Bernie killed him, but he didn't. Besides, the Devil would know if the Mexicans had the money: he would've got the call from the Cartel and then Henry would've called Gavin.

Then there was the third and final option: that somebody had found Davey dead and cold and they had taken the suitcase for themselves. That was the worst

option. If the cops or the Mexicans had the case, he could go home. For the first time in his life, he longed to hear Henry's voice.

Gavin stood on the shore of East River. He'd walked from the very tip of Battery Park uptown to Sutton Place all the way up on 57th Street, and now it was morning. Davey wouldn't have made it to Central Park, not wounded.

Gavin was cold. The wind had picked up, and he didn't plan on walking aimlessly in the cold anymore today. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his gold lighter and the last of his cigarettes. After a few vicious flicks of the lighter the paper and tobacco burned. He took a deep breath, holding in the smoke for a long time as he looked out across the water. The sky was a bright molten orange, streaked yellow with waves of blue. The clouds were smudged black and thick, thrown across the morning sky. The sun was trapped behind the 59th Street Bridge, and behind the crying river he could hear the light humming of cars travelling from Queens to Manhattan. He looked out across Roosevelt Island toward Astoria, the skyline a silhouette of leafless trees reaching their tendrils to the golden sky. There was a sign on the far shore with the word 'Silvercup' stamped black into the sky. He enjoyed this time alone, where he could think and smoke and dream about sleep and Ireland.

Bernie was late, as always, and Gavin didn't want to think where he had been or what he had done. There was opportunity in the morning sky; during the night Bernie could have solved all of his problems: he could have found the suitcase. He could be given an opportunity to finally go home. But Gavin didn't want to trust to hope, it had failed him too many times.

The wind blew across the river and he could feel the cold in his bones. His body didn't feel like it did a few years ago; it was like an old car that had been driven too many years without a service, he found the mornings difficult to start, even when

his beating engine had been running all night. He wanted to lay down here before the river. To sleep on the sidewalk, to let the sunlight catch his face, warm his body. He wanted to give up on the suitcase, to leave New York City and America for good. But he knew the Devil would hunt him down if he quit now. And it would be Henry and Bernie hunting him, his kid brother waiting in the darkness to kill him with that hatchet, their father's hatchet. And Bernie would do it too; he would let his own blood spill. Gavin threw the end of the cigarette into the water. Pulled out another smoke and lit up.

It was his fault – all of it. He should've taken Bernie away from their father, when he was young and malleable. There were times he longed to forget. Moments in life he could never get back. Moments of cowardice, of horror, of hatred. When he was eighteen and Bernie wasn't even ten years old, their father had a prisoner tied up on a chair in their basement. A prisoner not willing to snitch on his crew; his crew who had wronged their father. Gavin had been woken up in the early morning to help out, to help his father get answers. But Gavin knew that it wasn't answers his father was after. It was violence. Blood. Death. 'Hit him,' his father had said. Gavin shook his head. 'I said fuckin hit him.' Gavin shook his head, his father struck him, knocked him out cold. He awoke in the darkness, with the basement light glowing yellow above the prisoner, and his father, and Bernie – small innocent Bernie, with a pair of pliers ripping off the prisoner's toenails. One by one. Scream by scream. Bernie didn't cry, he didn't smile, he just kept pulling at the pliers until there were no toenails left.

This was supposed to be his time, alone, in the early morning New York sunlight, and yet he thought of Bernie, and it ripped him away from the future and back into the darkness he had been caught in since he was thirteen. Gavin knew he was a coward then, and knew that he was a coward now. He was a gangster who had

never executed a man, you know, bang bang, see you in hell. ‘You’re as soft as butter.’ his father would say.

He looked up at the sky, the clouds had thinned out and those closest to the sun’s rays were glowing white. The smoke from his lungs crept out and faded in the light, and he watched the wind carry his breath away, out across the water.

A body moved in next to him and looked out.

Gavin didn’t turn around. The thick clouds were moving faster now, and the light had dimmed somewhat. Gavin turned to face Bernie. He looked down at his brother’s hands. His black gloves were empty. ‘No fuckin luck then.’

Bernie shook his head. Gavin looked up to his face; the sunlight gave Bernie’s eyes a youthful glow, his eyes so blue against the dark of his hair. There were patches in his beard where he couldn’t quite grow enough hair to cover his white Irish skin - he was still a boy. Gavin wanted to smile and stroke his face, but he saw splashes of blackened red against the pale skin. He drew hard on his smoke and walked away down 57th street toward Molly’s.

‘Where you going?’

‘You need to get yourself cleaned up, get that shite off you.’

‘Shite?’

‘You’ve got fuckin blood on your face, Bernie.’

It was just after 11am when they had to leave Molly’s. Gavin had been sitting by the fire, underneath the glowing Christmas lights, with a Guinness on the table, trying to close his eyes and find some sleep. He was sifting in and out of consciousness; his head tilting towards his shoulder and back up again like a bird drinking water. He was dreaming. For the first time in months he was dreaming: he

was in tunnel, nothing but darkness and the smell of damp decay. He could hear a tapping, like large hands against a hollow table coming from in front of him. Far away but close.

Tap ... tap, tap.

Tap ... tap, tap.

He walked to the rhythm of the noise, deeper and deeper into the tunnel. There was another noise at the end of the tunnel, the wail of an engine in the distance, like the revving of his father's old Charger that he used to hear from the back of the house late at night when he was a boy.

It was getting louder now. Louder. There was a light, small at first sight, but growing brighter.

Tap ... tap, tap.

Tap ... tap, tap.

The silhouette of a figure came toward him with the light, and he could feel the heat coming too, bouncing off the walls of the tunnel.

Tap ... tap, tap.

Tap ... tap, tap.

The tap was deeper now, like the beating of a tom in three quick strikes. The sound of his father's charger was louder and higher pitched, coming fast as if the wind carried it towards him, but he knew it was tireless wheels grating metal across the track beneath his feet. The figure was hooded and larger now. Eyes blue as a Dublin sky: O'Dougherty blue. He turned to run. His legs were failing, growing heavy. His right leg was asleep.

Tap ... tap, tap.

Tap ... tap, tap.

He looked down. There were rats everywhere beneath his feet on the tracks.
He shook his feet, kicked them away.

He heard a soft voice and looked up. He could see his daughter up ahead pointing behind him where the drums and the Charger and the screeching wind grew louder. He turned away from her and the shadowed figure was larger now, its eyes brighter, colder, like the morning sun shining over a frozen lake.

Tap ... tap, tap.

Tap ... tap, tap.

His daughter smiled as she pointed behind him.

Tap ... tap, tap.

Tap ... tap, tap.

He felt those icy blue eyes, the ice was thin and cracking, waiting for him to fall backward and down into the tunnel away from his daughter. A bloody hand touched his shoulder. The eyes were above him now, leaking water from their empty sockets. Then he woke.

‘Gavin, we need to leave.’

‘Ah, what the fuck is it then, Bernie?’

‘It’s Henry. He says we have to get to Gramercy Park.’

‘Gramercy Park?’

‘He got a call from the insider. There’s a homicide. Large white male with dark hair and green eyes.’

‘Davey.’

Bernie nodded his head and put on their dead father’s hat.

Gavin felt his breast pocket for his smokes.

Chapter 16

Amy

Gramercy Terrace was empty but for Amy, Lisa and Jane, and the three waiters who leaned up against the register, waiting for them to leave.

‘It’s 11am,’ said Lisa. ‘Those assholes aren’t coming.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ replied Jane. ‘Let’s just go.’

‘Maybe they didn’t come because of the attention in the Garden,’ suggested Amy. ‘There are a lot of police down there, not a good time to be walking around with a bloody suitcase full of money.’

‘Maybe,’ replied Lisa, ‘but I fucking doubt it. I bet those fuckers have made off with the money.’

‘Andr- I mean John wouldn’t have done that,’ assured Amy.

‘Maybe not,’ replied Lisa. ‘But I bet that Adam guy probably talked John into it. You two told me all morning that this Adam dude was a creep. I couldn’t tell that last night, I was too wasted. Lucky I didn’t fuck him.’ It wasn’t a joke.

‘His name’s not Adam,’ declared Jane. ‘It’s David. David Gregson.’

‘Yeah, yeah, same creep,’ Lisa said, waving the name away.

‘And John’s not John,’ said Amy.

Lisa and Jane turned to her. ‘What?’ asked Lisa.

Amy picked up her water and had a sip. ‘I said, John’s not John. His name is Andrew Green. He told me as much last night. He’s a lawyer from back home in Adelaide.’

‘Then why the fuck did he call himself John?’ asked Lisa.

‘Because he didn’t want me to know that he was the lawyer taking my father’s guitar shop.’

‘Why not?’ asked Lisa, tilting her head to the side.

Amy shrugged her shoulders and had another sip of water. She sat forward in her chair, unable to get comfortable. ‘I think he’s depressed, maybe. Someone close to him died. I don’t know.’

‘Died?’ Lisa snuffed. ‘That doesn’t explain anything. These weirdos both have fake names. We shouldn’t have trusted either of them. The money is gone, I bet.’

‘I think we should tell the police then,’ said Jane, looking at the rain outside.

‘Why the hell would we do that?’ asked Lisa.

‘Because it’s the right thing to do,’ replied Jane.

‘Then we should’ve fucking done that last night,’ Lisa took a deep breath. ‘Now we’ll have to explain to them why we didn’t tell them earlier. Nup, I’m not doing it: too much trouble. And what about the money we already have, huh? I’m spending it today, that’s for sure. And I haven’t given up hope on the suitcase yet. There’s a chance we might still find it.’

Amy looked over at the register. The waiters were chatting amongst themselves, idle hands waiting for them to leave. One of them saw Amy and he gave her a fuck-you kind of smile and nodded his head. ‘I say we just keep what we’ve got and don’t say anything. I need to buy a guitar. If I can’t find Adam-’

‘David,’ interrupted Jane. ‘Dr. David Gregson.’

Amy glanced at Jane. Why did she keep saying his name? ‘I was just saying that if I can’t find David, then I’ve got no guitar. I need to buy another guitar.’

‘Let’s get out of here and spend it now then,’ said Lisa. ‘Before the police take it away.’

Amy nodded. Jane looked outside again.

‘They’re still there,’ said Jane. ‘The police.’

‘Let’s go then,’ said Lisa. She reached down beneath the table, but then stopped in realization. ‘Shit, my fucking handbag,’ said Lisa. She put her hand up to her mouth. ‘Oh my god. What if I left it in the park. Next to the body. I’m fucked, I’m so fucked.’

‘I didn’t see it there last night,’ said Amy. ‘Did you have it at the Cake shop?’

‘I had it in the cab, I remember checking my Facebook. I’m so fucked.’

‘There’s nothing to worry about, Lisa,’ said Jane. ‘If the police had your bag, which has both your ID and credit cards not to mention your keycard to this place, they would have come looking for you by now, don’t you think?’

‘They could be in my room now.’

‘And if they are, we’ll tell them we went to the park yesterday during the day and you left it behind then,’ said Jane.

‘What?’ Lisa said sarcastically. ‘And just left it next to my dead boyfriend.’

Amy laughed.

‘This isn’t funny,’ declared Lisa.

Jane managed a smile. ‘We’ll ask the concierge downstairs if anyone has asked for us, okay, Lisa,’ said Jane.

‘Okay.’

‘If no one’s asked for us,’ continued Jane, ‘then the police haven’t found your bag, and you’ve got nothing to worry about.’

‘Okay,’ she conceded.

‘You probably left it in the cab or something,’ said Jane.

‘Probably.’

Amy looked at the waiters. ‘These waiters want us to go, I think.’

Jane took her eyes away from the clouds. Lisa turned around. The waiters nodded their heads and smiled again.

Jane stood up. She turned to her cousin. ‘Let’s go downstairs and speak with the concierge.’

‘And then let’s go spend this cash,’ whispered Lisa. She turned to Amy and slapped her on the shoulder. ‘Amy, let’s get you a guitar. Alberto works down at Ludlow guitars. I used to fuck him. He’ll get you a brilliant deal.’

Amy waited in the lobby as Lisa and Jane spoke to the concierge at the check-in desk. She looked around at the place. It was beautiful, considerably nicer than the American Dream Hostel. This *was* the American dream, here at Gramercy Park Hotel. She sat on a red suede sofa next to the giant Christmas tree, looking about the place for Andrew or David, but they weren’t there. A couple minutes later Lisa came back smiling, Jane at her heels.

‘No one’s asked for me,’ said Lisa.

Amy stood up. ‘That’s good.’

‘Let’s get you that fucking guitar, my love,’ said Lisa, putting her arm around Amy. ‘But we’re walking the long way around. And then I’m going to fucking Tiffany’s to buy a fuck-off sized diamond.’

By the time they made it outside, the rain had stopped. They turned left as they exited the Gramercy Park Hotel, and headed all the way down Lexington Avenue

until they hit 23rd Street. The clouds had thinned out, and Amy could see the Empire State Building in the distance. She smiled. She was in New York City, not on her own, but with some new friends, about to go guitar shopping. Nothing else mattered: not the dead guy in the park, not the money, not her mother, not her father. Nothing. They turned right down 23rd Street, and kept walking. There were no leaves left on the few trees that were on either side of the road. An American flag fluttered in the breeze above a building, which on closer inspection was just a boring post office. Up on the corner there was a Starbucks Coffee on her right and a Duane Reed Pharmacy on her left: she knew she was in America. They hit 3rd Avenue and stopped.

‘Oh fuck,’ said Lisa. ‘This is the L train stop heading to Brooklyn. I’m in auto pilot.’

‘I thought we were going the wrong way,’ said Jane.

‘Then why didn’t you say something?’

‘Hey, do you mind if I get a Starbucks coffee?’ asked Amy.

‘You’re joking, right? Starbucks is shit,’ said Lisa.

‘Really?’ asked Amy. Jane and Lisa both nodded their heads. ‘There used to be one in Adelaide,’ said Amy. ‘Until it closed down. I used to like the novelty.’

‘It wears off pretty fast,’ said Lisa, ‘But what the shit, let’s get one while it’s still there for you.’

Amy sat down, smiling and sipping from the white ceramic mug branded Starbucks green, while Lisa stole Jane’s phone and used the free Wi-Fi, fingers flicking through diamonds on the Tiffany’s home page. Amy thought about what guitar she was going to get. Gibson or Martin? Maybe a Santa Cruz if she could afford one? Definitely not Taylor, they were too pretty and sounded thin. She wanted a real guitar, a workhorse guitar: a Gibson J45 or Martin D28, or maybe a Martin

000? Amy finished her coffee and then had to wait for the single bathroom behind four people. When she returned, the girls were ready to leave.

‘It’s stopped raining,’ said Lisa. ‘So we’ll walk up to the Park Avenue stop and get the Green line downtown.’

It started raining after they reached Lexington Avenue, but Park Avenue was only another block away. They finally made it to the green cast iron railing on the corner, and headed down the stairs to the subway and out of the rain. Lisa showed Amy how to get a Metrocard and Jane loaded it with credits, and then they waited a few minutes beneath the ground for the rumble and hiss of the train. They hopped on the green number six train, that was headed downtown, and found a seat. Amy looked out the window of the train as it started moving, listening to the metal wheels against the track. What was she going to buy? Not a Martin D28 like her dad had. She needed a fresh start. Her own guitar. Not her father’s, but hers. The train was jammed full of people, but she felt quite comfortable squished between an old man and Jane. And she didn’t mind the orange plastic seats either. They were fine and it was warmer in here than outside. ‘Hey, I need to buy a decent winter jacket too,’ she said to Jane. ‘I’ve got all my thermals on and I’m still freezing.’

Jane smiled. ‘Okay, we’ll find you something nice. That way you can get rid of those rags.’

They hopped off the train and walked up the stairs and headed down Bleeker Street toward Houston and then down onto Ludlow. Katz’s was on the corner of Ludlow and Houston: there was a line of people waiting outside in the rain, looking inside for a vacant seat or table.

‘Wow, this place must be good,’ said Amy.

‘Only if you want to eat an entire animal between rye bread,’ said Lisa.

‘Don’t mind her, Amy, she’s one of those vegetarians,’ said Jane, smiling.

‘Fuck off, Janey,’ Lisa gave her a little shove, smiling. ‘But hey, that’s cool, after we’ve checked out these guitars, you carnivores can come back here for lunch and I can head uptown to 5th Avenue to spend my bloody money, while you eat your bloody meat.’ She smiled and then turned to Jane. ‘Alberto’s going to be asking why we didn’t hang around last night, you know.’

‘You were drunk,’ said Jane. ‘I’m sure he’ll understand.’

‘No, he’ll be pissed. And besides, you don’t *really* know his family, Jane. They’re fucking crazy.’

Jane shook her head. ‘Alberto is sweet.’

‘Why are they crazy?’ asked Amy.

‘They’re caught up in the whole drug scene. By caught up, I mean they distribute. Not Alberto, but a lot of his friends and family.’

‘Distribute what exactly?’ asked Amy.

‘Cocaine and heroin. They’re Mexican, not meth-making fucking Chemists from Albuquerque. What else would it be?’

Amy shrugged and began picking at the calluses on her fingers.

‘Hang on! That’s it!’ declared Lisa. ‘Maybe I can speak to Alberto and he can track the suitcase down for us.’

Amy smiled.

Jane didn’t.

‘Those two bastard liars don’t deserve it,’ continued Lisa. ‘I found it, not them. Why should they have it?’

‘If you tell Alberto,’ said Amy, ‘and he tells his friends, then they might take the case for themselves, right?’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Lisa.

‘I met them backstage at the gig last night, and one or two of them seemed pretty dodgy.’

‘No, they’re fine,’ declared Lisa. ‘Just a little crazy. They wouldn’t hurt us or Alberto. We need that suitcase back.’

‘Can we please just stop talking about the suitcase?’ said Jane.

‘Why?’ asked Lisa

‘Because I don’t care about the case,’ said Jane. ‘I just want to go home.’

Lisa shrugged. ‘Your loss.’

‘And Alberto’s friends can’t be trusted, I’ve heard them talk about stuff before. Like you said, Lisa, they’re fucking drug dealers.’

‘I don’t think the decision is yours to make, Janey,’ said Lisa.

‘You can’t trust them, Lisa. Just let it go. Like you said, it’s done, it’s over.’

‘You can trust Alberto,’ said Lisa. ‘And I’m not letting it go that easily. It’s too much money. And it’s a principle thing.’

‘I thought we’d decided not to look for the suitcase,’ said Jane.

‘I never said that,’ said Lisa. ‘Don’t get me wrong, money’s not the be all and end all, but money’s nice, and spending money and partying is fucking fun. I could party my entire life with that sort of cash.’ Amy walked along between them, listening. ‘What do you think, Amy?’ asked Lisa.

‘I guess there’s no harm in asking them because we’ve got nothing anyway, right?’ Lisa nodded. ‘But if the money is theirs in the first place, then we won’t get anything at all, cos they’ll just take it back, won’t they?’

‘Maybe,’ said Lisa. ‘But I doubt Alberto would’ve gigged last night if Ricky and his crew lost millions of dollars.’

‘Ricky?’ Jane looked nervous. ‘Was Ricky even there last night?’

Lisa shrugged. ‘I guess we’ll find out soon.’

They headed past Katz’s and down Ludlow, past the Cake shop and eventually stopped in front of a small single storey black-painted building on their left. Amy looked into a window full of guitars and hurried inside. Her eyes were dazzled by a cabinet of colourful squares. ‘Oh my God, look at all those pedals.’

‘Pretty cool huh,’ said a guy behind the counter.

Amy leaned against the glass, almost pushing her nose onto the counter to get a closer look.

‘Alberto!’ said Lisa.

‘Where the fuck were you last night?’ he asked, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

‘Fucking wasted.’

‘You’re always wasted.’

Amy looked up, she’d found a pedal she wanted to try, the Eventide Space. She went to tell Alberto, but his eyes were glued on Lisa. He ran his hands through his liquorice hair.

Amy moved away from Alberto, Jane and Lisa, and headed deeper into the store. There were two massive walls of guitars, one behind the counter, the other for her to inspect at will. And there was music coming from two closed doors at the end of the store. ‘Wow, so many guitars,’ she said to herself. ‘Better than the no-name Mexican-made shit that Dad stocked.’

‘I thought your guitar was good?’ Amy turned, Jane was following her.

‘Yeah, that was Dad’s, he bought that before he bought the store. The only good guitars we had were Cole Clarks and a few Mexican Fenders, but not much, the rest were shit.’

‘So this place is good then?’ asked Jane.

‘Yeah, I could buy every one if I had the money.’

‘Well, you might have to settle for just one guitar. Lisa’s already told Alberto about the suitcase. He went white as a ghost too, as if he didn’t want to know. I think he owes Ricky money or something.’

Amy shrugged her shoulders. She moved away from Jane and picked up a Rosewood Gibson J45. It never left her hands.

They left the store an hour later; Amy had a new guitar, one reverb pedal, one delay pedal, and a smile. She looked to Lisa, who was glum and hadn’t said anything for the last ten minutes as she waited for Amy to collect her receipt and her guitar.

‘So what did they say,’ said Jane, with a hint of sarcasm. ‘Are they going to help?’

‘So, Alberto’s going to speak to Ricky tonight,’ said Lisa. ‘Tell him who’s got the case.’

Jane shook her head. ‘Not Ricky.’

‘Yeah, Ricky. You were right, he wasn’t there last night, Alberto had a fill in from the store. Alberto’s a little spooked. He already knew something was going down. He heard Ricky on the phone, yelling something about Irish gangsters. Alberto thinks it’s their money, Ricky’s crew’s money for drugs I guess. So we’re fucked. And if they found out that we spent some of their cash, we’re fucked too.’

Jane stopped. 'Here,' said Jane, reaching into her handbag. 'You guys can have it. I don't want it.' She pulled her money out of her purse and gave it to Amy. 'I'm leaving tomorrow. Back home. I'm done with New York. It's too much.'

Lisa ignored her. 'I hope half of that is for me,' she said to Amy. Amy put down her guitar and split the bundle down the middle and gave Lisa half. 'I'm gonna spend my half at Tiffany's now. Fuck Ricky's crew. I found it. I'm spending it.' Lisa stormed off.

'Hey, where are you going, when will you be back?' said Jane.

Lisa turned around. 'Where do you think? To Tiffany's. If I don't have it when they come asking for it, then I never had it in the first place. As far as Alberto's concerned, he's telling Ricky that we had the suitcase, not that some was missing from the suitcase, I'm not that dumb, I didn't tell him about the cash we found first.'

'How are you going to get into The Gramercy without your keycard?'

Lisa turned around and took a few steps toward Jane and put out an empty hand.

Jane reached into her purse and gave her own keycard to Lisa. Then Lisa turned away from them and started walking uptown toward Houston. 'See you when you get back, Janey. I'll be in the spa, most likely drunk, with some new diamond earrings and a new fucking hand bag.'

Amy watched her leave. She stuffed the extra money underneath her thermals.

'Let's go to Katz's, I need to eat something before I pass out,' said Jane.

'And then can you help me buy a nice jacket? It's so cold.'

Jane nodded her head. 'And then I'm going to arrange to have my flight changed. I'm going home to London tomorrow.' Jane looked up at the rain, and then

started heading towards the red glowing signage, and the smell of salted meat in the distance.

Amy picked up her new guitar and followed.

Amy stepped inside the blue room of the American Dream Hostel. She could still taste Katz's pastrami as it came up in noiseless burps from her unhappy stomach. Amy put down her guitar and put her shopping bags in the corner and turned on the room's heat.

'Just make yourself comfortable,' she said.

Jane sat down on the bed next to the window. She looked outside.

Amy picked up her new guitar and placed it on the bed beside Jane. Jane didn't move or react; she just sat there staring outside.

'You want to go home, hey?'

Jane nodded her head. 'I'm tired,' she said.

'I know how that feels, I've been tired my entire life, until now. Trapped in that old guitar shop. Now I feel like I've actually woken up. That maybe it was New York that woke me up.' Jane didn't reply to that; she just sat there staring out the window.

Amy opened up her guitar case, and she smiled, looking down at the J45. She picked it up carefully and sat down on the other corner of the bed. She gave it a quick tune and then started playing *Things Behind The Sun* by Nick Drake. She started singing.

"Please beware of them that stare

They'll only smile to see you while

Your time away

And once you've seen what they have been

To win the earth just won't seem worth

Your night or your day

Who'll hear what I say.

Look around you find the ground

Is not so far from where you are

But not too wise

For down below they never grow

They're always tired and charms are hired

From out of their eyes

Never surprise."

Amy put the guitar down, mid-song. Jane now stood staring outside watching the rain. She was crying, not whimpering or making noise, but blinking away tears.

‘Are you okay, Jane?’

Jane was silent. She still sat there, eyes fixed on the rain.

‘Do you want me to stop playing?’

Jane shook her head and then she turned and faced Amy. ‘You’re here in New York to make something of your life right? To become a musician?’

Amy nodded her head. ‘I guess so.’

‘Have you ever thought that the suitcase, that having that money, is the opposite of that achieving that goal?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, if you had all that money, then you won’t need to play guitar anymore.’

‘Money won’t stop me from playing guitar.’

Jane focused her eyes back to the window and the rain. ‘But will you still play that nice shiny new guitar in a months time? Or a year?’ Amy listened. ‘That guitar right there, your new guitar, you love it right?’ Jane didn’t see Amy nod. She only saw the grey misery outside. ‘Well if you had millions of dollars, you’d buy another guitar, a better guitar, and that one will sit around collecting dust, and everything that you loved about it will disappear; this moment today – gone.’ Amy rested the guitar on her knee, her left hand moved away from the mahogany neck. ‘Then you’ll buy another guitar because you won’t like your new guitar, and then you’ll go searching for something small that you don’t like about that one, and before you know it you’ll have a room full of guitars and not one of them will make you happy.’ Jane was still staring outside as she spoke. The rain kept falling. ‘You won’t need to gig anymore, because you won’t need the money. Then you’ll probably travel for a couple of years and you’ll forget about guitar and singing and music and performing. And then you’ll start drinking, and buying clothes and looking at yourself in the mirror, and reading magazines and buying more clothes. Then you’ll have a wardrobe full of old clothes that you don’t wear, covering up all your old guitars that you’ve barely played. And then you’ll buy more clothes and more possessions until nothing can make you happy.

‘And then you’ll take a step back. Something will force that to happen. It could be a man, a man called Diego, and you fall in love, and then you break up with him because you think there’s something better, that he’s not quite right. And when you want him back, he doesn’t want you, and there’s finally something that you can’t have. And for the first time in years, you’ll stop and think. And then you’ll start seeing a therapist because your spending and your unhappiness has become pathological. And then you’ll take meds that make you feel better, but they make you numb and then you won’t feel anything anymore. And you’ll have no one, except for

a cousin overseas and a few friends at home that love your money not you. Money can't buy happiness. Or friends. Or family. Money is nothing.'

Jane turned around. Her face was wet with tears. 'Where's the bathroom?' she asked.

Amy put her guitar back in its case. She stood up. 'It's just through there, outside and then down the hall on your right.' Jane stood up, Amy touched her shoulder as she went by, but Jane never turned around.

A few minutes went by, and Amy was left alone with her new guitar and her thoughts. She thought about her old guitar, her dad's guitar. And then she thought about home, about Adelaide, about the farmhouse in the Barossa. She thought about the mugginess in the air, the humid darkness of her small room and the sleepless summer nights. She thought about her mum and her dad and that night. That night. There was so much yelling, not from her dad but from her mum. Amy could hear it through her bedroom door. Her mum was yelling over and over again, 'You're a fucking loser. You've ruined us. That fucking store. The fucking debt. You can't cope with it. You're too stupid. You're a fucking loser.' Amy walked out of her upstairs bedroom where she saw her dad crying, and her mum screaming at him, pushing him. 'A fucking loser. You're a loser. Why the hell did I marry a loser. You fucking loser.' She kept pushing him and pushing him. Amy yelled 'Stop it.' But she didn't stop. She just kept yelling at her dad and pushing him. Amy ran up to them, she yelled for her mum to stop, stop, and then she pushed her. She pushed her mum away from her dad, and her mum fell. She fell backwards, losing her balance, down the stairs, and onto the floor. Amy stood at the top of stairs, in her pyjamas, disoriented by the heat and the gloom, with her hands over her mouth, looking down at the bottom of the stairs as blood spilled from her mum's head. It happened so fast. The yelling. The heat. Amy's

dad ran down the stairs, and held her limp mum, listening for a sign of life, but there was none. Later that night, when the police came and took her dad away, she couldn't even talk, but she wanted to scream, to scream loudly: 'It was me! It was me!' But all she could do was cry and babble. And as they put him in cuffs and pushed him into the back of the car, she watched the blue and red lights take her dad away, and she ran after them screaming admission, but nobody heard but the heat in the night. She never got the chance to say anything to any one, to apologize to her dad. He committed suicide that night, alone in his cell, with a packet of antidepressants, and a note for Amy – sorry, I love you.

Amy wanted to sing. For her father. For her mother. She wanted to make them proud. To say thank you. To say sorry. She looked around the room, wishing for her father's guitar, for her mum and her dad. But they weren't there: they would never be there. Instead, there was a pile of money, perhaps \$5,000 dollars sprawled across her bed next to her shiny new guitar. She stared for a long time. At the guitar. At the money. Until a knocking on her door broke her musing. 'Come in,' she said, relieved.

The French receptionist entered, 'Hello, Amy. You have a visitor. Okay?'

Amy nodded her head and smiled. 'Yes, that's okay.'

Eloise nodded her head and then left. Jane didn't enter. Amy tilted her head left to see who it was. She saw the guitar case first. And then she saw Adam. No, it was David, Dr David Gregson.

'Hello Amy,' he said. No smile. Just blank. He took a few steps into the small room. His eyes were dark and focussed, staring at her bed. At the shiny new guitar. At the money. And then he put down the guitar case, carefully. And stood up straight. He looked at Amy. There was a small twitch in his left eye. He looked back down at the money. At the shopping bags. At the new guitar again. Then he looked at Amy, turned

and left the room. Her father's old guitar was left on the blue carpet. She didn't pick it up, but left it where David had placed it.

She sat down on the bed and wondered where Jane was and if she was coming back. And then looked outside at the grey clouds. And the rain. There was so much rain.

Chapter 17

Dr. Gregson

The Australian girl is a liar. A deceiver. An equivocator. She's no different than the others. She's cheated me. I wanted to give her the money as a gift. I wanted to know what she would do with it. Would she tell the others? Would she keep it for herself? Would she share it with the unfortunate? What would they have done if they found out that she had taken the money but hadn't told them about it? Would they come for her? Would they kill her?

This game is not the same anymore. It has lost so much. I wanted to see her battle, and I wanted to see her win. She was 'human spirit'. I wanted to help her win and slowly bleed out the others. But now she's just like the others, and I want nothing to do with her. No, that's a lie. I want to kill her. I want to feel her last shuddering breath as I slide my knife into her. I want to hear her whimper as I twist the blade inside her as she presses up against me. I want to feel the warmth of her leak from her body onto my hands, painting them red with the glory of God. I want to watch her flop onto the ground. To hear the thud as her limp body crashes onto the carpet. I want to kill her.

I will kill her.

She is a gluttonous whore and New York is where she belongs, and I can make her stay here for eternity. Her consumerist spirit will walk these disgusting streets, window shopping for guitars and clothes and lies. I cannot believe she lied to me. Why would she do that? How could she be so callous?

As I pass the last blue step of the American Dream Hostel and push open the door, the cold air of New York City scrapes at my face and no longer feels invigorating. It is nothing more than winter air filled with pollution and greed and the voices of a million humans crying out for redemption. The rain is coming down harder now, and I feel it beat against my skull. Each drop of water is a reminder of who I am, of where I am and how I got here, and of what I must do for the good of God.

This was a lesson.

He was testing me.

Offering me someone else to serve on his plate of avarice. I lick my lips and taste the rain and I smile. My plan has changed. This is a good thing. There shall be one more dish: Amy Winston.

The liar.

The consumer.

Society's leech.

God's burden.

I shall parlay with her blood. My smile grows as I walk the wet streets of New York City. This is my home now. This is where I am meant to be. I can fit in here. Pretend to be like the rest of them: a consumer who buys meaningless accessories and drinks coffee in the daytime, and who wanders the meaningless bars and whorehouses and drinks whiskey at night. But my accessories will be knives. And my drink will be blood.

A shiver takes me as I step out onto another numbered street, 30th this 40th that, they're all roads to death, shops selling the souls of humanity. As I pass beneath scaffolding, and out onto a main road, I see the people swarming the city, their feet

covered in the tar of consumerism, sticking them to the filthy streets of New York City. The cabs and cars pass with their smoky breath, and as they stop, the squealing of brakes is their song, mechanical, lifeless; metal demons trolling through the greed of man. As I continue to walk, the rain continues to fall, and I hear a small bell ringing in the distance. There's a man up ahead blocking the path with his red and white *Salvation Army* sign and his red bucket and his bell. That irksome bell. Five steps away.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

I kick his bucket out from the shelter and into the rain. Money spills out, and the nauseating creature gets down on his filthy hands and knees and refills his bucket. He grimaces with panic as the money tries to escape the tar. I smile with ecstasy.

The cops are still everywhere around the Gramercy Park Hotel. Idiots. If they only knew what they had missed – a suitcase filled with money, drug money. If they found the suitcase and the money, they could put themselves on the news, in their ironed navy suits, with their shiny badges and their stupid hats, and they could smile and they could stand up tall and they could say that they saved you; that they are heroes; and the media will love them and then we will love ourselves and know that we are safe spending in the streets on New York City, the greatest city in the world.

Right?

Wrong.

One bust is nothing. One bust is a pat on the back; the corrupt city mayor thanking the navy blue for their stupidity and cowardice: always at a crime scene, never preventing the crime. I push through the front doors and remove my coat, which is dripping onto the black and white tiled floor. A bus boy gets down on his knees with a towel that he's had ready at his side like a gun in a holster. Just like the homeless man ringing his bell: a slave for money, but his money is a tiny wage that strips him of humanity every moment he shits on his dignity and serves the rich, the callous, the viruses of New York City. I run my fingers over the blade of the fish knife in my pocket. I want to kick him over as he cleans the floor that I have dirtied, and then I want to put my knee on top of his chest, take the fish knife in my hands, and stab him in the face.

Stab him in the eye. So he can finally see.

But that would be stupid. My work would end. And I would be locked behind bars and God's work would no longer bleed from my hands, from his hands. This bus boy – his time will come, I'm sure of it. But I have others I need to kill first. I feel the appetite within, and I know that I need to kill again, and kill soon.

I need a new plan now that Amy the liar must die. Perhaps a whiskey might help me think? I walk beneath the big arched doorway, heading toward the Jade Bar. I look ahead. There's a man, slumped over at the bar, falling in and out of sleep.

I smile.

I sit next to him.

The bar man comes up to me and I ask the little shrew for a whiskey. The dialogue between the shrew and I seems to stir the man out from his waking sleep. He reaches for his drink with shaking hands. I look to his face. He is sweating. Eyes only half open. I slap him in the face to wake him from his drugged state. The barman

looks at me strangely. I feed him a wad of green bills, he nods, leaves the bottle of whiskey on the bar and ducks away. I turn to the sleeping man and I hit him again. This time harder. He reacts slower than I'd have hoped. Our eyes meet.

‘Hello, John. Or is it Andrew?’ The sorry excuse for a living, breathing human being can barely keep his eyes open. I slap him again. ‘Andy, we need to talk.’

Chapter 18

Andrew

There was always sunlight in Adelaide. Andrew's wife had said that. Even in the coldest of winters the sun showed its face, through the clouds and the rain and the darkness. When Andrew was a law clerk, working part time hours, he'd come home in the early afternoon and find her sitting inside by the fire, with her guitar on her lap, staring outside into the greyness, waiting for the sun. Most of the time, during the darkest days of the winter months, it only appeared for a few minutes, sometimes not at all. But whenever it did, she'd leave her guitar for those few precious moments and go outside and stand in the sun and look up to the sky, arms to her side, palms facing the clouds, and she'd spin about and smile.

Andrew eventually got a promotion, got paid more, and worked longer hours. Three years later he was an Associate, working fifty-hour weeks, and the loneliness took its toll on her. During her last few months, she didn't look for the sun anymore. She didn't look outside. She didn't play her guitar. She didn't sing. Andrew would come home late and find the curtains closed and her guitar in the corner of the room. She sat closer to the fire; the jarrah floor was scratched where she'd pulled the tan sofa closer to the flames, as if the heat somehow made her feel more alive than she did. Andrew never saw the signs. He used to ask questions. She used to reply. Nothing made sense. 'I'm cold.' That's all she ever said. That was her answer. He didn't want to hassle her with questions. He was too busy.

Toward the end, she sat in the lounge room all day, even on the weekends, getting up to use the bathroom and to drink water. She'd stopped cooking, a passion she once found joy in. She used to sit at the dining room table with piles of vegetarian cookbooks trying to find out what she wanted to cook, what combinations would be good: she could never decide. She used to read books that had meat in them too, and tried to figure out what she could replace the meat with – it was almost always a grain or a vegetable: she hated tofu. Andrew used to give her those books when she was on the sofa, trying to lure her away from the fire, but they never made it back to the dining room table, and she'd never read them.

The guitar collected dust, and on the strings where her hands used to touch, the oils had begun to turn the steel black until it eventually started to rust. Andrew would get home from work later and later, and she got worse and worse. The leather sofa had started to crack, like fractures through hard, dry soil that had waited months and months for rain. She never found her water. And then she stopped looking for it when the guitar broke. That was the end. Andrew never knew how it broke; he just came home to find her by the fire and her broken guitar in the corner of the room.

Her lips began to crack and peel when she no longer found the energy to drink water. When he kissed her, her lips were dry and her eyes were off looking for something in the fire that she'd lost and could never find again.

One evening, after drinks with clients, Andrew came home from work especially late. His wife was home on the couch, sitting by the fire - nothing out of the ordinary. Andrew said hello as he walked into the kitchen, passing the lounge room. She said nothing. He put down his coat and walked over to her, putting his hands on her shoulders – she liked that, she'd always put her frail hands up to his, and she'd smile – but this time she didn't react. He touched her neck. She was cold. The fire was

hot. Then he looked down to her face. Her green eyes were wide open, the fire dancing from her eyes like burning gemstones. He grabbed her hand, and pried the plastic bottle of pills out from her claws. There was no breath, no beating heart. She hadn't found whatever she'd lost in the flames. He'd come home too late. He was always home late.

Chapter 19

Dr. Gregson

‘So, Andy,’ I begin. ‘Tell me a bit about yourself.’

He slurs something, but I can’t quite make it out, so I slap him again. He gets annoyed in a sleepy kind of way, but not enough to really know what’s going on or whether or not to do anything about it. Symptoms of Benzodiazepines.

‘You know you shouldn’t drink when you’re having your medication.’

He slurs again.

‘Do you get anxiety? Panic attacks?’

His head drops down toward the bar, and then comes up slowly.

‘Andy?’

‘W ... what?’

‘Louder, clearer.’ I bring the whiskey to my mouth, and I feel it burn down my throat and into my stomach, curing me of the New York City taint that I will grow familiar with and perhaps learn to love.

He’s falling asleep again. My hand collides with his cheek. ‘Andrew Green.’ I say loudly.

‘What ... what do you wanna know?’

‘What do I want to know? Hmmm. I want to know how you met my wife?’

Yes, that’s a good start. How did you meet my wife?’

‘My wife?’ He begins to sob. ‘She’s dead.’ His neck muscles relax and his head drops again. I slap him.

‘No, my wife. Stephanie. My wife, not yours. My wife.’

‘Your wife?’ he slurs. ‘I don’t know your www...’ He can’t say the word wife. His shaking hands finally grasp the glass of wine and he only just manages a sip without spilling. He’s looking away from me now, trying to play it cool, trying to take back some power, regain some dignity, so I slap him again.

‘Stephanie.’

‘What?’

‘Stephanie?’

I slap him again. ‘Okay, what?’ he manages to say.

He’s waking up, finally. ‘Stephanie Gregson. You were supposed to meet her here weren’t you?’

He turns slowly. ‘How ... How do you know that?’ He’s mumbling again.

‘Because she’s my wife, you moron.’ He turns away. His eyelids cheat me. His head begins to tilt. ‘Andy, Andy.’ I slap him again. ‘You need to listen. Wake up.’

He reaches for his wine again. I push it away. ‘No wine.’

He closes his eyes.

‘Andy, Andy.’

I hit him over the back of the head.

‘What?’

‘Where did you meet her? Australia?’

‘What?’

‘Did you sleep with her?’

His eyelids sag, I throw his wine in his face. ‘What. What do you want me to do?’

‘Did you have intercourse with Stephanie Gregson?’

He nods. He mumbles. ‘Sydney. Is she here?’

‘No, she’s dead.’

‘My wife’s dead.’ His lips curl up, he closes his eyes. I can tell he wants to cry but the drugs won’t let him.

Pathetic.

Coward.

I want to kill him.

But not yet. Something dark inside of me wants answers. Something I thought I had given up: curiosity. Why? Why did that whore cheat on me with this pathetic thing?

‘No. Not your wife. Stephanie. I’m talking about Stephanie. My wife. She’s dead. I killed her. And I’m going to kill you later on. Is that okay with you?’ He’s falling asleep again, so I slap him. His eyes open up. ‘Is that okay with you?’

He nods. He mumbles and smiles. And then his eyes close, his neck muscles relax and his head hits the bar. A drug induced sleep. I should’ve left the wine glass there, it could have broken into his face. That would have been nice. Should I smash it on his head now? No, he can wait until later. I take a swig of whiskey from the bottle.

What now? There’s no point talking to him anymore. He’s out, wasted. I sit there for a few minutes, drinking the whiskey, and I suddenly feel confused. I’m not sure why I asked him about my wife. I wanted answers I suppose. Perhaps I should have asked her before I slid my knife through her ear and into the side of her head? I shrug. And I smile. I loved that feeling. When the blade slid in. I need to do it again.

My hands reach down to the whiskey and I knock it back. The bartender comes back now. He asks: ‘Is everything okay?’

My hands wrap around the whiskey and I think about smashing the bottle over his face, but that would be sacrilege to waste such good whiskey: he's not worth it. So I say: 'Everything's okay, mate.'

He nods and smiles in a feminine kind of way. This sparks further investigation. Perhaps I should kill him. Right now. Right here. I need to. I need to find my inner self, my animal.

'Are you gay?' I ask him.

'Excuse me, sir?'

'Are you a homosexual?'

'Sir?'

'Do you indulge in fellatio?'

'Sir?'

'Call me doctor.'

'Sir?'

I'm breathing deeply now. Slowly. One hand in my pocket, the other around the bottle. Which one will it be? Which one should I kill him with? I stand up, my hand wraps tightly around the fish knife. And then I exhale.

Control.

I look at those pretty dark eyes. 'If you come-on to me again, I'll call your manager,' I tell him. 'Is that clear, boy? I won't tolerate sexual overtures.' That is what he is: a boy, lost in the mess of life that few will ever figure out, or find their place within. But I've found mine. I am a Doctor. I am a soldier of God. I deal in death, and it is a kind gift to deal. For me. For you. For everyone.

He stands there, saying nothing, wondering what I'm going to do next. I've come this far, now it's time to end it. So I act: I grab the bottle of whiskey and pour

the rest of it over Andy's face. He gurgles a bit, mumbles something, I can't quite tell. Then I put the empty bottle on the bar, and I wink at the bartender. 'Have a good night.' I blow him a kiss, I smile, and then I leave the Jade Bar in search for something better. Something to keep me occupied before my animal takes over. The flashing lights outside attract me. That's it. The suitcase. The suitcase game. I am a soldier of God, remember? Remember who you are now, Doctor. You are a Godly man: you must therefore act accordingly. Yes, it is a game. But it is your job now. It is your life. You are a servant and one of the divine.

I look outside. There will be people looking for the suitcase, I know that much. And I want to find out who they will be. Perhaps I will find out, perhaps today. Perhaps tonight. I head for the door. And I wait in the rain, in the cold, in the wind. I wait. I wait for the cover of darkness. Just me. And my fish knife. And God. I *am* a Godly man, remember.

Chapter 20

Jane

‘I can’t believe he was here,’ said Jane. Amy sat on the end of her bed, while Jane paced back and forth. ‘Did he mention anything?’

‘Nothing, he just gave me the guitar and then left.’

‘I don’t like it that he knows where you are staying. Let’s speak to the receptionist on your way out and make sure they don’t let him back in.’

‘He’s okay, he’s just a little weird.’

‘He lied about his name, Amy.’

‘So did Andrew, but I still like Andrew. My father said that people deserve a second chance. Don’t you think?’

‘Do you think he’d give one to you?’

Amy shrugged. ‘He brought my Dad’s guitar back.’

‘Anyway, I don’t know why I’m talking about this. I’ve put him and the suitcase behind me now. I just need to get back home to the UK and leave all this mess behind me. Then sort my life out and try to fix the mess at home.’

‘So you’re still meaning to leave tomorrow then?’

‘Tomorrow night, I think I should spend the day with Lisa, if I’m going to be spending the rest of the night with you.’

‘Are you?’

‘I can’t leave you alone tonight. I don’t like that Dr. Gregson. And besides, you wanted to get wings for dinner, right?’ Amy nodded her head. ‘I’m happy to do

that, providing I'm back at the Gramercy by 10pm. I need to tell Lisa that I'm leaving. She'll be upset that what little money I have left is leaving too.'

'Okay. Shall we go then?'

Jane used to love Pete's Tavern; it was one of the first bars she went to when she first visited Lisa in New York City. But now it was too colourful and too loud. Silence was what she wanted. To sit in her bath in Highgate with the window open just a little bit, with a book and a glass of wine. She hadn't done that for years. In fact, she hadn't spent much time alone at all. She had so many friends back home in London, and would see them as often as possible to avoid having to spend time alone where thinking often got the better of her. But now she desired that time alone. She needed to think about who she was and where she was going. Her father deserved that much. He would have hated to see what she had become. Her mother was to blame; to blame for everything. But that didn't matter anymore. She couldn't blame anyone but herself.

She looked around the pub that had lasted more than 150 years: it had a certain charm, a place for families too, not just people looking to eat wings and drink themselves to stupor. Pete's Tavern glowed red and green: red lights covering the ceiling, green light surrounding the arches behind the bar. It reminded her of Christmas in Amsterdam, a Christmas where she was so drugged that she couldn't remember anything but the red glow and the grey smoke and the beating music. She looked across at Amy whose hands were covered in grease as she dipped her chicken wings into the blue cheese sauce. Amy looked up at Jane after she shovelled a wing into her mouth, and then down at the wings, and then back to Jane. 'Are you sure you don't want any?' asked Amy.

Jane nodded her head. 'I'm sure.' She wondered what the weather would be like at home in Highgate. It would be cold and grey. And there would be rain. But it would be home. And it would be out of this city, away from all these shops and lights and skyscrapers polluted by advertising and American flags. She scratched her head and took a deep breath, wanting to leave as soon as she could, but Amy didn't notice: she was too focused on the Buffalo wings and her lager.

After half an hour of idle chat and eating, Jane was more than ready to leave. She hadn't eaten a single thing or had anything to drink: she was too worn, too exhausted for anything; she just wanted to go home. 'Are you ready?'

Amy shrugged, 'Yeah, I guess. I'm pretty keen to get back to my new guitar.'

Jane smiled. She knew that Amy wasn't quite ready to give up on the money. She was a risk taker, and she had nothing to lose, but the suitcase wasn't in their hands anymore: Lisa had passed that on to Alberto. She still liked Alberto, she remembered his little black beard scratching against her chin and lips as they kissed that first winter night on Mulberry Street. And she remembered his smell: Ralph Lauren Romance, sweet and spicy, as she held onto him in the living room of Lisa's Brooklyn apartment. And she remembered his soft touch when they walked away from the noise, into the spare room and fell asleep together. But she also remembered the night when Lisa stole him away from her: Lisa had asked, Jane had said yes. Alberto wanted them both; Jane had said no. She remembered the regret and the desire in Alberto's eyes as Lisa pulled him into a bedroom. It should have been her, not Lisa. Instead, Jane was left alone in Ricky's apartment with Ricky and his friend. Jane was drunk, Ricky and his friend were on something else. They didn't ask, but Jane still said no. There was nobody there to stop them. It hurt Jane so much. She cried. They laughed. She could taste the smoke on them, feel the rings on their fingers

press against her body as she resisted. She wanted them dead after that, but she couldn't tell Lisa – Lisa wouldn't believe her.

She came back the year after for Alberto, to tell him everything, but she couldn't. She stayed in New York for a week or so after that Christmas, hanging out with Alberto, making love to Alberto, but that didn't last long: she grew restless and went back home to London, she was always on the move, being static didn't quite suit her, but she was willing to give that lifestyle up now. She wanted consistency; she needed to grow up.

They put on their jackets and pushed open the front door, walking out into the cold of Irving Place and 18th Street. Jane pulled her white beanie over her ears and looked at Amy. The rain was coming down hard and neither of them wanted to get out from the outdoor cover of the canvas portico. 'If we run down 18th and across to 3rd Avenue,' said Jane, 'we can probably get a cab.'

'Okay, I'll follow you,' Amy almost yelled as the rain continued to pour.

Jane wrapped her scarf snugly about her neck, then she ran around the corner down 18th Street, but she stopped soon after she rounded the corner: there was scaffolding all down the side of Pete's so they didn't need to run.

'That's lucky,' yelled Amy. She looked out to the road. It was still almost a block away. 'Should we just wait it out under here?'

Jane nodded her head and watched the rain beat down onto the wet road. She looked up, and across the road where there were two men smoking. One of them looked up at her and then flicked his cigarette butt onto the road. 'We might as well go back inside, and maybe wait for it to stop.'

'Sounds like a plan,' said Amy, not noticing the men.

Jane looked left as she headed back to Pete's Tavern. The two hooded men crossed the road. Jane hurried toward Irving, but the men cut her off. The shorter of the two pulled back his jacket, showing a pistol.

Jane turned back to Amy, until she felt the pressure on her arm, the man flung her around so she faced her. The other man grabbed Amy.

'Get the fuck off me,' yelled Amy.

'Quiet,' said the other one. 'We're loaded.' He revealed his gun to Amy this time.

Jane looked around the streets. It was wet; there was nobody outside.

'Alberto said you know where the money is, man,' one of them said to Jane. His accent was saturated with Latino.

'Alberto?' said Amy. 'Who the fuck is Alberto?'

The Mexican that held Amy smacked her with the back of his hand. 'No games, chica. The money where is it?' Amy said nothing. He went to hit her again.

'Stop!' yelled Jane. Amidst the street light and rain, she could see that the one that held Amy was Ricky. 'We don't know. Lisa spoke to Alberto to see if you could find it. We don't have it, Ricky, I promise.'

Ricky and the other one looked at each other. Jane felt the man squeeze her arm tighter, she wanted to cry out in pain. 'Alberto says you have it,' he said.

Jane shook her head. 'We had it, but a man called David Gregson took it.'

'We were told Adam had it?' said Ricky. 'You're not lying are you, chica?'

'No, no. We're not lying. David Gregson. He's staying at the Gramercy Park Hotel. I swear. Please don't hurt us.'

Ricky laughed. Amy tried to escape by kneeling Ricky in the testicles, but she missed. Ricky hit her. Harder this time. Even in the darkness, Jane could see the blood on Amy's face. 'Fuckin chica, I'll kill you. Fuck.' He spat on her.

'Please,' said Jane.

Ricky looked at her. 'I remember you now,' he said. 'You're little Alberto's girl.'

She shook her head. 'No. No, I'm not. I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Don't fucking lie, chica. I saw you with him a while back at his cousins house. Yeah, I remember you. You had a sweet ass. Me and a friend had that ass.' He laughed. 'Alberto be missing that now. Did he get one last squeeze before he cried like a sissy?' He reached forward and put his hand on her ass. Jane went rigid but said nothing.

'Get your fucking hands off her,' yelled Amy.

Ricky turned and hit her again. And then held the gun to her head. 'I said quiet, chica.'

'No, no. We'll show you where the suitcase is. Please,' said Jane.

He put his pistol away. 'You said you didn't have it, that Gregson has it.'

'I lied; we have it. I can show you. If you get Alberto to come too, we can take you to it.'

The two of them looked at each other and laughed. The one that held her whispered in her ear: 'Alberto's dead. He was a waste of time. That little sissy cried 'oh please'.' Ricky was laughing.

Voices came from around the corner. They were loud, 'No fuckin way is Melo better than Kobe. I don't care what you -'

‘Help,’ screamed Jane. ‘Help!’

The men looked up and ran toward them.

Ricky threw Amy to the ground snatching her handbag, and then grabbed Jane. He leaned over and whispered into her ear: ‘You’re fuckin dead, chica.’ She felt his hand release her. Ricky and his friend ran away across the street and into the darkness.

‘Hey, hey, you okay?’ A young man asked, picking up Amy. Another one rested a hand on her. His touch was soft. They huddled around Jane and Amy. There were at least six or seven of them. Amy collapsed and one of them caught her. Her face was covered in blood.

Chapter 21

Dr. Gregson

The cold night air stings my face. Winter's kiss is violent. I breathe in and soak it all up. Rain drops fall softly down from the tree. The clouds above shimmer with the light of New York City and I feel as though we are trapped beneath a grey blanket of sickening greed and I am here to save us. To save us all. To remove the veil that covers our need for more. No, our lust for more. Our gluttony. Our greed.

My hand slides against the wet tree as I shift position to prevent a cramp from erupting within my bones, and I feel a slimy residue between my fingers. It is not too dissimilar from blood, but cold, ice cold. My hands are numb, my sense of touch, of feel, is lost. The Australian liar still has my gloves. But for the better, I suppose. I feel like I am one with the earth, my bare hands amongst the branches that clap together: an ovation just for me. Together, the trees and I, we observe those below. We watch, we wait, voyeurs of the night. Waiting. Wanting. Curiosity is powerful, it makes us sinners, fighters, lovers. A desire that makes us act. That gives us guilt. That brings us down. Deeper. With the cretins, the beggars, the murders. But I am not a murderer. I take life to create life. The death that I deal is a gift. I rid the earth of its disease: the pestilence of man.

And as I sit high in the branches of the Gramercy Park garden I exult in my new self, in this new occupation. This new game. Hopefully the suitcase game is the first of many. I smile, but my smile vanishes and I shiver as the wind picks up. The cold is violent, and I can feel its tendrils digging under my jacket, under my skin

trying to burrow under the epithelium like a tick in search of blood. I should have worn thermals.

Enough.

Coward.

This is no time to whinge, to give up. Tonight the game continues. It must continue. I am sure of it. Logic says they will come. If I were a gangster looking for millions of dollars I would come here. The police will have led them here. That was my plan. The phone call had meaning. Everything does. Everything must.

My thoughts drift through the synapses in my skull, sodium floats out, potassium floats in, and there is balance. The wind picks up again, this time carrying voices. I look beneath me, but I see nobody. Come out come out you insipid gangsters. I want to scream into the air, to roar into the night. This is my jungle. You are my prey. I will penetrate your skull with my fish knife.

The wind stops, and then I hear the fence shake. An impact of boots and the wet earth follows. The whispers return. My heart beats, my blood pulses. Neural fibres from my sympathetic nervous system innervate my organs. I am alive. But I must be silent. I watch, I listen. I hear footsteps along the pebbled path. There, near the statue. I see them. Two of them. One big. One small. The rain comes down. My hair is wet, my fingers are numb, my member engorged.

They walk toward the statue; one of them stops in the shadows. Steam rises up. I'm too far away to smell anything, but I know he's urinating. I need to urinate too. I need to urinate desperately. Why did I only think of that now? Because I live in the moment now. Everything else is forgotten. Time is a fragile surface and history is unsteady and dangerous. The present is safe. Forward is the only direction to travel.

Reflection is for the weak. God's soldiers must be strong, have a mental vigour and courage unsurpassed.

The two men tread toward the bush where we found the dead body. I am above them now, but they don't know it. The tall one in the hat moves slowly, stalking the darkness. They start talking. I listen to their accents. They are Irish. They are here for the case. I smile. I want to jump down and meet them, introduce myself, say hello, show them my knife, the blade, their blood. But that would be senseless. Gangsters have guns.

I listen. Mexicans are after the case too, they say. Irish and Mexicans? An odd mix, but nothing surprises me, everything has purpose. We are all linked. My leg suddenly cramps up, and I slip. A small branch breaks, but doesn't fall.

Beneath me they stop talking. They remove their guns and they search.

My heart beats. I pull my jacket over my mouth and cover up my breath.

I pull out my fish knife, ready to jump down and slash. But they leave. The night air surrounds me, as I stand, perched high in my jungle. I slide my knife back in my pocket. And I laugh. I laugh loudly. I laugh viciously. The beast within stirs and I withdraw my penis from out of my fly and I urinate out of the tree and onto the ground below me. This is an almost a perfect evening. I must find someone to kill. I must give a gift to God.

Chapter 22

Gavin

... We dreamed of escape, Kathleen. Just you and I in some foreign country, together, away from everyone. But I couldn't leave Bernie. I'm sorry. And then that night, you lit the fire, because I couldn't get it started, and we fell asleep together, wrapped in each other's embrace, your hair waking me up, tickling me as if there were small insects in the room. But there weren't, it was just you and me ...

The NYPD pigs left before darkness, with the dead body, a homeless man, but without the suitcase. The suitcase wasn't there when the cops arrived on the scene, Gavin knew that much, but he was thorough in his work and had to be sure: 'leave nothing untraced and nothing behind,' his father would say, 'you got to be thorough, boy'. His father had said the same thing the first time Gavin came with him on the job, on Gavin's thirteenth birthday. 'This is part of the business and all that, Gavin. Do you want to do it, lad? You want to pull the trigger?' Gavin remembered the look on the young man's face: sweating and begging, bloody and beaten. The young man had seen them dump a van that his father's crew had used for a robbery, he was an innocent. Here, hold the gun, lad. Gavin had shaken his head, and turned to run, but his father's mate Victor had grabbed him and held his head toward them. 'You have to watch, Gavin. You gonna have to do it yourself someday.' And then his father held out his gun and blew the man's head off. That was the first time Gavin went to work

with his father. All the other kids went with their pa to work too, but nothing like this; there was no blood, no brains or bits of skull splattered against a tree in the Irish woods. That was the first time Gavin had met his father, his real father, riddled with a sickness in his O'Dougherty blue eyes, and Gavin didn't eat or sleep or speak to his father for days. Bernie had that same sickness, his father's sickness. And Gavin found himself losing sleep again now. He had no appetite, and all he wanted was Guinness, cigarettes, his wife and daughter, and the suitcase. And his brother back. He wanted his little brother by his side, to take him home to Dublin, away from the business that had moved to America over a decade ago now.

There was yellow tape was tied around the Gramercy Park fence like a Christmas decoration for criminals. There had been a dead body inside, the dead body they had been searching for. Davey O'Shannahan, a member of their crew, and the cops had stuffed him into a body bag and slid him onto a van and closed the doors.

Gavin and Bernie arrived in the morning, just before 11am, but a moment too late. Cops hovered around the dead man like flies around a dead dog left outside to rot. Onlookers spied through the gates: voyeurs delighting in bleak curiosities and images that they captured with their iPhones. You could hang a man in Times Square and most people would watch on and let it happen, and take pictures with their phone or camera to show their friends how interesting their holiday had been. Gavin wanted a holiday, away from all this shit. Away from America, and the stain he had left behind.

A tall ash tree that still clung to a handful of dead leaves, was their only cover from the rain and the streetlights that surrounded the park. It was the best place to navigate the fence unseen, beneath the black branches of the giant ash. Gavin looked up to the sky. Beyond the black canopy, the night sky was grey, the clouds sucking up

all the light that spewed out of every window in every building. Such an energy-sucking city. He pulled out his smokes and grunted: only three remained, that wouldn't be enough to last the night let alone last the suitcase race; which is what it had become. He rifled through his leather jacket and found the lighter.

Click.

Click

Bernie stared at him, annoyed by the noise. 'Quiet.'

Click.

Gavin sucked hard on the white cylinder of death, the tip of his cigarette glowed, and he gave Bernie a challenging glare. Over the years he had learnt that Bernie reacted more to action rather than words, and a stern glance with a furrowed brow and nasty squint silenced Bernie quicker than dialogue ever would have.

His gaunt face inflated, releasing that first glorious intake of tobacco. The smoke didn't last long in the air. Tonight was cold. A strong wind came rushing off the Hudson River, and not even the tapestry of buildings on Manhattan's east coast could dampen the iciness that clung to the air like mucus in a sneeze. It was a New York wind: that was the only way he thought to describe it to Kathleen. He'd spent his entire childhood in Dublin, but the New York wind was colder, more vicious, as if it carried a knife that sliced through your clothes and made your bones shiver. And with the addition of a light rain, it stung the face too. New York needed a heavy snow; snow would cover it all up, all of its filth, so the people could be left to contemplate life in solitude or with friends and family. A heavy snow was what Gavin needed, and a few days in the pub might put Bernie's killings to rest too, dampen his spirit a little.

He breathed deeply on the last of the silent cigarette, and then flicked the butt into a puddle on the ground and heard the brief fizz as the embers submerged.

Another one down. He saw each cigarette as a small step forward toward the suitcase. The suitcase was the finish line and the cigarettes kept him going. 'Let's check it out.'

Gavin gripped the cold iron and leapt nimbly up and over the fence and into the park. The fence shook as Bernie landed next to him. Gavin got his bearings; by the looks of it, the dead man had been on the other side of the park.

There resided a stillness within the park, a stillness that came with death and despair, as if the days spent waiting in anguish was like floating near a black hole where time was lost to nothingness. That anguish was in knowing that the suitcase couldn't be found, that he could never return home to his family, that the black hole would take him away from his world forever: a mark of a dark and violent relativity.

Gavin knew that the cops didn't find the suitcase, and although unlikely, there was a chance that Davey stashed it somewhere before passing out and dying. A gust of wind broke through the trees, and hit them harder when they stepped onto the pebbled path. The Christmas tree was still there, in the middle of the park, all lit up and swaying from side to side like a cobra dancing to the mechanical hum of New York City. As they rounded the Christmas tree he saw a statue looking down on him: the placard read 'Edwin Booth 1833 to 1893'.

Bernie stopped.

Gavin ignored him and kept walking. He didn't understand the fascination people had with statues: each of them being a landmark for tourists to come and wonder and photograph. To Gavin it was a piece of rock that reminded him he wasn't in Ireland. He couldn't remember a single name or detail about any statue in Dublin and nor did he care to discover their names or their details, and yet whenever someone

travelled to a foreign place they dwelt on the beauty of a statue: it made no sense to Gavin.

He turned around and Bernie was behind him, hidden behind Edwin Booth. Steam rose up from the base of the statue, and with it a pungent smell on the wind that caught his nose. Bernie ducked out of Edwin Booth's shadow and walked towards the trees.

They hurried away from Edwin Booth and off the path, out from the middle of the park where pedestrian lights spewed light from the other side of the gates into Gramercy Park. Stepping back onto the soil, Gavin ducked under and around branches while Bernie pushed them aside, until they found the spot where Davey had been. Gavin looked at Bernie and nodded his head, and he knew what to do. They searched through the bushes, and upon the frosted earth looking for loose soil, but they found nothing.

'It's not here,' said Bernie.

'No, it's not here,' he replied. 'Definitely not here. But we still need to look.'

'You're making no sense, brother.'

'Then we wait.'

'We wait?'

Gavin nodded his head.

'We wait for who, brother? The Mexicans? The police? For death? God's not ready to meet me yet.'

'Do you remember when we were watching the cops, Bernie?'

Bernie nodded his head. 'Of course.'

'Do you remember who they were questioning?'

'The bum.'

‘Right, Bernie. We wait outside these gates here for the bum. Homeless hang out in the same places, he’ll be back this way for sure, if not here then trying to get warm in an alley or something close by. We might just go for a walk around and then come back again tomorrow morning. He’ll be back then, begging outside these gates; he’ll be back for sure.’

‘He will be sleeping somewhere close.’

‘Agreed and – ’ Gavin paused. ‘You hear that, Bernie?’ he whispered. He took his gun out from his jeans, and then motioned for them to move, but Bernie was already moving, hatchet in hand. They hugged the fence, ducking in and out of tree trunks and bushes, walking soundlessly on the soft garden bed and grass as often as they could, weapons at the ready. They paused looking through the fence, looking around the park of shadows, but they saw nothing, nobody. Just the night and the night’s ghosts in the darkness.

‘I need fuckin sleep and a fuckin beer and a fuckin smoke. We need a find this fuckin case, Bernie. Let’s have a decent look around the buildings, we might find the bum. Then we’ll get a pint a Guinness and some smokes.’

They walked back to the giant ash tree and climbed over the fence. Gavin shook the dirt from his gloves and his jacket and then reached into his pocket for the cigarettes and lighter. The lighter worked first go. ‘Maybe my luck’s changing,’ he said to himself, and then drew deeply on his cigarette. They walked along the concrete footpath down East 21st Street, away from Lexington Avenue; Gavin walked through the puddles, savouring his cigarette. They crossed the road and Gavin glanced left. Even at this hour a concierge sat on the other side of the road beneath the canvas green entrance portico to 60 Gramercy Park North. It was as if the dead body had startled the guests forcing a late night concierge to cure their fears, but a sleeping

conciierge wasn't the answer. Up ahead, scaffolding clawed to the side of a sleeping apartment complex. That could be the place, Gavin thought. Across the street an old red couch had been left outside a church thrift shop. Rubbish bags to his right had been pilfered, and rubbish was spilling into the gutters. They kept going until, only a few steps ahead, they were beneath the scaffolding that sounded like an old wooden door being pulled from side to side. Gavin stood there for a second; taking the last deep breath of the cigarette before dropping it to the wet floor and squishing his boot into the glowing filter. It was wet under here; the windswept rain touched the base of his jacket. Bernie had already begun searching closer to the building, against the walls. 'Not in here,' said Gavin. 'Too wet.'

Gavin looked about in the darkness and he couldn't help but look back at the spilt rubbish outside the thrift shop. He stepped out from beneath the cover, and looked up. The thrift shop was attached to a church, gothic lancet like judging eyes looking out on the world. He crossed the road, and stopped at the black waist-high fence that stood in front of the church. From the small distance, he couldn't see beneath the shadowed church entrance, but a large door to the church was almost flush against the stone wall leaving no shelter to sleep. He turned right, heading back toward Gramercy Park, toward the building adjacent to the church. A narrow alleyway separated the buildings. Gavin jumped the fence and walked down the alley. Rain spilled down the side of the walls, creating a small current of water that led back down to the street. He turned around, Bernie was right behind him.

Gavin shook his head. 'It's too fuckin cold tonight. And too wet.'

'He's here, brother. I can feel it. The church. God's will.'

Gavin snuffed. 'I'm getting a Guinness.' Beneath the shadow of their father's hat, Bernie squinted. They walked back out onto East 21st street. It was dark, no street

lights in this section: it seemed like the perfect place, and outside a church too where donations might come sooner than otherwise for a homeless man, but there wasn't enough cover. It was too wet. Gavin reached into his pocket for his last smoke as they passed the thrift store, passed the red couch and the rubbish, and then he saw it: a shoe nudging out from the cover of the neighbouring building of the church. He tapped Bernie, and nodded his head. They moved forward deftly, silently, until they stopped at the large gothic door. The rain didn't quite find its way here. Gavin smiled. There was a homeless man, asleep or dead, it was difficult to tell, until Gavin squatted down and heard the faint rattling breath. He got out his phone and used the light to see the face of the homeless man, who was still asleep, beneath a cover of musty woollen blankets. He turned back to Bernie and nodded his head. His face was familiar. Gavin stood up and walked toward the alleyway that separated the Church and thrift shop. Bernie soon followed, with the homeless man in his grasp, hand over his mouth so he couldn't yell or scream for help. Gavin jumped the small fence and Bernie stopped, handing the homeless man over the fence to Gavin. The homeless man managed a small yell. Bernie stepped over the fence and wrapped a hand around the homeless man's neck, squeezing and moving him toward the darkness, until Gavin stopped.

'Enough, Bernie, go search through his things,' said Gavin. Bernie released the bum, and left them.

'We're here for the suitcase,' began Gavin. 'Do you know what I'm talking about?'

The homeless man shook his head. 'Please, I don't know nothing.'

Gavin took a deep breath. 'My brother will be back soon, and well, my brother isn't quite as nice as me, is all. So I'll ask you again. What might have happened to the suitcase? What did you think you might have told the cops?'

Before the homeless man could answer Bernie came back with a handbag. He handed it to Gavin.

Gavin took out his phone and scanned the blue light over the bag. It was Gucci, and expensive. He handed Bernie his phone to hold and searched the bag with two hands. There was a purse, no money just credit cards, he pulled one out. 'Lisa Rooney. Do you know Lisa Rooney?' he asked the bum.

'Nah, I don't know no Lisa, man.' Bernie pulled out the hunting knife. 'Fuck man.' The homeless man started to whimper.

'Tell me again, but not so loud, softer, whisper if you need to.' Gavin needed another smoke.

'I just found it. In the park. Some drunk girl left it there. Please man, don't kill me.'

'I'm not going to kill you.' Gavin continued to look through her purse, until he found a keycard for the Gramercy Park Hotel. He handed the card to Bernie and then stuffed the purse in his leather jacket. 'What might have happened? I know you were talking to the pigs, but you obviously didn't tell them shite, eh. You just wanted a meal and a nice hot shower. Is that fuckin right?'

'Please man –'

'Say man again?'

'Please man, I-' Bernie put away the knife and pulled out the hatchet. 'No, no,' the homeless man started waving both filthy gloved hands from side to side.

'Please. I'm sorry. I'll tell you. I'll tell you everything I know.'

'Okay,' said Gavin. 'It's okay, we won't hurt you, I give you my word. Tell me what happened.'

'Okay. There was a group of them.'

‘How many do you think?’

‘Five I think, four maybe. I-’

‘It’s okay, slower, softer.’

‘Five. Definitely five. I was outside the park, and one of them gave me some money for food. And, and then I heard a bitch scream a bit later, man. Fuck. Okay. Okay. You can do this Bryan.’

‘Look here,’ Gavin grabbed him softly by the chin, ‘you can do it, Bryan.’

Bryan nodded his head. ‘And then one guy left, and then five minutes later they all left and one guy was carrying a guitar in one hand a bag in the other man.’

‘Was it a suitcase?’

‘I don’t know, man-’ Bernie took off one of his hands. And the homeless man screamed.

‘Jesus, Bernie, you fuckin idiot,’

A few seconds later there were footsteps out on East 21st Street.

‘It was going nowhere. Your questioning was complete,’ said Bernie ‘we got a keycard and name and –’

Gunshots swooped down the alley. Gavin and Bernie jumped to the ground. Gavin pulled out his gun, and took aim. ‘Fuckin Spics,’ said Gavin.

More bullets cracked through the New York wind. Gavin heard them ricochet off the brick walls, and glass shattered behind him. He groaned: a bullet sank into his leg. He touched his thigh, pushing down with his finger trying to find the bullet but it was too deep. He winced and then fired three shots towards the shadows. ‘Let’s get the fuck out of here, Bernie.’

Bernie stood up tall, his old Smith and Wesson pistol in his hand, firing down the alley out onto 21st Street. Gavin hobbled down the alleyway and Bernie followed,

running methodically backwards and firing his old, loud gun. It was a dead-end with no way out except for a broken window, which led into the church. Bernie lifted Gavin up and shoved him inside. Gavin fell hands first, dropping his gun. He heard a door close at the far end of the church. He picked it up his pistol and looked forward into the darkness, ready to take aim, but there was no one there. Even inside the church, Gavin could hear sirens in the distance. Bernie followed through the window, firing his gun behind him.

Inside the church, candles lined the walls, shimmering faint light across the vast room. Gavin looked to the floor and saw small shiny footprints that led to a door on the east wall. 'This way.' They opened the door, and found themselves on Park Avenue. Gunshots rattled behind them. They stepped out onto Park Avenue. Up ahead was the Green subway line on 23rd Street, heading uptown. 'This way.' Gavin hobbled forward. Sirens bellowed down the streets. They hit the stairs. Bullets went over their heads as they headed down to the subway. The sirens were on top of them now, and Gavin saw a hint of red light from above as he looked back to see if the Mexicans were following.

There was a train. A welcome sight, and just as they stepped on they heard 'Beware of the closing doors please' echo through the subway terminal.

The carriage was empty but for a young man sleeping with his Yankees hat nearly falling from his head. Gavin took a seat on the orange plastic and cringed.

'I will kill those spics,' said Bernie.

'Tomorrow we go down to the Gramercy Park Hotel.'

'Tomorrow we're due to see the boss.'

'The Devil, he can fuckin wait.'

'And the homeless man? He needs to die.'

‘You cut off his fucking hand, Bernie. He probably won’t even last the night.’

Gavin took off his leather jacket and put it on the seat next to him. He tore off his sleeve and then tied it around his leg in an attempt to stop the bleeding.

Bernie looked down at the hole in Gavin’s jeans and the hole in his leg. ‘We should be dead. God saved us tonight, brother.’ Gavin said nothing. Bernie continued: ‘There was the church and then a train was waiting there, waiting for us. It was a miracle.’

‘There’s no fuckin god, Bernie. Only us fuckin humans, and we’re all fuckin devils.’

‘You’re wrong.’

‘My only God is Guinness.’ He tied the last knot and put on his jacket. He felt inside his pocket. The purse was gone. ‘Bernie. You still got the keycard and all that? Tell me you got the fuckin card.’

Bernie reached into his jacket and pulled it out. ‘Like I said, brother: a miracle.’

Gavin shook his head. ‘It’ll be a fuckin miracle if we get this case and go home. Go home to my wife and kid.’ He wasn’t happy with the knot, so he undid it.

Bernie stood up and walked away.

‘The spics were always looking for it, Bernie. Was just a matter of time.’

Gavin dug his hand into the wound, to see if he could feel the bullet. Blood spilled out. ‘Bernie. I need you.’

Bernie stopped and stood with his back to Gavin, staring out of the moving train. ‘I have to get this bullet out. Must be pressed up against my artery or something.’

Bernie turned around, and crouched down, inspecting his leg. ‘You need to put pressure on it. You need bandages and antiseptic.’

They got off the train, Gavin leant on Bernie as they walked slowly up the stairs and onto the street. They crossed the road to the Duane Reed pharmacy. Gavin sat outside, putting pressure on his leg. The ground was cold and damp. The wind brought the rain onto his face. He needed a smoke. An old woman walked past and threw him a dollar. He smiled, wondering what she was doing out at this time of the night. Bernie eventually came out of the Pharmacy with bandages, antiseptic and metal tweezers. And a bag full of candy.

‘What took you so long?’

Bernie said nothing. The plastic bag was bloody. ‘Can you make it to Molly’s?’ asked Bernie. ‘We need to go.’

Gavin shook his head. ‘Just give me my fuckin smokes, then.’

Bernie took the new red and white packet out of his pocket, broke it open and handed them to Gavin. Gavin took out a smoke with his mouth, holding the packet with one hand and his wound with the other. He started searching around in his pocket for his gold lighter as the cigarette hung from his mouth. Bernie bent over and, with a cheap plastic lighter, lit Gavin’s smoke. Gavin sucked deep, and put the smokes in his jacket pocket. Bernie pulled the tweezers out from the bag. He threw away the bloody rag, releasing pressure from the wound. Blood pulsed out. He tore the hole in Gavin’s jeans open a little more. Gavin could feel the cold rain against his wound. Bernie took out some candy and put it in his mouth. ‘I need light, brother.’ Gavin turned on the light on his phone, directing the blue light to the wound on his leg. Bernie prodded around with the tweezers and then sent them two inches into his leg. He wriggled them about, trying to catch the bullet. A few seconds later he pulled them out with the

bullet, and chucked them on the wet concrete beside him. A wave of blood pulsed out. Bernie reached for the antiseptic, and poured it over the bloody hole. Bernie handed Gavin a thick, square gauze. 'Hold this down,' he said. Bernie took the bandage, tearing open the plastic covering. He then raised Gavin's knee in the air, and started wrapping the bandage tightly around his upper thigh. He clipped on the elastic and metal teeth securing the bandage. And when it was done Gavin passed out; the cigarette fell from his mouth and into a puddle beside him.

Chapter 23

Amy

The police drove them back to the American Dream Hostel. The Ambulance officers had sat Amy down in the back of the ambulance, out of the rain, and had cleaned her bloody face and given her a few stitches. She had told them that she didn't want to go to the hospital, that she didn't have insurance, and that she wanted to go back to her Hostel.

The two NYPD officers had questioned them, of course. A small crowd of people came out of Pete's Tavern and huddled beneath the canvas portico, watching, whispering. The lights flashed green behind them, red and blue in front of them.

Jane did most of the talking: 'We were mugged,' she said to the police officers. 'They took Amy's bag.' That wasn't a lie. They had taken Amy's bag, but they didn't get much. Amy kept her money and keys to the American Dream Hostel in her jeans pocket. Both Amy and Jane gave a description of the two Mexicans, but all Amy could recollect was that they had dark hair and weren't tall. Jane said pretty much the same thing.

They didn't mention the suitcase or the names Ricky or Alberto.

Amy reached into her pocket and removed the keys. Jane stood behind her. The police watched them enter the front door of The American Dream Hostel, and as Amy closed the door, she watched them drive away.

They walked up the stairs and past reception. Amy wanted to go onto the computers in the foyer and write to her sister, but she couldn't – she didn't know what to tell her – so she walked down the hall to her room.

Jane followed her closely, and it reminded Amy of her older sister Stacey: the way that Stacey used to look after her when she was a child, whenever she got hurt or got sick. Stacey would make her honey and lemon tea, and read books to her until she fell asleep. Amy would wake up in the middle of the night, and her sister would be gone, and all she would leave behind was a few strands of her dark brown hair and her smell. Amy could smell her sister now, a sweet florally smell of shampoo and damp hair.

Amy opened the door, turned on the light and walked over to her bed and turned on the heater. She almost tripped over her father's guitar that was still in the middle of the room where David had left it. She sat on the end of her bed and Jane closed the door behind them.

'I'm going to stay here tonight with you, okay?' said Jane.

Amy smiled. 'It's okay. I'll be fine.'

'Don't be silly.'

She watched Jane walk to the corner of the room and take off her jacket and her gloves and her beanie and watched her delicately place them on the table. She headed over to the small kitchen bench and sink. 'Do you want a water?'

'Okay.'

Jane poured her a glass of water and handed it to her and then went to the window and looked outside. 'I knew the suitcase was bad news. I knew we should've just told the police in the first place,' said Jane.

'We still can, you know.'

‘No we can’t. Not yet. I have to call Lisa first. If we told them something tonight then we would have had to tell them everything, and they would go to the Gramercy Park Hotel and Lisa might have gotten herself into trouble. No, I think we did the right thing tonight. We’ll tell them tomorrow. Are you happy with that?’

Amy looked over at the bags of new clothes, her new guitar. ‘Yeah, that’s fine. You’re right I guess.’ Amy touched the small bandage on her head and felt the stitches underneath and she thought about the serving agent. She had left him there in her father’s shitty old guitar store. He was breathing steadily when she left. And when she arrived in Sydney, she had called her sister and told her everything. Stacey was crying, fearing the worst, even though Amy had called an ambulance. She wanted a fresh, trouble-free start. She wanted to forget the past, and she realized couldn’t go back to Adelaide. She didn’t want to end up like her father. She wanted a second chance. Amy looked over at Jane. ‘Can you tell them. Without me?’

Jane looked at her and smiled. ‘If that’s what you want.’

Amy nodded. ‘They might send me home.’

‘We all have to face what’s at home one day.’

Jane walked over to her bag and pulled out her phone and walked back to the window. Amy watched her, slowly sipping her water. She didn’t want to face that guitar shop and the assault charge. But more than that, she didn’t want to face the truths she would one day have to tell her sister. That she killed her mother and her father. And that she could never get them back.

Jane pressed buttons on her Blackberry and held the phone up to her ear, but Amy didn’t want to listen to what Jane said; she wanted to hear Nick Drake. She got up and put her water on the bedside table and then she walked over to her new guitar, undid the case, and removed it. She smiled. She picked at the strings delicately with

her long nails. Quietly. She dreamed she was on a stage – just her and her guitar and a mic – and she closed her eyes and played for them, sang for them. She dreamed what it would be like to be famous, to meet other famous musicians. She wanted to meet Nick Drake, Elliott Smith, Jeff Buckley, but she couldn't: they were all dead.

Jane hung up the phone, placed it in her bag and walked over and sat next to Amy on the bed. Amy stopped playing and pushed her hair behind her ears. 'Lisa's not answering the phone in our suite at the Gramercy,' said Jane. 'So I just left her a message. Her mobile was in her bag when she lost it, so I can't contact her directly either, but if she gets back to the Gramercy at least she'll know where I am tonight.'

'That's good.' She looked at Jane. Jane looked outside. The rain had softened. It ran down the window. 'I'm sure she's okay.'

'I hope so.' Jane stood up from the bed and turned to Amy. 'Do you mind if I leave you for a few minutes?'

'That's fine. Where're you going?'

'I need a hot shower.'

'Yeah that's cool.' Amy watched her grab the towel that hung over the only chair in the room and walk out the door.

Amy was in New York City. Bloodied and beaten. But it didn't matter. She had her guitar. Nothing else mattered. Not Adelaide. Not her father or her mother or her sister. Not the guitar store. Not money. Not guilt. Nothing. Nothing but music.

Chapter 24

Gavin

... We went back there all the time, together, and you taught me how to be a man. How to be a lover. Those were the best nights of my life, laying down in bed talking about everything, talking about nothing, playing games and laughing. Just you and I together, away from the world. Away from your father and my father. I wish I was there with you now. You and me and Abbey ...

It wasn't as hard for them to get inside as they had thought, and when Gavin hobbled inside The Gramercy Park Hotel he was briefly taken aback by the visual stimulus. It lasted only a few seconds, and then he realized why he was here and what he had to do. Bernie followed him, passing the concierge desk in the corner, heading toward the elevator. Gavin gave the man a smile and a wink, and the man smiled back. Nothing out of the ordinary. Just a couple of gangsters heading upstairs to question a girl.

To question a girl: that was it; that was all.

No violence this time. Gavin had said as much to Bernie. 'No more killing, that's done, that's past you now. I have a daughter at home. She'd be thirteen or something now, so no killing. Do you hear me? Do you fuckin promise me, Bernie?' Bernie had never promised. A tilt of the head was it, barely enough to call a nod. That didn't matter. Gavin was there. He was in control.

He inserted the card into the slot above all the numbered buttons in the elevator and pressed the button for level 20. Gavin looked up to Bernie, standing tall in his father's old hat. It didn't look right. He was supposed to have killed their father, not turned into him.

Bernie was calm, but beneath his hat his eyes revealed an excitement. Gavin wanted to pull out his smokes, but he couldn't. Suspicions needed to be kept low. If anyone entered the elevator and he was smoking that would be it. He was a pro, not an idiot. This was to be a quick gathering of information, maybe even just a matter of picking up the suitcase, and then they would leave. No bloodshed, suitcase in hand, everything would be fine. Then he and Bernie would drop it off to the Devil, and then they would go home to Ireland, as a family, for Christmas, now only three days away.

The elevator came to a stop. Gavin took out the card and walked down the corridor. He was nervous. For years he had worked for the Devil, with his father, representing the O'Dougherty name, earning money that he sent to an account in Ireland for Kathleen and Abbey. Now all that work was finally coming to an end. His thirteenth birthday was the beginning: he could still see the young man's face thrown across the Irish woods. Now this was the end. His stomach felt small, and his chest tightened. He took a deep breath and walked forward. This was the end of the killings, the end of life working for the mob. He was almost free.

There were only two doors on this level. The first door was the one they were after. Gavin stopped outside the door before entering the key card. He turned to his younger brother. 'Remember Bernie, no bloodshed. We'll tie her up and we'll leave her there and then we'll phone up the hotel tomorrow to say she's tied up. Once the Devil has the suitcase. While I'm at the fuckin airport about to catch a plane home to Kathleen and Abbey.'

Bernie nodded his head.

Gavin took a deep breath and then he put the keycard into the door. He could just hear dance music coming from inside.

The red light turned green. He heard a beep. He opened the door.

Gavin stepped inside; Bernie followed, closing the door behind him. The dance music was louder inside. There was a jacket hanging up that was still wet. He walked across the dark wooden floors through to the red and blue kingdom. Shopping bags had been thrown onto the dining room table. The room turned right. There was a fireplace and two sofas at the end of the room. The fire roared. They walked through the double doors into the lounge room and then turned right, following the music. Gavin could see steam in the air as he limped softly toward another decadent red sofa, and a small table and chairs. He poked his head around the corner. They were in the bedroom now. The music pumped out of the speakers in the corner of the room. Steam came out of an open door. Gavin could hear singing: a woman's voice, out of tune, perhaps drunk. They stepped inside, and Gavin heard the water turn off. He paused. The young lady walked into the room, naked and drying her hair with a towel over her head. She kept singing, Princes' *Diamond and Pearls*, while drying her hair. Gavin looked at Bernie and nodded.

They sat her on the couch, naked, until Gavin threw her a dressing gown to cover herself. 'Look, we're not here to hurt you,' he said. 'We just want a few answers okay, Lisa.'

Lisa nodded her head. Her hair was wet and tangled. They had left her music on, but they had turned it down so they could talk softly and still hear each other.

'Do you know why we're here?'' asked Gavin.

Lisa shook her head, looking down at the bloody bandage on Gavin's leg. She met Gavin in the eyes and said: 'To give back my fucking handbag? That's how you got in here right? With my keycard. That's how you know my name? I don't know why you're here. To rape me? Then let's get this over with, so I can have another shower and go to sleep.' She hiccupped. Her breath smelt of red wine. Gavin took a deep breath. Bernie sat calmly.

'No, Lisa, we're not here to rape you or hurt you,' continued Gavin, 'we need some answers and we need you to tell the truth and all that, okay?' She nodded. 'We're here because you took something that didn't belong to you. An old suitcase filled with six million dollars of unmarked American bills.' She looked up at Bernie, blue eyes staring back beneath the shadow of his father's hat. She looked down at Gavin's leg again. 'Have you seen it?'

She shook her head. Bernie hit her. Gavin stood up. 'What the fuck did I say, Bernie?' Bernie didn't answer; he just sat back down on the chair. Lisa brought her fingers up to her lip, and looked down at the blood on her hands. 'Sorry about that, love. Will you tell the truth now?'

She nodded her head. 'We don't have it anymore. John, I mean Andrew Green has it?'

'Who's Andrew Green, love?' Gavin's mobile rang. 'Just a second.' He looked down to the LCD screen: Henry was calling. 'Hold on love, I have to take this.' He looked to Bernie. 'Remember what I said?' Bernie nodded his head. Gavin walked out into the room by the fire.

'Henry,' he said into the phone.

'I need you to meet me at the church where you had the shooting, do you hear?'

‘Yeah, I hear you Henry. Is it about the money then? Do you have it?’

‘No, we still don’t have it.’

‘The girl doesn’t have it either.’

‘Well, tell Bernie to stay there with her until you get back. We need to talk, you hear. We need to talk.’

‘Okay, Henry. We’ll talk then.’ Gavin hung up the phone and walked back into the bedroom. Gavin and Lisa still sat on the couch; neither of them had moved. ‘I have to go, Bernie. Henry says we need to ask her some more questions when I get back, I’ll be gone for five minutes.’ He looked at Lisa and smiled, then he looked coldly at his younger brother. ‘You remember what I said then, Bernie? Don’t you break your fuckin promise. A promise is a man’s bond. It’s everything. A man’s nothing without his bond.’

Bernie nodded his head, but beneath the shadow of his hat, his eyes still stared at Lisa.

Gavin fixed the silencer to the end of his gun and limped out.

The church was darker than he remembered, like a courtyard lit by kerosene lamps, except the smell was waxy and fragrant. In front of him there could have been thirty or forty long benches, too hard to tell in the darkness. He saw Henry toward the front, sitting alone, as if waiting for a priest or brother to give a sermon at 3am. The window in the corner, where Gavin and Bernie had jumped through, was still broken, but it had been taped up to keep out the cold and the rain. Gavin looked about. He couldn’t see any other doors or any other way out other than the way he had come in. Everything was lost in the darkness, candlelight teasing shadows through the room. Gavin walked down the middle, between the two sections of benches. Henry didn’t

move as Gavin's steps echoed through the church, but rather stared straight ahead, waiting. Silence was nothing out of the ordinary for Silent Henry, but this must be important: Henry was never one to waste time. Gavin sat down next to him. 'You said you wanted to see me, Henry?'

Henry didn't answer; he just stared straight ahead.

'Henry?' Gavin turned to face him. There was a hole in Henry's forehead, a line of blood still oozed down his face, between his eyes. There was a noise behind him: the shuffling of clothes. Gavin felt a gun press against the back of his head.

Chapter 25

Andrew

Andrew looked at the menu until his shaking finger stopped under the words *Chef's Specials*. He threw the menu back on his bed and dialled room service.

His wife had always loved Parmigianas. Every Tuesday night in Adelaide they'd walk down to Finn McCool's: he would order a chicken schnitzel with Diane sauce, and she'd order an eggplant parmigiana. It wasn't far to walk; just down Edward Street, up Beulah and then down Osmond Terrace beneath the plane trees until they hit Finn's on the corner. She used to push in the front door before him, smiling as they walked inside. She danced toward her preferred booth beneath the Irish paraphernalia, darting around the corner to scope out the seat that would be hers. And if there were none available then she'd sit on the table closest to the booth, and when someone left, she'd pick up their plates mid-meal and step over to the empty booth, push away all the dirty plates with her elbow and sit down. Andrew would take a few seconds to realize what was going on, and he'd sit at the table with a knife and fork in hand, hunched over an empty table. She would laugh, she always used to laugh. Until the end. Then there was just the fire.

He lay back on the bed in his blue and red hotel room and rolled over, facing the empty space next to him where she should have been. He had taken more and more Xanax to silence his inner screaming, and for minutes he dozed in and out of sleep. He closed his eyes and imagined that she was there with him, he reached out his shaking hands to touch her. He breathed in and could almost smell her. Then he

opened his eyes, saw the emptiness beside him and got off the bed and headed over to his travel suitcase. He had packed some of her clothes, the ones that still smelt of her perfume. There it was, a scarf, threaded gold and grey and navy. He picked it up, and something sharp cut his hand: a piece of glass from a broken bottle. Then the smell hit him: his *Issey Miyake* cologne. It was strong. He ignored the blood on his finger and quickly pulled her scarf up to his nose. But it was gone. The smell was gone. Her smell was gone. She was gone. All he could smell was himself: *Issey Miyake* cologne. He hugged the scarf and he cried. And he stood there like that for a few minutes, with no sound but the wind and rain pressing up against the glass, trying to break in. He needed more Xanax. He walked over to the bedside table, where a new brown and white bottle of drugs waited to be opened, and grabbed it. He took a few steps over to the alcohol cupboard and reached for the gin, his wife's favourite drink, like the bottle that he had found by the fire at home, next to her chair, when she had slept and never woken up.

He broke open the lid and poured the little rectangular white pills into his hand, and threw them into his mouth. He took the bottle of gin and took a swig, feeling the pills make their way down his oesophagus. Another handful. Another swig. He sat back down on the bed. The little brown bottle was empty. The gin fell from his hand, and onto the floor. He lay back on the bed, on his side, and grabbed the scarf, holding it in his arms. He began to doze, dreaming of her smile. And the fire. That's where she had gone. That's where he wanted to go.

Knock. Knock.

The flames shimmered.

Knock. Knock.

The flames grew hot.

Knock. Knock.

He opened his eyes, he got up from the bed, scarf tucked beneath his arm, and he walked like a drunkard to the door and opened it.

‘Hello, Andrew.’

His eyelids grew heavy. The hazy image undulated, a blurry figure in the darkness of the corridor. ‘I’m not hungry anymore.’

‘I’m not here to feed you. I’m here to kill you.’

Chapter 26

Jane

It was 3am and Jane hadn't slept. It wasn't the cheap bed and the flat pillow or the heater that rattled, it was the thought of home. She slipped out of the bed unnoticed and put on her thermals. Amy was in a deep peaceful sleep, the faint street light through the window shimmering across her face. Jane wanted to say goodbye to her, to go over to her and lightly brush her hair from her face – to tell her that everything would work out for her here in the Big Apple, but she couldn't. She wanted to forget New York City and all its temptations. Forget New York City forever. She pulled on her jeans, and then put on her jumper and jacket. She walked over to the window and looked outside at the empty street. This was a quiet spot in Manhattan, but you could still hear the screeching of brakes even at this hour. There was a single skeletal tree outside on the footpath with empty waving branches. There was nobody to be seen outside. Not David Gregson, not Ricky, no one.

She walked over to the table and put on her beanie and scarf, and then she slunk out of Amy's room, down the corridor, past the empty reception and the buzzing computers, down the blue steps and then out the door and onto 28th street. She walked over to 3rd Avenue without seeing a single soul, and after only a few minutes of standing on the street and shivering, she hailed a cab.

It only took two minutes to reach the Gramercy Park Hotel, and when she got to the hotel she was worried they wouldn't let her inside. But she was wrong: there were still a few late nighters, maybe two or three, leaving the Rose Bar where the

music had been turned down to a melody-less hum. The late night cleaners were waiting in the lobby with their vacuum cleaners and mop buckets waiting to be let inside so they could clean and go home and sleep. Jane was feeling sleepy now. She went up to the concierge desk and showed her ID to the concierge who gave her a card to her suite and a sleepy smile. She walked over to the elevator, which stopped once, and a young girl walked in, pushing a fragrant trolley with food. Jane wanted to ask her when they stopped serving, but she knew the answer: never. The room service lady got off on level five and then the elevator kept going up and up until it finally stopped. She walked down the corridor and she could hear the faint sound of dance music coming from the door to their penthouse: Lisa must still be up. As she approached the door and went to put the key-card in the slot, she noticed the door was already open.

Jane stepped inside, and as she turned and closed the door behind her she felt a sticky wetness on her hands. She looked down: it was blood. She started breathing deeply, quickly. She didn't want to step inside. She didn't want to see what Ricky had done to her cousin, to Lisa. She looked down at her hands again and then she stepped forward into the dining room. The table was covered with shopping bags. She turned right and as she walked through the doors she saw a red hand print on the blue wall. She could feel her heart.

Thump, thump.

The fire blazed at the end of the room. She stopped. The music was louder. It was dance music, the bass was heavy and fast like her heart.

She surveyed the room from a distance, not knowing if she could go any further. The walls were no longer just blue. As fire danced light across the dimly lit room, it danced across the walls and the floor and the furniture: streaks of red and

purple and black. There were handprints and finger marks and other marks: as if a large paintbrush had been used to smear the blood against the wall.

Thump. Thump.

Her chest beat.

The music beat.

She couldn't take it anymore, but she had to know. She had to see. She walked towards the fire. There was something on one of the sofas. She stepped over torn, bloody clothes, and as she got closer to the fire the rug became wet and sticky. She heard the spongy noise as she walked closer to what was left of her cousin.

Thump. Thump.

There was a hand on the couch.

Thump. Thump.

She looked away. She closed her eyes.

The music beat.

Then she opened them. And that's when she saw Lisa, poor Lisa. Her cousin watched her from the mantle piece, above the fire. But her gaze was fixed, unmoving. There was no body. Just a head.

Thump. Thump.

The music beat.

Jane turned and ran out of the room.

Thump. Thump.

She passed the bags and the table.

Thump. Thump.

She pulled down on the handle.

Thump. Thump.

And then the door closed behind her.

She was in the corridor. But for the beating of her heart and the beating of the drums, she was alone. Her back slid against the wall until her bum hit the ground and her knees touched her chest. She thought about her father. She remembered running toward where the car had spat him out. She remembered watching his blood leak into the water, his life running down the gutter of a filthy London street.

She grabbed her knees and then buried her head into her chest and legs and she cried. She cried for a long time. She hadn't cried for her father or for anyone but herself in almost ten years.

Chapter 27

Gavin

... You and me forever, that's what you said. And I can't break that promise, Kathleen. I'm coming home to you. I'm finally coming home to you and Abbey. See you next Christmas.

Lots of love, Gavin.

There was a stillness in the church that would have stirred even God himself. Gavin stood above two dead bodies. Two dead Mexicans. All it took was one swift move, and two swift shots and they were down: dead. They were amateurs and Gavin was old school. Gavin's father had taught him a lot over the last few decades, and there were many rules to being a gangster; one of the most basic was: never press your gun against another man's body unless you mean to shoot him. The idea of a gun is the benefit of proximity, his father had said, if you're too close, boy, then the gun might as well be a fucking French tickler. The Mexican should have known that, but he didn't and they had both paid for it.

After the Mexicans died beneath God's gaze, Gavin stood in the church for a long while, staring up in the dark where small candles sent a lustre through the room that Bernie would have said was God's presence. It wasn't God, unless God was calling one of the dead Mexicans whose phone had fallen out of his pocket and continue to vibrate and glow. Gavin knew there was no God. But whatever it was in

the dark stillness, it frightened him. And when he closed his eyes he was back in the cave with his daughter, with the engine and the light storming down the tunnel, and death; death was always there, waiting in the darkness. He felt a pain shoot up his leg. The wound had begun to bleed again. He wondered why he was here in New York City, why he didn't just leave, fly home to Ireland, take Kathleen and Abbey to a cottage in the hills where nobody could find them and he could live the rest of his life in peace with his family. He knew that was a dream, a dream that would never come true until the Devil had the suitcase. The alternative was to kill the Devil. Gavin had thought about that, but he'd also thought about the ramifications. The Devil was just one wheel of the car that drove the drugs through South America, to Mexico, to America, and all the way to Europe. There were bigger players than the Devil, and killing him would have its consequences - Gavin would be hunted for life: that was not freedom. He was not an animal in a game reserve where life quickly turned to death with a loud crack and a smoking gun.

Gavin knelt down and picked up the Mexican's gun that had been pressed against his neck, and shoved it into his jeans. He gripped his own gun tightly, and, with his finger on the trigger, he limped out of the church, away from Henry, and away from the mobile phone that continued to vibrate on the tiled floor. He pushed the door open and felt the cold immediately. He looked across the street, then left, then right. Nobody. He stuffed the gun into his jeans, next to the other, and he felt the warmth of the nozzle against his leg. He hobbled down the steps, into the night's arms, down 21st street and limped his way toward the Gramercy Park Hotel.

As he walked he reached for his phone. He'd been there for over half an hour standing in the church trying to find answers in the ceiling that was hidden in darkness. He was there for too long, lost in Death's cave. Bernie was not a patient

man. He went to reach for his smokes, but then looked at his phone. He dialled Bernie.

No answer.

He pulled out his lighter and his smokes and, as he drew inward on the cigarette, he felt the relief rush through him. The rain had stopped and there was a cold dryness to the wind. He walked up 21st Street, watching the smoke leave his lungs only to get lost under the haze of the morning air. The light poles were dim, hunched over like his crippled great grandfather, but the black posts had a rustic charm to them which reminded him of Ireland. He would be home soon. With his wife and daughter.

He felt the phone in his pocket vibrate.

‘Where are you? You said you’d be five minutes, brother.’

‘Henry’s dead. It was a fuckin setup. I’ll be there soon. We need to get some answers from the girl and fast. I don’t think the spics will quit just yet.’

‘I’m not there.’

Gavin stopped. ‘Where the fuck are you, then?’ He took one last drag of his cigarette and flung it on the 21st Street sidewalk. The trees in Gramercy Park shook in the cold wind.

‘I’m in room 516.’

‘516? Why the fuck are you there?’

‘That’s where the girl said the case would be.’

‘Is she with you now? Do you have the case then?’

There was a long silence. Gavin started walking. ‘Bernie? Are you listening? The girl then? Do you have her then?’

‘I don’t have the case. I’ll leave the door to 516 open.’

'The girl?'

The line went dead.

Chapter 28

Dr. Gregson

Andrew Green is pathetic. I didn't even have to tie his hands as I questioned him about his morals: he's drugged to the eyeballs. Numb. A breath away from death. I could've taken him to the heavens. Taken him to God. But now he has destined himself to hell. In an hour or so he will be there. His sweat has become constant, his eyes heavier. He's sitting on the dining room table, muttering, unable to answer any questions I have for him about what's her name? Oh right, Stephanie, my dead wife. I'm glad that promiscuous woman is dead. She was the catalyst for my religious journey. Some people speak in tongues. I speak in blood. God understands me. God commands me.

There is a knocking at the door that breaks my musing. I look at Andrew. I see the menu on the bed next to the empty bottle of Xanax. 'Room Service?' I ask him. He doesn't answer. I slap him. 'Room service. Did you order room service?' His eyelids open a sliver and he nods and mumbles.

I move away from the dining room table and walk across the red rug to the front door. I open the door. All I see is a shadow and the butt of a gun.

I'm tied up, sitting on a dining room chair next to Andrew Green. There's a man standing over me, covered from head to toe in blood. Is this God I wonder? Has he come to help me, to teach me?

'Finally, you're awake.'

God couldn't be Irish, that wouldn't make sense. I look into those blue eyes, the shadow of his hat slicing them in half. It is a great hat. And I know I've seen him before, in the park last night.

His eyes sparkle more than any eyes I've seen. He too is a soldier for God. An angel sent down to judge the greed of man. I smile at him and I nod my head. We are brothers, him and I. Sons of God.

'I'm Bernie, the last face you'll ever see, so remember me, remember my name,' he says, touching the brim of his hat, softly, sacredly.

I want to shake his hand, but my hands are tied. 'Hello, Bernie. I'm David.' He is going to kill me. But I'm not ready to die yet: I have so much work left to do. I can feel the fish knife tucked underneath my sleeve. If only I can get it out.

'Your friend, what did you do to him?' He slaps Andrew in the face. Andrew doesn't react.

'He's not much of a talker, he never really has been,' I say.

Bernie looks at me. He licks his lips; his tongue brushes against his black beard, cleaning the blood from his whiskers like some giant panther after a kill, except Bernie's still hungry. 'Perhaps I should send him to God.'

I nod my head. 'Sounds like a great idea.' I smile.

He picks up a hatchet, turns, and in one swift motion removes one of Andrew's hands. Andrew's eyes open, but he doesn't flinch. He doesn't cry out in pain. He just stares blankly into a deep nothingness. 'I'm going to see her soon,' I think he mutters.

'The suitcase. Where is it?' Bernie looks at me, as if Andrew's fate is mine too.

Of course, the suitcase, gangsters after their drug money. But Bernie is no gangster; he is a wolf in sheep's clothing. A devilish sheep I must admit, but a sheep nonetheless, pretending to be like the rest of them, pretending to fit in like me, only his inner animal is much more fierce, less tame than mine, more mature, you could say. He is a man once more: not drowned by society's needs and wants. His instincts have returned. He has become at one with himself and the nature of the earth and the simplicities of life and death. I could learn much from Bernie.

I watch him as he takes off Andrew's other hand. Andrew's eyes are flooded with tears. He vomits, almost lackadaisically, and it spills out from his mouth and he falls onto the red carpet. This annoys Bernie, so he decides to take the axe to Andrew's throat. Blood sprays out onto Bernie, but not as much as it should have. He was hoping for it to spray everywhere, to cover himself and the ceiling, but Andrew's heart has already stopped. He is already dead.

I look up at Bernie, and beneath the hat I see a child; a damaged child enlightened at a late age and not able to deal with something he should have learned earlier. But now he is dealing with it. Dealing with it in his own animalistic way. I respect that. Respect his outwardness. Being insular is ever consuming. Look at Andrew Green. Look at what became of him. He is dead now because of the pain that festered inside of him, with no way to release it or contain it. I could not give him to God, and that pains me slightly. But still I smile as I watch Bernie take Andrew apart with the hatchet, piece by piece. This is fantastic. I wriggle my hands that are still bound. I feel the fish knife slide down gradually. I need a pen and paper: I want to take notes. There is a knocking on the door.

'That would be room service,' I say casually.

It takes Bernie five long steps to reach the door. He comes back in with a tray of food and a hysterical room service lady.

I watch Bernie hit the girl and strip her naked and throw her on the bed. She has rather nice breasts. I wriggle my hands. Oh how I wish I could put my fish knife into those round slopes of joy. Slowly. Surely. I breathe deeply in anticipation. I feel blood rush to my member.

Bernie reaches for a hunting knife that sits bloody on the table. Then he heads back over to the bed. He stands above her, adjusts his hat, and then cuts out her tongue. Amazing. My heart is beating with joy. Then he grabs one of her hands, swings down with the hatchet and cuts it off. She wants to cry out but she can't find her tongue. I laugh. There is blood everywhere. Red blood running down her face, pulsing out of her arm. I want to finish her off myself. With my fish knife. I've almost got it. I can smell the food and my stomach rumbles.

'Don't let the food get cold,' I say to him.

He looks over at me strangely, and moves his hat up a little so I can see his eyes more. He doesn't say anything to me, he just goes over to the plate, lifts off the sterling silver cover and then starts eating.

'Is it good?' I ask him.

He looks at me, but says nothing. He eats it with bloody hands, stuffing it into mouth like an animal. Then I hear his phone ring.

'Are you going to answer that?' I ask. I wriggle my hands again, but the fish knife is stuck.

The phone rings out. Bernie goes over to the table and picks up the phone. With bloody hands he presses buttons on the phone and takes it to his ear. 'Where are you? You said you'd be five minutes, brother.' He pauses. 'I'm not there. I'm in room

516.’ Another pause. He is standing; still looking over at the food. ‘That’s where the girl said the case would be.’ A longer pause this time. Bernie seems uncomfortable. He looks over at his hatchet. ‘I don’t have the case. I’ll leave the door to 516 open.’ Then he puts the phone down and goes back over to his food, an eggplant Parmigiana. ‘My brother.’

‘I’m looking forward to meeting him.’

‘You talk a lot.’

‘Yes, I was a shrink.’

He looks at me. ‘A shrink? Then you need to speak to my brother. He needs help.’

‘Why?’

‘He’s delusional. He lives in a fantasy world. He’s got to remember what happened, who he is. And then he must find God.’

‘Explain it to me?’

He removes what looks like a folded up piece of paper from his pocket, he slides the room service trolley in front of me and puts down one piece of handwritten paper. ‘Read this.’

I read it. ‘A letter to a wife and daughter. What is its significance?’

‘They’re not real.’

‘Who? The letter writer, Gavin, or the people in the letter?’

‘My brother, Gavin, he’s real, but he has no wife and daughter. They’re dead. My father killed them a decade ago. He knows this, but he won’t see it.’

‘Are you sure they’re dead? His wife and child?’

‘Yes, my father told me recently, in Montana. He told me everything. His enemy’s daughter and my brother. She was pregnant. My father didn’t condone it. He

killed them both, the mother and the child inside her, my brother's wife and child. And he sent my brother and the business to New York to work for his cousin the Devil. My father had all Gavin's letters to his wife and child, all addressed to a cottage in Ireland that belongs to my father. This letter, written just last year, it was my favourite.'

'Forget the letters, Bernie. Your brother needs to kill your father.'

'Too late, I've already done this. I chopped him to bits.'

'Your brother needs to find God.'

'He can't. He won't.'

'Why do you need to fix him?'

'He is all I have and love. He is half of me. His letter. This letter. It represents love. His love for them, his love for family,' Bernie looks down at the letter.

'And the other half of you?'

He touches the brim of the hat. 'My father and his hat. He is hate. And – .' He picks up the letter, and angrily puts it back in his pocket. 'Enough about me. How do I fix Gavin? Tell me and I might let you live.'

I'm not interested in his brother, Gavin. I want to know more about Bernie. I look at his hat, which has been placed so precisely on his head. He looks at me. And then he reaches for the hatchet. 'You can't fix him. You must kill him, send him to the heavens with his wife and child.'

He throws the trolley to the side. 'Your turn then.'

'My turn?'

He nods his head. 'Are you ready to meet God?' He hand tightens around the small wooden handle of the hatchet. He adjusts his hat.

'Aren't you going to ask me where the suitcase is?'

He stops. The hatchet hangs limply from his hand. Then the hand tightens.

‘Where’s the suitcase?’

‘It’s at the American Dream Hostel on 24th Street,’ I say. ‘It’s in room number 3. A girl by the name of Amy Winston has it.’

He looks down, stares at me.

‘I can take you to it,’ I say.

Then Bernie hits me with the butt of the hatchet. I can taste blood in my mouth. He grabs my tied hands. He raises the hatchet high in the air.

‘Stop.’

Bernie turns around. ‘Gavin.’

Gavin is looking at the girl on the bed, and at the remains of Andrew Green. He seems to be crying, but I can’t quite tell. ‘All this shite had better be worth something, Bernie,’ he says.

Bernie nods. ‘The suitcase. We have the answer, brother.’ Bernie turns to me. ‘Tell him.’ I give him what he wants.

‘It’s at the American Dream Hostel on 24th Street,’ I say. ‘It’s in room number 3. A girl by the name of Amy Winston has it.’

Gavin takes a deep breath and puts his hands beneath his black leather jacket and pulls something out of his jeans. It’s a gun. ‘Father taught me one thing that I could never do. Do you remember what it was, Bernie?’

Gavin is crying. And he is shaking, looking at his younger brother, looking at me. I look up at Bernie, who’s standing next to me with the hatchet in his hand.

‘Do you remember, Bernie? Huh? Tell me? What did he used to say?’ His eyes are fixed on me.

‘He said that once we’ve got what we need, then give them a quick death. Execution style,’ replies Bernie.

His hand is shaking, the gun is shaking. I wriggle my hands again. The fish knife comes down into my hands. I start slicing through the rope hurriedly. I’m panicking. Faster. Faster. I look up at Gavin. Faster. Faster.

‘That’s right Bernie, a quick death. Execution style. But I could never do it could I?’ Gavin holds the gun tight and pulls the trigger.

Chapter 29

Amy

Amy rolled over and found the other side of the bed cold. Jane was gone, and had been gone for sometime. The only thing that remained was the smell of her shampoo: sweet cherry blossoms. Amy sat up and felt the weight in her head. She touched the small bandage and could feel the stitches beneath. It reminded her of a time in her childhood: she was only nine years old, running through the dying vineyards that didn't tolerate minimal water and the forty degree summer days; her sister running behind her in a scary rubber mask, chasing her through the tall grass between lines upon lines of dead vineyards. Their boxer dog, Bruno, was behind her barking – he always barked when Stacey wore the mask. Amy ran faster and faster through the grass, until she started down the hill and lost control of her legs. She fell, hitting her head hard. And when she got up, Stacey was there in the mask, Bruno was beside her barking. Amy wasn't crying but there was lots of blood. She remembered Stacey taking off the mask and throwing it to the side, kneeling down and asking her if she was okay. I'll get dad, she had said. Amy had waited only a few minutes until her dad had arrived. He'd picked her up, and ran her towards the house and put her in the car, driving straight to the doctor. Dad held one hand and Stacey held the other, while the doctor stitched her up. She managed to get through it, crying only once. And when they got home, they found Bruno had chewed up the mask and was running about, through the grass, shaking his head trying to destroy whatever life was left in it. Her mum had made her favourite cake, which she ate greedily, and then her dad had

sat her down next to the window where a cool evening breeze had started to blow into the old cottage. And he went and got his guitar, his old Martin D28 that Amy's mother had bought him when he was only twenty one. He rested it on his knee and he started to play Neil Young's *Heart of Gold*. She always remembered that day, so long along, and yet it felt like just last week. After the grapes had died, that's when her father had thought that opening up a guitar shop in Adelaide was a good idea to make money. He was wrong. That's when the fights started.

Amy hopped out of bed and felt the cool touch of New York. She put on her clothes, even her jacket and shoes and scarf. The heater was a sorry excuse for warmth, nothing like the fireplace back home in the Barossa. She looked at the tweed case that held her father's guitar, but didn't have the courage to play it. Instead, she went over to her new guitar, opened the case and removed the Gibson J45. She started strumming an E minor then a C, then a D and then she stopped. It didn't feel right playing that song, *Heart of Gold*, on this guitar. It was her father's favourite song. It was their memory on his guitar. Not some shiny new Gibson that she had bought with drug money. This was not how she wanted to start her music career, with a guitar with no history, with no character, no marks or dents, dents that her father had made during years of playing, playing in front of her mother when her parents were young lovers without care, playing in front of Amy as a child. She walked over to the end of the room and leaned her new guitar against the wall. Her father's guitar was where Adam or David or whatever the hell his name was had left it. The only memory of her parents, sitting lonely in the middle of the room, discarded. She took a few steps toward it and then stopped. She looked out the window and saw it, saw it for the first time in her life: snow. She smiled, and reached down to open up the guitar case, but something stopped her.

The door pushed open. There was a bloody man in the doorway, limping slowly into the room. He held both hands up, palms out, a symbolism of peace.

‘Are you Amy, Amy Winston?’

Amy nodded her head.

‘Look, girl, I’m not here to hurt you. I just want the suitcase and I’ll be on my way.’

Amy looked down and saw the guns at his hip, where his leather jacket had come back. ‘I don’t have the suitcase. Andrew had it. Please.’

He stepped further into the room, past the guitar that reflected light into the bloody bandage on his leg. ‘Don’t worry; I’m not here to hurt you. I just want the case. You have to have it. Please tell me you have it.’

Amy shook her head. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t know where it is.’ The man reached into his jacket. ‘Please,’ she said. Then he pulled out a gold lighter and cigarette. He flicked the lighter once, twice.

‘Stupid fuckin thing.’ Three times. Four.

Behind the man, a shadow crept into the room, silently picking up the new guitar that leaned against the wall. Amy looked behind the man. The man went to turn, but it was too late. The guitar came crashing down over his head. A gun fell to the floor.

‘Jane.’ Amy ran over and hugged her.

Jane picked up the gun off the floor. ‘Come on we’ve got to go. They killed Lisa. She’s dead.’ Jane pulled Amy by the arm and they headed for the door, but Amy turned.

‘No wait. My dad’s guitar.’ Before Jane could argue, Amy stepped over the Irishman who dripped blood onto the blue carpet trying to get up. She grabbed her father’s guitar and then, together, they ran.

They ran down the corridor and past the foyer; down the stairs and out the front door; out onto 24th Street and into the snow. Jane stopped, looking left and then right as the small snowflakes dusted them. Then she pointed left. ‘This way.’ Amy heard the click of a door. She turned. The Irishman stood by the door to the American Dream Hostel.

‘Please, just give me the money,’ he said. ‘I don’t want to hurt you.’

Amy and Jane turned away from him, running past the post office, heading down toward 3rd Avenue. The Irishman wasn’t fast, but Amy wasn’t fast either with her guitar case, and she turned around watching him hobble through the snow like a monster in a mask chasing after her. Jane slipped when they rounded the corner onto Lexington Avenue, but Amy put down her guitar and picked her up. Jane picked up the gun.

Snow was falling in the darkness.

When they stood up there were three men before them. ‘Hello, chica. I knew we’d find you.’

Lisa pointed the gun at Ricky.

He held up his hands, ‘Whoa, whoa.’

‘Run Amy, run.’ Jane fired the gun. Ricky held his stomach.

Amy pushed through them with her guitar case, taking them off guard. She crossed the street and heard a gunshot and a bullet ricochet off the building in front of her, she felt another one hit the guitar case. She continued down Lexington Avenue almost slipping on the snow, her father’s guitar clutched tightly in her right hand.

Amy heard another gunshot, she turned around and saw Jane fall back onto the snow.

The snow fell. The dim darkness of New York City cried in the distance.

At least a dozen more gunshots echoed through the twilight air.

Amy made it to 23rd Street, but she slipped on the icy road. Her guitar slid forward.

More gunshots.

She crawled after her father's guitar on her hands and knees, feeling the ice beneath her fingernails.

The gunshots echoed through the streets.

She picked up the case and got to her feet. She looked back. The Irishman was on her side of the road now, limping and firing his gun at the Mexicans. Another one of them was down.

She continued down 3rd Avenue.

A cab passed her.

She kept running.

The snow kept falling.

Three more cars passed her, unaware of what was going on. There were people trying to kill her. She ran past a Citibank, past a 7-11 and that's when she saw it, the green handrails leading underground to the subway.

Silence, but for the crashing of her feet.

No guns.

No yelling.

Just the snow.

She almost slipped as the weight of the guitar case pulled her down the steps, almost falling out of her frozen hand. She made it to the bottom, slid her guitar case beneath the ticketed entrance, and then leapt over. The subway was empty but for a pile of boxes and old clothes and a shopping trolley in the corner. Not a single person in sight.

She heard footsteps. And then she saw the Irishman crouch beneath the ticketed entrance, and he hobbled towards her. He was bloodier than she remembered. 'Please love, just hand me the guitar case and I'll be on my way. I don't want to hurt you.'

Amy stood shivering. The lights above her flickered. She heard a rumbling in the distance, and a shuffling of boxes closer by. The Irishman moved toward her.

'Please,' he said. 'I'm not here to hurt you, love.' Amy walked back, closer to the tracks. He shuffled toward her. 'I have a daughter at home who's about your age. I just want to get home. Please, just hand me the case.' He held out his hands. The rumble grew louder. The lights trembled.

A shadow moved in the corner, amongst the boxes, behind the Irishman.

'Please, girl. The case.' He pointed down at the guitar case. Amy couldn't see the hundred-dollar bill coming out, jammed into the case, half in, half out; all she saw were blue eyes, on a gaunt, bloody face.

She heard the screeching of metal in the distance and felt the rumble beneath her feet. The shadow in the distance came closer. She moved back toward the tracks.

'Please, girl.' He held out his hands.

The shadow came forward.

The train grew louder.

She looked down the tunnel and saw the light coming toward her. The Irishman lunged after the case.

Amy stepped back.

The shadow came closer.

The rumble was deeper, the screeching of the train louder.

‘Please, I just want to go home to my family.’

The lights flickered. And the shadow came forward pushing the Irishman down onto the tracks. The Irishman looked left, down the tunnel. Light came towards him. There was a rat by his feet. He went to get up, but his bloody leg gave way and he fell back down against the tracks.

He screamed.

The city slept.

And then he was gone.

The train eventually stopped. Amy turned to the shadow. She was crying. ‘Are you okay, miss?’ the homeless man asked her.

Amy nodded her head. She looked him up and down, and then hugged him. He winced and moved away holding a bloody, bandaged stump where he should have had a hand. ‘Thank you,’ she said. She hopped on the train. The doors closed behind her.

She sat down on the orange plastic chairs, and rested her guitar case down by her feet. She buried her face in her hands, and sat there for a few minutes. The train moved forward. She looked up, around the train, just in case Ricky or any of the Mexicans had survived. There were three other people on board, a sleepy old couple with travel cases, and a man in a hat who was writing in a book. She took a deep

breath. She was safe. She looked down at the guitar, her father's guitar, she saw the money, and then she cried.

Chapter 30

Dr. Gregson

I have never had pieces of human brain on my face before, but somehow it feels familiar, it feels right. I throw away the string, which was once tied around my wrists, and slide the fish knife into my pocket. Like a herbal facemask, I rub the fatty, bloody brain tissue into my skin and I lie back on the bed next to the naked hotel employee who has bled out and died. I take a deep breath. I close my eyes and I smile. This is perfect. I am elated. I wonder how I survived, why Bernie didn't kill me, why Gavin killed Bernie, his own brother. But then it hits me: God had planned this, it was his work; he did this so I can continue mine. My work. My work for God.

I stroke the cold, stiff breasts of society's whore, a servant for the rich, until my hand finds her nipple, and I twist the brown teat delicately between my thumb and finger. After a few seconds I lose interest, so I get up from the bed and I look down at the bloody mess on the floor, at the limbs, the head: Andrew Green is dead. Suicide on Xanax. Pathetic. Coward. Now his spirit cries for mercy in the fiery depths of hell. I look left. Bernie: dead, lying on his back, a hole in his head, his blue eyes cold and staring into the heavens. He died for God, for me, so that I can go on. He will reside in the heavens, in the arms of God. I will see him there one day, but not yet. My work is all that matters: Amy the Liar Winston, Lisa the Drunk and Jane the Weak. They must die, all of them. I will slide my knife into them, one by one. Bit by bit. First it will be Amy. I nod my head, satisfied with my decision, my motivation. This will be

fun. My hand slips into my pocket and I graze the blade just a little until I feel it catch my skin. The sound excites me. I am ready.

I step over the bits of Andrew Green, over the suitcase that reeks of cheap cologne, until my hand finds the front door. I open it, looking left and right down the red corridor. There is nobody in sight so I take a few steps to my room, insert the key card and enter. I head straight into the bathroom. I strip. I run the cold tap of the shower, and out of the corner of my eye I see my reflection. My face is smeared red, bits of brain melted into my hair. I pull a piece of the brain out of my curls and I eat it. My jaws grow hot and wells with saliva. I spit it out: man was not made to eat man. I suddenly feel ashamed so I walk forward into the shower, beneath the cold water, and then I turn on the heat until my skin goes pink and hot. So hot that I feel disoriented and I lose myself. I have a job to do. The American Dream Hostel and Amy the Liar Winston await.

I grab the soap and I clean myself up. The blood, the brains, my fearful sweat: gone. I think about the blood, the look in Bernie's eyes, I see the hatchet and the knife slicing through flesh, I see the whore on the bed, blood leaching from her tongueless mouth, and without realizing it, I am masturbating. I turn off the taps, I find a clean towel and dry myself. I dress quickly, choosing an appropriate shirt and tie. A red tie. Red to celebrate today's deaths, and my saviour, Gavin. I put on my jacket and coat and put the fish knife in my pocket.

I tighten the red silk tie, and I feel my windpipe constrict: this is good and keeps me alive. Now to visit the Liar. I smile and look around this colourful hell; the living hell of decadent man; one of New York's cancers. I see my short story on the floor and for some reason this inspires me to get some reading done on the way to the hostel, so I pick up the Derek Chambers file, yesterday's New York Times, my

notebook and pen, and a pocket edition of the bible. Perhaps I'll take the subway downtown and then back up so I can get a decent portion of reading done before I kill The Liar? Satisfied, I head out of my room and into the corridor. As I pass room 516, I stop. The door is ajar. The scent of cologne and blood catches my nose. This makes me hungry. I swallow and push the door open until it hits the wall and shudders back toward me. And as the saliva glides down my oesophagus I see it: across the room, amongst the decorations of flesh that occupy the floor. The hat. Bernie's hat. Bernie's hate. I smile and enter Andrew's room. I step over the suitcase, I kick Andrew's head to the side, and I bend down and pick up the hat and carefully place it on my head. The knife in my pocket cries out to me, I want to take a finger from Andrew, from Bernie, from the vacuous whore on the bed, but these are not my gifts to God. My necklace can wait a little longer.

I never did like the London Tube. In fact, I hated it. It was always crowded full to the brim with people, slaves of consumerism, earning money to spend on meaningless things. I step onto the almost-empty New York City subway train, on the way to see Amy The Liar Winston, and I sift through the Derek Chambers file, until I find something inspirational.

The train stops. I hide the Derek Chambers file between the pages of the New York Times, and put on my hat. The doors open, and, as I am about to stand and exit the train, I see a guitar case, then a girl.

Amy the Liar Winston.

I smile and stroke the fish knife in my pocket. She finds a seat, looking around the train, but she doesn't notice me; she puts her guitar between her legs, and buries her head in her hands. I pull my hat down a little, my Godly hat, so she can't see my

eyes. She can't see me yet. The game has only just begun. I reach into my breast pocket for my notebook and pen. I open to a blank page and I carefully begin writing in the notebook, looking down at the pages from the Derek Chambers file for inspiration. And Derek Chambers is just that: an inspiration to man, a prophet, a genius. He had many little birds, many he called his own and then gave to God. I will follow his voice, God's voice, and I will have the chance to de-feather my own little birds. I will clip their wings little by little with my fish knife, collecting their fingers for God's necklace of virtue.

I look over at the only other people on the train: a sleepy couple with their travel bags, most likely about to fly off away from the New York winter, away from the snow, to spend what money they've slaved to earn. It makes no sense. Holidays are like a void of logic: three weeks away to spend, to eat, to consume. And what do you have? Photos and memories to brag to friends about where you've been, decorating your house with all the things you've bought. I feel the fish knife in my pocket, and then I quickly begin to write in my notebook before my instincts take over. I have work to do. I must focus. I must make a list. A proper list. I must find greater, more righteous reasons to kill. I must observe. I must be selective. This is God's work.

I scribble into my notebook, the name of the next little bird I shall give to God: Amy the Liar Winston. I feel the fish knife in my pocket.

I close my notebook, I smile, and, ever so slightly, I tilt the brim of my hat.