

# **My Killer Secret**

## **Volume 1: Major work**

**Phillipa Deanne Martin**

**Presented for the degree of the Doctor of Philosophy**

**School of Humanities**

**Department of English and Creative Writing**

**University of Adelaide**

**March 2019**

## Table of contents

Table of contents.....	1
Abstract.....	2
Declaration.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	4
The novel .....	5
Chapter 1.....	5
Chapter 2.....	9
Chapter 3.....	13
Chapter 4.....	21
Chapter 5.....	32
Chapter 6.....	44
Chapter 7.....	55
Chapter 8.....	67
Chapter 9.....	76
Chapter 10.....	86
Chapter 11.....	90
Chapter 12.....	99
Chapter 13.....	113
Chapter 14.....	120
Chapter 15.....	124
Chapter 16.....	132
Chapter 17.....	138
Chapter 18.....	145
Chapter 19.....	152
Chapter 20.....	157
Chapter 21.....	164
Chapter 22.....	170
Chapter 23.....	175
Chapter 24.....	178
Chapter 25.....	191

## **Abstract**

My creative work, ‘My Killer Secret’, is a crime fiction novel that aims to use characteristics more often associated with the ‘literary’ to create a hybrid novel that contributes to both literary fiction and crime fiction. It also signifies a major departure from my established writing style as a popular crime fiction novelist of a police (FBI) procedural series.

‘My Killer Secret’ is about a reformed child killer with a new identity, who’s caught in the middle of a child abduction case. It explores use of multiple voices through multiple narrators, as well as other literary features and experimentation as outlined in Volume 1 of this thesis, ‘Literary Crime Fiction — An Analysis’.

## **Declaration**

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

I give permission for the digital version of my exegesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

I have received approval for an embargo on my creative artefact for 24 months and do not give consent for digital dissemination, loan or photocopying of my creative work for this period when deposited in the University Library.

I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

SIGNED

15 July 2019  
DATE

## **Acknowledgements**

I'd like to thank my supervisors, Brian Castro and Joy McEntee, for their support and insightful, life-saving feedback. This PhD has been an amazing experience, filled with highs and lows, which have given me a new understanding of my approach to writing. Thanks especially to Brian for his extraordinary talent and his belief in me. Brian's and Joy's support and guidance in the world of academia has been invaluable.

I'd also like to thank the School of Creative Writing and the broader University of Adelaide for its backing of the arts and writers; and the Australian Government for its Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship, which has allowed so many writers to immerse themselves in the dream — including me. I'd also like to thank the many postgraduates I've met along this journey, always such a welcoming and fun tribe.

Last but not least, I'd like to thank my family for their wonderful support and encouragement.

# The novel

## Chapter 1

I make you weak at the worst of all times.  
I keep you safe, I keep you fine.  
I make your hands sweat, and your heart grow cold,  
I visit the weak, but seldom the bold.

Let me tell you a story. A story about David Story. Actually, it's *the* story. The David Story, story. (You see what I did there, right?) You may wonder why it's my story to tell. Well, you see I *own* David Story. His ass is mine. Has been for a long time now. No escaping it.

Everyone thinks David is a nice guy. No fucking way. He's no fucking nice guy. Do you mind the swearing? You see, I'm old, real old. I reckon I'm old enough to swear as much as I like. But, I understand not everyone likes the f-bomb littering their prose, corrupting their lives. David...he never swears. Well, not any more. He used to f-bomb in anger and when shooting the breeze. He used it as an adjective, a verb, a noun, hell, if he'd been able to use it as an adverb he would have. (But fuckly doesn't cut it, does it?) Everything was *fucking*. But that wasn't really David Story. Or maybe it was, and this man, the man you see before you, is simply a construct of his own imagination. An actor, who's played the part of David Story for ten years. That's how long it's been ... since he's been David Story. Did I tell you that already? That David Story isn't even his real name? No, sir-ree. Even that's a lie. Which is hilarious given he's lying next to that sweet new wife of his, and she thinks she's Susan Story. But it's all a sham. One big f-ing lie. Sorry. You know what, I'm going to kow-tow to your modern sensibility ... ain't nothing wrong with a bit of self-censorship. Know what I beeping mean? Maybe you've come up against me before, or someone like me. But chances are you live in *your* world, not mine. And my world's pretty beeped up. Just the way I like it; up in stars or asterisks. But that don't mean I have to pollute your world with the f-bomb every few seconds. And don't worry, my role is small in this story. Crucial, but small.

\*\*\*

Yes, back to David Story. The David Story story. Man, that never gets old. I wonder if the 'powers that be' made that name up as a private joke, assuming one day someone would tell David's story. Expose him.

Anyways...it's true. David's life is a lie. But maybe you shouldn't listen to me, shouldn't trust me. I'm not really the trustworthy type. I'd sell my mother — if I had one — to get what I want. I don't give a beep about anyone or anything.

But enough about me. Guess you want to see David Story. Meet him? He's asleep now, but don't let that stop you. It sure as hell don't stop me. But first, before I show you the main man, *my* main man, let me ask you something. Do you believe in forgiveness? Complete and utter forgiveness? What would you forgive? A lie? Stealing? Swearing (ha, ha)? Adultery? Rape? Murder? I've got the progression right, yes? Murder's worse than lying...so everyone tells me at least. Anyways, I want you to think on that. On forgiveness. What could you forgive?

I've ranted long enough. I know you're waiting to meet David. Can't wait to meet him, right?

You see him?

That's him, there. Lying in bed. Asleep. Tossing and turning like a mother-beeper. Like a hornet's up his ass. Not a peaceful night's sleep is it? But maybe you 'get what you get and you don't get upset'. I heard one of my clients say that to their kid once. But she screwed up the context. Yup, she was a piece of work, all right. Giving her little girl a piece of stale bread because she'd spent all her money on smack and having the balls to say: 'You get what you get and you don't get upset'. I showed her all right. She got what she got from me. That kind of shit even upsets me. And that's saying something. Like, *really* saying something.

But I'm getting distracted...again.

Before I show you David, I need to give you one more thing. A clue of sorts, because you're undoubtedly wondering who I am.

I'm handsome. That's all I'm saying. The handsomest mother-beeper you ever did see.

\*\*\*

Thump, thump. Thump, thump, thump, thump. Water. Drowning. Struggling. Need to breathe. Gasp.

David's eyes adjusted to the darkness. Shadows, silhouettes came into shape. Ominous. Thump, thump...heartbeat slowing. The dream, water...the water was sweat. Sluicing the length of his body. He squeezed his eyes shut. He didn't know which darkness was worse — the darkness behind his eyes or the real darkness. *Tik, tik, tik*. The ceiling fan's rhythmic sound hit him, the last stacking of the reality puzzle.

He opened his eyes and turned. Another silhouette, this time the naked form of Susan. His wife...wife. He still couldn't get used to that. He was married. A husband. What a fool he'd been.

Susan was motionless. Mercifully asleep. One day she'd be awake during one of his episodes. What then? Excuses. Lies. His essence. What's another lie? Did she ever notice the sweat-stained sheets? Wake to his night-time muttering and observe him? Maybe. Probably. But it wasn't in her nature to be quiet on something like this. She wasn't the one with secrets. It was all him, screwing up everyone's life. Just like he'd always done.

He placed his hand on her shoulder, let his touch run down to her waist, settled on her hips. She was so petite. So delicate. Soft curves, milky white skin, auburn hair. And her smile...he sighed. He didn't deserve her. Didn't deserve happiness. A normal life wasn't something within his grasp. Or at least shouldn't be. That's the crux of it. *Shouldn't* be. He wasn't entitled to happiness. What made him think, even fleetingly, that he could be normal? That he deserved anything but bleak suffering; pain, searing through his muscles, nerve-endings, mind. The guilt settled like it always did, in the void between his heart and his gut, flipping and roiling backwards and forwards. Killing him. Maybe. But that would be okay by him. He was ready to die. He'd had his foot in the grave since he was twelve but someone or something kept dragging him back to the world, reconnecting him. Now there were his kids. Damaged. Dark. Dangerous. Maybe they needed him. Maybe some good could come from it all.

He rolled onto his back. Closed his eyes but then opened them again, afraid. Afraid of the darkness behind his lids, the darkness inside. He counted breaths...in, out...and pushed the past aside.

Eyelids heavy. He blinked darkness. Blood, so much blood. An eye — open, unseeing. A butterfly.

A shot of oxygen and he awoke in the millisecond between death and dreams.

Blood.

Fear.

'What's up?' Susan curled around him, her voice slurred by sleep's hold.

'Nothing.' The lie tumbled effortlessly from his mouth. But he could never tell her the truth. How would he form the words? Say it out aloud? Re-live it all? No. Never. Anything but that. He'd spent so long in that moment, that horrible moment.

He rolled over, pretending he was half-asleep.

Darkness. He didn't like the darkness. But how could he tell his wife that he was afraid of the dark? A twenty-eight-year-old man who could barely close his eyes for fear of



the menace of darkness. His sight adjusted once more. Bedside table. Bathroom. He waited until Susan's breathing changed then edged off the bed and fell to his knees. His lean-muscled forearms clasped the cross from around his neck in his hands and he prayed. Prayed for his soul, for Susan, but most of all for those he'd hurt.

\*\*\*

Pathetic, ain't he? Like praying can make up for his sins. That's the problem with the world these days, maybe since the world began, people think they can do all kinds of vile shit, and just say sorry. Go to confession or whatever gets you off and it's all okay. Well it ain't. Not that I'm complaining. You can lie and cheat and kill all you like. Don't make no difference to me. I actually kinda like it.

I'm surprised David's still fighting. It's like he doesn't get it. Doesn't realise. Why fight? He can't change the past. It always tempers him, grounds him, oppresses him. A vice. I've got his balls in a vice. The end game is inevitable.

## Chapter 2

You can see nothing else  
When you look in my face,  
I will look you in the eye  
And I will never lie.

Morning.

Susan. Now she's a sweet girl. She's from the right side of the tracks, unlike David's unhinged past. Don't know what she was thinking marrying David. David Story (we all know that ain't his real name). But she's gone and done it now. Pity. Pity her life, her fate, is tied up with his. Sure, it's been sixteen years, but can a leopard ever change its spots? A sinner ever become a saint? A wife-beater ever stop? Can a meth-head stop shooting up? Well, that one is a yes. But it's tough. That stuff's like the devil. Maybe I was hard on my 'client' before. Maybe she was doing the best she could for her kid when the daylight devil had a hold of her, dragging her down deeper and deeper into the abyss of false ecstasy, false prophets.

I've gotta stop getting distracted. You're making me forget what I was saying. Susan. Let me give you the picture. The back story.

Quiet kid. 'A' grades.

Middle class.

Middle child of three.

Happy family.

Happy childhood.

Nurse. The real kind, the original kind. The bleeding heart, *I don't mind cleaning up someone else's shit or spew because they're sick...or old*. God love her. And I'm sure He does.

I think it's the saviour syndrome for Susan. Must be. Not a bad excuse to hook up with someone like David, I guess. Plus he had the David Story face on then. And now. How could Susan know?

Sshh....Susan's about to wake up.

\*\*\*

Susan flailed her arm around on the other side of the bed but David's side was empty, as usual. Still damp with sweat. Also normal. He sure did run hot at night. She still couldn't get used to his habitual early mornings. Was he escaping from her? Memories of her college days and the handful of one-night-stand runners invaded her. But David was her husband. Married only two months but sometimes it seemed like the honeymoon was over. That honeymoon high was supposed to last for at least a year, right?

Part of David was inaccessible. He denied it, but she still felt it. Since before they married. But he'd come around, eventually. He just needed love and tenderness, a healing of sorts. She could do that. She healed people every day at work, she could certainly heal her husband.

She swung her legs onto the edge of the bed and sat up. A deep breath and the fragrance of freshly ground coffee pulled her downstairs to the kitchen.

David turned, smiled. 'Morning, gorgeous.' He took her into his long arms, ran his hands down to the peak of her naked butt.

'Morning. You been up long?'

He shrugged. 'An hour or so.'

It was the 'or so' she wondered about. Seven am now. Six? Five? And the runs. The late-night running. Early-morning running. Often both. Still, she knew what she'd signed up for. Especially given how they met.

'No run this morning?'

'Sure. But I've showered already.' He handed her a cup from the freshly brewed pot.

'You need more sleep, David.' She took a sip of the murky darkness.

'You know Tibetan monks believe five hours is just about right. Have you read *The Seven Storey Mountain*?'

'Mmm...' She sighed and sank into the nearest chair. She wasn't sure about this monkish turn.

'You're the one who needs more sleep. One night-shift a week isn't good for you. Changes your body clock around in the middle of the week.'

She laughed. He was telling *her* about sleep?

David smiled, came over to her, ran his hand through her hair. 'I love you, honey.'

His voice sounded strange, almost strangled, but she smiled back. 'I love you, too.'

\*\*\*

No, no, no! They giving you the wrong idea completely. Sure, they may look like happy newlyweds, but the happiness is borne from ignorance — least on her part. Is that true happiness? I'm a fan of lies, love 'em in fact. Need them. Live for them. Live through them. But I'm putting my foot down. I don't want you getting the wrong impression, see. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away...yeah, whatever.

Okay, I know I said I wasn't going to be a big part of this story, but seems I was wrong, at least for the moment, cause I can't leave you in the hands of David and Susan. They giving you entirely the wrong idea. You hear me? Let me show you something else. Let me take you back. Close your eyes, now. We're going on a little trip, you hear?

Oh, the clue. I nearly forgot the clue. Mmm...let's see now. How's this:

I'm a time traveller. I'm a mother-beeping handsome time traveller.

\*\*\*

'Mummy! I want my Mummy!' The boy screamed, sobbed, begged. Snot ran down his nose, smeared on his face.

But *he* laughed. Testosterone, adrenaline surging through his body. And anger. God, so much anger.

The boy cowered, held onto his Teddy. Teddy went everywhere with him.

Bam.

Another hit. Out cold.

Another whack. Blood.

Laughter. Laughter. Deep breathing...not the little boy's. No breathing there now.

Another hit.

Gone to God.

\*\*\*

You see? You hear me now? Feel me? Actually I respect David (*so* not his real name). You gotta respect someone who, at twelve, beats a little boy to death. Well, *you* don't gotta respect that, but I do. A man after my own heart.

Now don't you forget this, you hear. I don't want David Story or that sun-shines-out-her-ass wife of his filling your head with nonsense. Sure, I'm not saying I'm the most trustworthy of characters, but trust me on this. Okay? David Story has a past...a murderous

past. More importantly, have you been thinking on forgiveness? Found your personal line? So what do you think of David now? Can he ever be forgiven?

## Chapter 3

It cannot be seen, cannot be felt,  
Cannot be heard, cannot be smelt.  
It lies behind stars and under hills,  
And empty holes it fills.  
It comes first and follows after,  
Ends life, kills laughter.

David leaned on the door, lurching it open with his body weight and the heaviness he always carried with him. Eighty-five kilograms of lean muscle, plus eight-five kilograms of his past, weighing him down, dragging his soul to the ground.

Inside. The walls closing in on him, trying to contain him. Just like he contained himself in his spindly body every day.

The sign on the door read: *Welcome to the Hammett Youth Centre*. It was written in cross-stitch, an odd, old-school homey feel in a modern world. Not that the Centre was modern. It was rundown, a relic from the sixties with walls up to their sixth or seventh coat of paint, from quick patch up jobs. Brown carpet, stained from years of kids spilling soft drinks and God knows what else on the floor. Green bathrooms, filled with grout you could never get clean. Unfortunately, the Hammett Youth Centre was an accurate reflection on Hammett itself. Over thirty percent of the people lived below the poverty line. Houses were rundown, the handful of newer developments were deserted or overrun by squatters. They lived in a field of grey and brown...grey concrete interspersed with brown bricks. The only redeeming feature was that it didn't take long to reach some of the greener areas, and a little further some lakes. David and Susan had bought a nice house, cheap. Only fifteen kilometres from town, but it was like another world. David straddled the worlds. His home life with Susan, and the bleakness of the youth centre. He'd done what he could when he started six months ago. Colour had been the first thing. He'd insisted on that.

'Colour, the world needs colour. Particularly your world, son,' Willifred had said. So many years ago. Now David was bringing colour to kids like him. His kids, he called them. Kids on the verge of horrific deeds. He had to keep them from tottering over. Bring them back. Anchor them.

Belonging, focus, escape. God, he knew about escape. His father's yells, the fist connecting with his mum's face, with David's face. Sometimes he'd go for the body shot, but mostly he didn't care if the world knew he beat the crap out of his wife and kid. Black eyes barely got a second glance in their neighbourhood. David shuddered. Looked up. This place wasn't *his* escape, but it was the escape for lots of kids. It may be rundown on the surface, but

it had a basketball court. Good programs like carpentry — the kids were working on a mini Ninja warrior obstacle course out the back. But maybe most importantly, it was warm in winter and cool in summer. And safe. No drugs. No violence.

For David, it was where he came to pay his debt. To work his soul free. But part of him knew that would never happen.

Noreen was in her usual spot, the face of the Hammett Youth Centre. A big black woman who many of the boys called ‘Momma’— no doubt they all wished she was their mother. She’d lost her own son thirty years ago. Shot on the street at only nineteen. Maybe Noreen was working her soul free too, but not from guilt, from pain.

David forced his breeziest smile. The consummate actor, seasoned performer. ‘Afternoon, Noreen. Busy?’

Noreen gave him a nod, her double-chin grazing her collar bone. ‘I’s always busy, David. Still chasing the kids who cut school today. Will have a word when they show their faces here. Education. The only way out.’ She pulled a pen from her dense pony tail.

David wondered how many times Noreen had said that to the kids.

‘School’s not all it’s cracked up to be.’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘Don’t you go telling the kids that, now. You hear?’

‘Never.’ He gave her a wink and made for his office. Besides, she was right. Kids out of school could get into trouble. Plus kids with violent tendencies needed structure — school provided a semblance of that when their homes usually didn’t.

David probably could have done anything he wanted when they gave him his fresh start. When he arrived at juvie, the first thing they did was a battery of tests. Intelligence tests, personality tests, academic tests. Think they were all surprised to discover his IQ was one-forty. He’d done okay at school in primary, but only okay. Then crashed and burned in seventh grade, with everything that happened and the court case. But he soon caught up in Churchill. Education, school, was part of the program at Churchill. It was the one part of his time at the juvenile centre that he’d been happy about. That and Willifred.

With his SATs he could have done medicine or law, even. Now that would have been ironic...David Story a lawyer. No, perhaps the powers-that-be would have intervened on that one. But he’d chosen this. It was what he needed. For himself, for God, and for Parker. Here, there were moments. Tiny windows of time when the past lifted, his debt partially paid. Perhaps he would have felt that as a doctor too, saving lives. But it didn’t seem right. And maybe someone would have stopped him. Wouldn’t have given him the power of life or death. Surely. Rightly so, too.

Perched on his desk was a photo of Willifred. If it hadn't been for their different skin colour, he would have told everyone Willifred was his dad. Willifred, saviour. Maybe even an instrument of God. He liked to think of Willifred as his father. He imagined a life, growing up with him. A peaceful life. Calm. Happy. Conflict-free and violence-free. A life where the anger never bubbled, never overflowed. When that horrible spring day never happened. A normal life; or maybe the idyllic life. Maybe his life and those of the kids around here were more normal than anyone cared to admit. Drugs, alcohol, violence. The triple threat. Dead-beat dads and dead-beat mums abounded here. Not like Willifred. Not at all like Willifred. More like David's actual dad, who had been away half the time, and when he was home his favourite occupation had been beating on his family. His dad's image would never grace David's desk. He tried to erase that man from his memory altogether. Like he tried to erase lots of things.

\*\*\*

David fired up his computer. He didn't need to glance at his diary to know who was coming in first. Teddy. He always knew when Teddy was scheduled to come in. It was almost like a sixth sense. How could one boy give rise to so many conflicting emotions? Sometimes it felt like looking into a mirror, a mirror of his former self — a person he hated and wanted to save, to redeem. His life, rolled into one recurring cycle. Troubled boys grew into violent men, troubled girls occasionally into violent women, but more commonly into victims...and often dead. The cycle of life in families in neighbourhoods like this. Poverty, violence, drugs, alcohol, crime. What else was there? Noreen was right — education was the only escape. That and prison.

A quick knock and then in came the mirror to his past. Teddy Ryan. Not named after a Kennedy, or even a Teddy bear. Apparently named after Ted Bundy because his mum thought Bundy was 'cool'. Who names their baby after a serial killer? If stupidity or neglect was classed as abuse, the system would be even more jammed than it was. Still, maybe some of the rich kids could claim neglect too. It's just that their folks had their heads stuck up their own asses, stuck in a phone chasing the greenback, rather than chasing their next hit.

'Hi, Teddy.'

Grunt. He moved straight to the chair, flopped into it, backpack on the ground, legs splayed out.

David moved into his spot — the other armchair. Ritual. Routine.



David avoided the standard opener of ‘So, how are things at home?’ The answer was always the same...screwed up, although with a lot more colourful adjectives thrown in. Variations on the same theme. Teddy was the stereotypical example — father skipped out a long time ago and Mum was an alcoholic. Teddy was thirteen and all limbs and awkwardness. He had two older brothers and a younger sister. Biding their time, waiting to get out. Although the eldest may have found his way out...his court date was only four weeks away. Did he know what he was in for?

David decided to lead with this. ‘How’s Lucas doing?’

Grunt. Shrug.

It was all a game with Teddy. A skin to be shed. He held it tight, yes, but Teddy usually shed the skin for David. He never *gave* it up. No, David had to work for it every time, let him adjust from his world of home, street and school, into David’s world. Trust.

Transitions. Home, school, the Centre. Some adults who mistreated, some who tried to help. Hard for kids to work out. Transitions were difficult for kids like Teddy.

It didn’t help that David was white. The racial divide so deeply rooted in the town’s history, its present. In the nation’s past and present.

‘He must be getting nervous.’

Another shrug. ‘Luca don’t care whether he locked up or not. Least he get fed inside, right?’

David pursed his lips. ‘Yup, he would. And he’d be tried as a juvenile. Might end up in juvie instead of prison, prison.’ Churchill came to mind. But David couldn’t mention that. Couldn’t tell anyone about Churchill. It was halfway across the country. Even far away from his fake birth place. You could disappear in a country like America. Melt into the surroundings, especially if you could take on different forms, different faces. A Chameleon. David could do that...camouflage himself into any environment, any persona. He pushed himself back into the moment, back to Teddy and his brother Lucas.

‘Luca would bring ’em to their knees,’ Teddy said.

David smiled. Teddy was wrong. A good institution could turn some kids around for good. Like David. But a bad one...or if the DA managed to get Lucas tried as an adult. Possession and armed robbery...he could go away for a long time if the system dug its heels in.

‘I haven’t seen Lucas for a while. You should tell him to drop by.’

‘Think you can save him, doc?’

David let the corner of his lip turn up. ‘Told you, I’m not a doc.’

All the kids called him doc. Some even pretended they were like the rich kids and David was their therapist. It was the youth centre's in-joke. Again, probably because David was white. He'd never be one of them.

'Whatever. I'll tell Lucas.'

David gave a nod. Time to dig. David doubted Lucas was really so blasé about prison or a juvenile institution, and he doubted Teddy wasn't hurting and frightened. And fear led to anger, and then to violence. And Teddy already had a history of violence. 'Would your life change much? If Lucas wasn't at home? At school?'

Teddy shrugged, but an uncomfortable shrug.

'Go on.'

'Lucas is a bad ass on the street. I get that. But at home...he keeps us all running. He's like a...what do you call it?' He screwed up his face. 'A...protector.'

'Protector? How so?'

'Shit, that ain't the right word. Sandwich...no...'

'A buffer? Like between your mum and you guys?'

'Yeah, that's it. A buffer.' He swayed his pointer finger in David's direction. 'He even manages to get her ass up out of bed, and he hides the booze.' He shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. 'Not that it stays gone for long. She always finds it.' Teddy rubbed at his cheeks, looking for the five o'clock shadow that was still a few years off. An older man's gesture for a young man who'd already seen too much.

David leaned forward. 'Did you speak to your mum about going to the clinic?' That was the only way Teddy's life would really change...if his mum got off the booze.

Teddy drilled his eyes into David's. 'Nah, didn't feel like being slapped around this week.'

David didn't skip a beat. 'Don't blame you. Preservation was high on my list at your age, too.'

A narrowing of the eyes. Like he didn't quite believe, even though David had given him the basic outline of his early youth. 'But you gone and got out.'

'Yeah, I got out.'

'Where was that at again?'

David was often tested on his cover story, but he never wavered. 'Chicago.'

'Bet you were the only whitey there.'

'Poverty, violence, crime they can be white people's problems too.'

A little twitch of the head. 'Whatever you say, doc.'

Maybe David was fighting a losing battle on this one. All Teddy had to do was look around, look inside the prisons, look at TV, listen to African-American song lyrics of the more politically motivated songs and the truth would be forced down his throat. *Could* be a white person's problem, but statistically speaking...

David said, 'Well, just because you're poor, doesn't mean you can't get out...crawl out.'

He'd crawled out...in a manner of speaking. He'd been banished, really. The Banishment. That was his life from twelve to eighteen. Banished, ejected even from the dregs of society. His crime so horrific people still sometimes talked about it.

The familiar panic rose, the aching desire to go back, change it all. But he couldn't. David cleared his throat, worried his voice would be non-existent when he spoke again. He was about to tell Teddy that he could crawl out too, but a knock at the door interrupted him.

He scrunched up his face. What the hell was the 'Do not disturb' sign for? A knock at a crucial moment of a session could be disastrous for some kids. He fought every minute to get a footing with them, to make them drop their guards.

'Yes?' He didn't even try to keep the gruff tone from his voice.

The door was already half-open...not even waiting for his acknowledgment.

Noreen popped her head around the gap, but her usual mask of maternity — softness and sternness rolled into one — had vanished, like an item of clothing she'd forgotten to adorn. Something was wrong.

'What is it?'

The breath whooshed out of her. 'I'm sorry, but DeShawn's here. He's in an awful state. His little brother's missing.'

David stood up. DeShawn was one of his kids...a fourteen-year-old whose father was in prison and whose mother turned tricks to keep the family afloat. And her pimp was her current boyfriend. Shit. DeShawn had two younger brothers, Jamal and Tyrone, plus two younger sisters and an older brother who didn't live at home.

'Which brother?' David wasn't sure why he asked that question. Somehow it seemed important at the time, the first thing that rolled off his tongue.

'The youngest. Jamal.'

Three...the same age as Parker.

The butterfly danced in front of him, dazzling blue. But it was the murky darkness of its black spots that captured him. It floated toward him, caressed his cheek, woke him. An unstoppable surge. Reality. Blood. Thump...bone breaking.

In court he told them he ‘came to’ at that moment. The butterfly brushed his cheek, woke him from the stupor, from his complacency, catatonia, psychotic break. It floated over Parker. Little boy blue, broken. Tarnished with red. The butterfly’s wings the same colour as Parker’s T-shirt.

At Churchill, over a year into The Banishment, he’d told the full story. But even now, he didn’t know if he’d made it all up, lied in court, or if his brain had swallowed that memory whole, frightened it would engulf him. Observer? Doer? Both. In his dreams sometimes the baseball bat was in his hands, sometimes it was in Joe’s. And in some versions they played a cruel game of tag-in-tag-out.

‘David?’ The word, his name, was shouted. But he wasn’t David...he was Tony. It took him a few seconds to adjust, to remember it wasn’t Joe and Tony who’d done something terrifyingly shocking to Parker. It was Jamal, DeShawn’s little brother. The same age as Parker, but not Parker. Little boys who needed protection, needed their purity safeguarded. But Jamal had probably just wandered away from his mum in the supermarket. Not met the sinister end of Parker.

Blue, bright red, dark red, black...overwhelming blackness. Joe’s grin. He was grinning...a crazy son-of-a-bitch, maniacal upturn of his lips.

Teddy stood. ‘You should talk to DeShawn. He in my class. Worships that brother of his.’ Teddy slung his backpack onto his shoulder and walked past Noreen and out of the office.

‘You okay?’ Noreen asked, one eyebrow arched. ‘You look like you seen a ghost.’

David managed to give a nod. A ghost...how accurate.

‘I’ll tell DeShawn to come through.’

‘Yup, you do that.’

David collapsed into his chair. A toddler, missing. Please, no.

\*\*\*

He didn’t see that coming. No, sirree. Now he’s screwed. Thrown. I saw it coming. Of course I did. I see all. I’m in the past, present and the future, ever-present. Know what I’m saying? David’s screwed. You know his real name is Tony, right? But he’s been David for longer. Tony for twelve years, Scott for six years, David for ten years. You following? Anyways, I’m happy his secret’s out — well, to you at least. Not Susan, not anyone in his current-day life. I was going to puke at him and Susan playing house. The man should know better. He’s a scumbag, a deliciously lowly man. And now he’s in the eye of the tornado again. So, I’m

happy. I know...I shouldn't be happy at poor David's misfortune or that little boy's plight. Or rather, this fate. But that's just me. At least I'm honest, right? Well, to a degree.

I know where Jamal's at. Yes, sirree. Dead? Alive? I'm ever-present, remember. I can sense the future, like a lion can sense its prey's fear. The reek of it. God, I love that smell. I'm with the lions on this one. Fear. It has a slightly musty smell, you know? And it's always there, lingering in the abyss between light and dark, life and death. It's got me all excited just thinking about it.

Anyways, back to David Story. Now you're seeing the real him. The David Story of my world, of my story. Yup, he's going to get his comeuppance. Mark my words. The future holds...well, let's just say it's going to be a great ride.

Your clue. Want your clue? I'm a chameleon (just like David). A handsome, mother-beeper, time-travelling chameleon.

## Chapter 4

What is greater than God,  
More evil than the Devil,  
The poor know it's inevitable:  
The rich are the same beneath the sod,  
but if you consume me now, why,  
you're sure to die.

Susan rested her head back on the deckchair's small pillow, the birds' calls striking out a delicious springtime melody. A canopy of two large maples provided shade to half of the deck for hot days, but today she'd dragged two chairs across to the full sun. Usually it was she and David sitting on the deck on weekends and occasionally on weekdays when their shifts connected. But today Susan was sitting with Patricia, catching up for the first time in three months. First time since before the wedding.

The sun was glorious. It was amazing to think that the light and warmth hitting them now was generated so long ago. Susan imagined the sun's warmth reaching through time and space to keep Earth alive. It made Susan feel alive, too. She closed her eyes for a moment, relishing the prickles of heat in her cheeks.

She blinked and leaned over to top up Patricia's glass. 'It's been too long.'

'I know.' Patricia took a sip of the chardonnay. 'I've been counting down the days. To see you, get away from work.' She held up the glass. 'And drinking with you on a Friday. Like our college days.'

Susan clinked her glass against Patricia's. 'God, that seems like a lifetime ago.'

'I know...I'm a cougar now.'

Susan snorted, nearly losing wine through her mouth and nose. 'You're at least fifteen years away from cougar status, maybe thirty.'

Patricia raised her eyebrows. 'Well, I do like them a bit younger than me.'

Susan shook her head.

'And you,' Patricia gave her a wink, 'you'll be popping out babies soon.'

'Mmm...' Susan forced a smile. Babies. David said he didn't want children. But that would change. Once he was feeling happier, more stable. Once he got used to her unconditional love, the feeling of it wrapping around his sensitive soul. He'd change his tune...didn't everyone? They'd been married two months, but together for only just over a year. He just needed more time. His idea of childhood was skewed. He was frightened he'd end up like his dad, but that would never happen. David was one of the gentlest souls Susan had ever encountered.

She leaned back on the deckchair, feet up, studying her feet. She wriggled her toes, enjoying the feeling of the air brushing across her feet, in between her toes. A nurse's feet took a beating and needed air every now and again.

'This is glorious.' Patricia rested her head back, eyes closed underneath her designer glasses.

'Not bad for the 'burbs, huh?'

'Swings and roundabouts.' Patricia turned her head. 'But you were always more of a 'burbs girl.'

Susan smiled. It *was* a compliment, not a dig. Susan couldn't imagine anything worse than living in a big city — people, concrete, noise, pollution, sensory overload at every turn. No, she preferred the trees, the birds, the backyards...this deck.

'You going to sell up?' Susan asked. 'You could buy the house over the road.'

Patricia gave a guttural snort. 'Not for me, honey. I'm not the white picket fence kind of girl.'

Susan smiled, rested her head back again.

They lay in silence for a few minutes, soaking up the early autumn sun, the edginess of the sun subsiding from a month or so ago.

'I can't wait to meet David.'

With the distance between them, Susan and Patricia only caught up a few times a year. The last couple of times had been in New York and, despite Susan's pleading, David hadn't wanted to go with her. Said he'd been once and hated it. He didn't like big cities either. Maybe it was that sense you could disappear in them forever.

Patricia lifted her head and nodded at the large, framed wedding pic, barely visible through the sliding glass doors into the living room. 'He's pretty cute.'

'I know.'

'Of course he's batting higher than his pay-grade with you.'

'You always were good for my ego, Trish.'

'Right back at ya, honey.' She took another sip of wine. 'Listen, I'm so sorry I couldn't get to the wedding.'

'I told you, forget it. It's not like I gave you a year's notice or anything.'

The proposal, then the wedding...it all happened so fast. True love.

'Still, I should have cancelled the trip.'

Susan shook her head. 'No way, Patricia. Executive training in Paris? You couldn't have ditched that.'

'Well, when you say it like that...'

They both laughed.

Patricia gave a shrug. 'But maybe I should have.'

Susan waved her hand in dismissal. 'Don't be silly. God, I think I would have missed the wedding for a trip to Paris.'

Patricia gave a laugh. 'Yup, maybe work's not so bad after all.' She took a few more sips, nearly emptying the glass.

Susan held up the bottle. Only about a quarter left. 'At this rate the wine will be gone before David even gets home.'

'I can be the bad girl. Your college friend who's a shocking influence.' Patricia reached across and took the bottle of wine from Susan's hands, dividing its contents between their glasses. 'Promise I'll hold your hair back.'

'Gee, thanks.'

A car door clanked shut.

'That's probably David now.' Susan stood up. 'Think you can walk a straight line?'

Patricia hauled herself up with some effort. 'I'll try my darndest.'

Susan's first few steps saw her totter ever so slightly. Too much wine, too quickly. She slid the back door open and moved into the kitchen. From the open-plan kitchen-living she had a clear line of sight to the front door, albeit a small slither.

The door opened. David's face looked...different. He saw her. Blinked slowly. Re-arranged his face some. Did he? No, she was being paranoid. It was the wine.

'Hi, honey.' She lingered in the kitchen, Patricia just behind her. Now she was wishing she'd stayed in the deck chair, let David put on his social face. Or maybe it was his mask...for her too? No, he said the depression had gone. That he hadn't been sinking in the black hole since soon after they met.

Susan turned to Patricia, smiled, hoping she hadn't noticed her husband's change. Maybe he'd had a bad day at work.

David strode into the living room, his satchel draped across his shoulder. He looked younger than his twenty-eight years. Except for his eyes. They held that tortured look she often saw in patients frustrated and depressed by their prognosis or lack of progress. She held their hands and got them through it, she'd do the same for David.

David was all smiles and dimples now. The reassuring, open face she loved so much.

'Hi, darling.' He bent down and kissed her.

'David, this is Patricia.'

He held his hand out. 'The college roomie.'

'That's me.'



They shook hands.

‘Looks like you two started without me.’

Susan giggled. ‘I think I’m nearly finished.’

David cocked his head to one side. ‘You’re damaging the reputation of nurses around the world with a comment like that.’

Patricia laughed. ‘You’re right, David. She’s a lightweight in her field, that’s for sure.’

David smiled. ‘I’ve heard lots of wonderful things about you.’

‘Likewise.’ Patricia scrunched up her face. ‘You look kind of familiar.’

David gave a soft laugh. ‘I’ve got one of those faces. Too generic for my own good.’

Patricia smiled.

‘Beer or wine, honey?’ Susan ambled to the fridge.

‘Beer, thanks.’

She pulled a Bud from the fridge, opened it and handed it to him.

He looked at it for a few seconds, then drained half of it.

That was a first. David wasn’t much of a drinker these days...not good for depression.

‘Oh, I know that look,’ Patricia said. ‘Hard day at the office, huh?’

David sighed. ‘You got it.’

‘Oh, honey.’ So that explained his weird expression when he thought she wasn’t looking. She gave him a squeeze. ‘Come and sit in the sun and tell us all about it. It’s glorious out there.’

They headed back onto the deck and sat in the reclining deckchairs.

David pulled up a chair next to Susan and sat, but he seemed uncomfortable.

‘So?’ Susan asked. She knew he’d be careful what he said...he was always so respectful of his patients’, clients’, privacy. He preferred to call them clients.

Sometimes she worried about him, with those kids. It was easy to forget David was fragile too. Was exposure to such troubled and violent kids good for him? Was he up to it? Then again, she knew he was well-qualified to relate to kids like that. He didn’t like to talk about his past, his childhood, but Susan knew his dad had been violent and ran out on them, and his mum died five years ago. She could read between the lines. She knew he’d had a tough childhood. No money, little love, no siblings to hold him together. And then when he was fifteen he’d got into a fight at school, and ended up charged with assault and sent to a juvenile facility. His life had been desolate. And isolated. And most importantly, lacking in love.

When they got married David only invited five people. Five! Two colleagues from his old work, two college friends and an older guy called Willifred.

Willifred was still a bit of a mystery to Susan. The bond between him and David had been palpable at the wedding, but David was always cagey about him. Said he'd helped him. Got him on the straight and narrow. And at the wedding, he stood at the back of the church, and sat quietly at the dinner, seemingly only saying a couple of words to those around him. Then he vanished at nine o'clock. He'd looked at David with a paternal kind of pride, but yet he'd stayed for such a short time.

Susan was pulled back by David's voice.

'I'm sure you'll see it on the news.' He took another slug of beer.

'On the news?' Susan sat up. 'God, had there been a shooting at the Centre?' That was her biggest fear. 'Are you okay? Is everyone else okay?'

David reached his hand over and rested it on her thigh. 'Nothing like that, honey. We're fine. But one of the kids I work with...his little brother is missing.'

'Missing? Like abducted?'

David closed his eyes. 'It looks that way.'

Susan was vaguely aware of Patricia looking at David. Studying him, perhaps doing the friend's duty of assessing the 'new' man in Susan's life — even though it was too late to get her opinion.

'That's horrible, darling.'

David nodded. 'I'll say.' He drained the rest of his beer.

Susan bit her lip. This was exactly the kind of thing she feared. Tragedy bleeding into David's life, when he wasn't up to it. What if this was the trigger that led him into the depths of depression again? She needed to protect him, heal him, somehow.

Her husband, David Story, seemed so strong, but he was in pain. A troubled man.

\*\*\*

'I should have cooked something.'

'Don't be silly.' Patricia gave her a smile. 'I love pizza, and this way you get to relax.'

Susan still felt a little guilty. It had been ages since she'd seen Patricia — why hadn't she gone for the full spread? Instead they were eating pizza, two boxes stacked on the outdoor table.

Patricia leaned forward and pulled another slice onto her plate. 'Seriously, this is gorgeous.'

Susan glanced at David, but he was a million miles away. A pity Patricia met him today of all days, with the weight of the horror sucking him downwards.

Patricia turned back to David. ‘I still can’t work out why you look so familiar.’

He shrugged. ‘Like I said, I’ve got one of those faces.’

‘Mmm...’ She took a bite of pizza, chewed, swallowed: ‘Sure you’re not from Charleston or somewhere in South Carolina?’

He shook his head. ‘Nope.’

‘Maybe you played high school football or basketball in Charleston?’

‘No, sorry.’ He shifted in his chair.

He looked weary. Susan hoped this poor boy wouldn’t be David’s trigger. Wouldn’t lead him into the black hole of depression.

The doorbell rang.

David looked at his watch. ‘Eight o’clock on a Friday night.’

‘I’ll get it.’ Susan stood up. ‘It’s probably Cheryl next door...out of something again.’ She headed inside listening to David explaining Cheryl’s weekly shopping omissions.

Susan was smiling when she opened the door, but the smile quickly disappeared. At the door were two men, badges at the ready.

‘Mrs Story?’

‘Yes?’ Susan’s stomach tightened. Had something happened to her parents?

‘Is your husband home?’

‘Sure.’ She relaxed a little — it was about the boy, of course. ‘This is about that little boy?’

‘That’s right. Sorry to disturb you at home on a Friday night, but timing is critical in these cases.’

‘Of course. Anything we can do to help.’ She led them through the living room and kitchen onto the back patio.

David turned around. ‘Hello?’

One of the men showed his badge. ‘I’m Detective Saul and this is Detective Parker.’

David’s face seemed suddenly paler and he did the three quick blinks that he does when he’s stressed or nervous. Poor David. Can’t stop thinking about that boy.

‘Are you okay, honey?’ she asked.

‘Of course.’ David stood up.

‘Have you got a few minutes, Mr Story?’ Detective Saul asked. ‘We’d like to talk to you about DeShawn and some of the other boys at the Centre.’

‘Sure. Let’s go inside, huh?’ He moved toward them.

Susan noticed one of the detectives eyeing the pizza boxes.

‘Did you want some pizza, detectives?’

‘Smells good,’ Saul said. ‘But we couldn’t eat your dinner.’

‘Speak for yourself.’ Parker nodded toward the pizza. ‘I’ll have a slice if it’s on offer. I’m starving.’

Saul shook his head and gave Parker a look.

‘Of course. Let me get you a plate.’ Susan followed them inside and grabbed a plate from the kitchen. She hurried back outside for the pizza. When she was back within earshot she heard David say:

‘My wife’s got a friend visiting from New York and I’d hate to spoil their fun.’

She handed Detective Parker the slice of pizza.

‘Thanks, Mrs. Story. That’s mighty kind of you.’

Susan gave him a little nod. ‘Something to drink?’

David interrupted. ‘I’ll organise that. You go back out to Patricia and enjoy yourself. We’ll sit down here so we don’t bother you.’ David motioned to the living room.

Susan hesitated. She wanted to know more about the boy. What had happened. David hadn’t gone into much detail, obviously wanting to protect her or stay away from such a dark topic when they had a visitor. ‘You sure I can’t make you a drink?’

David raised his hands. ‘I promise to get them a drink, honey. I am capable of southern hospitality, you know.’

‘Where *are* you from Mr. Story? Originally?’ Saul asked.

‘Chicago.’ David gave Susan a strange smile.

Susan smiled back, but still tried to gauge her husband’s mood. ‘I’ll leave you to it.’ She headed back out.

Patricia was staring past Susan at the detectives. She shuddered. ‘That poor little boy.’ She stared silently at the sky for a bit. ‘This world’s wretched. Evil.’

\*\*\*

David took the detectives into the living room. He’d thought about the study, then decided the living room would be more informal. He needed to appear casual. Concerned, but casual. Normal. You’d think he’d have it down by now, but it was hard. He wasn’t sure which was worse...being out there with Patricia or in here with them. Both roads involved lies. Lies, lies, more lies. Patricia had been asking about his high school years. Locked up by then. And Charleston...Patricia was getting dangerously close. He was from Florence county, South Carolina. The story, his violent acts, made national media but would have got a lot more airplay, and for longer, in SC. He’d been trying to work out how to shut her down when he’d

been literally saved by the bell — the doorbell. But it was out of a blazing fire into a scorching inferno.

He motioned to the sofa. ‘So, can I get you a drink? Water, tea, coffee?’

‘Water would be great, Mr. Story. Thanks.’ Saul sat down.

He seemed to be the lead.

‘And you?’ David couldn’t look Detective Parker in the eye. Parker? What were the chances? Was this God’s way of saying he still didn’t forgive him for his sins? Rightly so, too. No one should be forgiven for those sins. *Revelation 21:8* ‘But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.’ David belonged in the fire. Sometimes he yearned for it. Maybe this Parker was God’s messenger, riding the wings of the angel of death.

‘Water’s fine.’

David headed into the kitchen and squeezed his eyes shut tightly, trying to erase the picture of Parker, his Parker, on the ground. The shakes started. He needed to get them under control. What would two police detectives make of a man shaking in their presence? He may as well have it tattooed on his forehead, *I’ve got a secret. A killer secret.*

He took a deep breath. Got himself a beer. Settle his nerves, but look normal — just a regular Friday night beer. He came back over to the detectives, handed them their glasses of water. Detective Parker had almost finished his pizza. David went back for his beer then sat down. If there was violence in him you would never see it.

Let the dance begin.

David started. ‘Horrific business. DeShawn’s devastated. A mess.’ That part was true, of course.

‘Yes, we’ve spoken to him.’ Saul took a sip of water. ‘Are your discussions with the kids subject to patient-therapist protection?’

Straight to the point.

David didn’t like where this was going. ‘Actually, they are.’

‘But you’re not a psychologist or psychiatrist, right?’

‘No. My official qualification is youth worker. But I’m still bound by confidentiality laws that apply to *all* healthcare workers. But I’m sure you know that, Detective.’

A shrug, that could mean a yes or a no.

Saul leaned forward. ‘Unless someone’s life is on the line.’

David gave a nod. ‘Of course. But I don’t think any of my kids will be able to help you anyway.’

‘Your kids?’ Saul took a notebook out of his pocket.

Damn notebooks. Memory can’t be relied on, not one hundred percent, but a detective’s notebook? They’re taken as gospel. He flashed back, saw himself as a boy sitting on the sofa, his mum convinced it was all a terrible misunderstanding. Her child couldn’t possibly be involved in anything so abhorrent, so violent.

Saul cleared his throat, bringing David back to the present. ‘Your kids?’ Saul reminded him.

‘Sorry, I just can’t stop thinking about that poor boy.’ David sighed, knowing his explanation would, should, suffice. ‘That’s what I call them. My kids.’

‘How long have you been working at the Centre?’

David swallowed hard. ‘Not long. Six months.’

Saul scribbled some notes, looked around. ‘So you can’t really know the kids that well. Can’t know for sure what they’re capable of. Maybe this will be one of those rare cases when you need to break confidentiality.’

‘We’ll wait and see on that one.’ David stood his ground.

A silence, then: ‘Nice place you got here. You been married long?’

‘What’s that got to do with DeShawn or his brother?’

‘Sorry, just making polite conversation.’

David didn’t trust it. Or maybe cops *did* make polite conversation when they thought the person they were talking to was just an average guy...not a twelve-year-old boy who’d killed.

Still, he went for mock outrage. ‘Shouldn’t you be more interested in finding the little boy? Or his killer?’

‘Killer?’ Saul raised his eyebrow. ‘You think he’s dead?’

Shit. Walked into that one. He shook his head. *It’s not a problem. Go for the stats. General knowledge.* ‘Isn’t that how these things work? Gone twelve hours, statistically speaking...’

‘True. Although it’s still early days. We’ve called the Feds in.’

David closed his eyes, forced them open. Would the Feds know all about him? Would it be anyone he knew? From back then? No, that was in Florence too far away. But the minute that kid went missing his name — old name and new name — was probably flashing on someone’s screen, somewhere. The kid was even the same age as Parker had been.

David took a big slug of beer. Hopefully not so big he’d put the detectives on alert. Then again, he was pretty good at hiding his emotions, riding the narrows. The extremes lead to danger...in all its different forms.

‘So, have you ever met Jamal?’ Parker asked.

David shook his head. ‘No, but DeShawn talks about him a lot.’ David looked at the mantelpiece and thought their wedding photo looked a little crooked. He immediately stood up, straightened it.

‘I hear he’s a troublesome kid,’ Saul said.

‘DeShawn or Jamal?’ David sat back down.

Saul raised his eyebrows. ‘Both. DeShawn’s been in trouble with the law already, but I hear Jamal was a bit of a whiny pain in the ass. That DeShawn used to get cross, lose his temper with him.’

David shook his head. ‘You’re barking up the wrong tree. Sure, Jamal could be an annoying little brother...that’s what little brothers do. But DeShawn loves Jamal. Protects him.’

‘From the mother or the boyfriend?’

David hesitated. Would this be betraying DeShawn’s trust? No, it was common knowledge that his dad was in prison, his mum turned tricks and the pimp boyfriend sometimes beat on the wife. Police had been called out.

‘You know it’s the boyfriend. I’m sure you’ve got it written down in that book of yours.’ David nodded at the detective’s notebook. The Bible of justice.

Saul smiled. ‘You’ve got a record, too.’

David’s stomach tightened. He pushed his body into slow-motion. Breathe. Take a sip of beer. Smile. It’ll be the fake juvie record.

‘Eighteen months in juvie for an assault.’ The fake crimes of David Story. If only that was the true extent of his crimes. ‘I was young. Angry. Stupid.’

‘Like DeShawn?’

‘A bit, I guess. That is why I do this. Obviously.’ All part of the cover. US tax dollars hard at work covering for a killer. Making it possible for David to walk down the street, get married, have a life.

‘Obviously.’ Saul took another sip of water.

‘So, if you don’t like DeShawn for this, any of your kids you think we should be looking at?’

David took a deep breath. He wanted to help DeShawn, help his missing brother, but his kids needed to know they could trust him. That he respected their privacy.

He took another deep breath. ‘I don’t think so, no. If you really think it’s a strong line of inquiry get a warrant for my case notes. But I can’t betray these kids’ trust, not now when they’re really just starting to trust me. I’m not going to throw it away.’

‘Even to save the life of a little boy?’

David held strong. ‘I don’t believe any of my boys are involved in this, but I promise I *will* let you know if that changes.’ David paused. ‘Have you looked at the adults in his life? The boyfriend? Or what about stranger abduction?’

Saul stood up. ‘Don’t worry, Mr Story. We know how to do our jobs.’

David caught the urge to swallow, dampened it down. A bobbing Adam’s apple was enough for an astute detective. And they wouldn’t like what they found if they dug too deep into David Story.

\*\*\*

It’s a coming. The tide is changing, and David’s time is running out. Hallelujah!

*The Bible?* I can give as good as I get, you hear? *Deuteronomy 32: 41-43* ‘If I sharpen my flashing sword, and my hand takes hold on justice, I will render vengeance on my adversaries, and I will repay those who hate me. I will make my arrows drunk with blood, and my sword will devour flesh...’

I like this section. Vengeance. That’s what it’s all about. Yes, sirree. *The Bible* got some things right...though of course some of it’s a work of fiction. But now’s not the time to get into that. No, now’s the time to see David squirming. *I’m* sharpening my sword, and so are those nice detectives. David’s trying on his innocence, holding it close as the cold encroaches, but he’s no innocent. Nothing he can do will ever atone. Nothing can take away his past deeds. What’s done is done, on the permanent record of his soul.

That’s what I say, anyways. And I know all. I’m a mother-beeping handsome time travelling know-it-all. That’s me.



## Chapter 5

Each morning I appear  
To lie at your feet,  
All day I will follow the path of deceit,  
No matter how fast you run,  
I will not perish  
In the midday sun.

He waited until Susan was asleep, until her breathing had turned to the deeper gurgles — more gurgles than usual because she'd had more to drink than usual. He tiptoed past the guest room, hoping Patricia was sound asleep, too. Downstairs into the study. It was late, but hopefully not too late. He took out one of the burner cells paranoia made him purchase. He could never truly escape the feeling of being watched, monitored. At least an over-the-counter pre-paid phone was clean, not linked to him in any way.

'Hello?' His baritone voice flowed over David, enveloping him in calmness and making him feel instantly safer. Grounded, more connected to God. The power of one word from the right person.

'Willifred, it's me. David.' Fake name, effortlessly. Maybe out of habit, because he'd played the role of David Story for so long. He'd only seen Willifred a few times in the past ten years. There was a time when he couldn't imagine not talking to Willifred every day. He'd been a constant presence for six years in the juvenile residential facility. Then on his eighteenth birthday he was released, assigned another new identity. He was supposed to leave everything from his past behind, but he needed Willifred. Needed to at least know he was a phone call away. So important in his life — a photo on his desk, an essential presence at his wedding.

'David? What's up?'

'Something's happened.'

'What's wrong?'

'A local boy has gone missing. He's three years old.' David's voice was brittle.

Silence. Then: 'You need to keep calm. The boy may be found, he might be okay.'

Or he might not. 'It's more complicated than that.'

'Why?'

David thought maybe he could hear fear in Willifred's voice. If Willifred thought he was involved in this...that would hurt more than anything else. More than imaginable.

'I...' His voice broke. 'I didn't do it.'

‘I know that, son.’

But did he? Or was he just saying the words now that David had proclaimed his innocence? David curled himself into a ball. ‘It’s more complicated because the boy is the brother of one of my clients. The police came to my home tonight to question me.’

‘About the boy’s brother and your other clients?’

‘Yes.’

‘You know how these things work, David. They cast a net...the Centre is in their net, that’s all.’

David nodded even though he didn’t want to be in the net. His whole existence depended on him flying under the radar. ‘They’re bringing in the FBI. Surely some computer somewhere is going to send them my name.’ An image of Susan’s brother, a computer whiz, sitting in front of his computer flashed through David’s mind. He’d been paranoid about Louis for months before the wedding — was still paranoid about him. He imagined him getting curious one day, digging. If he wanted, Louis could get past the official record.

Another considered silence on the other end of the phone. ‘WITSEC will know, but I don’t think the FBI will. And it doesn’t matter. You’re innocent.’

David chewed on his lip. Innocence didn’t always cut it. Didn’t always guarantee your safety. Particularly in something like this. If the FBI discovered David’s past he’d be suspect number one. People didn’t believe in rehabilitation, couldn’t believe a leopard could change its spots. But David had only been twelve. Malleable. And with Willifred’s help all those years ago he’d moulded himself into something else entirely. A phoenix reborn.

‘Have you prayed on it?’

‘I’ve prayed for the boy’s safety. But not for mine.’

‘Pray on it some more, son. The Lord knows you’ve repented, he will show you the way, give you guidance.’

‘Will he?’ For the first time in fifteen years, David wasn’t sure if the Lord could answer his prayers. And was he deserving?

‘If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.’

‘Matthew 18:12-13.’ David knew the verse well. It was one they’d talked about many times. It was one of the first parts of the Bible Willifred had quoted to David all those years ago. A thought, a hope, that had kept him sane. Made him believe he could have a future. Sometimes he could feel the sheep inside him, the one who’d come back to God, to society.

But other times...other times he just couldn't see how anyone could or should rejoice in someone like him rejoining society. Rehabilitated or not.

He didn't deserve the Lord's forgiveness, no matter what the scriptures said. No, he deserved to be in purgatory and maybe this was the start. His hell on Earth. He closed his eyes, thought about Susan asleep upstairs. This would destroy her. It would destroy him.

\*\*\*

Now this is the shit I like. Oh, yeah. Gotta give me some stress. Some tension. Some high stakes. Life and death. Death is beauty distilled to its purest, simplest form. Death is my domain. I will always be there in that delectable moment. I do love that moment. The call, the pain, the realisation in those final seconds. Sometimes the relief. Their body, their soul, awash with relief that they're finally leaving their God-forsaken existence. The screw up of a world around them. Yup. But maybe that's just me. I'm a pessimist. Part of the job description. I hold lives in my hands.

But back to David. I'm happy. Happy that David's finally starting to realise that no amount of falling onto his knees and praying can protect him. Can save him. After all these years maybe I'm finally going to get what *I* deserve. Sweet satisfaction. Yes, sirree.

Maybe it is all about me. Yes, back to me. That mother-beeping handsome, time-travelling know-it-all.

\*\*\*

David checked his watch again. Finally it was 5am. A reasonable time to get up for his jog. He hadn't slept at all. How could he? Instead he'd thought about Jamal, lying somewhere, dead. His body could be found any minute. Or it might never be found. He'd thought more about the possible involvement of one of the kids from the Centre. If it *was* one of the kids they wouldn't be covering their tracks. Not old enough or sophisticated enough for that. That level of conscious planning and afterthought requires a high degree of premeditation — not the chaotic actions of a child or teenager.

Chaos...all around him was chaos. He remembered the chaos of that day. Parker. David had started spiralling, barely able to stand.

Blue. Butterfly. Red. Blood.

Blue. Butterfly. Red. Blood.

Blue. Butterfly. Red. Blood.

His brain hadn't been able to register much past that for minutes. Maybe hours. He remembered running. Running along the forest path, running along bitumen. The soles of his feet hot and sweaty, his body dripping in sweat. Cheeks red. Breathing uneven. Joe looked normal. Was smiling. Grinning. The butterfly was above them. Chasing them? Maybe it was Parker's soul, his next life. Haunting them already. Parker. Someone's son. Someone's brother. But David hadn't thought of that until much, much later. Parker was just a whiney kid. He'd looked impish. Weird. Joe had said they'd give him a scare — that was supposed to be all. Give his mum a scare too. So where had that baseball bat come from? The question that was never answered.

Bone shattered. David/Tony, hands on knees. Throwing up.

'Jesus, Tony. Get it together.' Joe. Grinning. Grinning?

How was that possible? In *that* moment? That was the right memory, wasn't it? That's what had happened, right? A short time frame, maybe only ten minutes. Yet confusion netted throughout his brain, overwriting everything else. Bad code. Forever murky.

David forced the memory away, pushed his body into his gym clothes, his runners. Pulling on another skin, another persona. Another person. Meet jogger-David. Fit, newlywed David.

The darkness was just starting to dissipate. A nice time to run. The hint of the sun, the promise of darkness receding. Peaceful, quiet, a time when the light took over again. He'd been in the dark for many years, but eventually the dawn had broken. And he didn't want to go back to the darkness again.

He did a few stretches first as a cursory warmup. His main warmup would be the half a kilometre to the lake. He set off at a slow pace. His legs were heavy, maybe from lack of sleep. He felt like he literally hadn't closed his eyes all night, but it was possible his brain had lured him into sleep for an hour or two. The fitful sleep of the worried or guilty. He was used to a troubled sleep, used to running on empty. He expected it. Accepted it. Why should he find peace at night? The dreams. And after. Sensations that were worse than the dogged tiredness permanently seeping through his body.

The houses were still quiet, mostly dark. His street was in a small estate that had been built near the lake and a nearby park. The houses were all the same, cookie-cutter moulds with different coloured doors and trims, different gardens. Built when property was booming, first bought for double or triple their current value. Susan and David had got in at the low point. Housing was cheap in and around Hammett, even nice houses like these on the better side of town. Sometimes the conformity bothered him, but given he was trying to conform, to blend in, it was apt he was just another white male in suburbia. At the end of the street he took

a left, cutting across to the parkland. Occasionally during his morning runs he'd see another jogger, or a dog-walker, but for the most part it was too early for other souls. The world started around 5.30am or 6am. Before then, David was usually safe in his solitude. His feet scuffed at the gravel, his foot-strike crunching the small stones, a millisecond of slippage before the ball of his foot was pushing off the ground again. Trees arched over the pathway. He ran east, into the approaching dawn. He moved faster, making his way to the lake and the circular path around it. He normally did four laps of the two-kilometre path, but this morning he might do more. This morning he needed to keep going until all he could think about was his body's pain.

He sucked in a breath, felt the dampness in the air, a bite. Autumn kicking in. Soon the leaves would be turning to blood-red, orange, yellow. Then plunging to the ground. But no one mourned their deaths. The leaves had another month or two of life left in them. What about Jamal?

He stopped short, slipping on the gravel and almost tumbling head-over-heels. A lump up ahead. No...please, no. He hesitated. If Jamal was dead, he couldn't be the one to find the body. But why would the body be in the park David ran in? He looked around — still deserted. He moved forward slowly, taking short, hesitant steps. It was hard to make anything out in the subdued light. Could be a dead animal. Could be someone's jumper, crumpled on the ground. Or a trick of his eyes? His dark imagination, his fears. He was fifteen metres away now, squinting to try to make out the form. He had another look around, but thankfully he was still alone. He edged forward, taking purposeful steps. He could just turn away. Run. But then he'd never know what was up ahead. It was too small for a boy, surely? Ten metres. David fished out his phone and used its light to see properly. A jacket. A hoodie. David poked it with his foot, just to make sure, but it was empty, deflated. David's heart was beating so hard and fast it was blasting blood into his ears. Ready to explode. He took a deep breath, several more. Then he spun on the ball of his foot and pushed off on his usual circuit. Run, flee, escape. Run, flee, escape. He drove his legs into the ground until they were numb from the pummelling.

It was 6am when he rounded the corner into his street. He stopped. A black van. It hadn't taken them long.

When he was a few houses away, a man slid out of the vehicle. A dark blue suit hugged his frame, his face haggard with stress...and maybe too much sun in his twenties. It was a face David hadn't seen for a few years. He'd put on some pounds, but only a few. He still looked fit and lethal — a man who walked the steely line every day. Walked it well. US Marshall Walter Bright. David's official handler. Supposedly one of only four people in the

world who knew his real name, his location. That's how the witness protection program worked.

They'd first met when David was Tony, and only twelve years old. After the sentencing the government had assigned him a new identity and relocated him. Even in a country the size of America you could only disappear so much if your name and face were plastered everywhere. In today's technological age it was amazing the government managed it at all. He served his juvie time in Florida, with red hair instead of black, blue eyes instead of brown, and clear glasses. Only three staff members knew his secret, knew the extent of his horrendous crime. The psychiatrist, the manager, and Willifred, the chaplain. A new identity for a twelve-year-old going into a juvenile facility was easy. And then to be on the safe side they'd given him another new identity, David Story, when he was eighteen. Happy birthday.

Now, he looked different enough. The boy had become a man. His jaw bone broadening, his forehead bulging, his small child-body now a lanky man-body. Occasionally someone would claim he looked familiar. Like Patricia. Some part of her subconscious had clocked his image, the image of Tony Moretti the horrific child killer. And something in David, maybe his eyes, a look, tugged at that memory, willing it to break free. David shuddered, pushing away the possibility that Patricia would connect the dots, would tell Susan. No, it was too long ago, too many physical differences. David doubted even his own mother would recognise him now. If she wasn't rotting in hell.

She killed herself before he was released. Because of him, he supposed. He'd been surprised she was with it enough to even register the way people must have looked at her after. Everyone tried to blame her. It's the mother's fault, right? He hated her, but he didn't blame her. Sure, maybe if she'd spent less time caught up in the booze and more time on him things would have turned out differently. But there were too many other factors in his perfect storm.

Somewhere in America Joe had been gifted the same fate. A new identity, sentenced to the juvenile system until he turned eighteen. It was probably west coast, or Middle America. It would have been somewhere far, far away from Florida. The judge had been clear they needed to be separated, as far away from each other as possible...forever. Something for which David was thankful. The courts hadn't been one hundred percent sure in the end who was the leader, but they'd clearly suspected David. Joe came from a good home. His mother a teacher, his father a plumber. They were almost middle class. About to move into a nicer part of town. They'd even managed to pay for a lawyer, and hide the fact that Joe had been expelled from three schools. Unless the expulsions had been lies, Joe boasting to David about what a bad boy he was. Instead, they had an expert witness present stats on juvenile violence

and its link with socioeconomic status, with broken homes. And guess who was from the broken home? The lower socioeconomic status? Of course they'd done it so sensitively: *Poor David/Tony, but our Joe was the one who got swept away. Unable to jump off the runaway train.* Joe the leader? No, it couldn't have been him. He had fine, upstanding parents and no risk factors. The court had fallen for it...except the judge did sentence Joe to six years in juvie, so maybe she'd seen through the charade all along. By the end, even David wasn't sure of his role. His memory of those few minutes was a distorted mess. But this was how it came across to him in court: Tony, blah, blah, blah, Tony, blah, blah, blah. Tony, Tony, Tony. Tony (David) whose father was a drunk and beat them then left, Tony whose mother lost herself in the bottle long ago, Tony who'd already been caught shoplifting, skipping school. Tony, the master manipulator who'd groomed the poor, unsuspecting Joe. Tony who'd come up with the idea. Tony who'd struck the first blow, maybe all the blows. Tony who'd had such a hold over Joe that Joe had lost his own sense of right and wrong, caught up in Tony's agenda. Tony's evil.

David closed his eyes. Opened them.

Bright gave him a nod, his eyes still burning shame into David. The look behind those eyes: *Once a killer, always a killer.*

'You know why I'm here.'

'Yup.'

Bright opened the back of the van. 'Hop in.' His hand rested on his holster, like he was expecting David to revert to form at any moment — or maybe it was just second-nature, or training.

'How long will we be? My wife...'

'Most likely won't be up for another half hour or an hour and we'll have you back by then.'

Bright knew their routines. Knew what time Susan normally woke up. David didn't like that, narrowed his eyes. What could he expect? Of course they kept tabs on him. In some bizarre game of fate, David represented a big monetary investment. Six years in a juvenile residential facility, two new identities, lifetime monitoring. Sure, he'd had a year to get on his feet financially at eighteen, but over time he'd cost the government resources and money.

David stepped into the back of the van and buckled up, ambivalent to his sweat covering government-issue upholstery. Bright tossed a bottle of water into the air and David just managed to catch it, surprised by Bright's momentary kindness.

'Thanks.' He opened the bottle, guzzled nearly all of it. He never took water on his runs but he rehydrated as soon as he arrived home.

Bright started the car and pulled out. 'So, you know Jamal King?'

'Know of him, but I've never met the boy. His brother DeShawn is one of my clients at the Centre.' Bright probably knew all this, but it was how law enforcement liked to play. David decided how much he disclosed, but the implication was that Bright would catch him out if he didn't tell the 'whole truth and nothing but the truth'. David knew how to play the game. Had lots of experience playing.

'And the brother? What's he like?'

David shrugged, took another slug of water. 'Capable of violence, but also capable of kindness. And love...and he loves Jamal.'

'So you don't think he did it?'

'No.' Bright wasn't treating David like the prime suspect. Good. Still, didn't mean anything with Feds...it could all be part of Bright's game. Get David relaxed, make him feel like it's almost a collegial chat, then bam!

'What about the others? Anyone at the Centre capable of this?'

'Well we don't know what 'this' is. Has Jamal run off, been kidnapped, been killed?'

Bright glanced at David in the rear-vision mirror. 'Let's assume the latter. For argument's sake.'

David squeezed his eyes shut, pushing the flashbacks away. 'I've been thinking about it all night. There's one kid I think might lash out at someone other than his parents.' Often it was the parents who copped it. More likely with kids in their twenties or thirties, but sometimes with teens. Juvenile homicide — mostly gang disputes or teens killing one or both of their parents.

'Go on.'

David paused. He wouldn't tell the cops last night, so why should he tell Bright? He hesitated. Thought some more on confidentiality, his duty. The best way forward. It *was* different with Bright. The cops thought they were talking to local youth worker, David Story, Bright knew he was talking to a killer.

'I'm not saying it's him, but I've been worried about Teddy Ryan. He's angrier than the rest...his situation at home is pretty bad.'

'Lots of kids have a miserable home life...but they don't all kill.' Bright's eyes bored into David. An accusation. A reminder.

David's home life had been miserable. David had killed.

He swallowed hard. 'Teddy reminds me of me. And that doesn't bode well.'

Bright raised his eyebrows. 'No. You're not exactly the best role model.'



‘I wasn’t then, but I am now.’ David rested his forearms on his thighs. He *was* a good role model now. ‘We just going to drive around?’

‘For the moment. I’ve got a safe house lined up if I think we need more time.’

David read between the lines...more time meant if Bright thought David was involved in the kid’s disappearance. At least Bright hadn’t gone straight there, wasn’t already shining the spotlight in his eyes. He’d mellowed over the past few years. And maybe the stats helped. WITSEC had a good rehabilitation rate.

‘Any other thoughts about the missing kid?’ Bright asked.

‘The home. I hope the police look there.’

‘I’m sure they will. Lots of violence?’

‘Dad’s in jail, Mum turns tricks and drinks...I’m not sure how much. DeShawn has hinted, but never said outright. The boyfriend is violent, and her pimp. It’s possible one or both of them did something to Jamal, accidentally or on purpose, and now they’re covering it up.’

‘People are sick.’

David gulped. ‘I know.’

Silence.

‘So how’ve you been, David?’

Not the innocent question it seemed.

‘Okay.’ He had brief moments when Parker wasn’t in his thoughts, moments that had lengthened when he met Susan. But he could never really be ‘happy’. Then again, who was? The world seemed unhappy now. Dragged down by the politicians, the horror stories on the news, superficial obsessions like celebrity and social media. And evil. Sometimes David could see the devil’s work around him. Or maybe it was just the tools of the devil — drugs and guns. A world gone mad, gone bad.

Happiness?

Each time David felt a whisper of happiness he’d come crashing down. He’d remind himself how undeserving he was, how disgusting it was that he’d let himself forget and enjoy a moment, even briefly.

‘Does your wife know?’

David closed his eyes, opened them again. Bright’s eyes on him in the rear-view mirror. ‘No. I don’t want to tell her, ever. Besides, I know telling, even her, is against your rules.’

Bright hesitated. ‘Everyone has secrets from their spouse. Everyone.’

But a whole life? ‘So what’s going to happen? With me and this investigation?’

‘At this stage, nothing. We’ll be maintaining your cover, your identity. Which means neither the police nor the FBI will know about your past. I’m sure they’ll want to talk to you — they already have — but it will be in the standard course of the investigation, not as someone who’s been involved in a child abduction before.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Your true identity, capabilities, will hold.’

True identity? Sometimes he felt like ‘David’ was his true identity and the first twelve years was just a horrible dream. A nightmare he’d awoken from.

At least his life wasn’t going to be bulldozed around him. He’d worked hard to get to this point — to at least feel like he was doing something to help young kids, and maybe to help society. It could never atone for his sins, but it was something. He shared his knowledge with the kids, tried to help them. “And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” *Hebrews 13:16* He must continue to sacrifice himself for his kids. Yet they must never know about his true past. It would undo it all.

And then there was Susan. He’d dragged her into this. He had no right. He’d pay for it eventually. Somehow. How could he have been so selfish? So foolish? The knowledge of who she was *really* married to would destroy her. He shuddered.

Bright continued. ‘We’re going to look at the case file ourselves, unofficially. But we don’t need to disclose what our interest is or why. Sure, there’ll be questions, but we won’t be providing any answers.’

David didn’t like the sound of that. The cops and FBI would wonder what the US Marshalls were doing around the case. The logical leap would come virtually instantly: someone close to the case was in witness protection. Mostly WITSEC was for criminals turned witnesses to save their asses. But for David they’d used the system to hide Tony Moretti and Joe Simpson, to delete them for good. It was only in rare cases, cases like David’s, that the Marshalls provided protection and relocation for offenders who hadn’t turned witnesses. Either way, the investigators would assume the ‘witness’ the US Marshalls were protecting was a possible offender, and living in the area. And that would make them curious. Not good. He’d worked hard to construct this life of his. Even if it was a lie. A house of cards that could tumble down at any moment.

‘Won’t they get suspicious? Want to know why?’ David asked.

‘Sure. But so what? We don’t answer to them. WITSEC is our baby, no one else’s business.’

‘But...’ David trailed off. Nothing else to say.

‘I’ll be in town for a bit, though.’

It probably wasn't Bright's first time in town. How often had Bright or someone else watched him? Agent Bright knew when Susan got up. Obviously knew that David went for an early-morning run every morning. He'd been waiting...discretely, but waiting nonetheless.

'So you'll be investigating me?'

'I'll be doing my job. Making sure your true identity is never revealed, that you don't fuck up.' He paused. 'But for my own peace of mind, I'll be checking your story.' A pause, then: 'A kid is missing.'

David gave a nod. It was actually damn reasonable. Bright had mellowed. He'd often wondered why Bright had chosen WITSEC — he seemed so driven by justice that David had thought the FBI or police would have been a better fit for him.

Bright pulled the car over and David realised he was just around the corner from his house.

Bright killed the engine. 'I know...I know you've been doing good. But I've still got to—'

'I understand.'

Bright opened the door and walked around to the van's side door.

On the bitumen David hesitated, unsure whether to shake Bright's hand. Somehow over the years the dynamic between them had shifted. The ground felt uneasy. He gave a nod instead and started walking.

'David?'

David turned around.

'You're doing a good thing down at that Centre. Keep it up.'

David managed a smile. So that was it. The Centre. Bright must have been keeping close tabs on him, had heard that he really was doing good nowadays. That was as close as he was going to get to Bright's approval, and the half-smile was as close as David could get to show his relief. So many people that David had to prove himself to — still. Even after all these years he wanted Bright and everyone else to know, to realise, that he'd truly reformed. That he was a good man who'd done the most horrible, despicable thing as a child but that he'd turned over a new leaf. A new life. Maybe he didn't have to be defined by his past. Forgiveness.

\*\*\*

Walter Bright. Agent Walter Bright. Walt, I like to call him. Good man. Believe me, I've tried to find some dirt, some rotting excrement clinging to the man. But he's a saint. Clean as a

whistle as they say, as you'd say. You'd think, after all these years some of the darkness would have seeped under his skin, into his soul. To rot the flesh, the heart, the mind. But no. The man's a damn island. Freaking freak show. Lord, forgive me for I have sinned...no, not Walt. He's never sinned. Well, maybe, some minor transgressions that's not even worth mentioning. Like I imagine him cheating on his wife (in thought, not deed, of course). But even that seems a stretch with this guy. This freak of nature. It confounds me, really. Frustrates me. I don't like 'good'. Don't like 'saints'. I mean, let's be honest here, boring as all beep. Yeah, you know what I'm saying. Don't make me say it. Wink if you got that. Or raise your hand. Whatever...

Anyway...

Gotta love a good conversation starter. 'Anyway'...one of the best words in the English language. Duplicitous. Anyway. I gotta say I kind of like Walt. As much as someone like me can like a man like Walt. That holier than thou approach gets kind of old (like I said, boring as beep), but still. Respect. You know what I'm saying? Chest-thumping, respect. R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Yeah, you know what I'm saying.

Back to Walt. Agent Walt Bright. You know he hates David/Tony, right? I mean a man like him, a man like David? The constant battle between good and evil. It's in their DNA. Sure, there's a truce at the moment. That's fine. Cool. Whatever. But how long can it last? With a young boy at the heart of it all? Poor Jamal...doesn't your heart just go out to the little-un. Yup. Broken, crushed. Somewhere.

Dead you ask? Why should I tell you? I see all, know all, but I don't have to tell all. Just shootin' the breeze ... all those whisperin' breezes and butterflies David remembers down in the deep south.

I'm a tease. Yes, that can be your next clue. I'm a mother-beeping handsome time travelling know-it-all tease.

Go!

## Chapter 6

As destructive as life,  
As healing as death;  
An institutioner of strife,  
Just as prone to bless.  
It is all that is good,  
Yet with an evil trend;  
As it was the beginning of things,  
It can also be the very end.

He came around the corner and noticed a car he didn't recognise a few doors down from his house. As he jogged past he looked in, made eye contact with the driver, but didn't stop or show any recognition. The Marshalls were on him. There'd probably be someone parked out his front door 24/7 from now on, and now it was this guy's turn.

He opened the front door just after 7am.

'David?' Susan's voice trailed into the hallway.

'Yup.' He headed for the direction of her voice and the kitchen. 'You're up early.'

She put the coffee filter into the dripolator. 'I had a terrible sleep.' She put her hand to her head. 'Too much to drink.'

David laughed, put his arms around her and kissed her forehead. 'Go back to bed. Get some sleep.'

She scrunched up her face. '*You* should get some sleep. You left before five-thirty this morning.'

'I didn't sleep so well, either.' He stared out the sliding doors. Imagined a child, Jamal, or maybe a child that Susan and he could have, running across the deck, disappearing into the greenery. Or maybe it was Parker. Parker, alive.

'That kid?'

David clenched, every muscle on the alert, simultaneously ready for action and closing down. *That* kid...

'Jamal?'

David squeezed the breath through his teeth. *That kid*. He'd thought of Parker, not Jamal. Thought for a second she knew.

'I can't stop thinking about him, and his family.' Not a lie. It was nice to be able to tell your wife the truth once in a while.

'You should go over to their house today. See if the brother wants to talk to you.'

David hesitated. A house call? Not normally in the Centre's repertoire. Then again, nothing was normal. Maybe he should go over, offer his support to DeShawn and the rest of

his family. Make sure the mum's boyfriend wasn't going too ballistic and taking it out on the kids. Besides, the boyfriend was the most likely culprit, so maybe a home visit was a good place to start. If the lens ever did come onto David, it would help if he had a better idea of where the risks in Jamal's life actually lay.

David leaned against the counter. 'Maybe I will go over. See how they're doing.'

Susan moved closer to David, went up on her tip-toes to give him a kiss. He bent down until their lips met. She lingered, drew the kiss out, and David responded.

'Maybe we should both go back to bed.' Susan ran her hands up his thigh.

David groaned but shook his head. 'I'm too sweaty. Besides, we don't want to wake Patricia.'

'We can be quiet.' Susan took his hand and put it around her waist.

S-E-X. The three-letter word. Sex was difficult for David. Pleasure. Something he didn't deserve.

'David, it's been ages.' Her voice was quiet, concerned.

It had been exactly nine days. Probably a lot for newlyweds. Sometimes he accepted he needed to do things to appear normal. Perhaps sex was one of them.

'Let me shower first.' David went up to their ensuite and turned the taps on extra hot. He'd only been in for a few seconds before the shower door opened and Susan joined him.

\*\*\*

He blinked. Eyes open. Awake. They'd had sex in the shower, then were relaxing on the bed after. He couldn't believe he'd actually fallen asleep. He glanced at his watch — 10am. How had that happened? Nearly two hours of quietness in his head. If Patricia wasn't here he would have dressed and slipped downstairs without waking Susan, but he didn't feel comfortable heading downstairs to spend time with someone he'd only just met. Way too socially taxing. Not to mention the fact that she was still trying to place him. Trying to marry up his image with that vague memory of one of the boys who killed Parker.

He gently shook Susan, whispering in her ear. 'Susan. Susan, it's ten o'clock.'

She moaned and rolled onto her back. 'Mmm?'

'It's ten. We should go down in case Patricia's up.'

Susan did a fast double-blink. 'Oh crap, we fell back to sleep?'

'Yup.' He kissed her shoulder and then got up and pulled on some shorts, a T-shirt and sandals.

Downstairs Patricia was up, a cup of coffee propped on her lap, but still in her PJs. 'Morning. Helped myself to coffee.' She held up her cup.

'Great.' Susan seemed relieved. 'Sorry we're just up. David went for his usual jog at some ungodly hour and then we fell back to sleep.' She headed to the coffee machine and poured out two cups.

'It's Saturday morning...and I certainly don't expect you to wait on me.' She gave Susan a wink.

'Thanks.' Susan gave David his coffee and then collapsed onto the sofa. 'I definitely should have taken it slower on the booze and poor David was thinking about that little boy all night.'

Susan nodded. 'Me too. His poor family.'

David didn't want to think about it. He couldn't go there. Based on what DeShawn said, his mum wasn't going to be in the running for mother of the year, but that didn't mean she didn't love her kids. Wouldn't be suffering now. Love was funny like that. Take the object away, and suddenly it seems more precious.

'I might go over there later. See if there's anything I can do. Unless...' he glanced at Susan and Patricia, 'we've probably got plans, right?'

'Well, I think this takes precedence over exploring some of the local lakes and walks.' Susan took a sip of coffee.

'You two should still go. It's been so long since you've seen each other.' He looked at Susan. 'And maybe stop at that new restaurant, have a glass of wine. Hair of the dog. It could do you good.'

'Maybe. But it seems crass — with that boy's fate hanging in the air.'

David didn't want Susan dwelling on Jamal. It was a wormhole best left closed. Besides, Patricia seemed to recognise him yesterday and he didn't want her linking David to a missing toddler. Already it was dicey — was the link in her subconscious working its way into conscious thought? He needed them distracted.

'I'll tell you what.' He placed his coffee cup on the table. 'I'll go to DeShawn's house now, and then we can go exploring and out for lunch. Patricia should enjoy a bit of countryside while she's away from the big city. Even with everything else that's going on.'

Susan glanced at Patricia and then nodded. 'Okay. If you're sure.'

David gave her a kiss on the forehead. 'I'm sure.' He grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl and headed out.

\*\*\*

Susan stood in the kitchen, feeling dazed.

‘Hello? Earth to Susan?’

Susan took a breath, shook her head a little. ‘Sorry.’

‘You were miles away.’

‘Yeah.’

Patricia put her arm around Susan. ‘Everything okay?’

‘I’m just worried...about David. And Jamal.’

‘David’s close to the kids at the Centre, huh?’

‘Yeah, that and...’ She trailed off.

‘What?’

Susan didn’t want to betray David’s trust, his need for privacy, but she needed to talk to someone about it. At least part of it.

‘David...David suffers from depression.’

‘Oh, honey. I didn’t know.’ Patricia rubbed Susan’s back. ‘Bad?’

‘He’s okay at the moment, but...’

Patricia nodded. ‘You’re worried this will set him off. Affect him more than it would most?’

Susan let out a rush of air. It felt so good to say it. Or rather have Patricia understand and voice it for her.

‘Yes.’ She leaned against the counter top.

‘Is he on medication? Is it under control?’

‘Yes and yes. But I’m still worried. What if this triggers him?’

‘Things are good between you, right?’

Susan nodded. ‘But it’s not that simple. A happy marriage doesn’t make depression just disappear.’ She snapped her fingers.

‘Sorry...I know. You’re right. But it must help, right?’

‘I think a little.’ She didn’t want to say what she was thinking: *I hope I make him happy. Give him something to live for.* She saw it all the time at work. Families that thought they’d done something wrong, that their relative’s mental health issues were their fault. And in some cases certainly a very difficult childhood could be a trigger or the root of the depression. But lots of people from happy, healthy families also had depression. It was so much more complex than people realised.

‘I know I’ve caught you at a bad time, but even so you guys seem great together. David’s nice. I like him a lot.’ Patricia put her coffee cup down.



‘He’s great, right?’ Susan felt a little pathetic that she needed the reassurance.

‘Yes.’

Susan bit into her lip a little. ‘Do you find him...guarded?’

Patricia stared out the window for a bit, giving the question her consideration. ‘I think he’s shy. And private, yes. But I can also see he’s gentle and kind. And I can see how much he loves you. The way he looks at you...’ She gives Susan a wink.

‘You think?’ Susan did feel his love, see the love in his eyes, but because she also felt a distance between them at times it was nice to hear that an outsider could see closeness.

‘Of course.’ Patricia furrowed her brow. ‘Are you seriously worried he doesn’t love you? Is there something else?’

Susan shook her head. ‘It’s just...sometimes he feels so far away.’

‘Sounds like a lot of men I know. You know what they’re like.’

Susan took a sip of coffee. ‘Yeah, I know.’ It was true, many women felt and communicated at a much deeper level than men. And they hadn’t been married for long. They were really still getting to know each other.

‘There is one other thing I’d love your thoughts on...’

‘Shoot.’

‘David...well, he doesn’t have a very high sex drive. At least he doesn’t seem to want to have sex with me very much. Not compared to guys I’ve been with in the past.’

‘That would be affected by the depression, yes? Or the anti-depressants maybe?’

‘Both can lower sex drive. But we’re newlyweds.’

‘That doesn’t change how depression or the meds would affect him.’

Susan managed a smile. ‘You’re right.’

‘See. You can call me Dr Warsawski.’

Susan raised her eyebrows. ‘You’d actually make a good shrink.’

‘I wouldn’t go that far.’ She pushed off the kitchen bench. ‘I’m going to shower. And when David gets back we’ll go exploring and out for lunch. It’ll do him good not to think about that poor boy for a few hours.’ Patricia gave Susan a hug and then went upstairs.

Susan was left sipping her coffee hoping Patricia was right. David loved her. They had a good relationship. And yes, he was deeply affected by Jamal’s disappearance but he’d be okay. She’d make sure of it.

\*\*\*

It was just after 10.30am when David arrived at the King house. What had happened to Jamal? Every option seemed horrible.

Jamal lost somehow...wandered off? Seemed unlikely that someone hadn't found him yet. Unless he'd injured himself — fallen down a stormwater drain or something. God knows kids have died that way before.

Kidnapped? Stranger abduction would most likely mean death by now. Some insane ninety-nine percent chance. Maybe he was locked in someone's basement or already in a shallow grave, discarded like an unwanted toy.

Or maybe violence at home spilled over, got out of control, and somehow that poor boy died, knowing violence and pain from the people who were supposed to love and protect him.

No...all the paths led to pain, disaster. Lost was the only option with a glimmer of hope. He'd wake up, start yelling from wherever he was. Someone would find him.

David shuddered. Hope was for deluded fools.

As he pulled up he saw the news vans parked out front. Most were local news, but there was also a van from CBS. Not good. David's face couldn't show up anywhere. He looked different now, of course, but if you looked closely enough, or were familiar with the face of *that* twelve-year-old boy, the connection could be made. He kept driving and went past the house, and around the side. Would the journalists be camped out the back? Know about the old laneway access to the house? David only knew about it because DeShawn had told him about sneaking in late at night, trying to avoid his mum's boyfriend's rage. Still, when he found the little walkway and realised he was about to step into DeShawn's back yard it felt weird, an invasion of privacy. He pulled out his phone, dialled DeShawn's number.

He answered after two rings. 'Hello.' His voice was ragged. But what had David expected?

'Hi DeShawn, it's David from the Centre. How you doing?'

'Hey, doc.' Silence.

David waited, but when nothing more was forthcoming he said, 'Listen, I came by to see you but the press...'

'Yeah, it crazy. Wish they was out looking for Jamal instead of here.'

David imagined the swarm of vultures out front searching the streets instead of waiting for a glimpse of grief, of drama — they'd be a powerful force. DeShawn was a smart boy, living on the fringes but with an intellect that would have taken him far if he was middle-class. With a bit of luck it still might pull him out of Hammett. You should never underestimate kids in either direction — their propensity for kindness, their propensity for violence. That's what had happened straight after Parker, when they were looking for the perpetrators. No one could believe it was two twelve-year-old boys. But the evidence had been too great.

He pulled himself back to the here and now.

‘I remembered you talking about that old walkway...I’m out the back now. If you want to talk in person, I’m here.’

‘Okay, man. I’ll come out.’

The line went dead.

David headed into the property, climbing through the broken-down, wire fence. He was bigger than DeShawn and his brothers, and it was a tight fit. By the time he’d scrambled through, DeShawn was standing in front of him. The small back yard was in desperate need of some lawn mower action. The grass was ankle-height, with weeds interspersed every foot or so, giving the yard a wild look — the garden was winning the battle, and had been well before Jamal’s disappearance. Down the back was a rusted shed, its door half propped open because the metal was warped and angled to one side. The fence line was peppered with junk — a few coils of chicken wire, a broken chair, an old toilet, and planks of wood. Some of it was leaning precariously on the wire fence and posts, helped along by gravity and the gentle slope of the property. The fence was already angled sharply toward the back and the railway line, soon it would fall. An image of the broken toilet bowl hurtling down the side and past a passenger train almost brought a smile to David’s face. He adjusted his gaze from the back of the yard toward the house and DeShawn. A narrow concrete path, weeds overgrown through all the cracks, led up to six concrete steps. The balustrade was more rust than paint, but it was straight, sturdy. The house was an old weatherboard, which hadn’t been painted in at least thirty years. The weatherboards were white and pink speckled, but David couldn’t work out which was the original colour and which had been painted over.

DeShawn was staring at David, red-rimmed eyes wide.

‘Hi, DeShawn. I won’t stay long. I just wanted to see how you’re doing. See if there’s anything I can do.’

David heard swearing from inside, a male voice.

DeShawn closed his eyes. ‘Sorry. It’s pretty intense in there. Reg has come in from searching and Mum’s furious with him. Say he should still be out there.’

Reg was the boyfriend slash pimp. A real piece of work, from what DeShawn had said.

David was supposed to be a mentor and leader for these boys so why hadn’t he brought them all together to search for Jamal? They should be out there, walking the line, maybe even helping with a door knock. One big problem...it could expose him, put out his image in association with a missing little boy. What if Parker’s parents saw it? Or David’s old school friends. Or even Joe. No, he had to stay hidden at all costs. But perhaps Noreen could be the

public face of the Centre on this one. It didn't *have* to be David. Truth be told, a female matronly Black presence would be better, more appropriate.

'I'd invite you in, but...' DeShawn shrugged, looked back at the house. Raised voices ricocheted around the inside of the house and leaked out through the thin walls, a swear word littering the argument every third or fourth word.

David walked past DeShawn and sat on the porch step. DeShawn sat on the step two down, his back against the rusted railing.

'Have you been out looking?'

DeShawn nodded. 'Most the night.' He ran his fingers along the iron-red rust, bits of peeling off lime-green paint. 'No sign of the little shit.'

David recognised the defensiveness for what it was. 'I'll speak to Noreen and get her to organise some people from the Centre. We could look together.'

'Like a real community?' DeShawn rolled his eyes.

David snorted. 'Yeah. Even a dysfunctional community can come together for something like this. *Will* come together.' He'd seen it himself, except they'd come together against him. Against him and Joe.

He didn't like the memories. It was hard enough to keep them at bay normally, but when a missing kid was being shoved in his face? When that was what everyone was talking about?

David closed his eyes, took a breath. *Lord, give me strength.*

'Thanks, man. I...I don't know what I'm going to do if...'

David gave DeShawn's knee a tap, hoping to get the contact level right — so hard to do as a man with a fourteen-year-old boy. 'I know.'

They sat in silence for a bit. Then David asked what the police were saying.

'Feds now. They the ones asking all the questions. Making mum say it over and over again.' He paused, rubbed a stain on the knee of his jeans. 'Mum put Jamal down for his 'nap', DeShawn marked air quotes, 'and then lay down herself. In other words, she told Jamal to shut up and stay in our room while she had some asshole in there with her.' DeShawn stared at his feet. 'A trick...or...' He trailed off.

Or?

'You think your mum's having an affair?'

He shrugged. 'Dunno. Reg'd kill her.' He looked up, fixated on the train line below. 'She be crazy, but God I hope not that crazy.'

From what DeShawn had said in their sessions, his mum was a wreck. Chances were she didn't know what she was doing half the time or it was part of her self-destructive cycle.

Besides, a woman should never have to think the consequence of stepping out is murder. David thought about his own mum. She could have protected him, saved him but she never stood up for him. She was no match for his dad. It's true. But she could have tried. Should have done something. His mum could have packed him up and gone to live with his aunt. They could have run. But instead she stayed with the man who beat her up, and then her son. Why? It had been his dad who'd left in the end.

David's hand began to shake and he pushed it between his knees, using his leg muscles and knees to apply pressure to the bones in his hand. Distract him from thoughts of his own parents.

'Maybe this other man is offering her love...something it doesn't sound like she gets from Reg.' A boyfriend who pushes 'his woman' to sleep with other men for money.

DeShawn shook his head. 'Fucking crazy. No love's worth your life.'

'It depends.' David leaned against the railing too. 'I've seen it...what some people do and sacrifice for their kids, their husband or wife. Even now I bet your mum would give her life if Jamal was back.'

DeShawn raised his eyebrows. 'That's a stretch.'

David was silent for a bit. 'I know *you* would.'

DeShawn turned away, brushed his hand up against his face. A tear?

David continued. 'We never really know why people do things, DeShawn. Can never see into their heads, into their thoughts.'

'Ain't that the truth.'

'Have you told the FBI about the man? He could be involved.'

DeShawn raised an eyebrow.

David realised it was stupid as soon as he'd said it. Kids around here learn young that the police are the enemy. They don't tell them anything. Even when something like this is happening. Most households have a brother, cousin, nephew, uncle — someone — on parole or with an open warrant. Police don't help them with their problems, they hunt them down and arrest them. David even knew of young, first-time fathers who couldn't go to the hospital for their child's birth, in fear of being put into prison because of an open warrant for some minor offence. The American police lost the trust of African-Americans in this neighbourhood and others like it a long time ago. Or maybe they never had it. The 'war on drugs' and 'tough on crime' initiatives sound great. But put in their historical context, at a time when welfare was being cut, and when middle class African-Americans were moving out of the 'Black' neighbourhoods it meant the people left were facing poverty and poor Black neighbourhoods became ghettoised. Then there was the legal system, and what was happening

there. David had traced the history. Knew it was important for him to truly understand his kids and their situations. Incarceration rates in the US had grown exponentially and by the 2000s they were between five and nine times higher than incarceration rates in western European countries. ‘Business’ was booming, and much of the prison population was coming out of poor Black neighbourhoods. About sixty percent of male African-Americans who didn’t finish high school will be in jail by their mid-thirties. That included lots of David’s kids. And the ‘tough on crime’ campaign was tough on major crime, but it also targeted minor offences like prostitution, vagrancy, gambling and drug possession. In the 1980s, as the war on drugs took off and welfare support disappeared, African-Americans seeking ‘wages’ from the drug trade were arrested. In fact, the overall incarceration rates and high representation of Black men in prisons, coupled with the tough sentences for even minor crimes has been called by some experts and sociologists as the new form of racial oppression in America.

No wonder DeShawn didn’t want to tell the police or FBI anything. The system wasn’t there for him. Generations of poor African-Americans had been taught that.

‘Can’t tell anyone, anyways. What if Reg finds out....’ He looked up at the sky. ‘Mum’d be dead for sure.’

David let the silence hang for a bit, then said: ‘What do you think happened to Jamal? Do you think he’s okay?’

DeShawn closed his eyes. ‘I dunno. But the cops, the feds. They don’t seem hopeful.’

David gave a nod. He probably shouldn’t have asked that question...he knew the answer. Knew what people were capable of, even kids. And law enforcement knew that too. Saw it every day. Poor bastards.

‘Jamal just another Black kid to them. Whadda they care?’

It was later than David had planned by the time he turned into the driveway. But on the drive back home he’d managed to get a hold of Noreen and she was starting the ring around. At first Noreen thought it was strange David wasn’t involved — it was incongruent with his attitude towards the kids and the fact that for the most part he’d give up anything for them. But eventually she’d seen his point that a white male, new to the community, wasn’t going to work as well as a Black woman who’d lived in Hammett all her life. But he wasn’t sure yet what would be his excuse for not actually being there. He’d thought about using Patricia as an excuse, but it was too pathetic. Too incongruous with his beliefs. Noreen would know that. He might have to come down with a horrible cold...or something worse. He had to stay out of the spotlight. The media would report the Centre’s involvement. He could imagine one of those cheesy ‘community unites’ articles, complete with a picture. No, it was important he

was on the periphery. It wouldn't matter if his name got mentioned, but he needed to protect his face at all costs. For him, and Susan.

Susan and Patricia were ready as soon as he walked in the door. It was time to play perfect husband and tour guide.

'How did you go?'

He shrugged and went for the old but descriptive cliché. 'As well as can be expected, I guess.' David didn't want to talk about Jamal. It would only lead to thoughts of Parker. And he couldn't deal with flashbacks *and* be the consummate actor. 'You planned the route?' he asked Susan, even though he knew she would have.

'Of course.' She handed him a sandwich. 'You know you didn't eat breakfast, right?'

'I had a banana.' He took the sandwich and bit into it. Food was sustenance. Nothing more. But he smiled and told her it was delicious. Play the part, say the lines.

'Oh, and you got a delivery.' Susan leaned on the kitchen counter.

David finished his mouthful. 'On a Saturday?'

'DHL. Just an envelope. I put it on your desk.'

'Okay. Be back in a sec. Then we'll head off.' He made his way into the study, sandwich in hand. On top of his laptop was an envelope. He opened it. Inside was one piece of paper, with magazine cut-out letters.

*I know who you are.*

## Chapter 7

I may only be given but never bought.  
Sinners seek me but saints do not.

Two days, no leads, no breaks in Jamal's case — as far as he knew. If it looked dismal before it looked even more sinister now. The boy must be dead, surely. And the fact that Jamal hadn't been found — dead or alive — also probably ruled out the kids from the Centre. If foul play was involved, hiding the body, disposing of him, required a level of sophistication he couldn't align with the Centre's boys. David took the last few sips of his third morning coffee. Thinking about Jamal. He'd gotten through Patricia's weekend visit and kissed Susan goodbye an hour ago when she'd headed off to the hospital. David had tried to get on with life as normal in the past two days, while also actively helping in the background. He'd come up with an additional element of his reasoning to stay on the periphery — that in his role talking to the kids and knowing some of their secrets he didn't want to be pushed or compromised by the press in any way. Noreen was buying it, for the moment. Besides, the whole thing had amplified her mother-hen approach and she was working tirelessly to find Jamal. David knew it was dead or alive, and probably dead, but Noreen was convinced Jamal was alive — or maybe she was simply convincing herself. The lies people told themselves, and those around them, to cocoon their worlds. To function.

David drained the last of the coffee and was heading into the study for his bag when the doorbell rang. He stopped mid-stride, swivelled in the hallway.

He opened the door. On the threshold were detectives Saul and Parker and another man — clearly FBI.

'David, nice to see you again.' Saul held up his badge. 'Detectives Saul and Parker and this is Special Agent O'Brien from the Bureau.'

David gave them a nod. 'Hi. I was just about to leave for work. Can I call you later today?'

Saul's face was impassive. 'I'm afraid we need to talk to you now. At the station. You better ring the Centre and tell them you'll be late.'

'Oh...okay.' David kept his expression neutral. They loved to frighten you, to see your responses, *judge* your responses. He needed just the right amount of concern and lack of concern. Everything was about balance, walking that line. 'Any news on Jamal?'

'I'm afraid not.' Saul pushed his way into the house. 'I'll wait here while you get your things.'



‘Sure.’ David grabbed his work satchel from the study and slipped his keys and phone into one of the side pockets. He stared at the top desk draw, thinking about the note: *I know who you are*. It had filled his thoughts for the past two days. He vaguely thought about telling Saul and co about the letter, but then realised how preposterous that idea was. He came back into the hallway, caught the men having a snoop...looking at Susan and his romantic snaps, their décor. Judgements, judgements, judgements. Not to mention a lack of boundaries. Detective Parker was leaning close to a small silhouetted nude oil painting, close enough to see the individual brush strokes.

‘Let’s go,’ David said.

Saul gave a nod and Detective Parker pulled himself back.

Once they were in the car, David said: ‘So what did you want to talk to me about?’

‘About Jamal. But let’s wait until we get to the station.’

David’s stomach fell. They wanted it recorded. Part of the official police tapes. They either think he has key information or they suspect him. Either option was bad. What if they’d somehow figured out who he was? Could Bright have spilled it, despite his promise.

He wanted to call Willifred, ask for his help, but he pushed the child inside him away. He was a grown man, someone who helped kids heading down the wrong path. He didn’t need to call his metaphorical daddy.

\*\*\*

At the police station they led him to a small interview room. He accepted the soda they offered, his throat suddenly dry and parched despite the constant swallowing. Detective Parker thankfully disappeared and opposite David sat Detective Saul and Special Agent O’Brien.

Saul set the video recording equipment going, stated all the preliminary information: time and date, who was present.

David looked at the camera, his lips upturned ever so slightly in what he hoped was a normal acknowledgement of the camera’s presence rather than presenting himself as smug, or even psycho. Crap, it probably looked totally weird to smile at the camera. He should be sad. Concerned. Right? Is that what he’d feel if he was a regular guy who knew a missing kid?

‘Please state how you know of Jamal King, Mr Story.’

He was repeating himself, but he knew the drill. If he was actually a suspect, a person of interest, he could be asked the same questions in slightly different ways three, four, five, maybe even ten or more times. The hunt was on for inconsistencies. One slip up. His

responses at his house weren't formally recorded, rather his answers lay somewhere in Saul's or Parker's notes.

'I'm the youth worker at the Hammett Youth Centre. Through that I run individual sessions with lots of local boys and some girls, including Jamal's brother, DeShawn. I've never met Jamal, but I knew of him through DeShawn before he went missing.'

'What can you tell us about DeShawn?'

'He's a good kid. He's had some troubles and things are difficult at home, but he's smart and his head's screwed on. He just needs time and direction.'

'Direction?'

'I help the boys decode their often hectic lives.'

'Decode?'

'Make sense of it. At an intellectual and emotional level.' He took a sip of the soda, feeling more comfortable talking about his job at the Centre. In these discussions he could engage his intellect, not his emotions. 'A lot of the kids I see are smart kids, but their potential has been submerged, entombed really. They're weighed down by socioeconomic position and their environment in general.'

'In the slums?'

'For want of a better word, yes. We often talk about career paths and how they can get out of Hammett.'

'So you're a careers counsellor, too?'

'I'm trained as a youth worker. But I do talk to the kids about different job options, as well as their personal lives. Sometimes we talk about their families, sometimes drug and alcohol issues, peer group pressure, how they can improve their futures. It's different for everybody and can be different in each session. The kids usually decide what they want to talk about or we pick up where we left off last session. Sometimes I read aloud to them; some Elmore Leonard. They connect with that.'

'Why do they call you doc?'

David shrugged. 'I still correct them every now and again, but they all know I'm not a doctor, not a psychiatrist. I think it's just a bit of a joke for them. I'm one of them.'

'Yes, let's talk about that. A sealed juvie record. When we get that unsealed, what will we find?'

'You're getting it unsealed?' David kept his voice even, calm.

'Of course. Might be relevant to this case. You didn't by chance kidnap a kid, did you?'

David managed to force a hollow laugh. Could they really unseal his record? And was it the real one, or the fake one that was part of the David Story cover identity? No, they must be

talking about his fictional juvenile record. He needed to talk to Bright. He had Bright's number on his mobile — not under Bright's name of course, he knew how to cover his tracks.

He went for the cover story. 'You can get it unsealed if you want, but I've already told you what happened. I assaulted a kid. We got into a fight, I was bigger than him, angrier than him, and I went a little too far.'

'How far?'

'The kid wound up in hospital with a concussion and two broken ribs. I was sent to juvie, did twelve months there and came out the model citizen. American justice system at its finest.' David cursed at himself. What was he doing? Why antagonise them? He needed to pull his head in, get back under that radar. 'I realised that violence wasn't the answer. That it only made things worse. And I found God. Felt close to him.'

'And that's why you became a youth worker?' It was O'Brien who asked this time.

David tried to work out if he *knew*. If anyone knew his identity, it was more likely to be the fed, not the local cops. It was hard to read him from only a few words, but for the moment he seemed sincere. He wasn't looking at David like scum of the earth, like he was a killer. Not yet. Witness protection identities are *supposed* to be highly guarded secrets, even from federal law enforcement.

'That's right. I was lucky...it could have been worse. If I'd had a weapon...' He let the thought trail off. 'Or bad luck. I know of one kid who punched a class mate...but the other kid fell to the floor and smashed his head on a desk leg on his way down. Dead. Suddenly the charge wasn't assault, it was homicide. And I don't want that for my kids...at the Centre.'

O'Brien gave a nod. 'It's a noble cause.'

David's skin prickled. He did what he did to help others, yes, to stop them from taking the path he took, but he could hardly be called noble. Not after what he'd done. 'I don't see it that way.' He felt compelled to explain his body language, body language he was sure they'd notice if not on the spot then when some shrink or behavioural expert watched the video. A complicated game of chess. Strikes and counter strikes, misdirection.

'And your wife's a nurse?'

David felt his muscles tense, his need to protect Susan at all costs kicking in. 'That's right. And before you ask she's never met DeShawn or any of the kids from the Centre. I like to keep my personal and professional life separate.'

'Interesting.'

David bit back the 'why?'

'So I guess opposites didn't attract in your situation,' Saul said. 'Both you and Susan help others, in your different ways.'

David gave a nod. 'Guess so.'

'How did you meet Susan?'

David kept his body still, hopefully not rigid. 'Do you already know the answer to that question?'

O'Brien gave a wide grin. 'What do you think?'

That'd be a yes. David remembered reading in a book somewhere, fiction or non-fiction he wasn't sure, that in interrogations law enforcement should already know the answers to most of the questions. Strategy.

'I've suffered from depression on and off my whole life. Eighteen months ago things got bad, and I did something stupid.'

'Seems like you're always doing "something stupid".' O'Brien marked air quotes.

David took a breath, controlled his temper. 'Not always, Agent, just the twice.' The cover story, stick with the cover story.

'So, you were hospitalised after the suicide attempt and Susan was your nurse?'

'That's right. I asked her out, but she told me I had to get my life together first. And so I did. I had two things to live for — the kids, and Susan and what might be.' He thought about that moment of realisation. The guilt around the attempted suicide, the selfishness. The message to the kids? When things got hard it was okay to off yourself? He shuddered, not wanting to admit that he hadn't been able to see his way out of the black hole. Couldn't see, in that moment of time, what a stupid thing it was to do. He'd thought about suicide many times before — planned it, even. But that time he'd followed through on the plans. He'd forgotten that eventually the fog lifts, even if it doesn't disappear. For him, the fog would probably never dissipate fully. The weight of his actions, his past, was too momentous. But now he had others relying on him — Susan. And the kids at Hammett Youth Centre.

'Must have happened pretty fast?'

David blinked, stumbling out of his memories. Agent O'Brien. Was he talking about the suicide attempt or the romance and marriage? 'You mean Susan?'

O'Brien nodded.

'It did. I rang her a month after I was discharged. We started dating, and soon twice a week became every day.' He smiled. 'And then I proposed.' He smiled again, then pulled himself up. Why was he sharing all this with some fed? He shook his head. 'Why are you asking about this? About me?'

'You're a person of interest.' O'Brien leaned in, eyes intent.

'Well, that's ridiculous. I never even met Jamal.'

Silence. Then Saul said: 'Maybe DeShawn was just that little bit old for you.'

David scrunched up his face. ‘You’re sick. I’d never...that’s...disgusting.’

‘Why does a man like you surround himself with young kids?’

Here we go. David resisted the urge to shake his head. ‘You know why. I’ve told you why. I don’t want them to end up like me.’ Ain’t that the truth. ‘I’m trying to help them. I’d never...’ He shuddered involuntarily. Disgusted. Offended. Ironic, really. He was *so* offended by these allegations, but the men sitting opposite him didn’t know the truth. Didn’t know he’d taken a life. The ultimate sin. He gave O’Brien a steely look. ‘I’m not a person of interest. I’m on the periphery, and you’re wasting time.’

O’Brien didn’t skip a beat. ‘We can manage the team’s resources. Thanks for the input, though.’

David sighed. ‘DeShawn mentioned there might be another man in his mum’s life.’

‘You mean other than the husband in jail, the boyfriend and all her tricks?’

‘It’s easy to judge when you’re sitting pretty, Agent O’Brien.’ Not that David wasn’t partial to a little judgement. But in some cases a mother turning tricks showed love, that she was doing all that she could, the only thing she could, to keep a family afloat. It was better than the kids of junkies and the kids who saw domestic violence every day of their lives. But in fairness to O’Brien, DeShawn’s mum had failed in too many areas to let her off the hook completely. She was a drinker, did tricks in the house, with a three-year-old nearby. And her boyfriend was violent. The whole situation was a bomb waiting to explode, to take out everyone in the vicinity in the mushroom cloud. An explosive ripple effect.

‘Don’t give me the high and mighty social worker attitude, David. Isn’t that why you keep your personal life and professional life separate? To shield Susan from these sorts of details?’

David hesitated. ‘Yes.’ He didn’t need to add any more.

Silence again.

‘We are looking into all the men in Rosie King’s life, and we’ll follow up on this other male.’

David gave a nod.

‘We also want to take a look at the kids again. From the Centre. We’ve interviewed most of them—’

David took a breath.

O’Brien held his hand up. ‘—with their legal guardians or a state representative present, of course.’

‘And?’

O’Brien glanced at Saul.

Saul tapped his pen on the table. 'In my opinion they're all capable of violence, but I have my doubts about this.'

David gave a nod. He agreed.

'I'm not so sure.' O'Brien leant back in his chair, spread his legs a little. 'Violent dispositions and an opportunity...'

David shook his head. 'Come on, Agent. You really think any of the teenagers you met could carry this off? Without leaving a trail of blood...' Blood. Little boy blue, covered in red.

'I see the pessimist coming out in you, David. You're assuming bloodshed.' O'Brien was fishing.

'Pessimist or realist. I know you're thinking it too.' He looked to them. Silence. Admission.

He let the silence hang for a bit, then said. 'Look I've told you everything I know. I don't believe it's any of the kids at the Centre.'

'Because kids aren't capable of this?' O'Brien leaned forward, still on the attack.

David didn't answer. He knew first-hand what kids were capable of. He didn't want the pause to sit for long. 'I just think you're barking up the wrong tree. Look at Mrs King's clients. See what you find there. Not the boys.'

'Again, thanks for your input on how we should do our jobs.' O'Brien stood up, sending the chair skittering backwards.

David hid his relief. It was over.

'Thanks for your time, David.'

'Mr Story.' Saul gave a nod and also stood. The more submissive or the local cops kowtowing to the fed? Or maybe he'd just had enough. O'Brien wasn't worth the fight.

David stood. 'I want to help, I do. But I can't see anyone from the Centre being involved in this. Those kids are trying to get out Hammett. That's why they come to the Centre.'

'Well, this is one way out.' O'Brien gave a humourless wink.

David winced. 'They're trying to get out of Hammett and everything it represents.'

'Mmm....' O'Brien strode to the door and was gone.

Saul stared at the door, slightly puzzled, then returned his gaze to David. 'Thanks again, Mr Story.'

David gave a nod and headed out. As soon as he was in the car he rang Bright.

'Bright, it's me.'

'Yup, I know.'

So he had his number programmed in. Great.

‘I’m at the police station. Just finished being interviewed.’

‘Know that, too. I’m across the road.’

David turned around, searching. Down a side street he could see the tip of a black car.

‘Let’s go to the safe house. I’ll text you the address.’

F...he nearly swore for the first time in fifteen or so years. Another interview-slash-interrogation?

‘Have I got a choice?’

‘At this stage you’re still not a suspect in my book, David. The safe house is for your privacy.’

David blew some air out pursed lips. ‘Guess I’ll tell Noreen the police questioning went longer than I expected, huh?’

‘Good plan.’

Bright hung up. No goodbyes. No terms of endearment. Surprise, surprise. Less than ten seconds later David’s phone beeped. The address.

David closed his eyes and pictured Susan’s face. Imagined her leaning over a patient, smiling, making them feel better. Was it stupid and foolish that he craved that...craved Susan making him feel better? God he was pathetic.

\*\*\*

The safe house was only ten minutes’ drive away, halfway between David’s house and the Centre. No coincidence. Bright was too smart for coincidences.

David pulled into the driveway of a rundown weatherboard. Non-descript. Blend-worthy. Looked just like every other rundown house in Hammett. Any of the Centre’s kids could live here. Cold in winter, hot in summer. Damned any which way. It was nothing like David and Susan’s place on what was vaguely the ‘good’ side of town. David wasn’t sure whether to be impressed or bothered by Bright’s professionalism. His attention to detail.

Bright’s black Buick was in the driveway. Not the van. How many cars did the US Marshall Service have? And in Hammett? David killed the engine. Closed his eyes. Sat for a few seconds. Then realised Bright was probably watching him, always the observer. David took a deep breath. Pushed his mouth into more of an upward tilt than a straight line. Even for Bright, someone who knew the worst, it was still a show, still a charade.

David opened the car door, an old man who’d lived too hard, seen too much. At only twenty-eight. He tried to prepare himself. Would Bright be better or worse than O’Brien and

Saul? He left his satchel in the car but took out his phone. The Centre could ring, or maybe Susan. Or maybe the miracle call would come: 'We've found Jamal. He's fine.' He sighed. *Grow up, David. As if.*

He was about to close the car door when he grabbed the DHL envelope. Bright should know. He couldn't tell the cops or FBI but he could tell Bright.

There was no sign of Bright but he walked up the stairs, assuming he was inside. Probably waiting for him, observing him somehow. Looking out the window, or perhaps they'd set up a high-tech surveillance system for the beat-up house. Was David getting paranoid? An image flashed of police inside his house, searching while Susan was at work and he was at the police station. What would they find? Not much. David was always careful. Very careful. Even keeping the DHL envelope on him was a level of security. If they really suspected him it was more likely they'd get a search warrant for his car than his house. They'd look for blood in the trunk first, then...any sign of Jamal. A T-shirt, maybe a teddy. Teddy, little boy blue, covered in red. David pushed the images away. In the past, the horrible past. Not him now.

And as for the police...he wasn't really a person of interest. That was all a lie, a front. Made to spook him, made to 'force' him into giving up one of the kids. But he really didn't think it was one of them. Sure, he knew all about the dark underbelly waiting for the perfect storm to rear its head, but not his kids. No, he'd worked too hard. Hadn't he?

For the first time he started to doubt. Was he one of those people who only saw what they wanted? Who created their own fantasy world to avoid the realities around them?

David knocked on the door.

It opened within less than two seconds. David noticed the peephole...so Bright would have been looking at him.

Bright stood back. 'Come in.'

David walked in, handed Bright the DHS envelope.

'What's this?'

'You tell me.'

Bright closed the door, motioned to the room to his right, and started opening the envelope.

David hauled himself into the house's living room, which only held two basic chairs and a small, square table. He sat down. Waited.

'Well?'

Bright sat down opposite him, slid the letter back across the table. 'I don't like it. There are still only three people who know your location, your name. As far as I know.'



‘Willifred makes four. But there’s no way it’s him.’

Bright shook his head. ‘You were supposed to leave everything behind. Including him.’

David stared out the window. ‘Not possible.’

Bright crossed his legs. ‘I’ve known for years you’re still in contact with Willifred. He looked very sharp at your wedding.’

‘For Christ’s sake, is nothing private?’

Bright paused. ‘For you...no.’

David closed his eyes. Fair call. ‘So, is this a bluff?’ David wiggled the envelope.

Bright clasped his hands together. ‘I don’t see how? Some random person couldn’t write that and hit on this kind of goldmine.’

‘Goldmine...if you look at it like that.’

‘There are a lot of reporters in town. You been careful?’

David scowled. ‘Of course. I’ve set up a woman at the Centre as the public face. And made sure I haven’t been captured by one photographer or news camera.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Ninety-nine percent. Unless I’ve been caught by the mother of zoom lenses.’

‘Mmm...’ Bright tapped his middle finger on the table. A habit David remembered from those early days. Remember fixating on as a kid, then again as a young man.

‘Anyone else new in your life?’

David hesitated. Patricia? No, that doesn’t make sense.

‘What? You’ve thought of something.’

‘I met one of Susan’s friends for the first time on the weekend. Patricia Warsawski. She’s from South Carolina and did say a few times that I looked familiar.’

‘So maybe she’s put two and two together and—’

‘Actually, no. The letter arrived when she was here. Saturday morning. Plus a friend of Susan’s would just tell her if they knew who I was. They wouldn’t do this kind of thing.’ He looked at the envelope, willing it to reveal its secrets.

‘Still...’ Bright scribbled down the name, checking the spelling. ‘I’ll do a little digging on Ms. Warsawski.’

David sighed. Patricia might be onto him, but the more he thought about it the more he realised it was just a low-level niggler for her...at the moment. Maybe she’d guess in another few weeks, if curiosity got the better of her or that instant moment of realisation struck. The light bulb that revealed his past, his dark secret. David had been worried someone in Susan’s circle would discover the truth, but it had been her brother, Louis, that had bothered him the

most. Louis with crazy-good hacking skills. Louis who worked for some government contractor — exact job description, exact department unknown. Not good.

‘So, what did the cops want?’ Bright asked.

‘It was Detectives Saul and Parker, and an Agent O’Brien from the Bureau.’

Bright gave a nod. Again, David wasn’t giving Bright anything he didn’t already know. The man was omnipresent, everywhere, all the time, it seemed.

‘And?’

‘Fishing expedition. They did say I was a person of interest, but I’m not buying it. Seemed more like a spook tactic.’

‘Agreed,’ Bright said, but he leaned back, ran his fingers along his jaw and looked out the window.

David gave him a few moments, then asked, ‘What?’

‘They asked me a lot of questions, when I approached them for the files. O’Brien in particular was pretty aggressive.’

‘Of course they did. I told you it would create a shit storm.’

Bright gave David an unimpressed look. It seemed nobody wanted David’s insights today.

‘Maybe they’ve guessed I’m the one you’re hiding. Covering for.’

Bright shrugged. ‘Doubt it. You’re not the only male in their field of vision. Don’t forget, Jamal’s Black. A Black perp would be more likely. O’Brien knows offenders are less likely to cross racial boundaries — regardless of whether it’s a stranger abduction or someone known to Jamal.’

It wasn’t much consolation. The colour of his skin was all that stood between David and the bloodhounds.

\*\*\*

They’ve got David now. I’ve got his balls in a vice, and so do they. An interview room, facing questions about a missing boy. Talk about *déjà-vu*. I’m sure surprised he didn’t drop to his knees there and then. Do you think it excites him? Thinking about this boy? The crime? His crime all those years ago. He acts so saintly now, but is true and complete reform really possible? A boy like that? A man like that? I bring you back to the question I asked at the start of the David Story story...what can you forgive? Can you forgive him? He can’t forgive himself. At least, he wants us to think that. And it’s true, guilt weighs heavily on his soul. His thoughts burdened with the fat, stickiness of guilt. If humans are sixty-percent water, David’s

sixty-percent dirty, guilt-ridden water. All the Holy Water in this world couldn't mix inside him, wipe away his sins or absorb his guilt. I doubt it could even dilute it for very long.

Two little boys...Parker and now Jamal.

Jamal, Jamal, Jamal. I know your fate. Your small body, limp...or alive? Your mind...innocent or tainted? Your body...intact, or ruined? Blind eyes bulging like snails behind glass. I know. Only I know. Well, that's not quite true. Others know. Of course they do. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. I'm a bit like HIM...I give and take away. Well, mostly I just take away. Like most of the bloodsuckers. They're all around us, you know. There was a time when I was alone in the darkness. But not now...now I'm small-fry compared to the evil permeating this world. Your world. Can you look anywhere without seeing evil? I think not. Murderers, rapists, women-bashers, abusive parents, corporate greed, people who pillage the Earth and her environment, the churches overrun with paedophiles. Not that they're solely found in the church. No, sir-ree. I can feel their evil seeping through all layers of society, leaving children damaged or giving birth to those who will repeat the cycle...once abused, now the abuser. That's how it works, right? The world tearing itself part, pulling itself down into the depths of depravity from the inside out.

Sorry, I need to take a breath. Getting a bit carried away.

Anyways, you should fear all this beeping crap. Yep, it's coming to get you. Me? Well, I'm happy the world is going this way. Good and evil blurring in the middle of the spectrum, evil winning, taking over. Suits me fine. I'm an evil-worshipper. Yup, that's me. I'm a mother-beeping handsome time travelling know-it-all, evil-worshipping tease. An American psycho.

## Chapter 8

Walk on the living, they don't even mumble.  
Walk on the dead, they mutter and grumble.

David gripped the steering wheel and swung into the Centre's car park. Maybe the police, FBI and US Marshalls didn't want his insights, but that didn't mean he couldn't explore them himself. Maybe he was overestimating the kids (or underestimating them, depending on how you looked at it). David didn't want to admit that someone could be following his path. Or that he'd been powerless in preventing another boy's death, and another teen's demise. But he couldn't get Teddy out of his thoughts.

Then there was the man DeShawn had spoken about. His mother's client/lover. He also warranted a chat. Maybe he could get further than law enforcement. Maybe he was *smarter* than Detectives Saul and Parker and Agent O'Brien. Maybe not. Either way, the people of Hammett would be more likely to open up or drop their guard for the local youth worker than the law. Even if he was white.

He thought about the testing they first did on him at juvie — personality tests mostly, but also IQ. David scored in the top one percent of the population. Maybe it was time to see if he could actually put that intelligence to work. If the police couldn't solve the case, maybe he could. But that would also mean taking himself back. To *then*, his frame of mind. David had escaped his old life, did he really want to re-live it?

When he walked into the Centre Noreen looked up. 'Any news?' she asked.

He shook his head. 'I was going to ask you the same thing.'

'They still searching, but the numbers are dwindling.'

David leaned on the small reception window. 'Hope's fading.'

'Don't you let that even cross your lips, David Story.' Noreen waggled her pointer finger.

'Sorry.'

'What did the po-lice say?'

It wouldn't even occur to Noreen that they were looking *at* David.

'Just asking about the boys again. Fishing.'

Noreen shook her head. 'I know some of our boys be rough. But this? No way.'

But that's what everyone had said about him and Joe at first. And look how that turned out.

He kept quiet about the darkness no one can see. 'I know.'

'DeShawn's coming by later. He sounded real messed up on the phone.'

David nodded. DeShawn was a mess. ‘And Teddy’s still coming in?’

‘Yup. After school. If he actually at school.’

David gave another little nod, reminded of his own tendencies to skip school...from nine years old. At Churchill in Florida they’d told him nearly all violent juvenile offenders have a history of truancy. But that doesn’t mean all truants turn into violent offenders.

He sighed, gave Noreen a little smile and salute, and headed down the corridor to his room. Thanks to the police and Bright he wouldn’t have much time to go through Teddy’s file before he arrived. But maybe it would be enough.

He jotted down all the traits he was so familiar with, traits he tried not to think about...traits of juvenile homicide offenders.

- Childhood experiences of violence in the home
- Poverty
- Physical or sexual abuse
- Excessive interest in acts of violence and watching TV
- Lack of conscience (sometimes from not being disciplined enough during earlier childhood when acts of aggression or violence occurred)
- History of being bullied and being a bully
- Parental divorce
- Low levels of educational achievement/academic failure
- Lack of anger management skills

David had ticked many of those boxes — more than Joe. And that’s what the court had seen, what the outside had seen.

Teddy also ticked lots of the boxes. He’d counselled Teddy for six months, helping him deal with his aggression, his home life. But this time David would be looking at his file and his session notes from a different perspective.

Next to each bullet point he wrote notes.

- Childhood experiences of violence in the home — big tick there. Violent father who beat the children and wife/mother. Until he was killed by the police during an armed robbery five years ago, when Teddy was only nine.
- Poverty — another big tick. But all the Centre’s kids live well below the poverty line.
- Physical or sexual abuse — nothing for sexual abuse, as far as David knew. But it didn’t mean it wasn’t there, a repressed memory hiding in the recesses of Teddy’s hippocampus or something in his conscious that he wasn’t going to talk to David about. But there had been physical abuse. Teddy had various hospital admissions as a

young child — black eyes, cracked ribs, broken arms and legs. The police had killed yet another black man when they shot Teddy's dad, but that might have saved Teddy's life.

- Excessive interest in acts of violence and watching TV — this was an interesting one. It wasn't something he really talked about with the kids. But today, he would.
- Lack of conscience (sometimes from not being disciplined enough during earlier childhood when acts of aggression or violence occurred) — Teddy was certainly narcissistic, but that was part of the generation, right? Or just about every teenager in the western world, regardless of socioeconomic status.
- History of being bullied and being a bully — Teddy was a bully. He'd been expelled from one school, suspended twice from his current school. And that's when he first came to see David. It was part of the school's agreement to let Teddy back into the school. The administrator liked the Centre. Could see the good it was doing.
- Parental divorce — no, but he had the trauma of his father's death. Even though the family was safer without him, it didn't mean there was no loss.
- Low levels of educational achievement/academic failure — Teddy was a straight 'D' student. Not that grades really proved anything in terms of intellect, not when you threw Hammett's culture into the mix. But still, the trait was educational achievement, not raw ability.
- Lack of anger management skills — Teddy's biggest problem. Controlling his anger. David jotted down a few specific examples he'd heard about, or been told about by Teddy, including punching a kid at school, beating up on his younger brother and even his mum once. If the Ryan family wasn't careful, soon Teddy would replace the father as its chief threat to survival. Like father, like son. But was it nature or nurture? The age-old debate. Teddy had grown up surrounded by violence. It was normalised. What else did males do when they got angry? Hit. Shove, slap, push, punch, pulverise. And being named after a serial killer...that sure couldn't help.

Teddy arrived five minutes late, as usual. Life. Death. School. Nothing mattered. A lot of kids his age, fourteen, didn't know much about responsibility or repercussions. For them, repercussions were still something 'old' people (over thirty) talked about. Kids in this neighbourhood had a better sense of repercussions — they saw bad stuff every day; relatives being dragged away by the police, violence, drugs. But even in this environment, could a fourteen-year-old truly understand the extent of cause and effect? That had been one of the main defences at David's trial — he'd only been twelve years old. How could a twelve-year-

old understand the permanency of death? Of that sort of cause and effect. “And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’” *Luke 23:34*.

David often thought about his understanding of death back then. Did he truly not realise at twelve that a baseball bat would damage Parker that much? Kill him? That death was irreversible? He’d been taught at Catholic school that Jesus rose again. Had he expected Parker to rise again? Thought anyone could? Of course, now he understood. Jesus was different. Unique. But he wasn’t sure if he’d really understood that then.

Bang. The noise of the baseball bat reverberated in the room, in David’s head. Memory? Imagination? Conscience? All of the above. He shuddered.

This wasn’t about him. It was about Jamal. And maybe Teddy. Teddy, who at fourteen should understand life and death. Consequences.

‘Hi, Teddy. How you doing?’

A shrug. The whatever shrug. David rolled his eyes on the inside. Only ever on the inside. He was in hybrid mode. Half adult and half kid. Bad ass enough to understand what they were going through but also care for their souls. Not that he went into religion much. Faith was personal — you could share if solicited, but there was no need to shove it down someone else’s throat. He respected that.

‘How’s your mum?’

Another shrug. ‘Okay.’

David did a couple of nods. ‘Great.’ He paused. ‘Any problems with your temper this week?’

Another shrug. ‘The usual.’

‘Go on.’

He waited. Sat out the silence. He’d been on the other end of open-ended silence many times, for many years. And as annoying and transparent as the technique was, it worked. Occasionally he’d clear his throat or cross his legs, to remind himself and his client that he was there. Ready and waiting.

To keep himself occupied he often watched the clock. Had little bets with himself about how long the client would last until he or she started talking. No one lasted more than nine minutes. Not teenagers. Too restless. Too ready to hear their own voices, in most cases. Although once when *he* was sixteen he’d lasted a whole session — determined to out-shrink the shrink. Maybe that’s why the kids called him doc — because he did follow the standard psychiatrist and psychologist procedures even though he was officially a youth worker.

He sighed. Uncrossed his legs. Six minutes, twenty seconds. Maybe Teddy would set a new record today.

Seven minutes.

David looked at his cuticles and realised he'd started biting his nails again. He pursed his lips. When had that started? Must have been recent, because even Susan hadn't commented on it. And she would have. He fought the urge to hide his nails, hide his shame. No, he didn't need to do that. He could own it, change it. He'd totally transformed himself once, it would be easy to nip the re-emergence of this bad habit in the bud.

'No news on Jamal King?'

David blinked, looked at Teddy. 'No, I'm afraid not.'

'Wonder what's happened to him. Where he's at?'

David tried to decipher Teddy's tone, but it was so flat it was impossible. It could be idle curiosity, concern, or a thrill that something had happened to the boy.

He threw it back to Teddy. 'What do you think happened to Jamal?'

Teddy widened his eyes. 'Don't look good, do it?'

David kept his face impassive, maintained the silence.

Teddy continued. 'I reckon he been taken. Probably killed by some psycho.'

David examined Teddy's body language, but again to no avail. He could be discussing a fictional character or the weather the way he was talking. Removed from it all. That could mean something, could talk to his general lack of empathy, or it could be the teenage nonchalance that infected all of Hammett's teenagers. Like a plague. A plague of monotone gestures, voices, emotions. Everything skating over the surface. Maybe it was because they all had to endure so much. David understood that intimately. Better to ride the outskirts than go deep. Except he couldn't tell his kids that. Didn't really believe it for normal people, normal sins. Only the extremes. Like killing a boy when you were twelve years old.

He shuddered. 'So you think he's dead.' He forced himself to *this* boy, not Parker.

'Probably. Shallow grave. Maybe in some asshole's deep freeze.'

'You watch too much TV.'

'Chyea. You know I'm saying what everyone thinking, doc. You feel me?'

'Maybe.' David took the plunge. 'You seem excited about it.'

'Huh? No way, man. DeShawn...he all right.'

*All right...* highest compliment from Teddy.

Teddy continued. ''Sides he real upset. No way I'm excited.'

'How *do* you feel then?'

A shrug. Not a care in the world. 'Sad.' Almost a question mark teetering on the edge of it.

'Do you feel sad, or do you think others feel sad? That you *should* be sad?'



‘Bit of both?’ Teddy had the look of someone feeding a line. Trying it on for size and digging to see if it was the ‘right’ response. The correct set of emotions. David knew that look well.

David gave a nod. No harm in validating that emotional response. ‘I’m sad...for Jamal, for his family. Especially DeShawn.’

A pause. ‘Yeah, me too.’ Again, a measured response.

Teddy was always like this, and David had dug a little, but not too much. There’d been no reason to be aggressive in his approach before. But now there was a missing boy. And the threat *that* brought to David’s doorstep. The threat of discovery. If his true identity leaked across Hammett he’d have to start again. Another new identity. And would Susan come with him? Or would she be so repulsed by his actions that no amount of time and reformation could bring her around? Could make her want to lie next to him, kiss him, love him again. Susan was an amazing woman, but David couldn’t imagine anyone being able to get past murder. Somehow David had to make sure it didn’t happen. No one could find out about his past. He needed the police focus to be on a real suspect, not David.

If Teddy *was* involved his guilt would save David. For the first time he found himself wanting, wishing Teddy to be a killer. And all to save his own skin. David balled his fist, riding a wave of self-loathing. What kind of horrible person wishes that? He asked for God’s forgiveness and moved back to Teddy.

‘It’s an extremely difficult time for DeShawn. It’s normal you’d feel sad for him. We’ve talked about empathy before.’ David backed off. If he went in hard was he doing it for himself, or for Jamal and DeShawn? He didn’t know now. He was too invested.

‘Empathy.’ Teddy rolled the word around his mouth, like it was a foreign concept, twisting his tongue out of shape. ‘For my momma?’ His breathing became uneven. ‘My ho sister?’ Teddy ground his teeth together.

That was something they’d talked about before. Teddy trying to put himself in their shoes when he felt angry at them. When he wanted to hit them.

‘How are you going with empathy?’ David asked.

A grunt, then: ‘Momma all up in my grill, all the time. I *tell* her I gonna smack her down, but she don’t stop.’ He shook his head. ‘Know why Daddy slapped her around.’

‘No one deserves to be hit, Teddy. We’ve talked about this.’

Teddy cupped his fist, ‘Some people deserve what coming to ’em.’

‘Teddy, take three deep breaths. Re-set.’

Teddy turned wild eyes to David, willing a confrontation. David kept his face neutral. Even a friendly smile could be interpreted as a smug challenge.

Teddy narrowed his eyes, the desire to punch, maybe kill, still lurking in their depths. But he took the deep breaths. He was trying.

‘Have you tried the breathing techniques this week?’

‘Yeah.’

‘When?’ David wondered if it was anything to do with Jamal. Although the thought of Teddy actually going to DeShawn’s house and abducting Jamal was ludicrous. No, if Teddy was involved it would have been a crime of opportunity. He would have stumbled across Jamal. Felt his weakness, his vulnerability and decided to have fun with it. Then the fun turned deadly. That was the only logical progression that involved Teddy. He was fourteen, not some adult paedophile cruising the streets for his next victim.

Opportunity? So had Teddy been near Jamal’s house? They did live close to one another, both in houses that backed onto the railway line, both accessible through a disused path that ran along the track for about six kilometres. He knew lots of the kids went there to escape their houses, to do drugs, have sex. The area didn’t seem to be maintained by anyone, overgrown with weeds, making that part of Hammett look more like a ghost town than a habitable city. And some would argue parts of Hammett weren’t habitable...or barely.

‘Couple times.’

David forced himself back into the conversation — Teddy’s temper and his attempts to use breathing techniques to control it. ‘What were the circumstances?’

‘Momma in my face bout taking the trash out. Making me feel like shit cause I watching somethin.’

‘Go on.’

‘Then Cynthia taking her sweet time in the bathroom. She doin it on purpose. She knew I needed to go.’

‘So what did you do?’

Teddy sighed. ‘Smacked dat door right down.’

‘Was that before or after you tried the breathing techniques?’

Teddy looked at his feet. ‘Forgot that shit. It hard to remember, you feel me? Real hard.’

‘When the rage takes you over, consumes you.’

Teddy cocked his head to one side. ‘You feel it too, man?’

‘Felt it. Told you I was like you as a kid. Full of anger, rage. Ready to destroy anyone who got in my path.’ Although he’d been even younger. But fourteen was his cover story. Well, fifteen to be precise. That’s when he committed the fake crime. The David Story crime, not the real Tony Moretti crime.

He still fought the rage occasionally. It brewed deep inside.

‘So have you been violent this past week?’ Unlikely Teddy would admit that he’d beaten the crap out of someone, but David had to ask.

‘Yeah. Hit Momma once.’

Not much remorse in that statement.

‘And Cynthia go hit by da bathroom door. Walked into a door.’ Teddy winked, like he’d made a funny joke.

David shook his head. ‘Teddy, we’ve talked about this. Violence is never funny.’

Teddy slouched further in his chair.

David changed the subject. ‘Do you think Jamal could have been hurt by someone from this Centre? One of the kids?’

Teddy’s eyes widened, the whites flashing large, then squinted. ‘Dunno. Maybe.’

David studied him. Not the reaction of a guilty man. Genuine surprise coupled with no fear that David was onto him, no remorse. Still, it didn’t necessarily mean anything. Not with some of these kids, who seemed to have no conscience at all.

‘Would you have helped Jamal? Or another little kid? If you saw them in trouble, I mean.’

A shrug. ‘Dunno, man. It’s dog eat dog, you know? A kid’s gotta toughen up fast in this hood.’

‘Do you think someone’s trying to toughen Jamal up?’ David went with it.

‘Some mofo could’ve pulled him off the street and done all kinds a awful shit to the kid. Then buried him in a shallow grave or tossed his body on the tracks.’

David resisted the urge to raise his eyebrows. Very specific for a hypothetical. And the second mention of a shallow grave. But it’s also just the kind of dark fantasy a kid like Teddy might have, or the kind of thing he’d say to get attention. Look at me, the tough kid from the wrong side of the tracks — literally. David could be sitting across from Jamal’s killer, or he could be talking to one of the many messed up kids in Hammett. The latter seemed more likely. If Teddy had lost his temper and somehow managed to pull it together to hide the body (or bury it in a shallow grave), he wasn’t capable of doing *that* good a job of it. Jamal probably would have been found by now.

\*\*\*

So, David thinks he’ll succeed where the police have failed? *Ego, much?* Still, this could be good for me. The battle is raging within David now. He’s tried to push his ego aside for so

many years. He's so helpful and subservient now. It shits me. Seriously. The old David? The boy? Well, there was something strong about him. Powerful, yes. Narcissistic, yes. And then they beat it out of him. Not literally — that at least I'd respect. No, they did it with the good book and some clever compassion. Damn Willifred. You'd think the man was on a personal mission to convert as many lost and damaged souls as he could. If David could be Willifred's clone, he would be. Talk about unoriginal. He's a groupie. Yup, I sure do like the boy-David (Tony) better than this man I see before me.

It would be easy for him to shift...to become *him*. Shoulders sloping down more, stubble, hood up. It was the little things. Those miniature shifts that led to metamorphosis. A different person. David would think of it as a reversion, of the butterfly devolving into the caterpillar. The dirty ugly caterpillar, surrounded by poverty and violence, never meant to come out of the cocoon alive. But that's not how I see it. No, sirree. You ask me, when David shoved all his deep dark thoughts down, when he turned his back on his potential for violence, that's when he devolved. If only I could show him that. But it's useless. Pointless. For sixteen years David has refused to entertain the darker, egotistical side of himself. And it makes me sick.

David, David, David. How you've disappointed me.

But my time is coming.

## Chapter 9

I cut through evil like a double-edged sword,  
and chaos flees at my approach, my lord.  
A balance I single-handedly upraise,  
through battles fought with critique and praise,  
and blindly insist on my steady gaze.

David pumped his arms harder, desperate to push himself to breaking point. Desperate to feel something...even if it was pain and exhaustion. He closed his eyes, dared fate. He couldn't escape his mind, pounding, beating himself up over and over again.

Parker. Butterfly.

Parker. Butterfly.

Red. Blue. Red. Blue. Red. Blue.

So much blood. How could one small kid hold that much blood?

Redness coming towards him. Them. Chasing them. Taunting them. Reminding them.

*Run. Run.*

Instinct had taken over and he'd run. There was much made of that in court. Why didn't either of them 'snap out of it' and at least try to help the boy, comfort him. Glassy eyes, staring up. Focused. Then not focused. Then glass. Gone to God, horrifically. Cruel. That's what David was. A cruel monster.

His sneaker caught. Upper body lurched forward. Momentum took over, gravity bringing him down. He skidded across the gravel on his knees, skin tearing, tiny bits of gravel and dirt embedded in his skin.

David rolled over. Lay on his back, staring at the crimson-tinged sky. Not moving. He brought his thoughts back to the present, away from Parker and the trial. He focused on his body. There was pain, but only a little bit. Not the deep pain he deserved...needed...wanted.

He sat up. Examined the wounds. The kinds of grazes often littered around a kid's knees and legs. Scrapes, gravel rash, bruises, blood. Only a little blood though. A portion of what the body held. The average body held roughly five litres. The heart, pumping it around to the limbs, could so easily pump it out of the body. Every *thump, thump, thump*, expelling blood, the body's life force. Eventually leading to death. Parker's cause of death had been hard to pinpoint, apparently.

David shivered, the cold, damp earth seeping into his body. He wrapped his arms around his knees, cradling himself — childlike. Maybe that's all he was. A child in a man's body. He was just as bad as the kids he saw. Worse. Most of them probably only fantasised about the level of violence David had experienced. Inflicted. They'd all been on the receiving

end of violence...David, his clients. World was full of violence. Maybe driven by violence. Wars, violent crimes, domestic violence. Violence: fist hitting flesh, metal penetrating flesh at every turn. But there must be more to it? Yes? David had escaped. Was trying to make a difference. But could anyone truly make a difference in this plagued world? And now his past was coming back to torture him. Turn the screws on his already tortured soul. If that was even possible.

He looked at his watch... his wrist was bare. Must have fallen off in the fall. He stood up, searched the ground and nearby shrubs. Nothing. Was he wearing it this morning? He always took it off at night — didn't like the feel of the band around his wrist when he was sleeping — and left it at the front door. He always put it on before he left the house, an automatic ritual that his brain took care of unconsciously. He'd only ever 'forgotten' it a handful of times. Today must be one of the times. For some reason it unsettled him more than it should. He liked routine. Always found comfort in routines. Well, since juvie. He needed that level of control over himself and his environment. Not like that day. Complete loss of control. A true loss of consciousness. Or maybe it was his darker self, taking over, raging against the world, against an innocent little boy. Bile collected, threatened, at the back of his throat but he pushed it, and his emotions, down.

He hauled himself up. If only it was that easy to haul his mind up. Up and forward. Forward momentum. That's what he needed. He'd been thinking about Teddy Ryan all night. Probably only got an hour or two of sleep. Was the boy capable of killing? He kept flip-flopping. Yes...no...yes.

David remembered the first hours and days after Parker. It was...surreal, dream-like. 'Surreal' didn't even cut it. Didn't graze the surface of the out-of-body experience that had begun the second he walked off with Parker that day. Time slowing. Distorting. Memory, emotions...everything distorted and messed up.

Joe had run first. He was sure of it. Well, not so sure. Joe had said David had run first. That David/Tony was the ring leader, had instigated it all. That David had been the one cool and calm, telling Joe to run. But that didn't make sense. David remembered looking at the blood, fixated on the blood. Rendered immobile by the red, understanding in that instant the power of blood. The power of life and death. Realising what they'd done. The horror of it. It was like Death was on his shoulder, waiting. Urging Parker to take his last breath, driving Parker's little fast-beating heart to pump even faster, to pump those last millilitres of blood out into the world. Setting the blood free, setting Parker free, returning him to his maker. Parker would have gone to heaven. Of that, David was sure. Yes, the existence of God and heaven demanded faith, something that sat uncomfortably with David's sense of logic, but

even the scientific world had relied on moments of faith. Even if it was just faith to put forward a new hypothesis. Or faith that the world was ordered, that mathematical analysis would always reveal that order, that the laws of physics would always apply, could never be broken. That was faith, proven by science. He tried not to think of the many instances where science had proven beliefs, and people's faith, wrong — the shape of the earth, how germs were spread, spherical versus elliptical orbits, evolution, lightning can't strike the same place twice...the list went on.

Did Parker have faith in heaven? He was only three...did kids even know about the concept of heaven and hell then? Of death? No, because it was argued at trial that even Joe and Tony/David wouldn't have had a true and complete understanding of death. The permanency of it.

'Run, Tony. Run!'

He'd heard those words, hadn't he? Hadn't Joe shouted them at him? A few minutes after the crazy grinning? Tony/David had been in a daze. His senses overridden, overcome. And one thought had been running through his head over and over again:

*Little boy blue, broken in two. Little boy blue, broken in two. Little boy blue, broken in two. Little boy blue, broken in two.*

Circling his head, an angry wasp buzzing in his brain. Neurons exploding, overloading. Then he'd heard someone shouting. *Run!* He'd turned...seen Joe running away. David had told his legs to run. But they'd stayed firmly planted on the ground. His body disobeyed his mind. Is that what had happened when he raised the baseball bat? Had his body been disobeying his commands? Or was he in control? Sixteen years later he still didn't know. Still couldn't account for his actions that day. His memories were all jumbled. Shrink said it was post-traumatic stress disorder. And maybe one or two of the harder blows his father had struck directly to his head somewhere between the age of one year and twelve years old.

David often thought about the trial. He found it hard to separate his real memories — or lack thereof — from the story crafted by Joe and his defence. What was the truth? What was a real memory and what had his mind reconstructed from the trial? It was like looking at childhood photos...do you remember that moment in time or the photo of that moment in time? The brain's a tricky beast. Supreme master, supreme deceiver.

He could still see Joe on the stand. Body shrunken in, head down. Not more intelligent than David, but he sure was smarter. He knew exactly what to do on the stand. Or maybe he'd been well-trained by the lawyer his mum and dad had hired.

David took a breath, but instead of smelling the autumn leaves, the scent of nearby water, of parklands, he smelt the fetid stench of body odour. His senses were still in the past. Still in that court room. Why had it been so damn hot? That's right...the aircon was out.

'I know this is difficult for you, Joe. But can you tell us what happened next?' Joe's defence lawyer, Mr Plunkett spoke softly.

Joe had somehow shrunk even further into himself. 'I...' He buried his face into his hands. Crying. His lawyer rested his hand on his shoulder, glanced at his parents. Of course the jury followed his gaze. Saw the respectable looking Mrs Simpson in tears, leaning into Mr Simpson, as Mr Simpson pulled her in closer and rubbed the hand he had around her up and down her upper arm. Both the boys were Caucasian, but David's family was definitely white trash, whereas Joe's were a respectable family who'd fallen on hard times.

The lawyer had let it all sink in. Let the court sit in silence for a full minute. Then he turned back to Joe. 'Joe, it's really important the court hears from you. Please.' Hand on Joe's shoulder. 'Please try.'

Joe gave little nods. The lawyer took his hand off Joe and took a step back. 'Go on.'

'I...Tony...Tony said it would be funny. A joke.'

The 'I' was the only slip Joe had made during the entire trial. At least, David suspected it was a slip. He'd replayed so much of the trial over and over in his head. Eventually it had eaten him up and he'd got the transcripts. The 'I' was in there, in black and white. But perhaps Joe had been about to say something else entirely. Like 'I was upset' or 'I don't know what came over me' before fingering Tony. David often imagined Joe finishing that sentence differently... 'I said it would be funny.' Because that's what had happened...wasn't it? *It was Joe, wasn't it?*

Joe cleared his throat. 'That we'd take the kid for a walk to teach his mum a lesson.'

'A lesson?' The lawyer asked.

'She was...she wasn't really paying attention to him.'

'No!!!' Parker's mum stood up in the courtroom a guttural scream erupting from her lips, resonating through her shaking body. 'It's not true.'

The judge asked her to sit down. She obeyed, but it was more of a collapse than a controlled sit.

Everyone was busy looking at Parker's mum, but David kept his focus on Joe. They locked eyes. He smiled. Joe had smiled. It was like the smile that haunted Tony's memories of the day. Parker bleeding, Joe grinning. Mad son of a bitch. But smart. Calculating. The court room was just a big stage to Joe.



Tony/David was only twelve, but he could feel the court, sentiment, going against him. Everyone, even his own mum, was falling for Joe. Joe's lies. Sucked into Joe's story, Joe's fiction. David was a sinking ship. But by then he didn't care. He'd been sinking since Parker lay bleeding on the track. Dying. Dead. Everything gone forever.

'Go on please, Joe.'

Joe's demeanour was that of a frightened boy again. 'Tony...he said we'd take him for a walk. Only be gone for thirty minutes or so. Just enough to give the mum a scare.'

'And then what happened?' Plunkett's voice quiet, understanding. Almost nervous like he thought Joe might not be able to endure his time on the stand. Might collapse and have to be taken away.

Joe brought his hands up to his mouth, chewing on his nails. 'It,' he said in a whisper.

'I'm sorry, can you repeat that. Louder this time.'

Joe squeezed his eyes shut, coerced a tear. 'It.' His voice cracked.

Tony wondered how he'd done that. Forced his voice to crack at the exact right moment. Maybe that's when he'd started doubting. Started believing Joe's lies himself. Started questioning his own fragmented memories. They say there are always two sides to a story, but can there be more? Or can both sides be false? Twisted, manipulated, consciously or subconsciously, into something incoherent?

'I'm sorry, Joe. But the court needs you to say what "it" is.'

Joe took a deep breath, flicked furtive, tortured eyes to his parents, then the jury. Then he'd looked down, studying his hands again. 'That's when I saw the baseball bat.'

'And where was this baseball bat?'

Joe shrugged. 'It came from nowhere. One minute Tony was holding the kid's hand, next he had a baseball bat.'

Liar.

Plunkett took a baseball bat from his table, still in a large plastic bag. 'Is this the baseball bat?'

Joe looked away, then turned back, squinted, leaned forward. 'I can't be sure, but I think so.'

'Let the record show Joe has identified Tony Moretti's baseball bat, the bat the Coroner has already identified as the weapon used to inflict blunt force trauma on poor little Parker.'

David had shuddered. Replayed the Coroner's testimony from two days earlier. He'd identified sixteen separate blows spread all over Parker's body. Every blow struck by a right-hander (or right-handers). Both Tony and Joe were right-handed. It was impossible to

forensically say which boy had been responsible for which blows. That didn't mean it couldn't be used as a tool in the trial.

'So, Tony was holding that baseball bat?'

Joe glanced at the baseball bat, recoiled a little, then nodded his head.

When David looked back on Joe's time on the stand he often daydreamed about standing up and giving Joe a round of applause. He certainly deserved a standing ovation. What a number Joe and Plunkett pulled on the jury.

'Can you tell us, in your own words, what happened next?'

But there's no such thing as 'in your own words' in a trial. Every person who takes the stand has been coached, rehearsed. Did Joe need much coaching? He did seem to follow a script but it could have been written by Joe or Plunkett. Or maybe both.

Joe had taken another shuddering, difficult breath. 'I...I find it hard to think about. To remember.'

That made two of them.

'I remember seeing the bat, wondering where it had come from. But also why Tony had it. Then...there was something in his eyes. Something strange. Dark.' He swallowed hard. 'I know now that in that moment I saw evil. Pure evil in Tony.' For good measure he pointed at Tony.

Tony managed to shake his head. Stand up. 'No, no. That's a lie,' he got out before his lawyer had pulled him back down and the judge was banging her gavel. It echoed in the courtroom, three decisive strikes. It reminded David of the sound of the baseball bat hitting Parker's skull. One. Two. Three. He'd wanted to scream. To cry. But instead he'd sat back down and closed his eyes, covered his ears and willed the sound away.

When David opened his eyes again Joe had been staring at him, playing at being afraid. Like David was going to launch himself across the court room and beat the shit out of Joe. That would have been nice...in that moment. Now David was glad he'd checked out that day, hadn't let the rage take over. It would have been the last nail in his coffin...although Joe seemed to hammer those nails in pretty good.

'He hit Parker with the baseball bat. The first...strike...was to his legs, and Parker buckled in pain.'

David closed his eyes again, feeling Parker's mum's eyes boring into him. He could almost feel her hands tightening around his throat. Taking his last breath, just as David (or had it been Joe?) had taken Parker's.

'Parker was screaming. Crying. But Tony just kept hitting him. He completely lost control. He'd done some...weird...stuff before, but nothing like this.'

‘What sort of weird stuff do you mean, Joe?’

‘Well, it was only talk, as far as I know. Like he’d talk about how much he hated some kid at school and wanted to kick his head in, or how he wished a teacher was dead. That sort of thing.’

‘How often would you say he expressed these types of violent thoughts?’

Joe gave a shrug. ‘Few times a week, I guess. But he was...used to violence.’

David had shifted uneasily in his chair. It was one thing that half the school had known his dad was an abusive fuck, it was another thing entirely for twelve strangers to know this intimate detail. To know he’d been a glorified punching bag for his dad — when he was sick of beating on his mum. Sometimes David even wondered if his mother tried to deflect the abuse away from herself and onto David. But no mum did that, did they? Then his dad had left two weeks before Parker. Gone.

‘What violence are you referring to?’

David bit into his lip, felt a trickle of blood escape from the small puncture wound.

‘His father...his father used to hit him and his mother.’ Joe turned to the jury. ‘It’s not really his fault. He thinks it’s normal to beat the sh— sorry, to hit someone who’s smaller than you. That’s what his daddy taught him...before he ran off.’

David felt the heat, the intensity rising in his cheeks. He’d trusted Joe. Told him...stuff...and now he was doing this? Betraying him? Hanging him out to dry. Joe was the ring leader. Joe was the violent one...even if it didn’t look that way on the surface.

David had clenched and unclenched his fists until his lawyer gave him a gentle elbow to the ribs accompanied by a stern look. Then David had glanced at the jury, seen their faces. Seen the weird combination of pity and disgust. And fear. They were frightened of David. Frightened of what he was capable of. Of what he’d done. But what had he done, really? Which story was closest to the truth? It all got so jumbled.

‘Back to Parker, Joe.’ The lawyer had leaned in again, like he was trying to get Joe back on track. But David suspected Joe was the one running the show.

‘Parker.’ Joe brought his right hand up to his face, gnawed on the index fingernail a bit.

‘Joe?’

Joe jumped, like he’d come to from his dream world. ‘Sorry.’ But he still didn’t continue.

‘What happened after Tony struck the first blow.’ He’d emphasised ‘first blow’. He’d either instinctively known the importance of that to the jury, or he’d calculated it. In retrospect David could see how the whole dance had been carefully planned out — by one or both of them. A choreographed show.

Joe chewed on his nail some more, but eventually said: ‘He hit him again.’ He’d said it softly.

‘Let the record show the witness said *He hit him again.*’

‘Yes, yes. We heard him.’ The judge had sighed, perhaps also aware of the dance. Maybe she’d been the only person who knew exactly what was going on in that courtroom over the ten-day trial. Although she’d clearly been shocked by the ages of David/Tony and Joe. Shocked by the brutality of the crime and the senseless death of a young boy. Even David had been shocked by it and he was one of the perpetrators.

Plunkett had turned quickly back to Joe. ‘So he hit him again. Where? The legs again?’

Joe moved the gnawing onto his ring finger. Shook his head. Eyes closed.

‘It’s all right, Joe. You need to tell us this.’

Joe gave little nods, took a deep breath. Let the floodgates open. ‘He hit him another six or seven times. Maybe more. The little kid was curled up, bloodied. Tony told me...’ Joe paused, his brow furrowed. ‘Told me it felt amazing. That I should at least have a shot. Try it. I shook my head, but he handed me the bat and kept chanting my name over and over. Told me it was okay, it was part of nature. Survival of the fittest or something.’ He shrugged, then shuddered.

David *had* talked about survival of the fittest...but not on that day, not about Parker.

Joe continued. ‘The bat was in my hand. He kept calling my name telling me to ‘do it, do it’ over and over. And then...’ Another long pause. Some eye-dabbing. More nail biting. ‘And so I hit him. Once...but then Tony started up again. ‘Hit him again, harder. Do it, do it, do it.’ I don’t know what happened, why, but I hit him again. Then I dropped the bat and started crying. I huddled into a ball and closed my eyes. I could hear the bat hitting that kid over and over again. Smash, whack, smash.’ He shuddered. ‘I couldn’t open my eyes. Couldn’t look at that poor little boy. Next thing I knew I heard Tony calling my name and telling me to run. By the time I got to my feet, Tony was only just in sight. I saw the baseball bat lying there. Blood and...stuff all over it.’ Joe buried his head in his hands and the microphone picked up sobbing.

Plunkett had successfully painted the picture of an impressionable, middle-class boy who’d been caught up in the charisma and excitement of a delinquent, or maybe if you were generous a delinquent-in-the-making — Tony Moretti. Joe had only struck two or three tentative blows, urged on by his friend and peer group pressure. Not to mention an unclear sense of right and wrong and of the permanency of death. Tony had done the real damage.

After a minute or two of Joe’s sobbing Plunkett had asked for a break. The judge agreed.

The jury was staring at Tony/David. His fate had been sealed.

\*\*\*

I swear to tell the truth...the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Unless it doesn't suit me. Unless it incriminates me. Unless it just...irritates me. Unless I can't remember the truth. Unless I don't give a shit about the truth. Or unless I'm just plain going to lie to save my sweet ass...so help me God. Now *that* would be a better oath. Know what I mean? A more accurate assessment of what really happens in court. I mean, you really think a murdering son-of-a-beep is going to confess his crimes just because he in court? No way. No beeping way. Why? Why would you? These people don't believe in God, in Heaven and Hell. No, sirree. They don't give a beep about no one but themselves. So as if *they* going to suddenly go weak at the knees. 'I'm sorry, it was me after all. Can I change my plea to guilty? Can I beg the court's forgiveness? The victim's forgiveness. I don't know what I was thinking, but it was plain wrong. Darn-tooting.'

What else? You want another fantasy? Like some white guy getting up on the stand and suddenly coming clean: 'I'm a racist mother-beeper so I killed that Black man. Cause I hate all Black men.' All those whispering breezes, butterflies and swinging ropes. Nope, it just ain't going to happen here. Really, what's the point of swearing to tell the truth? It's a farce. Almost as much of a farce as the legal system. No, if you want justice, you have to take it yourself. Like everything really: if you want it done right, do it yourself. Justice? Vengeance? Same thing as far as I'm concerned.

And as for the truth? What is the truth? David was onto something with that. Two sides to a story. Two truths. Sometimes they can't co-exist and sometimes, well, sometimes they can. It's all that grey stuff, you see? Don't get me wrong. I see black...lots of black. Black and white. I ain't talking about skin colour here. No, I'm talking about the world...how you see things. I see it in black and white for the most part. How bout you?

In fact, I see mostly black. But truth be told, there's lots of dark grey, like real dark grey. But it's the stuff that lies on the outer, that lurks on the periphery to beep with your head. Like the people who don't believe in abortion...unless the woman was raped. Suddenly the black and white gets murky, grey. Or those agnostic indecisive mother-beepers. 'I *might* believe in God. A higher power *might* exist. But I just can't commit either way.' Whatever.

You know what? I don't mind the grey so much. Kind of dig it, in a weird way. Grey...grey's where the money's at. The bread and butter of my business, pulling down the fence-sitters, pulling them from their grey tower to the gloomy depths of my black. Yup, let's

hang in the grey. With all the indecisive beeps out there. Yup, you and me, just hanging. You know you want to. You want to spend time with me, get to know me. Find out about the man behind the voice.

Who am I?

I'm a mother-beeping well-dressed time-travelling know-it-all, evil-worshipping tease...who likes the grey.

Can't tell you any plainer than that. No, sirree.

## Chapter 10

The more you have me the less you see.  
Shine a light on me and I will flee.

Susan was starting to get worried. Had David left for his jog later than usual? Had he gone further? Got lost somehow? Or had something happened to him? He hadn't been himself the past week. Even his nightmares were worse now. She started pacing, remembering how he'd looked when they first met on the psych ward. David, depressed and suicidal, and Susan somehow drawn to this sweet man who seemed to be fighting himself at every turn. She hadn't told Patricia the level of his depression, or how they'd met. Maybe one day, but it hadn't felt right on the weekend. And she knew how private David was...she couldn't imagine he'd want her discussing his suicide attempt with anyone. Let alone telling them all about his past, his childhood. His past — well, what he'd told her — was horrible, but even after all this time she still thought he was hiding something from her. Something more than emotionally and physically abusive parents who were killed in a car accident when he was twelve. Susan felt like there was a deeper source of his self-loathing. Or a heavier guilt than the burden of beating up a kid and landing him in hospital. Apparently the kid made a full recovery, yet David hadn't. Not psychologically, at least. But maybe the memory of that incident, of inflicting pain on another, was enough for a gentle soul like David. Enough to drag him down. Maybe. There was something else she'd always wondered about, perhaps even suspected. Was David sexually abused as a child? She knew that sexual abuse survivors displayed all the traits David seemed to exhibit. Problems with self-esteem and depression, a sense of a hidden secret or burden...even the fact that David didn't want kids. Susan often thought it was because he couldn't bear the thought of a child having a childhood like David's, didn't want to wish his past on a child. Susan had told him that it would be different for them. That they'd be good parents; kind, caring and loving. But he wasn't convinced.

Finally she heard the door. She moved toward the hallway, not wanting to make too much of a fuss. David disliked attention, fussing.

She held her coffee cup in both hands. 'I was getting—' She stopped short, took in David's muddy clothes and scraped knees. 'What happened? Are you okay?'

'I just tripped, hon.' He smiled. 'It's nothing serious, just a few little grazes.' He fumbled about near the entry table. 'Have you seen my watch?'

Susan shook her head. 'No.' She took a closer look — he seemed okay.

‘Odd.’ He dropped to his haunches and looked under the table. Then he emptied out the small bowl of keys — even though he never put his watch *in* the bowl. It was too precious to mix with keys that could scratch the watch’s surface.

‘Maybe you lost it yesterday. At work.’ She tried to think back to sitting on the sofa together, but she couldn’t recall if he was wearing his watch. ‘I can’t remember if you had it on last night.’

David’s brow furrowed. ‘I’m sure I did. Sure I put it on the table.’ He hesitated.

‘What?’

He gave a shrug. ‘I do it every night...I could be remembering the night before last.’

Susan took his hand. ‘It’ll turn up. And if not, at least I know what to buy you for Christmas.’ She tried to downplay its significance, knowing the watch could never be replaced.

‘Well, I’ll need a watch before Christmas.’ He looked around, distracted. ‘It must be here somewhere.’

She put her arms around him. ‘An early Christmas present, then.’ David was impossible to buy for. But according to her friends all men were, and it got harder as time went on. It still felt a little strange being a newlywed. It had all happened so fast. And it was so very different to the way she’d imagined she’d meet and fall in love with her husband. She certainly never thought she’d cross that line with a patient. Well, he was officially an ex-patient when they started dating. About a week after his release he rang her at work. He’d been so hesitant, so nervous, but eventually he’d asked her out. It was a big step for him, and she knew it was unlikely he’d try again. He’d been so fragile back then and it always made her nervous. He’d probably always suffer from depression. It was a bit like addiction in that way...it wasn’t something that just disappeared entirely (unless it was triggered by a particular event that was then resolved). David would always be dealing with depression of some level. The brain was a curious thing.

When David had rung that first time she’d made it clear she was interested, but insisted they wait six months before they dated. David had understood, in fact it seemed to work well with his recovery. David was logical, results-focused. Another life, another childhood, and he would have been a scientist or research doctor, or maybe an engineer. That’s how his brain worked. She gave him the how and the why, and he was satisfied with that. One week shy of six months to the day he rang her, set up the date for a week later. So exactly six months after he’d first asked her out, they were sitting across from one another at a way-too-romantic restaurant in Hattiesburg. After the first date came a second, then a third. Six months later he proposed. Susan still wondered how long he’d planned it for. It felt almost spontaneous, like



he'd bought the ring that day on a whim. She gave him an out, but he never took it. In fact, he pushed for the short engagement. The small wedding, just over twelve months after their first date. It was a romantic story — they fell madly in love, overcome by a whirlwind romance. But sometimes she wondered how well she really knew David. He was so kind and open in some ways, so closed in others. Then again, how well did we know anyone? You needed to be in their heads, walk in their shoes to truly understand. Everything else was conjecture, assumptions based on the evidence. That's probably the way David would put it.

She headed into the kitchen. 'Eggs?'

'Sure. Thanks.' David was still distracted, hunting for the watch.

Susan took a breath. She had to do it. Been planning when and how she'd ask the question for a couple of days now. Another breath. *Do it!* 'You're still on your meds?' She tried for a breezy, casual voice. But in reality she was hyper focused on him, on reading his reaction.

'Of course.'

Susan put some spray oil in the pan and turned on the gas. 'I've...I've been worried about you.'

'I'm fine.'

'But Jamal? The centre?'

He stopped, looked up at her. 'It's hard, but I'm okay.' He came over to her. 'I haven't forgotten my promise.'

Her nose started to itch, her eyes filling with water. 'I'm glad. You can't ever forget it.'

He put his arms around her. 'It's stressful. Difficult. But I'm not slipping back into depression. I'm okay.'

She narrowed her eyes, still unsure whether she could believe him. But why would he lie? 'Are you sure? One hundred percent?'

'Yes. I'm upset, worried. Angry even. But not depressed.'

She nodded, swallowed down the tears of relief.

He pointed to the pan. 'Think it's ready.'

Smoke was rising from the heated oil. She moved the pan off the heat to cool down for a bit while she grabbed the eggs and put two slices of bread into the toaster.

'I'll be on toast duty,' David said.

She put the pan back on the heat and cracked two eggs. She needed to talk to David a bit more, just to be sure, but she waited until breakfast was ready and they were sitting down at the table. The first part was better done without eye contact, casual. The next part she wanted to see his eyes, his face, the whole time.

She started after a few bites.

‘David...’ She stared at her plate.

‘Uh-huh.’

‘The nightmares.’

He seemed to freeze for a millisecond, fork halfway between his plate and mouth.

‘Yes.’ His voice was quiet.

‘They’ve been worse.’

He gave a shrug, like he was trying to pretend it was nothing. ‘Like I said, it’s a stressful time.’

‘Of course...I just mean...’ What did she mean? Now the thought seemed lost.

He reached his hand across the table, took hers, gave it a squeeze. ‘Everything’s fine.’

But was it?

She left it for a bit, tried to keep quiet, but only lasted a few minutes. ‘Who’s Parker?’ She said it softly, tentatively, worried what the answer might be. Someone who assaulted David as a kid? Maybe another victim?

David seemed to freeze for a bit again. ‘Parker?’ He scratched his head. ‘Detective Parker? Who came to the house about Jamal?’

Susan felt the air whoosh out of her. It was all just Jamal. David was thinking about the investigation. ‘Detective Parker. That’s right. I’d forgotten his name.’

David smiled. ‘I can’t get Jamal out of my mind.’

‘You poor thing, baby.’ She squeezed his hand.

He gave her an unreadable look and then went back to his egg.

\*\*\*

Susan, Susan, Susan. So close. So close. You’ve no idea how close. Maybe you and David are a good match. Both weak. Subservient, do-gooders. Sure, David’s still trying to cleanse his soul, atone for his sins, but right now, in this moment. Do gooder. Don’t you think?

Beep, I hate beeping do-gooders.

## Chapter 11

I hide in a dark tunnel awaiting my time.  
I can only be released by sniffing out crime.

David sat at his desk, trying to look busy. Doing a bad job of the pretence. He pulled out his notebook, started writing up details about Jamal. Mind-mapping the problem. Willifred had told him about mind maps. He'd used it at first to order the chaos in his mind. The endless thoughts swirling round and around. Trying to dissect that day with Parker, trying to remember. The trial had left him more confused. By the end of it he'd even questioned his sanity. Joe and his lawyer had managed to convince David that he was the big bad wolf, whereas Joe was an impressionable — maybe even sweet — young boy. Crazy, right? Obviously the jury hadn't believed everything. They convicted Joe of the lesser crime of manslaughter with intent, David got murder. But the judge had sentenced them both the same. Had she seen through Joe's act? Or was it simply that they'd both got the maximum sentence? They were too young to try as adults. They stayed in the juvenile system until they were seventeen and were then transferred to serve their last year in a youth section of a regular jail. Another grim twelve months of David's life. He'd had lots of horrible days, rolling into horrible months, horrible years. First with his parents, then the constant horror of finally realising, understanding what they'd done. What he'd done. Parker. Innocent Parker, gone forever. But jail was much worse than Churchill. Bad enough to keep David on the straight and narrow. Not that he would have strayed anyway. He was committed to his new life, and to God. To following the path of good, not evil.

The first weeks at Churchill Juvenile Detention Centre were aberrations of time and place, aberrations of identity. He couldn't shake the surreal feeling of Parker's death. Couldn't believe it had actually happened. Couldn't believe Churchill would be his 'home' for the next five years. A step up from his real home. At least David was an only child. No brother or sister to protect from the violence. David knew from his work at the Centre the joy and danger of siblings. The responsibility. Teenage girls sexually abused by their father or their mum's current boyfriend and putting themselves in the lion's den every night to protect their little sister. Humanity truly was disgusting. Girls placed in that position? David disliked the pushy Christians and the doomsday prophets, but at times he thought maybe the world did need a re-set. A time to Noah's Ark it all again. Ironic? David wouldn't be worth rescuing. According to Willifred in the good versus evil scales, David had tipped the scales in his favour. David wasn't so sure. Not that it mattered — he'd be more than willing to sacrifice his life for others. For good.

Churchill had a strong program for youth offenders, founded on all the latest psychological research. But designed for the extremely violent, abhorrent offenders. David was the youngest. No surprise. Not many twelve-year-old murderers. Not that David and Joe were unique...they were just in the handful of younger juveniles around the world who'd killed. And not parricide. No, they'd unleashed on a three-year-old boy. David still had a visceral reaction to that thought. His pulse quickened (not from excitement), his sweat glands went into overdrive and nausea swirled its way up from his stomach to his head, vertigo. Then there was the urge to run. Just to wildly run and never stop. Sometimes the urge was so strong he had to hold onto something, to keep him from giving in. Run. Maybe that's why he liked jogging so much. Symbolic of a man, a killer, on the run from his deeds and the past.

The routine at Churchill was strict. Well-defined. They kept the boys busy. Mr Tom Raid ran a tight ship. The kids called him Major Tom. David had always wondered how he'd got that name. Not many kids were into the whole Bowie, *Major Tom* thing...but perhaps it had been a staff member. Someone from the right generation. Or maybe it was just the military precision that wafted around him.

Major Tom didn't have a military background but his father did. You could tell he'd been brought up on discipline, rules, boundaries. Completely the opposite to the kids living in Churchill. David soon realised that while they were all individuals, they were also all one person. Like a composite of a certain background — poverty, violence at home, violence at school, drug and alcohol abuse (by the kids *and* the parents). So clichéd...yet true. David hated that. Hated that the stereotype was based on reality, that a kid's background was like a genetic predisposition to the gene of violence. A marker. That's why he'd moved into youth work...to help the many kids, like him, who couldn't escape their environment.

Sometimes he missed Churchill. Missed the predictability of it. Everything was so much clearer then. Partly because they were big believers in milieu therapy, of encouraging some behaviours and punishing undesirable behaviour. It made it simpler, black and white. David soon learned where the line was, and always stayed on the right side. He never wanted to feel like he'd felt after Parker. Never. There was cognitive behavioural programming too, teaching David to be aware of his thoughts and how they affected his behaviour. David had found it hard to be even-keeled in those days. He was all anger and rage, or all depression. But at the time he couldn't identify the anger and the depression within. Didn't understand how his behaviour was linked to his internal processing. He was intense. That's the exact word he'd use to describe himself. Emotional intensity. Supposedly a characteristic of very high IQ, but it didn't excuse his actions. It did, however, help him understand himself. He'd always felt different and finally he understood why.

Group activities and group therapy were big at Churchill. They talked about social interactions, showed David and the other kids how they should respond and how to solve problems instead of exploding and taking it out on others. They'd focused on establishing a positive peer culture at Churchill, and covered anger management, empathy training and vocational training so the kids had something to do when they got out...if school wasn't their thing. David studied in juvie. Long-distance education. Threw himself into it. He'd hated school at school, but this was different. He ended up finishing high school just after his fifteenth birthday. By the time he was released from his one year at real prison, he had his undergraduate degree. Eighteen, ready for the world.

The hardest part of his incarceration had been analysing and addressing his own offence. Homicide. Killing Parker. And they'd spent hours and hours of therapy and discussions with Willifred talking about David's own victimisation history. His dad, his mum. What they'd done to him, to each other...to themselves. Even after years of talking about it, he still felt sick thinking about living in that house. Watching his parents, their toxic and violent relationship. The house. Floor invisible under the papers, the rubbish. And the kitchen? Dishes piled everywhere, cockroaches playing house in the sink, on the benches, the dark crevices that abounded. David had learnt to fend for himself young. He hand-washed his underwear and socks, hung them up on the end of his bed. His bedroom. The only neat room in the whole house. It was his, and he'd been determined to control at least that part of his environment. Neat. Ordered.

His life back then had mostly been ordered. Controlled by him. Except for his moments of rage, when all semblance of control went out the window. There was no middle ground for David, either complete control or complete lack of control. His mother always complained what a terrible child he'd been...was. She painted the picture of a devil-child. A baby who didn't sleep, a child plagued by meltdowns. Often he was responding to the noise in the house. So damn loud. When his parents started one of their fights, it felt like his ears, and his brain, were going to explode. Red hot pain, poking through his ears and into his brain. It made him want to scream. Like maybe he could out-scream them, or his noise would drown out their noise. He tried it once and it did ease the pain inside his ears and head — for all of ten seconds, until his father back-handed him so hard that David had flown across the room, landed in a heap. Blacked out.

\*\*\*

Do you feel sorry for David now? You feel him? Feel the horror of his life? It's all true. Ain't no denying it. *I ain't denying it.* But who do you blame? Is the person responsible for their actions or if they see their mother being beaten up everyday is violence so normalised that you can almost forgive them? Almost? If sleep begets sleep, does violence beget violence, and evil beget evil? Grey area? Told you about that beeping grey, didn't I? Yes, sirree.

\*\*\*

David's mindmap had stalled, overtaken over by the past. The piercing buzz of his phone rang in his ears. He resisted the temptation to cover his ears. Reception. Noreen.

'Yup?'

'Police to see you.'

David hesitated, closed his notebook on the skeletal mind map. 'Send them in.' He stood up and waited by the door. It was the same detectives again — Parker and Saul — but no Fed this time. He gave them a smile. Forced. Could they tell?

'Come in.' He motioned towards the seats. 'What can I do for you?'

The detectives sat down and took out their own little notebooks.

David sat at his desk. 'Any news on Jamal?'

Saul narrowed his eyes. 'You tell us.' Saul gave a long, hard stare.

David knew that look. The ground started shifting beneath him. Could they know?

David shrugged. Played it cool. Maybe he could act his way out of this. 'No news this end. I've asked around, but if anyone knows anything they're not saying.'

A pause. Saul again. 'Do you ever visit the kids? At their homes?'

David shook his head. 'No.' He stopped short. 'Although I did go to DeShawn's house about four days ago. To see how he was doing.'

Saul raised his eyebrows. 'Mrs King doesn't know anything about that visit.'

David resisted the temptation to point out that he probably could have walked through the front door without DeShawn's mum taking much notice.

'I came around the back.'

'Why?'

'It was a media circus out front. I thought it would be...simpler, for everyone, if I just slipped in. I rang DeShawn, told him to meet me near the train track access out the back.' He paused, wondering how to play it. Would a 'normal' person be defensive? Demand to know why they were questioning him? Give them a bit of attitude. Or would they still be overcome

with grief, too focused on giving the cops everything and anything they could to help find a little boy? He sighed. 'I wish I could be more helpful. I really do.'

'Sure.' Parker said it casually, but almost sarcastically. Or maybe David was just being paranoid.

'Is there anything else I *can* do?'

Both detectives ignored his question. 'So which way did you approach the King house?' Parker opened up a page of his notebook to a sketch of the property and surrounds, including the rail track behind the residencies.

Why did they need this level of detail? David was perplexed, but he acted like it was normal, not a problem.

'I parked at the end of Cross Avenue, and walked along the track just above the railway lines. Then I made my way up the little path on the...' David overlaid the compass points, 'south-east side of DeShawn's house. I waited about here,' he pointed to the map, 'until DeShawn came out. And then we sat on the back porch steps.'

'Did you leave the same way?'

'Yes.' He tried to skip ahead to where the conversation could be leading. Foot prints? 'I might not have retraced my steps exactly, but certainly pretty close.'

'And have you ever been around this section of the King house or surrounding area?' Detective Parker pointed to the north-east side of the King's block and beyond, roughly two or three houses along.

'Nope.'

Both detectives leaned back, looked at each other.

Eventually Saul reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a little evidence bag. 'So you can't explain how we found your watch here.' He pointed to the boundary area of DeShawn's house and his neighbour's, on the north-east side.

David instinctively touched his wrist, felt the bareness where his watch should be. 'I have no idea how it got there. Although I *was* in the backyard. How did you find it?'

'Anonymous tip.'

'That sounds...suspicious.'

'You think you're being set up?' Saul jumped to it quickly, like he'd already thought about it himself. That was a good sign.

'It's the only thing I can think of.' David remembered the note. *I know who you are.* Was it the same person? And why would anyone want to set him up? Dredge up all that history?

'Got any enemies?' Detective Parker asked.

David liked where the line of questioning was going. So much better than the alternatives. Alternative, singular. There was only one way the questioning would go if they knew...you killed a three-year-old once, why not again? Of course he'd be their prime suspect. Maybe now he was a person of interest, someone they needed to cross off. But Tony Moretti...they'd sink everything into him. Develop tunnel vision, unable to see any other truth but the one where a child killer killed again. The truth that defied reformation, that consolidated what every cop thought: Once a killer, always a killer. Once a crim, always a crim.

But who would want to frame David? No one from this life, his current life, came to mind. 'I can't think of anyone. Except maybe the kids, but as far as I know they all like me. I do push them sometimes, though.'

'Push?'

'To take responsibility for their actions. It's a tough lesson to learn.' David knew firsthand just how tough.

'And how do they respond? When you push them?'

David raised his eyebrows. 'Depends on the kid. And what they have to take responsibility for. Anger. Tears.'

'Let's focus on the angry ones, huh?' Saul put the watch back in his pocket.

David leaned forward. 'My watch?'

'Evidence at the moment. You'll get it back. Eventually.'

David blinked, a long blink.

'That a problem?'

He'd sparked Saul's curiosity. Saul was way too on-the-ball for David's liking. His secret life, his old identity was at stake. He needed a dumb, lazy cop. Not a curious, astute one.

'I've had the watch for ten years. Sentimental value.'

'That so? Who gave it to you?' Saul again. Fishing again. He spent a lot of time fishing.

What could David say? The truth wasn't a good option. Willifred gave him that watch the day he was released from prison. It was important and symbolic because of who it was from, *and* the date it commemorated. He thought back to the cover story Witness Protection had created for him, the lies of David Story's past. In that version of his life, both his parents were killed in a car crash soon before he'd beaten up the fictitious kid...so he couldn't say his folks had given him the watch. If Saul decided to follow it up, the watch would lead them to a manufacture date that didn't add up with the parental death. So who else could it be? As



David Story he spent eighteen months in juvie for assault, so maybe he could say it was from a mentor. But Saul would want a name. Damn it, what business was it of his, anyway?

‘What does that matter, Detective Saul?’ Call him on it...or at least stall him.

Saul hesitated, then gave a shrug. ‘So, enemies? Any kids gotten angry at you recently?’

David wished he could say yes, just to get the detectives off his back. But that would be wrong. He couldn’t be selfish. He had to think of others first. ‘The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.’ *Luke, 6:45*. Diverting police attention to his clients, to the kids who were struggling day-in and day-out, would be wrong. Evil, even.

He took a breath, tried to feel the goodness within him. Tried to feel his heart’s purity, to focus only on that. ‘No, as I said before there’s only one boy in whom I see a strong potential for violence. But we get along well. He likes me.’ David hesitated. ‘I like him.’ Did he like Teddy Ryan? He saw himself *in* Teddy, but if anything that was a reason to dislike him. No one liked to look in a mirror and see an evil version of themselves. Even if it was an accurate reflection at one point in time.

‘You like him? Yet you think he’s capable of violence. No doubt he’s committed violence in the past?’

‘Yes, yes, and yes. Surely you see from your work, like I do, that unfortunately everyone is capable of violence?’

Saul shifted in his chair. ‘Sure.’ This time the ‘sure’ wasn’t laden with cynicism. ‘Capable, but most people can stop themselves, control themselves.’

‘These boys are kids.’

‘Kids? They’re fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. We’re not talking about eight-year-olds here.’

‘You know what I mean. This generation is more immature. They may not be as innocent as their historical counterparts, but can you see them signing up to fight at war and serve their country like kids did back in the days of World War I and World War II? No.’ David could go on, but he stopped himself. Pulled himself back, realising he was starting to go into one of his cerebral rants. Taking them off course.

‘You don’t have to tell me about kids these days. Irresponsible and selfish.’

David didn’t want to start bashing the kids or get into an intellectual debate about how they were a sign of their times. And to a certain extent victims of the time, of today’s society.

There was silence for a few beats before Detective Parker spoke. ‘Yes, everyone’s capable of violence in some situations. Like protecting their kids or loved ones. But that’s not what we’re talking about here. Jamal’s three years old, for God’s sake.’

David couldn't argue with that. He changed the topic. 'Did you look at the mum's so-called boyfriend? Or lover? Or clients?'

Detective Parker took a breath but Saul cleared his throat, then took the lead. 'Don't forget who's asking the questions, Mr Story.'

David kept his face blank, submitting to Saul's assertion of authority and power. Maybe David was better off keeping his head down.

'So, back to your watch,' Saul continued. 'No ideas?'

David shook his head.

'When did you first notice it missing? Is it possible it fell off when you were visiting DeShawn and someone picked it up, then tossed it?'

'I guess it's possible, but I only noticed it missing this morning.' That didn't tie in with his visit to DeShawn's house, but the words had popped out before he'd had time to screen, and potentially edit. Besides, if they'd already spoken to Susan she would have mentioned it. She was incapable of lying, even for David.

'Well, surely you would have noticed as soon as you lost it? Given its sentimental value, yes?'

David nodded. 'Yes, I think so.' No denying it. 'I'm sure I would have noticed sooner. I wear it nearly all the time. So I guess that brings us back to who might be trying to set me up.'

'Who indeed?' He let the question sit for a while. Then: 'Do you ever leave your door unlocked? Is it possible someone took it from your house?'

'No, we always lock up.'

Silence.

'Nothing else you want to say? Nothing you're hiding?'

David shook his head, made sure to keep calm.

Saul stood up, signalling the end of the interview. 'Don't go anywhere, will you Mr Story.'

David smiled. 'I'll be right here...with my wife and my clients.'

Saul gave a strange snort, impossible to read.

Detective Parker stood, too.

David felt his cheeks flushing, anger rising. 'If it's all the same to you, I'm going to look into Mrs King.'

'Police can handle police business,' Detective Parker said.

'Why? Because you're doing such a good job of it?' David was too riled up to regret it, but he had a vague knowledge that in about five minutes he'd wish he could take it back. This wasn't flying under the radar. He took a deep breath, started counting, selecting a pattern of

sevens, alternating with nines. Seven, sixteen, twenty-three, thirty-two, thirty-nine... His brain needed to be distracted from the building rage.

‘We’re doing our job just fine, Mr Story. Someone who knew the Kings, with inside knowledge of the boys, left his watch outside their place. Watching Jamal King, perhaps?’

‘That’s been missing for less than twenty-four hours.’ He pointed at Saul’s pocket and the hidden watch. ‘It doesn’t place me at the crime scene around the time of Jamal’s abduction. Check your footage of me from the first day you questioned me. I’m wearing my watch. *That* watch.’ Again he pointed at Saul’s pocket.

Saul cocked his head to one side, gave a funny smile, and it was enough for David to realise he’d fallen into the trap. They’d already checked the footage. Knew he’d been wearing his watch two days after Jamal’s disappearance. It was more of Saul’s fishing, this time to see what might rattle David. And he’d walked straight into it.

David was furious — at himself now as much as the detectives — but he forced a smile. At least they knew he didn’t drop his watch near the King house before or during Jamal’s disappearance. The timelines didn’t add up, and Saul and Parker knew it. David tried to force his jaw open, to un-grit his teeth. ‘So someone *has* planted my watch there.’

Saul gave a shrug. ‘Thanks for your time, Mr Story,’ he said. ‘Let us know if you’ve got any theories on how your watch got outside of the King’s house, you hear?’

David forced his gritted teeth into a smile. ‘Don’t worry, I will.’

He lingered at his door, relieved they were finally going. He gave them five minutes, before gathering his bag. It was time to find out more about Mrs King. David’s future might depend on it. Susan’s too.

## Chapter 12

With no wings, I fly.  
With no eyes, I see.  
With no arms, I climb.  
My word is sublime.  
More frightening than beasts,  
stronger than foes,  
I am cunning, ruthless at feasts,  
standing tall in my mourning clothes,  
I rule from on high.

David needed to see Bright, but first he'd look up Noreen's contact. Six months in Hammett hadn't been long enough to establish his own connections. Back in Hattiesburg people in his neighbourhood knew David. They would answer his questions...probably. They'd treat him like an insider, not an outsider. But he'd *had* to move away from Hattiesburg. Luckily Susan had agreed to up-end her life. His suicide attempt had done severe damage. If the person the kids looked up to wanted to check-out, how could they be expected to fight against the horror in their lives? David had got out of his childhood slum, but he was still haunted. The ghosts always lingering, pervasive. And over those few months leading up to the fifteenth anniversary of Parker's death, it had been too much, too overwhelming.

David couldn't return to his job in Hattiesburg...he was a failure, a terrible role model whose presence would do more harm than good. That's what the boys, and the handful of girls, would have seen. He'd betrayed their trust by taking the easy way out, or trying to. There had been no going back. He was enough of a hypocrite as it was — not that they knew that. Didn't know about Tony Moretti, about Parker. *Those* details he could hide, but he couldn't hide the suicide attempt. Both events, both actions, had ripple effects far outside David's insular world. And yet he'd done it...selfishly succumbed to his rage and self-loathing. Ironically, the advice he gave most kids — to hang it there, that something good could be just around the corner — had materialised for David. In some ways, both times. What happened with Parker was horrific, disgusting. But it had got him out of his hell-hole home. He'd found Willifred, found God. Found his calling. And the suicide attempt...that had led him to Susan. If he'd never tried to kill himself he'd never have met Susan.

Fate. David often thought about fate. A pre-determined path. Did we make choices in our lives or were we at the mercy of some higher being? God? Could the two models co-exist? Surely God would be a proponent of free will, of guidance rather than simply laying out a path that everyone had to follow.

David parked outside Badger's Grocer, a small mini-market that was managing to survive despite the large supermarket only two kilometres away. David doubted it would last

much longer. The corner stores couldn't keep up with the supermarket prices and the older generations who liked to shop locally were dwindling. He headed along the street on foot toward the corner bar, a known hangout for the Spade Street Gang. He glanced inside Badger's, saw one older lady squeeze a tomato and then put it in her shopping bag. He kept walking. Bakery. Bank. A deli that was now out of business. Another abandoned shopfront, but no hint of what it once was. Just before the corner, a strong scent of oil and petrol fumes caught his throat. Nestled among the shopfronts was a small, double-fronted, old-looking mechanic's shop. Light was streaming in from a back entrance. Two hoists both held cars, a mechanic working on each. A hydraulic-powered machine of some sort groaned and hissed. David walked the extra few steps past a pawn shop to the bar.

Noreen had given David three names to try — all ex-members of the Centre, all boys she thought might help. But she'd said the first, twenty-year-old Dion Jones, would be the most likely to know, and maybe talk. Noreen had shown David photographs of the boys, and hopefully Dion hadn't changed much in the four years since he'd been a regular at the Hammett Youth Centre.

David walked into the small bar. An L-shaped bar near the front corner divided the two entrances. Eight wooden bar stools were dotted along the wood-top bar, which had dark grey tiles underneath, laid in a subway pattern. One older man sat in the corner position, a clear shot of something in front of him. A couple of neon signs adorned the wall above the bar, as well as mounted bull horns. The wood countertop had permanent ring-shaped stains and was littered with cigarette burns. To the right of the bar, six tables each with four chairs. Behind that, a pool table. There were only four other patrons, all gathered around the pool table, all smoking despite the state's no-smoking laws. But who'd report them? And at least two of them looked under twenty-one. David scanned their faces, clocked Dion at the pool table. Also under-age. Black, tall and lanky, tattoo on his upper right arm. He'd changed in the past four years, but not so much David couldn't recognise the teenager in the man. He made his way over.

Dion looked up, eyes on David. He put the pool cue down, his right hand went behind his back. David assumed Dion's hand was now resting on a gun.

David held out his hands to clearly show he was unarmed.

'Hi, Dion. Noreen from the Centre sent me.'

Dion relaxed a little, but only a little. Not the sort of man to take someone entirely at his word. Maybe life had taught him that lesson.

David kept his hands in sight, leaned against the pool table, a couple of feet away from Dion. Cigarette smoke swirled around the dimly lit room, around Dion, a snake spiralling its body around its prey.

Two other guys inched closer, ready for action.

‘How is Noreen?’ Dion asked.

‘She’s good. Still devoted to the Centre.’

Dion gave a little chin duck. Waited. ‘So who de fuck are you?’

David didn’t skip a beat. ‘I’m the counsellor there now.’

‘What happened to Brian? He gave up on Hammett?’

David gave a shrug. ‘Not sure to tell you the truth. Noreen told me he’d moved on, but nothing else.’

‘Noreen always so loyal.’ Dion grabbed a packet of cigarettes from the side of the pool table and tapped one out. ‘Though she don’t be keeping my name to herself I see.’ After he lit up from the burning ember of his old butt, he said: ‘Wadda ya want?’ He breathed out the smoke, a little extra push and it rushed out his nose.

‘You heard about the little boy who’s missing?’

‘Course, fool. Everybody heard about Jamal King and where he’s at.’

David gave a nod. ‘I’m trying to find out what happened to him.’

‘You the po-lice, now?’

David shook his head. Shifted his stance. He needed to show his old self a little more. Someone Dion could relate to, could sense was on his side. David looked like some white, middle-class dude who’d decided to help the ‘poor folk’ and become a youth worker...like so many of them did. But that wasn’t who David was. That wasn’t his story.

‘No, I’m not police. You wouldn’t talk to me if I was. I’m just trying to make this horrific situation a bit better.’ He resisted the urge to swear. Yes, it would make Dion relate to him more, see David was one of them, but it would also go against who he was *now*. And that was more important than anything...except Jamal’s life.

Dion leaned further back against the pool table, crossed his arms, cigarette still in his mouth. ‘I heard bout you. You just some white boy playing.’ His cigarette jumped around in his mouth, threatening to escape at any minute.

David shook his head. ‘Then you ain’t heard right. I’m the reformed white boy. I didn’t play bad, I *was* bad. But I changed.’

‘Like I could change, huh?’ Dion shook his head. ‘God’d forgive me my sins?’ His voice was thick with sarcasm.

Dion was baiting David, but he had to say it. 'God forgives all who truly repent.' He gave Dion a smile. 'But that's not why I'm here. I don't care if you believe in God. I'm not here to help you find the light, the right path. I'm here for Jamal and DeShawn. That's all.'

Dion narrowed his eyes, glanced at his friends, or maybe they were more co-workers. 'Do I's look like a snitch?'

'Course not. It's not snitching.' David took a step closer. 'I'm not the police, I'm here as a friend of DeShawn's, to help find his brother.'

Dion took a long drag on his cigarette. 'The righteous man here to deliver us from evil.' He laughed, the smoke oozing out from his nose and mouth, tendrils wrapping around his face.

'I'm not righteous.' David didn't have to act, he could feel the deadness in his eyes, feel it permeating throughout his body. He had to show Dion the old David, just a glimpse of the coldness inside would be enough.

Dion stopped laughing, stared. He took a puff of his cigarette, blew it out the side of his mouth. 'I stand corrected. I feel you now, brother.' He turned back to one of the other guys, then jerked his head in David's direction.

Even though it was what he'd wanted, intended, David was disturbed by the acknowledgement in Dion's eyes. Like he knew a killer when he saw one, recognised that primeval being in David. His repugnant alter ego.

David closed his eyes, opened them slowly. 'The Kings.'

Dion grasped his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, pulled it out of his mouth, but didn't say anything.

David prodded. 'I heard around the traps that the mum's got some man on the side. A trick or maybe more?'

A shrug.

'Do you know anything about it?'

Dion shook his head, like David was asking him for a million bucks. 'You white guys sure expect a lot. Privileged mother-fuckers.' Another shake of the head. 'Why you wanna know bout her?'

Could Dion be that dumb? Or did he just need David to say it. 'Well, what if one of these guys lost it with Jamal. Maybe Jamal interrupted them and the guy got cross. Hurt him, maybe killed him, and now he's covering it up. Or maybe he's not what he seems...he's a paedophile and has poor Jamal stashed somewhere.'

Dion's top lip curled up. Disgust. Anger. Maybe rage. Or maybe David had hit a nerve, a buried secret from Dion's past.

David took the cue. ‘A man like that should get what’s coming to him, right?’ David pulled Dion deeper into the anger, the darkness.

‘Yeah.’ Dion let out a grunt.

‘And a kid like Jamal...he shouldn’t have to pay for what his mother’s done, now should he?’ The misogynistic appeal, another good bet with Dion.

Dion was silent. He took another drag of his cigarette, then dropped his hands by his side. ‘I know who she been running around wit. And if he a paedophile I gonna kill him myself.’

David held up his hand. ‘Don’t go jumping to that conclusion, yet. I may have it wrong.’ He didn’t want to send Dion hurtling into a homicidal rescue mission. ‘It seems more likely they’ve tried to shut up the kid and something’s gone wrong.’ The best theory to present to Dion. He could probably relate to losing his temper, losing control. Presumably not with a three-year-old boy, but the concept was within his emotional and intellectual grasp.

Dion gave a grunt.

David could feel the hesitation return, but it was clear Dion wanted to do the right thing. Dion had *some* sort of moral compass. Maybe it didn’t always point North, but it was intact enough to feel outrage about Jamal. ‘It’s not snitching, it’s protecting your brothers. Kids, just like you were.’ Dion was still a kid in David’s eyes, but he knew that wouldn’t be Dion’s self-perception.

David paused. ‘Look, I only need his name. I’m sure there are plenty of other people who know who Rosie King’s fooling around with.’ Except not DeShawn. And not the police. And not Noreen. Maybe Rosie and her mystery man were being discreet.

‘I’m no snitch.’

‘But...Jamal? DeShawn?’

Dion came forward, chest out. Ready to take David on.

David took a step back, but had one more shot. ‘Please.’

Dion grabbed him by the collar, forcing him back towards the nearest wall. David was tall, but lanky. Light.

Dion pressed his face in close to David’s. ‘I said, fuck off.’ But he leaned in, whispered, ‘Chris Hops. Parton Street.’ Then he gave David a jolt and took a step back. Went back to his cigarette, took the last drag, stubbed it out in an ashtray, then looked back at David. ‘Get lost.’

David nodded.

Dion gave a barely perceptible chin-up acknowledgement. Then said: ‘Hey. I heard good things about you. Don’t fuck it up, okay?’



David managed a grimace. If only Dion knew how good David was at f-ing things up. Lives...the most recent being Susan's. Even before the boy went missing David had moments of doubt. Of disgust with himself for thinking, even for a moment, that he could have happiness — a wife. But as long as she never knew, he could face and fight his own demons. But now that might not be possible. Susan might be destroyed with him.

David headed back to his car and drove the three miles to Parton Street. It was in the seedier side of Hammett — although the whole town was really one big cesspool. Parton Street was simply one step closer to hell. Here it wasn't just the graffiti, the squatters, the kids on the street, the constant noise of shouting and swearing. Parton Street upped the ante. In the other poor parts of town people didn't have much, but they were proud. Lawns mowed, neat pot plants on the porch, garden beds weeded and pruned. Not in Parton Street. Some of David's kids lived in this area. Nearly every adult, every teenager was either drunk or high. Prostitution, including girls who must be at least two or three years underage, openly on the street. It was like even the cops had given up on these two blocks. Someone had to do more here. Maybe it could be him. Or at least the Centre.

David slowed down, wondered if he should have called Bright. No, the guy had law enforcement etched onto his skin. Although he also had enough of a bad-ass look that maybe he could look different if he lost the suit. Besides, David would always be a killer in Bright's eyes. In everyone's. Even his own.

He pulled up in the middle of the block, when he saw Joss Smith. A fifteen-year-old girl who'd been into the centre once or twice, before disappearing like a lot of the girls did. He didn't blame them, the centre officially serviced teenage boys and girls in Hammett, but the place was so testosterone-heavy that the girls only lasted one or two visits. David preferred it that way — he couldn't guarantee a girl's safety.

He got out of the car, walked around to the sidewalk. 'Hi, Joss.'

She turned to face him, showing a black eye. He took a breath, then held back his instinctive outrage and questions. He went with: 'How are you?'

She raised an eyebrow. Shrugged.

He gave a nod. At least she was still clean. 'I'm looking for Chris Hops. You know him?'

'Number twenty-six.'

He hesitated. 'You know the boys who come and see me?'

'Some.'

'One of them responsible?' He looked at her black eye.

She shook her head. 'Nope. You better leave this one, doc. Better for us both.'

If getting out wasn't an option, she might be right. David hated this part of his job but the reality was sometimes the kids were better off if he didn't get involved. Joss names someone, David talks to them, and she cops a beating — a much worse beating — for opening her mouth. What a f-ed up cycle. Joss might be better off if he walked away and kept his mouth shut. She was a nice girl, too. But living here...

'How are you doing at school, Joss?'

'Same.'

Joss's academic abilities might get her out of Hammett. If she could last another two years until she graduated, a college scholarship could be her ticket out. 'I'll get some info together for you about scholarships. Anyone around here you trust with it?'

She gave a smile. 'Joel. He my cousin.' She grabbed his arm. 'But don't be telling him about this.' She touched her eye. 'I don't want no one-eight-seven on my conscious.'

One-eight-seven is murder. Came out of Californian law, but found its way into African-American slang in lots of cities.

David hesitated. 'I think you need to remind whoever did that about Joel.'

She smiled, almost laughed. 'Maybe you right, doc.'

'Hang in there. And if things get worse, call the cops.'

She laughed. 'Cops? I ain't calling no cops. Like they gonna do anything anyway.'

He grimaced. 'Well call me.' He took out a card and wrote his mobile number on the back of it.

'What you gonna do? Pray? Talk 'em out of it?'

David tried not to feel helpless. He had to be able to *do* something. 'Quit being a smart ass and just call me, okay. I'll get you out, one way or another. College saved me, and it will save you.'

She closed her eyes, opened them slowly. 'Okay.' She slipped the card into her back pocket. 'Two years.'

David gave a nod. 'Two years. You can make it.' He touched her on the shoulder and headed across the street.

The Hop house was like most on the street — rundown would be generous. The relics of a small wire fence lay partly upright and partly broken and twisted on the front lawn. The rest of the front yard was covered with rubbish — old furniture, beer bottles, old mattresses, stray bits of metal and wood, soggy cardboard boxes, food wrappers. There was one small section that still had grass, and sitting in that corner was a small swing-set with a slide and red plastic tunnel. It looked like it had been lifted from a park or someone's rubbish. It was plastic, with broken edges and graffiti. Still, it provided a small play area for any kids under about five. It

sat in the corner of the yard, a sanctuary for someone...presumably a little child. David thought about his own house growing up. He would have loved something like this in their front yard. He would have spent a lot of time in the tunnel, hiding and blocking out the world.

The front gate was still on its posts, but was stuck open, like the posts had shifted and now the gate was stuck permanently half-open, caught on the concrete path. David walked through the gate and movement caught his eye. A little girl huddled in the red tunnel. Her face covered in dirt, dark hair matted together, almost in dreads. She looked four, maybe five. School next year, probably. At least she'd be out of the house several hours a day then.

He bent down. 'Hi there.'

She blinked, big round eyes staring at him, but didn't say anything.

'Are your folks home?'

She looked up at the house, still silent.

'Thanks.' David pushed upright and walked up the two steps to the porch. He opened the wire door, which was in desperate need of paint and a new fly screen. It creaked and sank as he opened it — needed a new hinge up the top. Looked like Chris Hops wasn't handy. Or maybe he was too busy with Rosie King to look after his own house.

David knocked on the main door, white wood, also in need of paint.

No answer. He knocked again, this time louder. He heard some movement on the other side of the door. It opened a crack. Red on white, a bloodshot eye peering at him.

'What?' The voice was male, husky. Grumpy.

'Hi. My name's David Story. I work down at the Hammett Youth Centre.'

'So?'

'I want to talk to you about Jamal King. And Rosie King.'

The door opened wider. 'Keep yo'voice down.'

Not surprisingly Rosie King's name was a touchy subject. Obviously David was in the right place.

'You'll wake the missus.' The man came out, wearing only his boxers. His boxers were slung low, forced down by a bulging pot belly. The skin was stretched tight over his mountainous stomach, but in another twenty years it might sag to either side. He had man boobs, a three-day growth and about the same amount of hair on his head. He also needed a shower.

David took a step back to take a breath in. 'Chris Hops?'

The man nodded. He looked at the stained chairs on the porch. 'Take a load off, man.'

David smiled, tried not to think about the stains and creatures, including the microscopic variety, that might be living in the cushions. This kind of dirt and disorder reminded him of

his childhood, his parents. He hovered in front of the chair. Tried not to grimace. Sat...this was for Jamal and DeShawn.

Chris picked up a beer bottle from the floor and drained the last half inch then started coughing and spat out a cigarette butt. ‘Jesus.’

David tried not to gag.

Chris picked up the packet of cigarettes from the small wicker table and lit up. ‘That’s better,’ he said after he’d taken the first puff hard and deep into his lungs. Had the foul beer-soaked butt made him want a cigarette? David shuddered, bit back the dry-retch. Focus.

David suddenly wondered what he was going to say. *Did you kill Jamal King?* It was insane. And would he even know if Chris was lying through his teeth. David was smart — street-smart and book-smart — but he wasn’t social-smart. Not by a long shot. He called Willifred a ‘friend’, but really he was his spiritual adviser/counsellor. They had a strong bond, a deep bond and it was the only ‘friendship’ David had that wasn’t based on lies, one big lie of his identity. Unless you counted Bright...which David couldn’t. Walter Bright would never be his friend. Ironically, the fact that he knew David’s truth ensured that. Bright was too committed to justice, law and order to ever be friends with a killer. No matter how much reformation had taken place. Or how much remorse. Susan was his friend. Wife, friend, lover. But she didn’t even know who he really was.

Everything was so messed up. He wanted to find Jamal, but was that for DeShawn, Jamal or the fear of discovery? He looked at Chris, then at the tunnel, the girl now hidden from view. He wanted to grab her hand and save her from the future. A future he knew all too well. He wondered if her bedroom was like his had been — the only bit of clean and order in filth. Or was her dirty hair and face a sign that she’d succumbed to her life? To her parents’ lifestyles?

‘I said, what the fuck you want, man?’ Chris’s voice brought David back. *What do you want?* He’d been asked that question a few times today. Pity he didn’t know the answer. To go back in time to the day of Parker, to change everything? That’s the only answer he could think of. But that’s not what Chris wanted to hear. Wouldn’t even make sense to him. And it’s not why he was sitting on a stinking porch with a man he already despised.

‘I want to ask you about Jamal.’

‘You ain’t the po-lice, so who are you?’

David introduced himself, his association to the Centre.

‘Got your work cut out for you with that lot.’

David managed a smile through clenched teeth. Like Chris Hops could talk. Men like him were part of the problem.

Chris continued. 'Sure feel sorry for teachers and people like you. Workin with kids these days...no respect. And you lot can't even belt them.'

David bit back the retort. Took a breath. 'So, I hear you're around at the King house a bit?'

Chris snuck a look over his shoulder. 'Who told you that?'

'Word on the street.'

A long drag. 'That so?'

David nodded.

'Explain Nancy's mood past couple o' days.'

'So it's true.' Statement, not question. He didn't want to give Chris any wriggle room.

A shrug. 'Maybe. She a mighty fine woman, Rosie King.' Another look over the shoulder. 'Dat booty.' He licked his lips. 'She fine. And easy.' He gave David a wink and then let out a hearty laugh, that turned into a phlegm-ridden cough. It took nearly a full minute for the coughing fit to abate. 'These things will be the death of me.' He wheezed, stared at the cigarette for a bit but then took the final drag.

'Your wife works?'

'Some days. Waitress.'

'And that's when you see Rosie?'

A non-committal shrug.

'What did she used to do with Jamal? When you went over during the day?'

'Why should I tell you any of this shit, man? You just some fucked up dude talks shit at that Centre. Fillin our kids' heads with lies...with hope.' He said 'hope' like it was a dirty word. God forbid any of the kids in Hammett should hope for a better life. David clenched his fists, felt the anger rising. He wanted to grab this guy's pock-marked face and... He could see it, feel it. His hands clenching around that skinny neck, throwing him onto the porch. Driving his knee into his chest and then throwing the punches. Face, teeth, skin pulverising, teeth breaking, nose bones cracking, breaking. The final blow. That's what he'd wanted to do to his dad all those years ago. What he should have done. His mum and dad should have been the recipients of David's rage, not innocent Parker. He was the surrogate. David had discovered that during years of therapy. Problem with therapy is you have to rip yourself apart before you can rebuild from the ground up.

David blinked. Realised Chris was looking at him. No broken bones. No blood-covered face. Good or bad? David wasn't sure. It was the first violent fantasy David had had in years. Usually when his temper started he could control it. Focus on breathing, on numbers, some scientific issue that interested him. So why hadn't he that time? Was the anger stronger? Or

was he just caught off guard, in this cesspool that reminded him of his own childhood too much for his liking.

‘What the fuck, man?’ Chris was staring at him. ‘Jesus, what the fuck’s wrong with you?’

Pot-kettle...but David *had* just blanked out. What would Chris do if he knew the truth? That he’d given himself over to a violent, dark fantasy of killing Chris?

‘Look. I’m trying to help this community. I don’t think it’s too much to ask you to help me.’ He didn’t put on his usual mask of politeness, of decency. Instead he gave Chris the same cold stare that had proved effective with Dion. ‘I give a lot for these kids. I care about them.’ He stood up. ‘Now show me *you* give a crap.’

Chris leaned further back in his seat. Looked at David, lit up another cigarette. He stood up. ‘I’ll be back.’

He returned less than a minute later, two beers in hand. He offered one to David, but David shook his head. He was too riled up for alcohol.

Chris pulled the tab off the can. ‘I didn’t see much of Jamal. Rosie always told him to go to his room the minute I walked in, or he watched TV. But he was a good kid...never heard a sound out of him, no matter how much noise Rosie and I were making.’ Chris gave a smile, then quickly dropped it.

*Good move, Chris.* David also noticed the past tense — he *was* a good kid. Could mean something, or Chris could just be like nearly everyone else and assuming Jamal was dead.

‘Did Rosie ever lose her temper with him?’ David assumed the police hadn’t ruled out Rosie’s involvement. Statistically speaking it was more likely that someone in the family, or someone associated with the family — like Chris or the actual boyfriend, Reg — was the perpetrator.

‘Sure. But nothing out of the ordinary.’ Chris took a large gulp of beer, then rested the can on his belly.

David thought that depended on your point of reference. What was ordinary or normal for some was an out-of-control rage for others. Maybe he needed to be specific.

‘Did she hit Jamal to discipline him?’

‘Sometimes. But only a few times that I seen in the past couple of months.’ He took another large gulp, enough to leave the can half full.

‘That’s how long you’ve been seeing her?’

‘This about Jamal or Rosie? Jesus. You trying to fuck her?’

David crinkled up his nose. ‘No.’ He left out the next part...I’m trying to find out if Rosie killed her boy. Is capable of it.

Another swig of beer. Can on stomach. ‘Yeah, that’s how long I been *seeing* her.’ He raised his eyebrows. ‘If you think she killed that boy, you fooling yourself. She love those kids. Do anything for ’em, ’cluding laying on her back.’ He drained the last of the beer. ‘Not that I paid her of course. Man like me don’t need to pay.’

‘I understand, Chris.’ David kowtowed to Chris’s show of manhood. ‘But I also hear Rosie’s a big drinker. Maybe she lost her temper, doesn’t even remember it.’

‘Rosie don’t drink that much.’

Again, David wondered about the point of reference. Maybe compared to Chris. But that’s not saying much. Not that David judged them...well, maybe a little bit. He understood why people like Chris, Rosie, even his dad, turned to the bottle. True escape seemed unlikely, so a temporary mental escape through drugs or alcohol had to suffice. Numb reality enough to get on with life. But it didn’t excuse their actions. Didn’t excuse the violence, the abuse the kids often copped — and the wives. And once someone was buried in the bottle or the needle, it was damn hard to get out. To even see a reason to try.

‘When was the last time you saw Jamal?’

Chris hesitated, picked up the second can of beer and ran his finger along the rim. Eventually he said. ‘Day he went missing. Only a few hours before. I went over there to...’ he gave a wink, ‘left around midday. She said Jamal would nap around one, so she was gonna get some sleep, too. When I left, Jamal sittin watchin TV.’

‘And Rosie?’

‘Saw me to the door in a robe.’

‘Did you guys have a few drinks together? Or anything else?’

‘Just a few shots of vodka.’

David gave a nod. ‘And they both seemed okay when you left?’

‘Course. Like always. I used to come over when Jamal napping, but the last week or two it was earlier, cause I had to be home before the missus got home from her breakfast shift.’

‘So who was with your daughter?’

He gave a little shrug. ‘She a real good girl. Don’t need much lookin after.’

Need and want were two very different things, but David kept his mouth shut, only too aware what it was like to live like that little girl. David had broken the cycle, but would she?

Things like this, days like this, made David question why he’d ever gone into youth work, why he’d returned to the type of communities that reminded him of his own pitiful childhood. Maybe he should have taken the easy, less painful path and got an office job.

He took a breath, questioning his calling, his feeling that the Lord wanted him to help others. Maybe it was all just some crazy notion borne from his respect from Willifred. David

didn't want to escape into booze or drugs, but he was starting to feel the need to escape. Get away from deadbeat mums and dads — and away from the fear of being found out, of a little boy dead, just like Parker.

He sat in his car thinking of escape. Before he knew it he was dialling Willifred's number. No need to use a burner now — Bright knew he was still in contact with Willifred.

'Hello?' Willifred's rich voice floated down the phone line.

'Hi. It's me.'

'How are things going? Any word on the boy?'

'No...but something else has happened.' He told Willifred about the watch.

'That ain't good, David.'

'No.'

A silence, then: 'Who do you think it is?'

'I don't know.' David shook his head. 'I just don't know. But I keep coming back to Parker.'

'He's never far from your thoughts, son, so of course your mind would make that leap. But is it right? Does it *feel* right?'

'That's the problem, Willifred. I just don't know.'

'How's Susan handling it?'

David sighed. 'Well, she doesn't know about the watch yet. And of course she doesn't know about the note.'

'So for the moment she's only worried for the young boy.'

'Yes.'

'And have you found anything out about him? Any ideas what happened to him?'

'His mum, Rosie, is surrounded by men. It's a web of possibilities.'

'I'm sure the police will be looking into them all.'

David said yes, but he wasn't so sure. The police didn't seem to know about Hops, after all. Did they? David needed to keep digging — or run.

\*\*\*

*Run, rabbit, run. Gather up your shit and run for the hills. Take Susan...or not.* Running's what David does best. He thinks he ain't running away every day when he goes into that youth centre. He convinces himself he's facing his past, confronting it, paying the price. But he's running away. Running away from his deeds by burying himself in other's. But you can't outrun who you are. And you can't outrun me.



David the saint. David, who wants to save Joss and see her go to college. David, who wants to save the little girl from her neglectful parents. Do you think his motives are as altruistic as he makes out? Maybe if he took that little girl's hand he'd lead her down to the train tracks, beat the shit out of her. He'd take that rage that's building, that he felt towards her daddy and unleash it on her. He ain't man enough to take on Chris, just like he wasn't man enough to take on his own father.

Can you even be sure David is innocent when it comes to Jamal? I mean, the watch is suspicious, don't you think? The cops are suspicious and they don't even know David is a cold-blooded killer. A child killer. Imagine if they did. They'll find out. Of course they will. It's a matter of time.

I know where Jamal is. *I* know if he's alive or dead. Me, the mother-beeping handsome time travelling know-it-all chameleon, evil-worshipping tease...who likes the grey. Yes, sir-ree. I see all. And not in the Time Warp kind of way. Or maybe. I do see time slip and slide, it's more fluid than you think. Time. Linear? Not so much. And once you know the truth it's true: 'nothing will be the same'. Nothing will be the same for David. For Susan. Not to mention Jamal and DeShawn. No, sir-ree.

Do you know who I am? Do you? Have you guessed? Want another clue? I can't go giving it away for all the dumb beeps out there. Know what I mean? Okay, another clue. Sure, why not. Power. I'm powerful. All powerful. I'm a mother-beeping handsome time travelling know-it-all chameleon, evil-worshipping tease...who likes the grey and is as powerful as all beep.

## Chapter 13

To unravel me you need a simple key,  
No key that was made by locksmith's hand,  
But a key that only I will understand.

When David arrived at the safe house Bright was waiting on the porch, looking like something out of a western. The law man looking down on his domain, weapon holstered — a shoulder holster rather than the Wild West belt. A man in charge.

Bright gave David a nod. He was just missing the wide-brim, the tap of his forefinger.

Bright looked around, no one in sight. 'You wanted to meet?'

David nodded, walked up the stairs and joined Bright on the porch. 'Did you know about my watch?'

Bright furrowed his brow. 'Watch?'

'Police found it near the King house. Right on their boundary line.'

'No. But I'm not in the loop. The investigative loop.' He leaned against the porch rail. 'They just found it?'

'Appears so. After a phone call to the tip line.'

'You know what the person said?'

'No.' David realised he hadn't asked that question. Had been too shocked.

'What else did the cops say?'

'Well, for the moment at least they seem to be following the idea that someone's trying to set me up.'

'Does seem that way. First that note, then this. Someone knows who you are, what you've done and they're trying to out you.'

David gulped, tried to imagine Susan's face when she found out. What would she say? Think? Do? He had to avoid that at all costs. Had to find who was responsible for the letter, his watch.

He had to ask. 'What about Joe? Back from...then.' He'd often wondered about Joe. Had he repented, reformed like David, or had he ended up repeating his violent behaviour? Perhaps he was locked away for life now? 'Is he...do you know where he is?'

Bright shook his head. 'No, but I can find out.'

'You haven't kept tabs on him?'

'US Marshalls, yes. But not me personally. I know where he was when you moved to Hattiesburg. Before we approved the move I had to make sure he wasn't in Mississippi. But that was six years ago now.'

'So he could be here?'

‘Not living in this state, no. If he’s moved in the past six years his handler would have made sure you weren’t in the same area. It’s part of the court order...as you know.’

David nodded. *Never to see one another again. Bad influences on each other, a case of two personalities that blended in a dangerous co-dependency to become a violent and volatile force.* David knew the transcript well. Hell, he was happy about it. Last thing he wanted was to see Joe again. Or whatever his name was now. Yes, he thought about him occasionally. A lot near the anniversary of Parker’s death, but it was never happy thoughts. He wasn’t reminiscing, he was re-living the hatred, the violence, the unchecked anger. And the regret, shame, remorse. The sins forever staining his soul — no matter what Willifred said.

‘So you don’t think it’s Joe?’

‘Didn’t say that. I’ll check it out. Make sure he’s on his handler’s radar, and hasn’t made any trips to Mississippi.’

‘I don’t know who else it could be. You were worried about Patricia?’

‘Your gut was right. She checks out. Yeah, maybe she recognised you in some way, but I don’t think she was responsible for the letter. We’re keeping an eye on her, though. Monitoring her email and phone.’

‘Shit.’ David didn’t like the idea of Susan’s friend being monitored because of him. At the same time, at least that way he might have a heads up if Patricia did discover his identity. ‘Let me know if anything relevant comes up?’

No response.

‘For Susan’s sake.’

Bright held his breath, let it out. ‘Okay.’

‘Thanks.’ David managed a small smile. ‘Anything from DHL?’

‘The envelope was picked up from a private address in Hattiesburg, but the residents didn’t match the driver’s description and don’t know anything about a letter. Never heard of you.’

‘So they say.’

Bright cocked his head to one side. ‘I’ve been down that path. I believe them. It’s a couple in their twenties. Clean. Besides, I interviewed them myself and my bullshit radar was flat-lining.’

David sighed. ‘I reckon you’d be as accurate as a lie detector test.’

‘Pretty close.’ He looked out at the street, flicked his eyes back to David. ‘I did push them. Just a little bit. Enough to know for sure.’

David shoved his hands into his jeans’ pocket. ‘But who does that leave? And how did they organise DHL?’

‘The driver said he picked up the envelope from a white male who was sitting on the porch smoking. Guy had a baseball cap and sunglasses on. Possibly a disguise, but lots of people would wear that without trying to disguise their features. Whoever it was simply waited for DHL to show up, knowing the owners would be out at work all day.’

David sighed. Another dead end. Although it gave them some details — white male. Joe? One of the white kids from Hattiesburg that he’d somehow let down or failed? Or who’d perceived David had harmed him or his family in some way? A relative of Parker out for revenge? Had hunted Tony Moretti and somehow gotten through the layers of paperwork and identities to David Story.

Leaving David’s watch at the King house. It reeked of a set-up. Something personal, someone who wanted to bring David down. The cops thought it was someone who had a grudge against David, but they didn’t know his full history. Didn’t know how deep that grudge would go. If it wasn’t about some kid who blamed David for...something, it was most likely about Parker. Someone who thought David should pay. And not with six years in juvie, not with guilt alone. David understood. Completely. If anyone hurt Susan he’d have trouble following the sixth commandment. *Though shalt not kill*. Even God-loving David wondered if that one needed a few exceptions...unless your life depends on it, unless you’re at war, unless the bastard has killed someone close to you.

Parker’s parents were another possibility. But why would they wait this long to come after David? Unless it had taken them that long to find him.

‘What about Parker’s parents? Maybe they’ve been tracking me, or Joe and me, and finally found me.’

Bright gave a nod. ‘I’ll look into it.’

‘Thanks. I appreciate it.’

Another small nod, the peace between them holding.

‘Sorry you have to be down here. Babysitting me.’

Bright had told him once he lived in Arizona. Could have been a lie. David could see that maybe Walter Bright didn’t want to tell a man like David his life story. Didn’t want a killer knowing anything personal about him. Probably a good guideline in Bright’s line of work. Some psycho could try to track him down one day. He got the impression Bright had kids, too. Not when they first met, but after. Their relationship had been through peaks and troughs over the years. When he first met Bright, David had registered disinterested disgust. No, not disinterested, distanced. He’d wanted distance between himself and the killer-boy. But there was maybe a hint of curiosity there, too. Curiosity had been common. How could a twelve-year-old boy have so much rage inside already? People, even the psychiatrist and head

of juvie, had been curious. They'd expected a monster, but David was...kind of normal a lot of the time. And while he was socially awkward, if you got him started on a topic he was interested in, he could have an adult conversation. In those first few months at juvie, they didn't know what to make of him. Maybe that was part of the reason why Willifred took him under his wing. He could see the good within.

Bright would have been about twenty-six when they first met. He'd entered a small holding room that had been set up as they were transitioning him from sentencing to his first new identity and juvie. David was waiting, staring out the window.

'Tony Moretti.'

David almost hadn't turned, he was still in a state of shock. He swivelled away from the wall and towards the voice. Bright was just what he'd expected. Cheap blue suit, short hair, a little longer on top but that section was slicked back. Broad, tall. Sharp features. Even in his twenties he exuded power and authority. Probably did at ten.

Bright stood in the doorway, staring at David. Staring at the monster.

'Don't look like much, do I?'

Bright gave a half-chuckle then forced it back down his oesophagus. He stared at Tony/David, a coldness in his eyes. 'Killers come in all different shapes and sizes.'

David gave a few mini nods. 'Guess so.'

Bright looked at the chair across from David and hesitated, like maybe he wasn't so sure he even wanted to be that close to him. David didn't blame him.

They'd next met six years later, when Bright was getting him ready for his permanent new identity, getting him ready to become David Story. Tony was gone, Adam was on the way out too.

'In three weeks' time you'll be David Story,' Bright had said.

He'd nodded. 'David.' He'd tried the name on for size, but it felt uncomfortable — like any change, anything new. Change was a tricky thing. Even at eighteen David knew not many people embraced change. Fear of the unknown always lurked, hovering above the excitement, dampening it. Anxiety followed soon after, and came in doses ranging from background noise to crippling. Back then, David knew more about the crippling end of that scale.

He'd looked at Bright, now in his early thirties. Still exuding power, still the image of the lawman. Suddenly David had wanted this man's approval, or maybe just an acknowledgement of David's remorse.

'I've...I've...'

Bright moved closer, an unreadable expression on his face.

'I've repented. I know what I did was wrong. Evil.'

Bright kept the even, unreadable stare. ‘I’ve read your file, son.’

Son? For a second David thought maybe Bright was offering an olive branch, a term of endearment, but then he realised it was more about David’s age. The fact he looked even younger. He was turning eighteen in three weeks, but looked sixteen. He was all arms and legs, skinny. Acne taking its toll. A pimply teenager to Bright. An evil, pimply teenager.

David had been sheltered in Churchill Juvenile Detention in many ways. Only three people knew of his true crime. And they no longer looked at him like Agent Bright, was looking at him. Disgust. Curiosity. Contempt. Righteousness.

David uncurled his spine. ‘I have sinned. The worst sin in God’s eyes. Society’s eyes. I may be finished paying my debt legally, but I’ll never pay off my debt in *my* eyes. I know that.’

‘Good for you, son.’

David narrowed his eyes. He couldn’t work out this man. Couldn’t read his cues. Not that David was particularly adept in that department anyway. David shifted the conversation away from his reformation. ‘So. David Story. Tell me about him. About the new me.’

‘You’ll need to know the cover inside and out. Can you do that?’

‘Thought you said you’d read my file?’

‘Point taken. How long?’ Bright placed the file on the small table in front of David.

‘Instantly. Photographic memory.’

‘Damn waste.’

David pushed back. ‘Feel free to speak your mind, Agent Bright.’

‘Always do, son.’

David picked up the file, opened it. Inside were ten pages with detailed information on the fictional David Story. His parents, school, a fake crime that landed him in juvie, his interests, his grades, everything. Some of it married with David’s real personality, even his past. The fake juvie record was for violent assault (just not ending in death and not on a three-year-old). Somehow they’d got his first- and second-year college credits into his new name — the power of the law at work — but his grades were lower. Probably a dig at David, an f-you, but it didn’t matter. He wasn’t going for a high-flying job where they’d be looking for impressive marks.

‘You know what I want to do?’

Bright gave a nod. ‘For the record, I don’t think it’s a good idea.’

‘What?’

‘You. Being in that world. Working in a youth centre.’

‘Trying to help kids like me be better people?’

‘Kids? You won’t be much older than the kids you’re supposedly counselling. You really think they’re going to trust some guy a couple of years older than them? Who looks the same age or even younger?’

It was true. Because he’d accelerated his learning he would only be a few years older than the kids he’d be counselling. At first, at least. After a few years he’d be in his twenties and the kids would still be in their mid-teens, with his first ‘batch’ long gone.

Bright gritted his teeth. ‘Just telling it like it is. You ain’t seen the real world.’

David felt his father’s fists hitting his cheekbone, smashing his jaw. Knocking him out cold. ‘Sure I have. Just not for six years.’

Bright sighed. ‘Sending someone like you, with a history of violence, homicidal violence, into a breeding ground for everything bad in this world.’ He shook his head. ‘A real bad idea, if you ask me.’

‘Did anyone ask you?’

Silence. ‘You got some attitude on you kid. For someone who’s repented and found God.’

‘You can serve God and still stand up for yourself.’

‘Maybe. But talk is cheap.’

‘You’re questioning my commitment, perseverance?’

‘Hell, yeah. You know what I think? You’re a damn fine actor. You fooled the generous folk in here, made them think you’re some kind of angel.’ Bright got up close and personal. ‘But you’re an animal, plain and simple. And no amount of education or praying can change that.’

David sat in stunned silence.

‘No smart mouth on you now, psychopath.’

‘I’m not a psychopath. Thought you said you read the file.’

‘You’re a psychopath to everyone except shrinks as far as I’m concerned. Only a psychopath could do what you did.’

David was silent. If only it was true. David had never been a psychopath. He’d been overcome by a violent rage. Maybe even for a short time suffered some sort of dissociative break from reality when he didn’t truly understand his actions, the consequences. Or perhaps he truly was too young to fully understand death, its permanency. But he wasn’t a psychopath — he had a conscience, felt deep levels of empathy. Often when he dreamed about Parker, he replayed the incident over and over again, but he wasn’t Tony...he was Parker. He was lying on the path, huddled in a ball, screaming, feeling the searing pain through his skull, his

abdomen, his shins. David's empathy was not only present, it was overdeveloped. Most of the time at least. Except for those few hours in April.

Bright was looking at the seventeen-year-old David with so much contempt David wondered if he was struggling not to lunge at David. Anger...it was an ugly beast, desperate to consume everyone in its path.

'Read it.' Bright pointed to the file on the desk. 'Memorise it.' He moved towards the window and stared at the grounds. David looked at him momentarily, then read through the file once more. He didn't need to — he'd already memorised it — but Bright seemed to need it.

'Done.'

Bright turned around, his face still plagued by disgust. 'I'll see you in three weeks.' He crossed to the centre of the room, took the file and left.

For a few seconds David had wondered if all his interactions on the outside would be this difficult but then realised they wouldn't be — because no one would know about him, about his past.



## Chapter 14

I'm always in front of you  
in the revolving door  
though you'll never see me  
but on the furthest shore.

David walked into the house, wanting to lift the heaviness but knowing it was useless. There was no banishing this sense of impending doom. The note, the watch. Jamal. Why Hammett? Why now? Why David? Maybe Bright had been right all those years ago and he shouldn't have dived back into the lion's den. Gone back into the world of violence, of systematic abuse of children until they only know one thing — violence.

'David?' Susan called out. It sounded like she was in the kitchen or maybe on the deck.

'Hi, honey.' He tried to sound breezy but couldn't pull it off.

Footsteps. Coming closer. She rounded the corner. Hesitated when their eyes met.

'What's wrong?' she asked.

She knew him well — at least the part of him he dared to show her.

He needed to tell the truth. At least part of it. His was a world of parts.

She moved closer, took his hand and gave him a kiss. 'You look pale. Have they found...'

He shook his head. 'No. But they found something else.' Suddenly his voice was croaky. He cleared his throat. 'My watch. Near Jamal's house.'

'Your watch? But...'

He wondered what she was thinking. Was she wondering, even for a split second, if he was involved in Jamal's disappearance? Or was she so in love, so wrapped up in his chameleon-esque performance, that it wouldn't even enter her consciousness.

'The police,' (and his US Marshalls handler), 'think someone's trying to set me up.'

'Frame you?' She got there quickly, but her voice reeked of disbelief.

He nodded.

'But why? Why would someone do that, and to you of all people?'

He couldn't tell her the reason he suspected — Parker. That someone knew his true identity. But he could give her the other theory. 'Maybe a boy who thinks I didn't do enough or did something wrong.' He shrugged. 'A relative of a boy. Maybe even someone from Hattiesburg.' Or South Carolina.

She led him to the living room and they plopped onto the couch together. 'Oh, darling that's terrible.' She grabbed his knee. 'Does that mean they broke in *here*? Stole your watch?'

David hadn't been thinking about that...the how. 'They must have.' He remembered the photo frame at the odd angle...but that was days ago so that couldn't be it. 'Unless it was taken from my locker when I was in boxing class. I guess it's also possible someone with very quick hands stole it off my wrist.'

'Do you know anyone like that?'

David tried to think, think about the boys. A lot of them were involved in robberies, some had even been charged, but he couldn't think of anyone who was a skilled pickpocket. That was more of an old-school skill, too. Now they just wave their gun in your faces. There was one boy, Byron, who was into illusions in Hattiesburg. Who used to talk about different people including Dynamo, and some of the tricks they'd done. He wanted to be as good as them. Certainly someone like that would easily be able to lift his watch without him knowing it. But wouldn't he have recognised him if they were that close? He tried to visualise Byron's face, and realised it was likely it would have only been a small portion of his face visible — hood up was a standard uniform in the street.

'There is one boy who might be capable of it.'

Susan stood up, started pacing. After a few steps she turned back. 'Darling, we need protection. If the person who took poor Jamal is targeting you, us. They should have a patrol car outside.' She waved her hand in the direction of the street.

Like that was going to happen. 'Let's just keep calm. The police know about it, they're on top of it. If there's any risk, I'm sure they'll let us know...and have someone watch the house.'

She shook her head. 'You're putting a lot of trust in the cops, David. And assuming they have the resources.' She sat next to him.

Susan had a point. He wasn't worried about himself — he could take care of himself — but what if some psycho came for Susan? Or came for him and found Susan?

He put his hand on her knee. 'Maybe you should visit Patricia in New York for a few days. Just until things die down.'

'So you *are* worried.' She bit into her lip. 'If you're worried, well...'

She didn't need to finish the sentence. David rarely voiced or admitted his concerns to her, so she knew if he was worried it was bad. But was it? Was it possible they were really at risk? David knew a lot of the kids from the Centre and his previous centre at Hattiesburg were capable of violent crime. But he was on their side, he was one of them. Would they really target him? He sighed. He knew the truth all too well: you never know what's going on inside someone's head. Sometimes you don't even know what's going on inside your own head.

'I don't want to up and leave, David. And I don't want you here by yourself, either.'

David knew this could be a turning point, one of those pivotal moments in life when you think ‘what if?’. If Susan stayed and something happened to her, he’d never forgive himself. He’d never be the same.

He turned his body toward her more. ‘Please, darling. Just go and stay with Patricia. Or what about your folks? You’ve been saying how much you miss them.’

‘Yes, but I also want us to visit them together. Not by myself and on the run from some...some twisted kid who’s got it in for you.’

David took a beat. Susan was soft, yet strong-willed. Caring and eager to please, but somehow also fiercely independent. She was almost as stubborn as David once she’d made up her mind.

‘Okay, so it’s New York.’

‘Nice try.’ She stared out the glass doors to their deck. ‘Let’s reassess in a couple of days. And in the meantime, call Detective Saul or Parker and at least ask them if they’d consider putting a car out front. At least while we’re here.’

David raised his eyebrows. ‘I’ll try.’ He’d have more luck seeing if Agent Bright could organise some babysitters. At least they’d know what they were truly dealing with. The why behind the threats. Or should he say the *possible* why.

\*\*\*

Susan looked out the window, glass of wine in hand, while David cooked. She’d offered to organise dinner tonight, offered to help, but David had insisted. Said it helped calm him. She’d sensed he wanted some alone time and moved from the kitchen to the living room. They were each in their own spaces, physically and mentally apart. Surely they should be talking about this. Together, not separated.

The watch. Someone in her house. She glanced around, looking at the dark corners of the room, thinking about all the closets, rooms, where someone could hide. Had she been home when this unknown robber had come in? Or maybe there’d been no home invasion...maybe the watch was stolen somewhere else.

She looked out the window again, into their back yard and beyond. They’d loved the fact that the house was near parks and the lake, backed onto the public parkland. But now it seemed sinister, like someone could be lurking in the shadows, in the bushes. Watching. Waiting.

\*\*\*

Ever heard of Adam and Eve? The Garden of Eden and that pesky serpent that lead poor little old Eve astray? Sure, you have. Know it well. I know it well, too. Remember, I'm a time-travelling handsome mother-beeper, so yeah. I know Eve. Knew Eve. Present tense or past tense. Guess it depends on your perspective of time. One continuum always present, always happening. Non-linear. That'll give you your present tense. But if you believe time follows a linear path, for everyone, then perhaps I should be using past tense when talking about Eve. The Eve. Anyway, Adam and Eve, and the serpent. Guess I'm like that serpent. I am that serpent. I like to lead people astray — women and men. Or maybe more to the point I like it once they're on the broken path. Yes, sir-ree, give me some sinning any day. The saints...well, I'd like to see how they fare in hell. You've gotta be strong to make it in hell. To survive down there. And most saints...as weak as beep. Sure, the God-faring folk among you will have something to say about that. You'll be standing now, shaking your fists at me — for you know that saints are strong. Well, I'll give you this: some show a bit more metal. Yup. But I'd still bet on the sinners over the saints any day. Men or women.

The fairer sex. They are fairer in many ways. Certainly seem more likely to see all the grey. And that's something I can relate to. But for most of them their flight or fight mode is heavily skewed in the flight direction. Sometimes that's the more sensible thing to do. But Susan...she mustn't be feeling very sensible at the moment. I *know* whether David will look back on this moment and wish he'd taken that sweet wife of his and ran for the hills.

You wanna know, don't you? Just itching to know how the David Story story will turn out. Stories are linear...or are they? How does the sequence of events play out, get plugged into the timeline? That's the question. Who lives, who dies? Who's truthful and who's a liar? That's probably the most important thing...not everyone is as reliable as they seem. Know what I mean?

So your clue. Riddles...I like riddles. After all, life is one big riddle, right? The meaning of life? Forty-two. Don't worry. That ain't your clue. I'm cruel. Mean. But I'm not so rude as to give forty-two as your clue. That's just crazy. Am I right? You know it. Anyway...well, let's stick with cruel. I'm cruel. I'm a mother-beeping handsome time travelling know-it-all chameleon, cruel evil-worshipping tease...who likes the grey and is as powerful as all beep.

## Chapter 15

If you have me, you'll want to share me.  
Once you share me, you'll not have me.

David woke to a loud thud. He blinked, tried to get his bearings. It was early. Must be very early — he rarely slept past around 5am.

Susan rolled over next to him. 'Was that you?'

Before he could answer the thudding sounded again. Someone was at the front door.

'Stay here.' He pulled on part of the running gear laid out at the end of the bed — shorts and a T-shirt — and headed downstairs. As he made his way down the hall the door shook with the force of knocking. A Poe-ish raven on his stoop? He imagined Parker, dead Parker, resurrected to enact his vengeance. His nightmares coming to life, leaping out of his persecuted imagination into his reality. 'Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death.' *Leviticus 24:17*

He pinched himself, just to make sure it wasn't a dream. No, still awake, still walking down the stairs.

Maybe it was Parker's brother or father, ready to knock the door down to get to David, to kill David and see justice truly served. He wouldn't blame them. No one would. He'd been waiting for the day of reckoning for a long time now. Waiting with true ambivalence, happy to embrace a violent end, but dreading it, too. He'd seen what death was like, those last few moments. The desperation, the hope, then the futility of trying to stay alive. The body and mind, giving up. Realising the futility of fighting, maybe the futility of it all.

David grabbed the empty vase that was sitting on the sideboard, vaguely thinking of protecting himself, all the while knowing he should just give himself up to whoever was coming for him. He should have killed himself a few years ago, or one of the other million or so times he'd considered it, planned it, over the years. Now it was time to face his accusers. To pay for his sins. He took tentative steps, being pulled toward his destiny, his demise.

Bizarre instinct took over and he said: 'Who is it?' He nearly laughed as soon as the words tumbled out of his mouth. Who is it? It's justice. Vengeance. It's Death. Yes, Death waiting to claim him. Finally, after all these years. He pictured the Grim Reaper from society's symbols. The dark cloak, the Scythe, the bony, skeleton fingers pointing to him. Marking him for death. *You're mine now sinner. And I'm taking you to hell.* Yup, that's what Death would say.

'David.'

He glanced up. Susan at the top of the stairs, her dressing gown draped around her. He shook his head, waved her away. Wanted to say: *Have you ever looked Death in the eye? I have — I've felt the darkness descend, time slowing, the prickle of pervading darkness lurking in the air. Death. Nice to meet you. No, it's not nice to meet Death. You don't ever want to meet death.*

*For God's sake, Susan. Run. Hide.*

He shooed her away again, his face crumpled, hopefully showing his desperation. But she stayed.

'Open up, police.'

David relaxed for a second, then tensed. Police. At...he glanced at the hall clock, 5am. That's not a good sign. They were so desperate to break into David's life, to leave it a crumbling mess, they couldn't wait until 8am, or even 7am. He glanced at Susan. Poor, sweet, Susan. The day he dreaded more than death had come. The truth. She would find out his truth.

He put the vase back on the sideboard, straightened himself. He'd answer for his crimes. Except this time he hadn't done anything wrong. Had nothing to do with Jamal's disappearance.

He opened the door. Noticed straight away that both Detectives Parker and Saul had their guns out. Not relaxed at their sides...no, they were ready. Like David was going to run, attack them. Like David was a dangerous criminal. So they must know. O'Brien stood behind them, taking a back seat for some reason.

'David Story, we're formally bringing you in for questioning.' Saul had a smug sort of smile.

David wasn't really shocked. Why else would they be knocking on the door like that? It wasn't a 'Hey, we found the kid trying to set you up' visit. No, this was the urgency of law enforcement making a big break in the case. Breaking down the doors in case he was about to run. Jesus Christ. He'd been framed good and proper.

'What for?' he managed to blurt, even though once again he knew what they'd say.

'The abduction of Jamal King.'

'What?' Susan was beside him, her dressing gown still billowing from the fast movement down the stairs and to his side.

'Detectives?' A voice behind the bulk of Saul and Parker, O'Brien and the two uniforms. A voice David recognised. Agent Walter Bright.

'Well what have we got here?' Saul turned to Bright, then back to Parker. 'Told you the Marshall was on Story.'

Parker shrugged. 'Guess I owe you twenty bucks.'

Saul gave a little nod, then stared intently at Agent Bright. ‘Story’s going down. No matter what gem of evidence he’s given you in the past.’

Bright raised an eyebrow. ‘What, no arrest warrant boys?’

Saul narrowed his eyes. ‘Not yet.’

‘Mmm...’ Bright crossed his arms. ‘No media. I can’t have his face on any TV or internet screen, here or anywhere in the States.’

‘We’re not miracle workers. How’s about you start talking, Bright.’

Susan leaned up to David. ‘David, what’s going on? What are they talking about?’

Bright came into the room. ‘David’s part of WITSEC...the Witness Protection Program.’

‘What? Why?’ Susan was throwing the question out to tender.

Bright glanced at David, then back at Susan. ‘I’ll leave your husband to fill you in with the details. But for now we’ve got more pressing matters. Who knows you were making this rather dramatic entrance this morning, detectives?’

‘Our captain. The two uniforms here.’ Saul jerked his head toward the back-up.

Four armed cops and an FBI agent for David. And now it was clear they didn’t even know who he was, what he’d done. Maybe it didn’t make a difference. The crime was the same — child abduction, most likely murder — it was just the wrong boy, and sixteen years after the fact.

‘David?’ Susan was desperate to find out what was going on.

He couldn’t look at her. Couldn’t bear to see her sweet face. The face of innocence that would soon be destroyed. He’d rather remember her expression before this. Before any accusation against her husband had been made. He turned away, moved closer to Bright who at least seemed to be presenting himself as an ally.

‘Okay, let’s keep it that way. Closed loop.’ Bright was taking charge of the situation. And putting his faith in David, at least for the moment. ‘Right.’ He slipped his hands in his pockets. ‘So, here’s what we’re going to do. You’re going to head out...make a show for any early-rising, nosey neighbours so they can see you’re walking out alone. I’ll stay here with David and follow you in half an hour, maybe an hour. No cuffs, no sirens. No fuss. And in the meantime, I’ll get my superiors to reach out to your captain, make sure she fully understands the situation.’

‘Well, we’d like to fully understand the situation first...if you don’t mind.’ Saul holstered his weapon, but still looked almost as lethal. ‘I think you owe us that, at least.’

‘You’ll be brought into the loop if need be. In the meantime, I know David will cooperate with you fully.’ He patted David on the back then positioned his body back to the

detectives. ‘Thanks, gentleman. We all want the same thing here. To find Jamal King, dead or alive, and whoever abducted him.’

David waited with baited breath wondering if Saul, Parker and O’Brien would kowtow to Bright’s authority. Pressure was on them to find Jamal King — or the next best thing, his abductor and maybe killer. But without a body, or an obscene amount of blood, it would be hard to charge anyone with murder.

Then it suddenly occurred to him. ‘Have you...have you found Jamal?’

Saul gave David a look of disdain, then moved to Bright. ‘Everyone will know soon, but we’ll keep it quiet until we get the arrest warrant.’

Bright gave a little bow. ‘I sure do appreciate that, Detective.’

Saul narrowed his eyes, flicked them to David with a look of disgust, then made for the door. The others followed.

As soon as they’d crossed the threshold Susan ran past David and closed the door, like closing the door would make everything go away. Shutting out the world, reality and David’s past. Except Susan had no idea who David really was. Would he have to tell her now? Later?

She leaned on the door. He couldn’t avoid her any longer. He met her widened eyes, saw the confusion, the doubt. Once you’ve been accused of something, no one looks at you the same way. David knew that to be true, whatever the court finding, whatever the truth.

‘What the hell’s going on, David?’ Her breathing was ragged. ‘They think you had something to do with Jamal King?’

‘It seems that way.’

‘The watch.’ She closed her eyes, opened them again.

‘Yes.’

She came closer. ‘What else? What aren’t you telling me?’ She turned to Bright. ‘And who the hell are you?’

Bright offered his hand. ‘Agent Walter Bright. US Marshalls.’

She turned back to David. Opened her mouth, snapped it shut again. Took a beat. ‘You’re in witness protection...what the fuck?’

Susan rarely swore, but he wasn’t surprised it rolled off her tongue so easily. It was a ‘what the fuck’ moment.

‘I know. I know it’s a lot to take in.’ David looked past Susan at Bright. The moment of truth...or not. He could spin another story now. Spin a tail of how he’d turned on some mob bosses, or some gang in one city or another. Tell the story of a righteous man. A man who stood against pure evil and lived to tell the story.



He *had* faced off against pure evil — but it was the evil inside him, and the evil inside Joe.

Lies, lies, more lies. He could spin forever. Or could he? Was his past, his real past, about to come out? If it truly was inevitable, he needed to tell Susan now. Get in front of it. He turned away, leaned on the sideboard. *Please Lord, give me strength. Show me the right path.*

*Thou shalt not kill.* What a hypocrite David was. Pretending to live the life of a pious man, all the while disobeying one of the most revered traits of a truly religious person, any truly good person — honesty.

He took one last look at Susan. The last time he'd look upon her within the protective cocoon of lies. He took a deep breath in, savoured the moment. The last time she'd think of him as anything but a killer.

He took a final look at Bright. Officially, he needed Bright's permission to tell anyone, even his wife, about his true identity.

Bright gave a nod.

David took another breath, lent on the side table, studied his hand, the skin and muscles squelching out to the side ever so slightly. He didn't look up. 'When I was younger, real young, I hurt someone.'

She reached out, placed her hand on top of his. 'I know. The boy ended up in hospital.'

David shook his head, not looking at her hand on his. 'No...worse. Much, much worse. That was part of my new identity. A fake cover story.' The contact of her hand on his felt warm, reassuring. But suddenly it was gone. The touch relinquished.

She took a deep breath. 'New identity. So David Story isn't even your real name?'

He could feel her gentle breaths on his neck. She hadn't taken the step back — yet. But her hand was the dawn of the cold. First her hand, then the physical step back and then the emotional distance. It was inescapable. It was sinking in for Susan now. The repercussions...her husband wasn't who she thought he was. Even his name was fake.

He shook his head. 'No. I'm not really David Story.' Or was he? Part of him was. That was the weird thing. In fact, a big part of him was David Story. Was about being with her. 'But...but I am David Story, too. This is the person I've become. David Story started off as a name, a new identity with a cover story, but it was so long ago now. I've been David Story since I was eighteen and I left...the other me a long time ago.'

'What do you mean?'

'I was only twelve when I...when I did what I did.' He still couldn't bring himself to say it. Couldn't let Susan see the real him. He focused on logistics instead, avoiding the word

‘murder’...and all the other words: killed, bludgeoned to death, erased, tortured, the list went on.

‘I went to juvie under a different name, a new identity, then when I was released the US Marshalls provided me with another new name. David Story.’

‘So...’ she scrunched up her face, ‘so David’s the third name you’ve gone by?’

He was somewhat relieved he’d managed to direct her attention to the identity changes, but it was only stalling. Stalling was all he had left. Unless he chose never to tell her, in the off chance this would blow over, that he’d be released with no charges and his first life, and past horrific deeds, would never surface.

The name changes, new identities sounded foreign, strange to Susan. David had gotten used to it. Morphed into each new person, or morphed the name to fit him each time, slowly. But for Susan, hearing about this in one hit. Who changed names twice before they even hit eighteen? David could tell her who...a child killer. A murdering, disgusting animal.

She placed her hand on his shoulder. ‘I don’t understand. Why? What could you have done...’ She trailed off, removed her hand again. Like she’d suddenly realised he must have done something so incredibly God-awful to warrant two new identity changes by his eighteenth birthday. Truth. She finally had a slice of truth.

‘I...I attacked a boy. Killed him. A young boy like Jamal.’

‘What?’

Incomprehension. She couldn’t marry that with the image she had of her husband, of David Story. He’d done well at projecting a different persona for so long. She couldn’t fathom that the man she’d married, the man she made love to, was a killer. And had killed an innocent child.

He said the words. Even though they were worthless, lame. ‘I was just a kid myself, didn’t know what I was doing. I don’t...I don’t even remember doing it.’ He gulped.

Red.

Blue butterfly.

Blood.

Little boy blue, broken in two.

He remembered parts of it. Fragments, breaking through his consciousness. Trying to fly away like that butterfly.

He was Parker, lying on the ground, in the foetal position. The pain. It seared through his body. He clutched to his Teddy bear. Cried.

David came to. Lying on the ground. Bright was staring at him. An unreadable expression on his face. Susan was kneeling next to him, but hesitating. He couldn't help himself...he rolled away from Susan and vomited.

Run. He needed to run. But there was nowhere to run to. He got up, staggered. Susan actually came to him. Put her arm around him. Steadied him. What had he been thinking getting married? Dragging her into all of this? He pushed her away, unable to accept her help, her pity. She should be angry, screaming at him. Soon she would be. Would be now if he hadn't collapsed on the floor in a PTSD flashback.

Bright knew. Knew he'd just witnessed Parker's dying moments. But Susan didn't realise. She probably thought David had regressed into a child in an abusive family.

'Susan. You don't want me. Not now.'

'I...you can't tell me what I want.'

'No.' He straightened a little. 'I can't tell you, but I know you. I know you'll never be able to accept what I did. I still can't, even after all these years, all the kids I've helped.'

'Let me be the judge of that.'

'Look at him.' He pointed to Bright. 'Look at his face.' Bright's face was laced with disgust. His skin a shade or two paler, lip upturned, whole body turned slightly away. 'He knows what he just saw.'

'I know a flashback when I see one, too.'

David nodded. 'But I wasn't reliving a time when I was the victim.' David couldn't hold it in any longer. Guttural sobs shook his body, convulsions borne from murder, fermented by time and so many years of lies, of pretending. He collapsed to the ground again, but this time as David Story, Tony Moretti, not Parker.

He could feel Susan next to him, rubbing her hand up and down his upper arm. Her touch so familiar, yet so distant at the same time. How could she touch such a vile person? He knew it wouldn't last. It hadn't truly sunk in. Not yet. He'd tell her his real name, she'd Google it and that would be the end of their short but wonderful relationship. What do they say? Better to have loved and lost?

He took ragged breaths, trying to form the words. Giving himself a death sentence of sorts. 'My...my...real...name...is...' He hesitated, not wanting to give her up, but knowing he had to. He took a breath, delaying the moment for as long as he could. Even got some control over his sobs.

'Tony Moretti. My real name is Tony Moretti.'

\*\*\*

Hallelujah. Praise the Lord. Finally Susan knows. Thank you, Jesus. It was killing me... her not knowing. Really, you should be thanking me. I let you in on the secret, David's killer secret, real early, now didn't I?

What's that you say? Thank you?

Why, you're welcome. Suspense isn't all it's cracked up to be.

## Chapter 16

Who does the job of a neat assassin  
without the untidiness of a thug?  
Not without carressin'  
the ego's ugly mug.

David sat next to Walter Bright in the interview room, Saul and Parker on the other side of the table.

Even Saul, consummate actor, couldn't hide his surprise. The verbal response, when it came, was vehement. 'What the fuck?'

Bright remained calm, legs crossed. 'You heard me, Detective.'

'Holy shit. You drop this... ' Parker managed a sneer in David's direction, '...animal, in our lap. In our town?'

Bright rolled his eyes. 'Spare me the dramatics, Detective. We both know this happens more often than we care to admit.'

'No, *you* know.' Parker jabbed a finger at Bright. 'You're the fucking US Marshall, after all. This is your shit, not ours.'

David took a breath. 'Let's be honest here. No town, no suburb, no jurisdiction would volunteer to take someone with my past.' He took a breath. Unsure whether he could muster the fight. 'But I've been working hard here in Hammett and in Hattiesburg before that. I know I can never atone for my sins,' he held up his hands, 'but I'll never stop trying.'

Saul managed to snap his jaw shut. He glanced at David, a cursory glance, David now a non-human, a lower-than-low scumbag. He moved his gaze to Bright. 'And you didn't think this was relevant to the case? To a young boy's abduction?'

David held his breath. Would Bright still back him now? Or would he tow the law-enforcement line? Side with Saul and Parker against a violent criminal, a social aberration that needed to be eliminated...or at least removed from the streets?

'Sixteen years ago I was with you. But I've followed David for sixteen years now, waiting for him to show his true colours. Waiting for him to revert to this violent past, his violent ways. But it's never happened... ' He took a breath. 'And I don't think it's happened this time either. I would have shared his past identity much sooner if I thought he was really a suspect in Jamal King's disappearance.'

Saul and Parker paused, seemed to respect Bright, seemed to sense that righteousness, that ode to the forgotten lawman when white was white and black was black. Bright was a straight shooter with thirty years' experience dealing with the large chunk of scumbags-

turned-informants amongst the occasional genuine innocent — the accidental witness. Plus Bright was an imposing man. There was always that.

Bright continued. ‘And let’s be honest...that little show at David’s house was to flush him out. See if David was in the program. You don’t actually have anything on him. Anything beyond the circumstantial evidence of his watch.’

Silence. They weren’t going to deny it, but they sure weren’t going to confirm it either.

Eventually Saul spoke. ‘Your wife know?’

‘As of forty-three minutes ago.’ It was strange to be able to tell the time your life unravelled to the minute. Although it had been two dates for David, forever fixed in his mind. Indestructible in his thoughts no matter how hard he tried to forget.

Saul hesitated, like he almost — almost — felt a shred of sympathy for David. But then there was silence.

David filled it. ‘It’s hard to tell your wife you killed someone.’

Saul shifted in his seat, Parker looked away. Interesting. Parker had killed someone. Presumably in the line of duty.

David pushed it. ‘I imagine taking a life in any circumstance brings with it...’ he thought about the right word. So many right words. Trauma. Regret. Disgust. Suicidal thoughts. Insomnia. Depression. PTSD. He settled on: ‘Heartache.’

They sat in silence for a bit, David acutely aware of the irony of the reformed killer and the three lawmen somehow sharing a comfortable silence.

David was the one to break it. ‘So, are you going to tell everyone? The Centre? Hammett?’

Saul gave a WTF look. ‘Are you kidding? We don’t want a fucking lynching. Although it’d sure make a change — the white man being strung up by the Blacks.’

David didn’t skip a beat. ‘There’d be one thing in common...innocence.’ Not that he’d mind at this point in his life if he took a swing from the rope. It would be the easy way out. A relief even.

Bright saved him from the dark thoughts. ‘Other persons of interest?’

Saul leaned back, looked at Bright. ‘The kid really does seem to have disappeared into thin air. No physical evidence, no sightings in this state or in response to the Amber Alert. We’ve got squat...except for our good friend here.’ Saul redirected his gaze to David. ‘Person of interest numero uno. And now...’

David took a breath, barely able to comprehend the devolution of his life in the past few days. But he had to remember, a little boy was lost. His life at stake. It wasn’t just about David’s life falling apart. His marriage. His career. His reputation. Life and death was much

higher stakes than all of that. ‘What about Chris Hops? Or his wife? Maybe she found out about the affair he’s been having with Rosie King?’

He watched Saul and Parker, curious whether his name dropping was news, or simply old news.

‘Chris Hops has an alibi.’

David hid his surprise. He didn’t realise they’d found Chris.

Bright cleared his throat. ‘What sort of alibi, though?’

Saul shrugged, a defeated movement. ‘His wife. Says he was at home when she got home from her shift at Rocky’s Diner.’

‘And you believe her because?’

‘Because...’ Saul paused, glanced at Parker, made the call. ‘Because she volunteered records on an app she got to track him when she first suspected he was having an affair. It confirms his location via GPS. The guy was at Rosie King’s house from 11am until 1pm then drove straight home. Unless he had the kid in his trunk, he’s in the clear.’

David was about to say it when Bright beat him to it. ‘Did you check the trunk?’

A nod. ‘Forensic examination found no evidence of Jamal King. Unless the guy’s a forensic genius, which seems unlikely, he’s in the clear.’

Chris was no forensic genius. He’d barely make the middle of the bell curve. ‘What about Reg? The actual boyfriend? Or her clients?’

‘Haven’t found anything in that lot, yet. And according to Rosie, Chris left and she fell asleep. Then when she woke up...’

‘According to Rosie...’ David didn’t finish the sentence. Was anything ‘according to Rosie’ reliable?

‘It all seems to line up.’ Saul crossed his arms. ‘We’ve shared. Your turn. Evidence someone may be framing you?’

David glanced at Bright, who gave a nod. ‘David got a note a few days before his watch went missing. It said “I know who you are”, so it seems like a safe bet that someone is onto David’s past. And may be framing him.’

‘Like who?’

David answered. ‘Lots of contenders, but theoretically no one knows me as David Story.’

‘Theoretically.’ Saul raised his eyebrows. ‘Give me some possibilities.’

‘The victim’s family comes to mind first. He had a brother a couple of years older, and the parents...’ David cleared his throat. ‘Followed closely by my co-offender. Our...’ David

paused, trying to work out the best way to express it, ‘accounts of the offence don’t correlate. And my memory is...shot.’

‘What do you mean?’ Saul narrowed his eyes.

‘It’s called PTSD, Detective. I genuinely don’t have a linear, sensible reconstruction of that day. It’s murky...and changes.’

‘Convenient.’

‘Actually, not convenient, Detective. I’d rather know...some things are better left unsaid, but some things *need* to be remembered.’

Bright cleared his throat. ‘The co-offender, one Joe Simpson, gave a very clear account of the crime. His lawyer painted him as a boy led astray, a good boy whose main offence was not being able to speak up and stop the horrific murder. They made David...Tony...out to be the leader. The dominant one in a co-dependent relationship.’

David stared at the table. Couldn’t look at anyone.

‘There were some holes in that story, though,’ Bright continued.

David looked up, tried to keep the pitiful look of gratitude out of his eyes.

‘Such as?’ Saul leaned against the wall.

‘At school Joe seemed the more dominant type. Confident, self-assured. David...Tony...was described more as a loner, quiet. The judge didn’t buy Joe’s account...she sentenced them both the same.’

Saul pushed off the wall, shook his head. ‘I don’t give a shit. David...or whatever the hell you want to call him...has a criminal past that matches this crime. I’d be a fool to turn my back on that. Just on the say-so of some Marshall and a supposedly reformed killer.’

Bright cleared his throat. ‘Statistically speaking, not many offenders in WITSEC re-offend. It’s not like parolees.’

Saul paused, slow-blinked. ‘Is that right, professor?’

David knew about the studies too and even though Saul was being facetious he decided to add to Bright’s argument. ‘Seventy-five percent re-offence rate for ex-inmates and only fifteen percent for WITSEC.’

‘So,’ Parker shrugs, ‘you’re that fifteen percent.’

‘After all these years? And in my own town...leaving my watch at the scene? You think I’m that dumb?’

‘So you’d do it somewhere else? If you thought you could outsmart the law?’

David clenched his jaw. Took a breath. ‘You know that’s not what I meant.’



Bright cleared his throat. ‘Let’s focus on the task at hand. For the moment,’ he held his hands up towards Saul, placating him, ‘just for the moment, let’s think about the framing angle.’

Saul hesitated, then went back to leaning on the wall. ‘Have you recognised anyone in town?’

David shook his head. ‘But I don’t know if I would either. It was all so long ago. And like I said...my memory’s shot.’

‘I’ve tracked Parker’s relatives. The oldest brother has business dealings in Hattiesburg. It’s possible he saw David there a couple of years back, tracked him here.’

‘So, let’s find this brother. Talk to him.’

‘I’m going to speak to the whole family, actually.’

David would like to speak to Malcolm himself. Look him in the eye, tell him how sorry he was. And Parker’s parents, too. Mind you, he might not be seeing the outside world for some time.

‘What about me, Detective? Will you hold me for forty-eight hours? Charge me?’

‘You know your law, David, huh?’

David didn’t reply. Course he knew the law. ‘You’re forgetting where I work, Detective. I need to know the law for my kids.’

‘Your kids. Degenerates every one of them. Just like you.’

‘They’re kids who need help. Souls waiting to be saved.’

Saul rolled his eyes. ‘Hallelujah.’

Silence. They were in the Bible Belt. Chances were both Detectives Saul and Parker were religious, probably churchgoers. But even some churchgoers found it hard to be Christian around what they considered to be the dregs of society. It was okay for Jesus to associate with prostitutes and lepers, but not the average God-faring southerner.

Bright held his hands up, trying to diffuse the tension. ‘I’ve got people on David. Have had for days now. Why don’t you release him? He’s not going anywhere and when all this blows over, Hammett will need David.’

Saul shook his head. ‘Not if Hammett knew who David was.’

\*\*\*

Detective Saul is right, of course. The people of Hammett would run if they knew who David was. They’d turn on him faster than Judas turned on Jesus. Not that I think you should be comparing David to Jesus. No...that would be...wrong. Jesus would have forgiven a man like

David, I know that. But only because he and his old man are weak. Forgiveness is for pussies. A grudge. Eternal damnation. Yeah, baby. That's what I want to see. David dead. David languishing in the depths of Hell. Although, the jury is out on where he'd go. Does one bad deed (like super-duper bad, disgustingly depraved, evil deed) outweigh years of doing good? It's a tough one. There will be a battle, that much I know for sure. A battle for David's soul. God and the Angels...they may want him. They will want him. He's atoned for his sins. He's served humans, served the neediest. So *He* will want him.

But I've got a say in it, too.

What more of a clue can I give you? No more, it is revealed. I'm a mother-beeping handsome time travelling know-it-all chameleon, cruel, evil-worshipping tease...who likes the grey and is as powerful as all beep. I am Death.

Nice to meet you.

Some try to hide, some try to cheat, but time will show, we always will meet.

Try as you might, to guess my name, I promise you'll know,  
when you I do claim.

Death

## Chapter 17

I may only be given but never bought.  
Sinners seek me but saints seek nought.

Susan paced. Wildly paced. She'd been doing it for two hours. Still no sign of David. She'd thought about going to the police station, waiting there, but she'd needed her own time, her own space. As soon as they'd left she'd Googled it of course. His real name, the crime. It hadn't sunk in. How could it? David wasn't a killer. There's no way he could do something like that to anyone, let alone a little boy.

But he had. He had. She had to keep reminding herself that he had.

When Bright first showed up talking about witness protection she thought there'd been some kind of mistake. It was all an elaborate prank. Even when Bright and David left disbelief was still the strongest emotion. But when she'd seen the photo of Tony Moretti she'd recognised David in him. The eyes looked the same, yet so different. It was hard to describe, the fact she could see the same dark brown eyes, but behind them there was something altogether different. In the photos of Tony Moretti the brown eyes looked distant, menacing, harsh somehow; yet on David Story, the same eyes looked soft, kind, deep. Eyes that made her feel warm, home.

'David is Tony Moretti. He's a killer.' She said it out aloud, but it didn't make it seem any more real.

But it was real. And it made everything else make sense. An integral puzzle piece. The guilt, the depression, the distance. She hadn't imagined the distance — he'd been keeping her away, keeping part of himself locked away for only him to see, to know.

He'd be home soon. Or would he? Maybe they'd already locked him up. No...he'd be home soon. He was innocent. The police would realise, they'd release him. They hadn't formally charged him with anything anyway. Had they? It was all a blur now. The thumping on the door. Police. The US Marshall. David's admission. Confession. Maybe she should call the police station. Get an update. If they'd tell her anything at all, that is.

She stopped pacing. Leaned against the mantelpiece directly in front of the television. She thought she heard a strange static noise coming from the screen, but the noise disappeared as quickly as it had come.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. David...*her* David was Tony Moretti. He'd killed a little boy called Parker Brown. God, no. She just couldn't reconcile it.

For a few seconds she wondered. Wondered if he had taken Jamal. Had he fooled her for the past eighteen months? Was he a different man to the one she thought altogether? Part

of her knew it was possible, knew that apparently even serial killers were described by those who supposedly knew them as ‘the nicest guy’. And wives, families, had been fooled. But that wasn’t who David was. You couldn’t act the level of remorse he so obviously carried around with him every day. Ironically, she thought a cold-blooded killer would blend in more. Hide his feelings better. And David had been so young himself. In the photos, he looked like a child. An angry child, yes, but still a child.

She’d read a few articles from the time. She now knew David’s parents hadn’t died in a car crash. That was a lie. But the pieces around it were true. David had told her his dad had been violent, had hit his mum and him for years. And that had come out in the newspaper articles. Now she knew that on top of that his father had abandoned the family only a couple of weeks before David...before he did what he did.

Oh, God. She couldn’t even say it to herself. Part of her wanted to pack her things, make sure she was gone before David got home. She was married to a killer. Wasn’t she? Was it possible that the man she married was a different person altogether? He was a killer then, but was he really now? It was so long ago. He’d been a child. A troubled, angry child. He was a different person now. In name and in personality. In every way.

She finally sat down, collapsed onto the couch. She was making excuses for him. She knew that. But she also believed most of them. She was in love with David Story. And he was a different man to Tony Moretti. Wasn’t he?

She knew what she had to do. She had to see him. Wait for him. She’d shower, get dressed and wait for him. Then she’d look at him...really look at him. And she’d know for sure.

\*\*\*

He’d been left to stew, by himself, for an hour. Then suddenly Saul had come in, gave David a look. Opened the door wider behind him.

‘You’re free to go.’

David was shocked, but he only hesitated for a few seconds. He wanted to get out. As fast as he damn well could. The police station, the interview room, it’s bleak whiteness, the so-obvious mirror-window...it all brought back too many memories. It had been worse when the detectives and Bright had left. He’d ridden waves of nausea, waves of flashes from back then. Parker (the real Parker), the butterfly and that damn Teddy bear. He’d wanted to bury his past, tried to bury it here in Hammett. But this? Now? He shuddered, rode another wave of

nausea, chunks of a non-existent breakfast threatening to appear from the depths of his stomach — a magic trick, fuelled by the evil within. Another shudder.

Saul stood holding the door open. David looked at him. Studied him. He could see contempt, maybe even pity there. But nothing more. Certainly not understanding. Not that David blamed him. Not even David understood what had taken hold of him that day. It was like the Devil had him, rode him hard, whipped the shit out of him. Parker — little boy blue.

David moved out of the room. He wondered what had happened in the last hour. The only thing that rang true was that, yet again, Agent Walter Bright had been on his side. David was happy, relieved. But he also felt a strong obligation to Bright now. Like he felt to Willifred and to God. A need to prove that he was worthy of the faith that had been placed in him. Worthy of good men, of God's love. And that was hard. He was unworthy in every respect.

Bright was waiting for him outside the police station. His non-descript, slightly government-ish pick-up rumbling in the early morning light.

David climbed into the truck. 'Why are you doing this?'

Bright flicked the car into drive. 'It's my job.'

'It's your job to keep an eye on me. Not to protect me.'

'Protect your identity. That's tax-payers' dollars, you know.'

David managed a small smile, even a hiss that resembled laughter escaped his lips. But only for a second. Then he got control of his traitorous body.

He leant against the window, stared out into the streets. 'Tax-payers' dollars hard at work. Hiding a killer.'

Bright spun the wheel in his hand, pulling the car into a right-hand turn down Wilcox.

Parker. Looking up at him. Blood running into his eyes. Memory or imagination? Hard to tell. A weird post-traumatic stress mirage. It happened sometimes. Made reality slippery.

'Can I come with you? To see Parker's family?'

Bright threw David a hurried glance. 'What? You can't think that's a good idea.'

No. Yes. Maybe. 'Probably not but it's time, after all these years, to pay penance in person. To look Parker's family in the eye and say my piece.'

Bright shook his head. 'No. For a start it could blow your cover. And the government's invested too much in your new identity to do all that again. Do you have any idea how much it costs?'

Was Bright really driven purely by government responsibility? His moral compass being driven by an almost socialist belief in WITSEC? Maybe that's all it was. Maybe Bright didn't really think David was worth his time, his protection.

‘Maybe they wouldn’t recognise me.’

‘How can you say your piece without revealing your true identity?’

‘Research shows it’s supposed to help, you know. If the victim and perpetrator come face-to-face. An apology does help the victims.’

‘Really? In cases like this?’

David sighed. No...not child murder.

Bright turned into David’s street. ‘You can come along, but stay out of sight.’

David grabbed the bone. ‘Sounds good.’

Bright slowed the car. David looked up, eyes fixed on his house. Would Susan be there? Or would she have packed her things and gone? His stomach was a raging turmoil of anxiety. What would he say if she *was* there? And what would he do if she wasn’t?

Bright stopped the car. Killed the engine.

David kept staring at his house. The matrimonial home. Built on lies. But maybe that was true of every marriage, every relationship. The face people presented to the world was always filtered at some level. Words were filtered, unless spoken in the heat of the moment. Actions, too. Controlled. It’s what made humans a different kind of animal, wasn’t it? A so-called ‘higher being’ because we could control our emotions...sometimes. People wear faces, wear personas. David had so many David Stories that the real David Story had become invisible. Overpowered by the many alter egos. David Story, husband. Caring, considerate, husband. David Story, youth worker. Caring, considerate youth worker. David Story, ex-mental hospital patient. Damaged, depressed. Suicidal. David Story, reformed criminal. Reformed. Haunted. Harassed. Evil.

He’d lost himself in all the David Stories.

He kept staring at the house. Couldn’t seem to bring himself to open the car door. To defy gravity and grief by actually walking.

‘She might forgive you. She seems the type.’

She was the type. But David didn’t know what he wanted. He loved Susan. Wanted her in every sense of the word. But he also needed to be punished. Susan leaving him...that would be punishment. Justice. What he deserved. Another way to atone.

He unbuckled his seatbelt. Rested his hand on the door handle. ‘I’ll find out soon enough.’ Her car wasn’t in the drive, but she normally parked in the garage. There was no way to tell from the outside if she was home or not. A guarded secret.

He opened the car door.

‘I’ll swing by for you in an hour.’

‘Okay.’ David hauled himself out of the car. His body heavy. Reluctant. He took a breath, made his way to the front door. He’d left in such a hurry at dawn that he didn’t even have his keys. It felt silly to knock on the door of his own house, so he grabbed the spare from its hiding place, stuck with blu-tak on the border of their decorative front porch screen. He slid the key in. Hovered in the hall.

‘Susan?’ His voice was soft, scared. He *was* scared. Scared of no response, scared of her still being there. God, she deserved so much better than him. He could never stop saying that, because it would never stop being true. No matter what he did, how he helped others. It wasn’t a giant balancing scale. Take a life, save a life, and you’re even-steven.

Silence.

He closed his eyes. Took a breath. One more time. ‘Susan?’

A noise upstairs. He looked up. She was standing on the top landing. Yoga pants, a T-shirt, runners. Just any other day.

She didn’t say anything.

They stood there for a full minute, staring at each other, silent.

Finally he sank onto the bottom stair, no longer able to hold the weight that always pushed him down. He put his head in hands.

Her light footfalls glided down the stairs. Fast, efficient, graceful.

She sat next to him, held him. And he realised he was crying. Wailing, really. Tears for everything. Everyone. They sat like that for several minutes. Him crying, her rubbing her hand rhythmically in circles on his back.

Finally he managed, ‘You should go, Susan. Get out while you can.’

She rested her head on his knee. ‘It’s too late. The deed is done.’

‘Deed?’

‘Love. I’m too much in love with you. Who you are now, not who you used to be. One very, very terrible thing you did as a kid. That doesn’t define you forever.’

Doesn’t it? If it’s something *that* big?

Where did she find the forgiveness? He couldn’t forgive himself, so how could she? Was this some weird relationship like those women who write to serial killers in jail and ‘fall in love’ with them? Is that what he’d reduced Susan to? Wonderful, angelic, Susan?

He pushed himself up. Tried to quell the tears. She stood with him, put her arm around him, but he shrugged her off.

‘Susan. Just go. You have to go.’ He moved through the house toward the kitchen and out onto the deck. There was just enough privacy in that space. In their suburban block. They lived in East Hammett, one of the best parts of the town, while his kids lived in a different

world. A world stripped bare by poverty, violence. And David was just another white boy who'd fucked them all over. A hypocrite. Another player in the white-black injustice. The biased justice system ...David had seen it first hand — from being in it, seeing the kids in juvie, and from being part of the youth work system. Eighty-five percent of judges in America are white and nearly forty percent of inmates are Black. How screwed up is that? Martin Luther King must be turning in his grave every day. He sighed, tried to get out of his head.

Susan was behind him. Standing close, but not touching.

His tears had dissipated, evaporation via logical thinking.

'I have to go Susan. I'm going with US Marshall Bright.' He leaned on the banister, let it take his weight. Sharing the burden? 'God has given me Bright. He believes me and he's going to help me find whoever took Jamal, whoever's trying to set me up.'

'So you're definitely being set up?'

He nodded. 'Two possibilities. We're thinking someone from Parker's family...the boy I...we...killed.' He swallowed hard, the lump in his throat thick and painful from crying. 'Or maybe my co-offender.'

'Joe.'

He nodded. 'You've Googled it.'

'Of course. I couldn't...not. Couldn't resist. Tony.' She gave a weird half-chuckle.

'Tony doesn't suit you. You're much more a David than a Tony.'

He was more David now than Tony. Had been for years.

'So you think it could be Joe. Why would he do it?'

'Who knows? Problem is the Marshalls have checked on him and he's where he's supposed to be.'

'Close-by?'

'I don't know where, but I doubt it. They'd keep us apart.'

'A co-dependent relationship.'

'You read that in the media coverage or have you read the transcripts?'

'Transcripts.'

David winced.

'You may have been co-offenders but you weren't co-defenders.'

'No. Joe's family had enough money for a good lawyer. I had legal aid.'

'Well, it didn't do him much good in the end.'

'I don't know. If kids like us committed that same crime now, they'd probably be sentenced to life without parole.'

'Not at twelve.'



David sighed. Looked upstairs. 'I've got to pack.' He started up the stairs, passing Susan on the way up but not touching her.

'How long will you be gone?' She followed him into their bedroom.

'Just a night or two.' He grabbed his gym bag and filled it with clothes, including two sets of running gear. He needed to be able to run. Running was the only thing that kept him sane. His last line of defence.

## Chapter 18

I do not have eyes but I once could see.  
I used to have thoughts but now no pity.

They drove to the airport and Bright parked his truck in long-term.

‘Do they still live in the same place? The same house?’

Bright nodded.

David would have escaped. Would have left the house, left the area. Too many reminders. ‘Why didn’t they leave?’

‘They can’t, son. Most cases like these the parents are stuck. Can’t leave, can’t start afresh. The house is the only link they’ve got left to their child. Although the parents have split up now, so it’s only Parker’s mum living there.’

‘They split up? When?’ David had followed news items on Parker...had a Google alert set up. Not that anything came in now...Parker was forgotten by the media pretty quickly. Bigger, newer stories to move on to. Murder didn’t take up nearly as much media attention as politics or celebrity. No, they were the big ones in America.

‘They split about five years after.’

‘More fall out.’

Bright cocked his head to one side. ‘Don’t think you need to wear this one. There was trouble in that relationship before Parker’s death. And after, Mary blamed herself. She let him out of her sight. And for more than a few minutes.’

David shuddered, remembering the media taking a hold of that angle. They were almost as ruthless to Mary Brown as they’d been to the boys. A lax mother, rumours of alcohol and drug issues. Rumours of neglect.

‘What were they like? As parents?’

‘Police files did mention alcohol issues, kids being left in the house by themselves. Marital problems. They weren’t saints, but they loved Parker.’

David sat in the car, once again overcome by the force of...something...on his body.

‘Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.’

They unloaded their bags from the boot and headed towards the terminal.

Bright gave him a light slap on the shoulder blades. ‘Must admit, if I was you I’d be at home with my wife. Working on that, not coming with me.’

‘Well, if I wind up in jail there’ll be no point mending fences with Susan.’

‘Mmm...true. But let’s face it...you can’t relinquish control to me, can you? Can’t put your life in my hands.’

David began to protest, but then snapped his mouth shut. Bright was right. He needed to have some control, some agency in his future. Or lack thereof. He took a deep breath. ‘Don’t get too far into my head, Bright. It ain’t nice in here.’ He tapped his temple.

‘Don’t worry. I know exactly what I’m doing, David.’

David stared at Bright, couldn’t read between the lines.

\*\*\*

Four hours later they landed in Myrtle Beach, picked up a rental car and headed for Parker’s house. From the minute they saw the sign *Welcome to Florence County* David’s skin prickled, little animals crawling all over him, trying to burrow into his skin. David looked out the window, tried to distract himself with the outside, not what he was feeling inside. They moved past the fields and larger farm blocks, until they were closer to Bindrew. The blocks of land got smaller, the houses got smaller. They turned again, and the shrinking effect repeated itself. Smaller blocks of land, smaller houses. Flat and green. The houses went from mostly brick to older weatherboards — dotted with renovated homes. Most blocks looked the same — wide green blocks, no front fence or only a small wire fence, gravel driveways. Bright started to slow down, then came to a stop.

Parker’s house. David had never seen the house in person. Seen a picture in the newspaper, after. A photo of Mary and Sam Brown, standing at their front door bombarded by journalists...vultures disguised as journalists.

The house looked much smaller in real life. Maybe he’d blown it up in his imagination as a symbol of Parker, or maybe the Brown’s had been so hunched with grief during the photos that the house had loomed tall and lanky behind them.

Bright passed him a small ear device. ‘Just in case I do miss something. Pop it in your ear and you’ll hear what I’m saying.’

‘Will you hear me?’

‘Uh huh.’ Bright got out of the car. Gave the roof two quick taps.

David pressed the ear piece into his ear canal.

Bright said, ‘You got me?’ He turned back once he’d crossed the road.

David gave him the thumbs up.

Bright nodded and opened the rickety gate. He knocked and after a few moments the door opened. David could just make out a young guy. Looked too old to be one of the younger siblings, so must be Malcolm, the brother who was sometimes in Hattiesburg. After

Parker, Mary gave birth to another boy and one girl. Malcolm had been five when Parker was killed, would now be twenty-four, and the younger siblings seventeen and fourteen.

When Parker was killed...when Tony had killed him. Yes...Tony. David liked the distance it created to think of Tony committing the crime, not David. Tony was another life ago, literally. But the distance was only an illusion.

‘Malcolm?’

‘Yup. And you must be the Marshall.’ Malcolm definitely did *not* sound happy to see Bright. ‘You want to dig this up, after all this time?’

‘I’m afraid I need to, Malcolm. Another—’

‘I know. Mum told me. Another boy has gone missing. Might be related to our Parker.’ Bright gave a nod.

Malcolm opened the door and stood back but with enough reluctance you’d think he was granting access to a vampire. A blood-thirsty monster about to feed on his family. But maybe that’s how Malcolm saw it. The aftermath from a visit from law enforcement would be a bloodbath for the Browns.

‘Your mum’s home, I assume.’

‘Of course. And she made sure the whole family is here for you. Even Dad.’ Malcolm gave a strange snort.

‘That’s mighty accommodating of her,’ Bright said.

‘Isn’t it just.’ Again, thinly veiled hostility in Malcolm’s voice.

The door shut and David only had audio to rely on.

‘This way,’ Malcolm said.

Footsteps sounded for a few minutes, before Malcolm spoke again. ‘Here we are.’

David listened as the introductions were made. Mr and Mrs, Sam and Mary, the younger boy Trent and the daughter, Cecily.

David could imagine Bright nodding, shaking hands, the consummate professional.

Mary Brown suggested Trent and Cecily should go into the other room and watch TV. Trent grumbled a bit, but it was a minor protest before he did what he was told.

‘So what’s all this about? Mary said there was some other boy?’ It sounded like Mr Brown’s voice.

‘That’s right. But I’ll get to that in a moment. I know we never met, back in the day, but I just wanted to pass on my commiserations. For Parker.’

‘Thanks, Agent.’

A few beats, then Bright spoke again. ‘How have you been holding up?’ Bright was moving them away from case details, probing them for any indication of anger, revenge.

‘What the fu—’

‘Malcolm! Hold your tongue. Don’t you swear in my house, and particularly not to an officer of the law.’ Mary Brown’s voice was strong, authoritarian.

‘Come on, Ma. This is...you know he’s US Marshall, right. Do you know what that means?’

Silence, then Mary said ‘He’s investigating a similar abduction and anything we can do to help another family...’ But her voice was uncertain.

‘US Marshall is WITSEC. So they probably think one of the animals who took Parker took this kid. Isn’t that right?’

‘Both of the perpetrators of Parker’s death are accounted for.’ Bright was dodging.

‘Parker’s murder. Not death.’ Malcolm again. And it was a good point, a good correction.

‘At this stage it doesn’t look like Tony Moretti or Joe Simpson are involved in this abduction. But there are some links.’

‘What links?’ Mary’s voice.

‘I’m not at liberty to say, I’m afraid.’

Silence again.

‘This is horseshit.’ Malcolm or maybe the dad, Sam Brown.

‘Have you ever tried to find the two boys responsible?’ Bright asked.

‘To make them pay? Because they’re not paying now, are they. Being protected by the government on our money. Fucking outrageous. Part of my taxes go to house those animals.’ Malcolm.

Malcolm definitely seemed to be the one with the most anger, or the one verbalising it the most.

‘Language,’ Mary shouted. ‘I won’t have it...’ Her voice broke. She started crying.

Silence

Eventually it was Mary who spoke again. ‘What are those boys doing. Are they still...evil?’

‘One of them is doing well. Head down, helping others. I truly believe he’s reformed. That he regrets that day...more than anything else.’

‘Regrets...ain’t that fine.’ David couldn’t tell which of the male Browns was speaking now.

‘I’d say he’d go back, lay down his life for Parker if he could.’

More silence. Then: ‘And the other one?’

‘He has been in trouble again. Served another five years for sexual assault.’

‘A young boy?’

‘No. A woman.’

‘Which one’s which? Which boy has reformed?’

Bright hesitated. ‘I’ve already said too much. But I thought you should know. Deserved to at least know that much.’

‘You bet your ass we deserve it.’

Bright said, ‘So you didn’t know any of this? About the offenders?’

Mumbled ‘Nos’.

‘Are you sure, Malcolm?’

‘If I found them, they’d be dead.’

‘Malcolm! No!’ Mary’s voice cracked. ‘Then you be as bad as them.’

‘Ma, come on. They deserve the death penalty, deserve to die.’

‘There’s all sorts of punishments, son. For some, living with their deeds, their guilt...that fate is worse than death.’

‘She’s right.’ The voice sounded older, Mr Brown.

‘Well I’ll never forgive them. Either of them. No matter what sort of life they’re living now.’

‘I understand, son,’ Bright said. ‘If it makes you feel better, at least one of the boys will never forgive himself either.’

‘It don’t make me feel better. I don’t give a shit about them. Him. I just wished they weren’t breathing the same air as me. It’s Parker who should still be breathing, not those assholes.’

Again David found himself agreeing with Malcolm. He was emotional, the tone of voice was clearly highly emotional, but the content was logic. Pure logic. Truth. And David couldn’t argue with truth.

‘Next time you see them, tell them Malcolm Brown wants their heads.’

David closed his eyes, wondered what Malcolm was doing, what his body language was telling Bright. But he’d have to wait for that. Still, Malcolm seemed too angry. He wouldn’t have the control to set David up. If he had somehow seen him, he’d never frame David. No, there was a truth to Malcolm’s words. If he was capable of murder, he’d kill David. Plain and simple.

Bright asked a few more questions, then said his goodbyes. David slunk down in the passenger seat, now desperate not to be seen. He couldn’t face these people. Malcolm was right, he didn’t deserve to be breathing the same air as Parker’s family. It would hurt them too much and give David nothing. No closure, no redemption.

Futile.

The car door opened and Bright climbed in.

‘What you expected?’ David asked.

‘Pretty much. I assumed at least one of them would be as angry as hell.’

‘Malcolm.’

Bright nodded, started the car. ‘Let’s get out of here. I don’t want them to see you.’

‘You were right...about that.’

Bright gave a shrug. ‘I’m often right, you know.’

‘So what do you think? About them?’

‘Malcolm’s too angry. Wouldn’t have the self-control.’

‘Agreed.’

Bright turned into the main street, then pulled over into a parking spot giving them just enough distance from the Brown house.

‘What about the others?’

‘I think we can count Mary out. She’s a religious woman, Catholic. Holy water font at the door. And she genuinely seemed relieved if not happy when I told her about you. I reckon Mr Brown is also out. He came back today, but he moved on a long time ago. He remarried six years ago and he’s got a five year old and a two year old. From the police reports he already had one foot out the door before Parker was killed. He hung around several years, probably stayed *longer* because of Parker. But now...I can’t see him jeopardising his new family to take revenge for Parker.’ Bright tapped the steering wheel. ‘But I can’t rule out the other son.’

‘Trent?’

‘Yes. He was born a year after Parker’s death...could be he suffered. He wasn’t Parker, after all.’ Bright sighed. ‘I’ll get one of our tech experts on it. See if we’ve got any points of intersection. But he’s at high school so I can’t see how he’d get to Hammett and back.’

‘It seems unlikely.’ David slumped.

Bright started the car again. ‘We’ll stay at one of the airport hotels, then head back to Hammett in the morning.’

They drove in silence for a bit, then David spoke. ‘Is it true? About Joe?’

‘There’s a lot more I left out of that story. He’s been charged and convicted for sexual assault once. But he had another charge that got knocked out of court and two other victims who wouldn’t press charges. We’ve been watching him very closely.’

‘Too closely for him to get to Hammett, abduct Jamal and then later steal my watch and plant it at the King’s house.’

‘Yeah. Got the confirmation on his movements this morning. He hasn’t left his state for three months. And the last time he did leave was for a holiday in Hawaii.’

‘What...what does he do? For a living?’

‘You know I can’t tell you that.’

‘I’m not going to try to track him down, I’m just curious. At how he’s turned out.’

‘He’s in the corporate world.’

‘How? With the four-year jail time?’

‘Had to give the bastard another new identity, didn’t we? He blabbed in prison.’

‘On purpose?’

‘Probably. He knows how to work the system, that’s for sure. Plus both his folks are dead now and he inherited their money. Not a million or anything, but enough to help him along the way.’

David shook his head, pushed the image of the twelve-year-old Joe away. Didn’t want to think of him in an office, maybe even in a position of authority. Power and success would make Joe happy. He’d always wanted power...even as a twelve-year-old.



## Chapter 19

I am enjoyed by some, despised by others.  
Some take me for granted, some love me like brothers.  
I last forever, unless you break me first.  
I warn you though, that I don't die of thirst.

Susan was home when he got back.

'Aren't you supposed to be at work today?' He dropped his keys into the dish on the sideboard.

'I've taken a couple of days off.'

David paused for a second, reached for a beer in the fridge but then gave little nods. It made sense. She needed time and space to process all of this.

'How'd you go? With the Browns?'

'It doesn't seem likely but Agent Bright's going to look into the younger brother now. See if there's any way he could have got to Hammett and back.'

She put her hand on his shoulder and leaned up. He bent down to give her the kiss she was looking for but she held him close, drew him into the deeper kiss. For a few seconds he let his body, his emotions, take over, then he got control of himself.

'Susan. How can you? How can you want to?'

She turned away. 'I guess...I need to see if I can. Now that I know.'

He winced. An experiment. A test they might fail? Can Susan make love to him, knowing? He hesitated, unsure whether they should pursue this test of hers or not. Maybe it would finally release her. Make her see sense. He hesitated for a second, then pulled her in close. He was overcome by the urgency, the need to be close to her, or maybe just to forget. To feel suspended in time. Yet for the first time, he wasn't lying. He could drop the façade, could be himself. He was scared, scared of the repercussions, but he also felt closer to Susan than he'd ever felt before. Than he'd ever felt to anyone. A lover, wife, friend, who actually knew. Who knew his darkest deed, knew about his repulsive centre. And she still wanted to make love to him.

They made their way down the hall, dropping pieces of clothing on the way. It felt different. More intense. Probably the way it's supposed to feel for newlyweds, or new love. They bounced along the walls, didn't make it to a bedroom or even horizontal — another unusual occurrence for them. Their lovemaking was usually in bed, at night. Controlled, so David could remain in control of himself.

When they finished she turned her head away, started crying.

They'd failed the test. He must have been too intense. Or maybe the urgency felt rough to her. 'Susan. I'm sorry. I just...'

She paused, held his gaze. 'You let go.'

'Yeah.' Now he looked away, feeling ashamed but not sure why. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rough.'

She stroked his cheek. 'You weren't rough...it's like the barrier that I've always felt between us was gone. You were here, really here. With me.' She paused. 'It was...how I've always wanted things to be between us.'

A few tears fell down his cheeks. 'But I don't have any right to be happy. To be with someone like you. And you deserve so much better than me.'

She wiped his tears away. 'Let me be the judge of that, huh?'

He stared into her blue-green eyes and the connection scared him. For the first time ever the cliché of 'falling into someone's eyes' made sense to him. He could fall into her eyes, lose himself.

But he shouldn't have lost control like that. Now she felt even more bonded to him at a time when she should be distancing herself from him. Should be preparing for the storm. He took a step back, broke the physical connection at least.

'It's not just about us, you know? What will your friends say? Your family?'

'They don't need to know, do they? In fact, given you're in WITSEC we need to protect your identity. They can never find out.'

There it was. A chink. It wasn't the need to protect his identity, it was the fact that she didn't want her friends and family knowing who the real David was. Maybe she was somehow able to overcome her judgement of him, blinded by love, but she had enough sense to know her friends and family would feel differently.

'If our friendly detectives get their way I'll be charged with Jamal King's abduction, maybe murder. Then my face, *your* face, will be plastered on newspapers, online, TV. Imagine your family finding out that way.'

'But you didn't take Jamal. Didn't hurt him.'

David pushed his hair back with both hands. 'If only it was that simple.' He leant his head back. 'The word 'justice' in 'justice system' isn't always accurate, you know?'

'But if you're innocent...'

'I hope you're right. I want to spare you from as much of the horror as possible. But I know what's coming—'

'What *might* be coming.'

‘Okay, what might be coming. And if it does...you’ll want to be as far away from me as possible.’

‘But I finally understand you. I understand the guilt. The depression. The self-hatred you carry around every day. Everything. And us...’ She waved her hand between them.

‘You say that now, Susan. But if everything goes belly up...’

‘Well let’s make sure it doesn’t go belly up.’ She pulled him in closer, gave him a kiss that made him want to try. But it was easier said than done.

‘We need to find Jamal.’ She scraped her top teeth along her bottom lip. ‘One way or another.’

‘I need to. I want you as far away from this mess as possible.’ He pushed off against the wall and pulled up his boxers and jeans.

‘What about that kid? From the Centre?’ She grabbed her top from the hall floor and pulled it on.

‘Teddy. It’s a long shot.’

‘Well, everything’s a long shot, right? And what else have we got?’

Susan was right. Joe was a deadend. Parker’s brothers were slim possibilities but Bright was looking into them. And David couldn’t wait around doing nothing. But Susan? She should go back to work. To her normal life until this played out, one way or another.

‘I’ll look into Teddy some more.’

She gave a nod. ‘What have you told Noreen. And the Centre?’

‘Still nothing. I rang yesterday from the airport and told them I needed to extend my personal leave. But I could probably go into work this afternoon.’

‘You should. See if Teddy is there.’

He leaned against the wall, closed his eyes. ‘What if the cops have said something to Noreen or someone else at the Centre.’

‘Why would they do that?’

‘To mess with me. To get Noreen or someone else there to divulge some perceived clue about me. I don’t think either of the detectives truly believe I’ve repented. Reformed.’

She put her hand on his arm. ‘Well, you can prove it to them. Find the real criminal and Jamal.’

David started to pace. Maybe it would be up to him in the end. Cops develop tunnel vision once they’ve got a suspect in sight. He took a breath. ‘At the moment, the cops can’t see past me.’

‘Well, you have to find the real culprit then. Ring the cops or get Agent Bright to, so you can at least prepare yourself for whatever is waiting at the Centre.’

‘Good idea.’ He paused. ‘But you’re supposed to be keeping out of this, remember?’

She brushed his jaw line. ‘I’ve got too much at stake here. As much as you.’

*More*, David thought. But he stayed silent.

‘I’ll call them from the study,’ he said. ‘If I can’t get through, or don’t get anything out of them, I’ll see what Bright can come up with.’

She gave him a kiss. ‘I’ll make us some lunch.’

He smiled, still feeling torn between desperately wanting Susan by his side and wishing she’d run away. Take cover before the explosion.

She headed to the kitchen, humming. Humming. God help him...and her.

He took a breath, pulled on his top and made his way to the study. He dialled Detective Saul’s mobile. He picked up after a couple of rings.

‘Hello?’ He clearly didn’t recognise David’s number. That was probably a good sign.

‘Detective Saul. It’s David Story.’

A second’s pause. ‘Yes.’

‘I was just wondering...’ There was no delicate way to put it. ‘I’m planning on going back to the Centre this afternoon and I’d like to know what you’ve said to them.’

‘Don’t worry, your bulldog tied our hands on that one. We spoke to everyone, but didn’t say we had you in custody or mention why we might be interested in you.’

David let out the breath he’d been holding. Thank, God. If they did somehow get through this, find Jamal or find the person who took Jamal, then maybe David would still have a life here. He didn’t want to let another group of kids down. His suicide attempt would have done real damage in Hattiesburg, and if he was even suspected by his co-workers, the kids or their parents here in Hammett, another group of vulnerable kids would be at further risk...because of him. The exact opposite to his intentions. To his life’s purpose.

‘Thanks, Detective.’

‘Mmm...thank the Marshall, not me.’

He was about to hang up when he decided there was no harm in at least asking. ‘Are you looking into any other leads? Other suspects?’

‘We’re following all leads and actively looking for Jamal King. Dead or alive.’

‘Okay. Thanks, Detective.’ David hung up, unsure if it was true or not. He had no doubt they were still looking for Jamal, but were they really pursuing other leads?

\*\*\*

David/Tony slipped through my fingers and he ain't going to do that again. No way. You see I don't like to lose. No, sirree. I'm a winner, through and through. Sure, I got plenty of souls to choose from. Plenty of sinners, plenty of evil out there. Plenty of souls to feed Hell, to feed The Devil. You get it now, right? I really am Death. Like capital D. The Death that works with the Devil. Tony's soul was mine the minute he raised that bat and struck poor little Parker. At least his soul *should* have been mine. But then he found religion, repented, became a good guy. Fucking sickening. Like he thinks he can dance with me and then leave me? He's got another thing coming. I've been there, whispering in his ear for sixteen years now. Waiting for him to slip up, willing him, begging him. At the same time, I decided to be a good sport about it. Sure, I *could* have been that voice in his head that never went away, that made him question his sanity. That drove him to the edge. But he already had that in his internal voice, plus I wanted to play fair. Wanted to get him back to my side, the dark side, immersed in evil, via his own free will.

It's not in my nature to forfeit. And that's what this would be if I backed down. Released David entirely from his obligations to me. No, he'll keep. One day, one day, his darkness will surface again. Maybe soon, now that everything is being taken away from him. Most people's futures I can see, clear as their past. But David...his is murky, like his mind, his soul.

## Chapter 20

I am in the past, never in the future.  
I don't exist, but have existed in nature.  
I saw what you saw, and this is what I will ever see.  
What am I? Not a fortune-teller. Just pay the fee.

'David, are you okay, sugar?' Noreen spoke before the door had even closed behind him. 'Is it Susan? She okay.'

'She's fine, Noreen. Thanks.' David had already anticipated Noreen's curiosity, had a story ready. 'Just a rough couple of days at the hospital for her, and she really needed the sounding board.'

'Poor little thing. Least she got you.'

David forced a smile. 'She's fine now, but she has taken a few days off.' Not a lie.

'A suicide?'

'No...violence between the patients. But Susan was caught up in it.'

'She such a tiny thing, too. Get me in-between two big guys and it'd be a different story, huh?' She gave him a wink, hands on hips. She was an imposing woman, alright. And while part of it was her physicality — she was five-ten, broad, bosomy, with ample padding — it also shone from within. The 'don't mess with me' vibe that people seemed to either have or not. Noreen was one of the sweetest, kindest people you could meet...but not someone you'd mess with. Even David was scared of her. Scared she'd find out his secret. What would Noreen think about the fact she'd been working with a killer?

'Any of the kids in yet?'

Noreen raised one eyebrow, jerked her head to the clock. 'They wouldn't dare.' Another twenty minutes until school was out. Noreen was right...they wouldn't dare.

David was about to run and hide in his office when he decided against it. 'Did the police talk to you?' He moved closer, leaned on the reception desk.

'Uh-huh.' She rolled her eyes. 'Wanted to know about the kids, the workers, everything. Like I be telling them anything.' She waved her hand into the air, then returned it to the counter. 'No one here a real suspect...they just fishing.'

David nodded, even though he knew it wasn't entirely true. 'So you don't think one of our kids did it?' He leaned in further.

Noreen's face fell. She hesitated. 'Heck, I don't know now. I was so sure at first and I keep saying it ain't them. But truth be told I really don't know no more.' She held her hands up in the air.

He understood. It was amazing how people's opinions could change. He saw it the minute anyone was suspected of a crime. At first there was outrage — so-and-so couldn't possibly have done it. Eventually even those closest to them doubt. Start to suspect. That's what was happening to Noreen...and David, now. He wasn't so sure anymore. Maybe he was wrong about them all. Maybe Teddy Ryan wasn't the only one he should look at. He circled back. No, surely the crime was too sophisticated. David could speak to that from personal experience. Joe and he left a mess. Forensics everywhere. His vomit had been the start of it — a familial DNA match because his dad's DNA was in the system. Plus they were on CCTV footage *and* multiple witnesses had seen Parker walking with two young boys. At first everyone, including the police, assumed the boys might have witnessed Parker's abduction. It never occurred to them that such young children could have actually been responsible for Parker's murder.

She sighed. 'What do you think?'

'Maybe. Kids, adolescents, lose control more easily. And these kids...some of them have got so much pent-up anger. And *reason* to be angry.' That was the clincher. They had reason to carry that anger around. Surrounded by violence, drug and alcohol issues, child abuse in all its forms, poor parental role models...the list went on. The perfect storm to birth a killer. 'But I don't know if a teen could pull this off without leaving anything behind.'

'Lord, I hope it ain't one of our boys. So many lives be ruined forever.'

She had that right.

David gave a nod, headed to his office. He was going to see Rosie King after work and focus on the men in her life, not the centre's kids. Maybe it was gut instinct, wishful thinking or just plain common sense. Jamal hadn't been found yet, which meant it was well planned or well covered up after the fact — a level of sophistication unlikely to be found in a teenager.

\*\*\*

Five hours later, the last of the kids disappeared from the Centre.

'I'm heading home, David,' Noreen called.

'Hold up. I'm coming too.' He gathered his briefcase, popping Teddy's file into it...just in case. Cover all bases. But first he'd try to find some of Rosie King's clients.

Noreen was standing near the door when he came into the reception area. 'How was DeShawn?' she asked.

David gave a shrug. 'Traumatised. But who wouldn't be? His kid brother has been missing for a week now.'

‘Do you think...you know what they say. About kids and their chances.’

David nodded. He’d heard the stats. Seen them on true crime and crime drama TV shows. First twenty-four hours are crucial in child abduction cases. Then pretty much every hour after that the chances of finding the kid alive drop, and drastically. By seven days...well, the stats didn’t fare well for Jamal.

‘We’ve just got to hope. And keep praying.’

Noreen nodded. ‘Amen to that.’

David called Susan from the car to say he’d be a bit late for dinner, then headed over to the King’s house. He pulled on a baseball cap and glasses despite the darkness of near-night and the fact that the media frenzy had dissipated into a media trickle, with only a solitary van parked out the front. This time he knocked on the front door.

DeShawn answered. ‘Doc, whatcha doing here?’

‘I wanted to talk to your mum. See how she’s holding up.’

DeShawn hesitated, glanced behind him, then opened the door fully. ‘See for yourself.’

There was an edge in DeShawn’s voice that told David to be prepared. What for, he wasn’t quite sure.

David walked across the threshold and the place felt familiar — probably because he’d heard about it, pictured it, from his sessions with DeShawn. The entrance took you straight into a small living room. The hessian-brown carpet was threadbare in parts, as were the two two-seater sofas. The place was surprisingly clutter-free, with only a couple of dishes on the coffee table and a half-full ashtray.

‘DeShawn! Who at the door?’ A woman’s shrill voice sounded from a back room.

‘It’s David Story from the Centre.’ DeShawn gave David a strange wince-smile.

Soon Rosie King was in sight, prancing down a hallway to the left of the living room.

‘Who the fuck that?’ She stopped in her tracks when she saw David, gave him the once-over. Not in a protective way, it was more...predatory. Sizing him up as a potential client?

‘Mrs King, I work at the Hammett Youth Centre. As the counsellor there.’ He extended his hand.

She brushed her hand against his in a strange half-hand-shake, half-intimate gesture.

‘Hi, David.’ She wore torn-off denim shorts, a polkadot top tied against her midriff and bare feet. She looked like something between 1950s pin-up and trailer trash. Except she was Black. And she had the slight swagger of someone who’d had more than a few drinks.

‘I wanted to pop in and see how you’re all doing. If there’s anything I can do.’

‘You’re married, David.’ She glanced at his wedding ring.



‘Mum.’ DeShawn nudged her but she ignored him. Like she didn’t even register her son had spoken or touched her.

‘How long for, sugar?’

‘A year.’

She gave a little flutter of the eyes. ‘Newlyweds. Guess the spice still there?’

David cleared his throat. ‘Of course.’

She gave a little laugh, touched his arm. David couldn’t work out if she was a natural flirt or if she was in work-mode. Or maybe she was just a tipsy-drunk.

‘I’m sorry about Jamal, Mrs King. You must be...’ David didn’t know what else to say. She wasn’t exactly sitting on the couch crying her eyes out.

Her face fell. He’d slapped her with reality.

‘Jamal.’ She walked over to the sofa, sat down, staring ahead.

DeShawn went to her side, put his arm around her.

David sat on the other sofa. ‘We’re all praying for you, Mrs King. For Jamal and your family.’

She gave another strange laugh. ‘That never done me no good in the past.’

David knew it wasn’t the time to have an argument about the power of prayer so he stayed silent.

‘I know Noreen’s organised a food roster, but is there anything else we can do?’

‘No.’ She shook her head. ‘Nothing can be done. So I’m told.’

‘Mrs King, I don’t want to seem insensitive, but have the police asked you about...’ he cleared his throat, looked at DeShawn. Hesitated.

DeShawn stood up. ‘I’ll get you a drink. Water? Coffee? Soda?’

‘A coffee would be great thanks, DeShawn.’

‘Mum?’

‘Sure. One of my specialities. And maybe David here wants one?’

David held his hand up, waved the offer away. ‘Coffee’s fine for me.’

DeShawn headed towards the door on the right. Presumably the kitchen.

‘Go on.’

‘I was wondering...I was wondering if you or the police have looked at your clientele?’

‘Clientele?’ For a few seconds she seemed outraged, but then she sunk back into the chair, like she didn’t have the energy to protest.

‘I gave the police a list.’

‘Good.’ David rubbed his hands up and down on his thighs. ‘Great.’ But was it great? What were they doing with that list? ‘Mrs King, would you mind giving me that list? It’s just...well, I don’t think the police are keeping an open mind.’

‘You wanna talk to my tricks?’

‘Yes.’

She sat back, studied David for a while. Eventually she said: ‘I left some names off that list. Men who ain’t never coming back to Rosie if I named ’em. And I certainly ain’t telling no po-lice about all my business.’

‘Go on.’

She glanced at the door to the kitchen, but David knew DeShawn was smart enough to keep his distance.

‘You got a pen, sugar?’

David searched in his pockets but came up empty-handed. Instead he took out his phone and opened up a draft email.

Rosie gave him a list of twenty names. ‘It ain’t...ain’t somethin I proud of. But they all regulars. Not some strangers. And it just a way to feed my babies.’

Food, alcohol and cigarettes. Hopefully in that order.

‘I understand, Mrs King. And these names...which ones didn’t you give the police?’

‘The last three.’

He glanced at the list — didn’t recognise any names. ‘Are you sure that’s all?’

She seemed to hesitate.

He persisted. ‘This is Jamal’s life we’re talking about.’

She nodded her head, quick little nods. Closed her eyes, pushed her lips into each other. ‘There is one more.’

David leaned forward, urging her on.

She took a breath. ‘Andrew Pope.’

‘Andrew Pope?’ It seemed ludicrous. Pope was the mayor. White, wealthy, handsome. Why would he risk everything to come and see Rosie King?

But he didn’t say any of that. Instead he said, ‘How often does he come?’

She studied her hands. ‘Once a week.’ She stood up. Shook her head.

Regret.

‘Now don’t you be messin with him, ya hear.’ She swung around. Faced David. ‘I need his business. He pay more than the others.’

DeShawn cleared his throat and started walking across the room.

Rosie smiled at him. ‘Thanks, honey.’

DeShawn passed David his coffee and gave his mum something clear in a tall glass. Then made a hasty exit.

She took a few sips of the drink. ‘You gonna see him, ain’t you?’

David nodded.

She took a large gulp of the drink, closed her eyes again. ‘You gotta promise me you’ll be discreet, you hear me. And make sure he know I haven’t gone and told the po-lice.’ Another sip. ‘No way Andrew could’ve hurt my Jamal, but maybe someone trying to hurt him. Drag his ass down.’

David nodded. A new path. A way forward. And something the police had no idea about. A fresh lead, all to himself. And someone with a lot to lose. And *that* could be motive.

\*\*\*

Susan dished up the bowls of chicken chilli and they walked over to the table, which she’d already set with guacamole, sour cream, grated cheese, jalepenos and corn chips.

She shook her head. ‘I still can’t believe Andrew Pope sees a hooker.’

‘More men use prostitutes than you’d think, honey.’

‘So I’ve heard. Still, Pope. You know he’s married, right?’

‘Uh-huh. Even more to lose.’

Susan blew out a breath through pursed lips. ‘This is big. And the police don’t know?’ He’d already told her they didn’t but she still felt the need to confirm this detail.

‘No. Don’t think so at least.’

Susan felt herself smiling. ‘This could be it.’ A married, white politician was sleeping with a Black prostitute. Once the police did know, the investigation would focus on Pope, not David. The smile faded quickly, her stomach fell. ‘But if he’s involved...he wouldn’t kidnap Jamal.’

David looked down. Stopped eating. ‘It seems unlikely.’

‘Oh, God.’ She hesitated and also put her fork down. The most likely scenario seemed obvious. Jamal was too young to let out Pope’s secret indulgence, so it must mean something happened to Jamal when Pope was there, maybe Pope killed him — on purpose or by accident — and he’s covering it up. Susan had been so happy to find out about Pope, but it was selfish. What about poor Jamal? And it also didn’t explain David’s watch.

‘What about your watch? Pope wouldn’t know you, let alone want to frame you.’

David took a breath. It was obvious he’d thought about this too.

‘The only thing I can think of is that they’re unrelated. Maybe someone stole my watch and dropped it along the tracks when they realised it wasn’t worth much. Or maybe Jamal’s disappearance gave someone an idea. Thought they could take advantage of the situation to frame me. Or simply to out me.’

‘Either way, someone’s out to get you.’

Susan’s excitement and hope had gone. If Pope *was* involved it didn’t bode well for Jamal, and it meant someone else was still out there with their sights set on David. Maybe someone who broke into the house, who could do it again. And if Pope wasn’t involved they were back to square one, with the police focused on connecting David to the crime.

## Chapter 21

I can never be stolen from you.  
I am owned by everyone.  
Some have more, a few have less.  
But be assured I'm certainly no fun.

He waited until 9.30am to be sure Pope would be in, and so it would seem like a regular time for an appointment.

He hadn't phoned ahead, hadn't tried to set up a meeting. He thought it would be easier dealt with in person. But first he had to get through the gatekeepers.

At the main reception desk, he simply said he was there to speak to Andrew Pope.

'You have an appointment?'

He lied, said yes.

'You're not on my list.'

'I should be. And I'm running late. I was supposed to be up there two minutes ago.'

Confident, verging on brash. Another act.

The woman eyed him, eyebrows threatening to rise, then said, 'Gladys will soon send you back if need be.' She buzzed him through a security door and he followed the signs to the mayor's office.

He weaved through the corridors, red and grey carpet in an old-fashioned floral design, white walls, wood-framed doors and windows. But a minor upgrade — an open-plan design and a few glass-walled corner offices. He figured the biggest must be the mayor's. A receptionist at a small desk pointed him to the north-west corner of the building. A glass-walled office with all the internal blinds down. Privacy. Defeats the idea behind open-plan offices. David didn't know much about corporate life. It was as foreign to him as a guilt-free existence.

Outside the door was an older woman, greying hair piled into a high bun. Her suit was conservative, charcoal grey, her makeup neutral tones and modestly applied. She peered over black-framed glasses, taking her attention away from her computer screen.

'Can I help you?'

'I'm here to see the mayor.'

A perplexed look. 'And you are?'

'David Story. Just let him know I'm here to talk about the Kings.'

'King...' The woman took off her glasses, looked at David. 'The missing boy?'

'That's right. I'm a youth worker at the Hammett Centre.'

'And what's this got to do with Andrew?'

‘Just tell him.’ He paused, then decided to play his hand. ‘Tell him we’ve got a mutual friend in the boy’s mother.’

She eyed him again, hesitated. Then pressed the intercom. ‘A David Story is here to see you about the missing King boy. Says you’re both friends with the boy’s mother?’

A pause. ‘Send him in.’

‘Yes, sir.’ She looked up, cocked her head. Perhaps curious. ‘In you go.’

Looked like the PA wasn’t hiding Pope’s tracks. Not surprising...she didn’t look like the type who’d approve of a prostitute in any circumstances, let alone when Pope was a married man. Pope was hardly going to use her to arrange his weekly appointment.

David gave one knock, then opened the door. Pope was a tall man, mid-forties. His well-cut suit was a few shades lighter than navy, white shirt, muted pink tie. He looked more like a finance broker than a mayor. Fit, clean-cut, respectable. He knew it was stereotyping, but he couldn’t imagine this man with any prostitute, let alone Rosie King — a woman from the wrong side of the tracks (literally in Hammett). She was beautiful, yes, but you could also tell she was a woman who’d lived hard...and continued to do so. Not to mention the fact that Pope was crossing two ever-present divides — racial and socioeconomic. Maybe that was the appeal for him.

‘Shut the door.’ Pope’s voice was neutral.

David followed orders. Sat down. Kept quiet.

‘So...Rosie King?’ Pope came to the front of his desk, stood directly in front of David but then leaned against the desk, folding his body slightly.

‘Yes.’ David cut to the chase. ‘I know you’re a client of hers.’

‘Really? She tell you that?’

David paused. ‘No. Her eldest boy.’

‘Why?’

What could David say. *I’m investigating Jamal’s disappearance?* No, that wouldn’t sit right at all. ‘I’m trying to find Jamal. Like everyone.’

‘You’re the first person to come to me, though.’

As David had thought — even the police didn’t know about Andrew Pope.

‘Guess I asked the right people the right questions. And the Kings don’t want to talk to the police.’

‘Mmm...’ He pushed off the desk, walked over to the window. ‘Where are you thinking of taking this?’

‘I’m not here to shake you down, if that’s what you’re asking. Just hoping you’ve got something that might help find Jamal.’ *Or that you know where he is.* If Andrew Pope had a

temper, could be he was in the middle of his visit with Rosie and Jamal came in for some reason. It doesn't take much to kill a three-year-old. A simple shove. So delicate three-year-old skulls. And given who he was...

'You spoken to anyone about this?'

David shook his head.

Pope put his hands in his pockets. 'I never felt comfortable with the kid there. But Rosie insisted there was no other way.' He shrugged. 'Guess I got used to it. He was so quiet...it really was like he wasn't there.'

'When was the last time you saw Rosie?'

'We normally have a standing time. Wednesdays, 12pm. So the day before Jamal went missing. Obviously I didn't keep the appointment this week.'

David noticed the language, "appointment" like it was a business deal or a meeting.

'Anything out of the ordinary that visit? The day before Jamal?'

'You're pretty interested for a social worker.'

'Youth worker. The kids at the Centre are important to me. And this is affecting them all, but especially DeShawn.'

Pope turned around, looked David up and down again. 'A dedicated professional.'

'Exactly.' Pope didn't need to know there was a helluva lot more to it than that.

'What about Thursday? What were you doing then?'

'You mean when Jamal went missing?'

'Yes.'

Pope laughed. 'Like I need to tell you.'

'You don't. But I could also let the police know Rosie King has an influential customer. One that had something to lose, something to kill for.'

'You've been watching too many movies. I'm mayor...not a presidential candidate.'

David cleared his throat, shrugged his shoulders. 'Maybe you're ambitious. Something like prostitution could bring your career aspirations to a screeching halt. Your base is conservative, right?'

No response.

'I don't even think your PA would forgive you for using a prostitute, let alone your constituents. And a Black hooker?'

Pope winced at the word "hooker".

'At least it shows I'm not a racist, huh?'

'Don't be naïve. You know it would be turned into a negative.' David drove it home. 'You're slumming with some Black whore. Feeding your fantasy about Black women.'

Pope cleared his throat.

David had him.

After several seconds, Pope said. 'So what do you want? I can give you my diary for that day. Hell, you can follow up my appointments to double-check if you like. As long as you do it discreetly. I don't want anyone making the connection between the date you're asking about and Jamal King.'

David stood. It sounded fair. 'Deal. Will *you* print it, or your PA?'

'Me. I don't want Gladys snooping. She's too damn smart.' He went back to his desk and after a few clicks his personal printer was spooling two pages. 'Here you go. Now get the fuck out.'

David was a little taken aback, but then smiled. 'Sure thing, Mr Mayor.' He took the printout and left. On the elevator ride down he felt completely deflated. The hot lead had fizzled out. At least, it looked that way. But maybe they'd always been fooling themselves that there was any way out of this mess.

\*\*\*

'Well?' Susan asked as soon as he walked in the door.

He shook his head. 'Doesn't look promising.'

Susan's face and body drooped. 'At least it's probably more hopeful for Jamal this way.'

David nodded, but could see her disappointment that they hadn't found an answer, an answer that cleared David. She needed this. Needed him, or someone, to find Jamal's abductor before their world came crashing down around them. It was one thing for Susan to know his true past, but it would be another thing altogether for her if *everyone* knew. He understood that. Knew the stakes. He was in the same boat. He didn't want Noreen to look at him differently, to crush her trust so completely, and the same with the kids. Would they think he was a hypocrite? Or maybe then they'd truly understand that he *knew* what was on the other side of violence. Could there be a silver lining to this nightmare? Would it bring him closer to the kids?

No matter what his past, there was still the racial gap between them. Hammett was one of the poorest towns in America, and eighty-five percent Black. Young men, bouncing from temporary home to temporary home to avoid open warrants, drugs that could get you busted, violence that could get you busted. And a future in which prison seemed inevitable at some point.



Susan pulled him back into the here and now. 'What are we going to do?'

'I'll call Bright. See how he's going with...' he hesitated, unable to say his name. He took a breath. 'See how he's going with Parker's younger brother. But like I said, I don't think Parker's family is involved. The dad's moved on, the older brother is too angry to *only* frame me, and it's too far away for the younger brother to pull off. He would have had to skip school, not come home for a couple of days.'

'Any other options?'

He shrugged. 'Not that I can think of. I keep coming back to Joe, but he's been positively confirmed as not even in this state.'

'So it wasn't him. But maybe he can help you. You said your memory from around Parker is fried, right?'

He nodded.

'Well maybe Joe's is better. And if this is related to Parker somehow Joe might remember something you don't. Or maybe he's a target too. You should go visit him. See for yourself.'

David let out a muffled laugh. 'You know I can't do that. Even Bright would disown me then. And I could be thrown back in jail.'

Susan sank to the chair, head in hands.

David felt so helpless. So useless. He'd brought all this on her and what could he do now? Everything seemed to be a dead end. He sat next to her, put his arm around her. 'I'm sorry, honey.' He pulled her into him.

'I can't lose you now, David. Not when I've finally got you in here.' She put her hand over his heart.

He took her hand. 'I'm sorry...for everything. Bringing this on you. Lying to you. Dragging you down with me.'

She shook her head. 'Don't give in, David. Please don't give in.'

He took a breath. 'I'll ring Bright now, and then the appointments on Hope's list. Make sure. And when I'm in the Centre this afternoon I'll revisit the boys with fresh eyes. Perhaps I discounted them too easily, too quickly.' He'd looked at them many times, but he'd do it again — for Susan.

She smiled. 'It's worth fighting for. What we've got.'

He tucked her hair behind her ear, let his hand linger near her face. 'It is.'

She stood up, clearly happier now that David had refocused on finding Jamal's abductor. 'I'll make us some lunch before you have to head to work.'

‘Thanks.’ He turned to head for their small study. ‘And there are two other clients on Rosie’s list. Two people the police don’t know about.’ Susan was right. He shouldn’t give in. Not yet. He had Susan. He had Willifred. And he had his Faith. ‘Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.’ *Joshua 1:9*

\*\*\*

Susan was making sandwiches on remote, her mind preoccupied. What she’d said was true. She couldn’t lose David now, not after she finally understood him. And not when he’d become such a good person. A truly good person. She knew others wouldn’t understand, but she knew David’s heart. Knew his mind. And that’s what worried her. Not because of violence — he was incapable of that now — but because of the depression. His natural state was low, pessimistic, lethargic. How long would his new determination to find Jamal or his abductor last? Would he have the emotional energy to see it through? If she wanted to save her marriage, save David, *she* had to do something about it. And she knew just who could help her.

## Chapter 22

I never was but always will be.  
No one ever saw me but I've heard of the ferry.  
I give people the motivation to better themselves.  
They speak of the netherworld and mischievous elves.  
Who am I?

She pulled up outside Joe's house. Although now his name was Toby. She'd had a hard time convincing her brother that it was important. That she had to know Joe's new identity and address. Tracking down Joe was a big move for her. Way outside her comfort zone. But she had to do something. And this was her only hope. Agent Bright said Joe was a dead end. But everyone was a dead end. The boys at the Centre, Parker's family. Parker's family...She shuddered. Didn't want to think about Parker. Didn't want to think about any version of David who could have done such a thing. But it wasn't him...not really. It was an extremely troubled boy, who'd been surrounded by misery and violence and had succumbed to it. This man, her David, was the real David. Tony Moretti was as fictional to Susan as The Godfather.

She tapped her fingernails on the steering wheel. Took a deep breath. Got out of the car. Her legs had never felt so heavy and weak at the same time. Reluctant and scared. Bright had checked on Joe — he definitely hadn't been in Mississippi, didn't take Jamal, plant the watch or send that note via DHL. But what if Joe was still a violent man? It was more common for a violent boy to bloom into a violent man than shed his skin and start all over again.

She hesitated on the pavement about to turn back, call Louis and get him to check if 'Toby' had a police record, but then the door swung open. A man in his late twenties appeared on the doorstep, a shoulder bag draped over one side of his body.

Joe was handsome in an aloof, arrogant way. The kind of man who knew just how attractive he was and expected to get things his way because of it. Entitled. He smiled, a slightly cocky smile. Small dimples formed in his cheeks, softening the harshness of his arrogance. He wore a grey, expensive-looking suit, white shirt and charcoal tie.

'Hi. Can I help you?' He seemed a little confused by her presence.

Susan hesitated, then moved a little closer. 'Are you Toby?' She made sure to use his cover name, his new identity.

'Yes?' He left the door open.

'Sorry, you were on your way out?' She nodded at him.

'Yeah, off to work.'

'I wanted to talk to you. About...about Parker.'

He froze at the name. Not surprising.

‘I don’t want to talk about him.’

Again, not surprising. David didn’t want to talk about him either.

‘Please...David...I mean, Tony. He’s in trouble.’

‘Trouble? What kind of trouble?’ He took a breath, looked back inside, glanced at his bag. ‘Look, you better come inside.’

She nodded. Moved toward him.

He stepped inside and opened the front door wider.

Susan hesitated again, trying to see past the respectable face this man wore. Was it a reflection of his interior or a mask? Eventually she took a breath, thought of David, and stepped over the threshold. At one point in time David and this man were best friends. Hopefully he still felt enough of a bond to David to want to try and help him.

Joe closed the door behind her. The house was small but neat inside and decorated in a modern, but cold manner. Definitely no woman’s touch here. The entrance opened into a narrow hall, with a living room space on the left and a couple of closed doors to the right.

‘I’m surprised to see you.’

She hesitated. ‘I’m David’s wife.’

Joe nodded. ‘I know. Susan Story.’

‘I thought you weren’t supposed to know about each other?’

‘Officially. But there are lots of ways around that nowadays. With the internet.’

‘But how did you even find out David’s name?’

‘How did you find me?’

A question with a question. She started feeling uncomfortable. She should have brought David. Or maybe Agent Bright.

‘Look, there’s a young boy who’s gone missing near us.’

‘Jamal King.’

‘You seem to know an awful lot about what’s going on in our lives three hundred miles away.’

He laughed, a deep throaty chuckle. ‘I’ve been following David for years. I’ve always known who he was, where he was. The other advantage of the internet...and computers, in general. Any information is accessible if you have the skills...or the money to pay someone with the skills.’

Her presence in his living room was proof of that. But she crossed her arms, put on her slightly unimpressed face. It was a front. Something she used when one of the patients in her ward started to cross the line.

‘Susan...you’ll have to do better than that. Who do you think you’re dealing with? Another David?’

She shifted, looked at the door. Was that a threat? Had she totally misjudged the situation?

Joe broke into a kind laugh. ‘Sorry, I shouldn’t play with you. I completely understand why you’re worried. And I want to do anything I can to help Tony...David. Come in.’ He started moving toward the living room. ‘Coffee?’

She took a deep breath in and out, steadying her heart rate. ‘Coffee would be great, thanks.’ She followed him.

‘Take a seat.’ He motioned to the sofa. ‘How do you take your coffee?’

‘White with two.’

He gave a nod and disappeared into the kitchen, a room of glistening white and steel based on what she could see through the slither of the open door.

‘So how did you and David meet?’

She took a seat, decided to give Joe the cover story. ‘At a mental health conference.’

‘Oh, right.’

She looked around, shifted in her seat. The room had the clinical coldness of a modern bachelor pad. Made for men who didn’t cook or entertain, who liked control. The modern, single professional male. David’s place had looked a little like it when she’d first met him. It took a while and some push and pull before he actually enjoyed the colour and smell of flowers, the presence of more than one or two photographs on the mantelpiece, and maybe even a little mess. God forbid.

Joe’s living room held a leather two-seater sofa, two large armchairs, a low sleek metal coffee table and a massive television over a gas fireplace. The house looked like a seventies ranch house that had been cosmetically updated but without any floor plan changes. It didn’t boast the modern open-plan living, just the modern décor.

Joe appeared carrying two coffees. ‘So what conference?’ He handed her one of the coffees.

‘Huh?’

‘The conference...what was the name of it?’

‘Marysville Youth Mental Health, two years ago.’

‘Right.’ He sat down in the two-seater opposite her. The ‘right’ had a strange ring to it, like he suspected or knew they hadn’t met at any conference.

‘Have you been in touch with David?’ She hadn’t told David she was coming here. He’d had no luck with the other names on Rosie King’s list and his momentary focus had

withered again. He'd left for work seemingly resigned to whatever punishment fate was going to deal him. But *she* knew he deserved this second chance, deserved to live a free man. She still couldn't reconcile the David she knew with someone who was capable of harming anyone, let alone a child. He'd paid enough, suffered enough.

'David and I can't speak to each other. I'm sure you know that. It's part of the court order.'

'I know that...but have you? Do you?'

'What did David say?' He smiled, had a sip of coffee.

'I haven't asked him.' She held firm.

'I haven't spoken to David in a long, long time. Since the trial.'

She felt a little better about that. At least she hadn't uncovered another lie. She shuffled back on the sofa, cup in hand, and had a few sips of the coffee. It was strong, but good.

'Nice coffee.'

He smiled. 'Thanks. I've got one of those machines. Means anyone can make a decent cup of coffee.'

'True.' She took a deep breath. 'So. David. Jamal King.'

He shrugged. 'I'd say I know less than you. Jamal King disappeared nine days ago. No trace. And David's past has come to light and he's a suspect. Am I right so far?'

'Yes, but he's also being framed for it. His watch was found near Jamal's house. David thinks it might have something to do with Parker, someone trying to get to him. But his memory of that time is...all over the place.'

'And you're hoping I can shed some light.'

'Yes. The Marshall has cleared Parker's family but is there anyone else who might be seeking revenge?'

Joe leaned back, thoughtful. After a few minutes he shook his head. 'I'm sorry, but I can't think of anyone.'

Susan swallowed the tears and panic. She couldn't cope with another dead end.

'The police like David for it, for Jamal's disappearance.'

'I don't know about that.' He was on their radar, but hopefully they didn't actually think he did it.

'I'm *telling* you...they think it's him.'

She furrowed her brow. 'But how could you possibly know?'

'Like I said...anything's achievable if you've got the tech skills.'

She had another sip of coffee. Thought about it. The only electronic version of this would surely be in the police station. The police reports. 'So you hacked the Hammett cops?'

He gave a nod.

This level of tech skills was concerning. ‘Personally?’ She took a few more sips of coffee, desperately wanting to busy her hands. She pushed the nerves away, had another sip but then put the mug back on the table. She sat back again, arms crossed, waiting for the answer.

Joe drained his coffee, then said: ‘I paid someone else to.’

Her head started to spin. She didn’t like where the conversation was going. Why would he pay someone to track the investigation? Concern for David? Curiosity? Or something more sinister. She blinked, her eyes getting heavy.

‘I know a lot about David. And you.’ He stood up and knelt down in front of her.

His face seemed hazy. Like she needed to put her contacts in...but she’d put her contacts in first thing this morning.

He moved his head from side to side across her field of vision. ‘I even knew what you looked like before you arrived.’

‘How?’ Her words sounded distant, slurred. She glanced at the coffee. She’d been so foolish.

‘I’ve had your house bugged since the moment you bought it. Before you even moved in.’ He gave a laugh. ‘I know everything about you.’ He moved closer.

Now his features were a distorted mess, like the crazy photo effects. She giggled, a weird panicked, drugged giggle.

He put his hand on her knee. ‘I even know what you look like, sound like when you come.’ He ran his hand up her thigh.

She fought the dazed feeling. Pushed his hand away. Then she was sinking. Her body falling backwards, a neverending freefall.

## Chapter 23

I disappear every time you say my name.

David gave up. Told Noreen he was feeling sick and went home early. He couldn't sit at his desk, talk to the kids when his mind was focused on one thing only — Jamal King. Was he still alive? Who had taken him? And was it random, or was it somehow connected to him? He vacillated widely between wanting to get out there and comb every inch of Hammett and its surrounds, to giving up, giving in to whatever God had planned for him. He'd been a fool thinking he deserved a real life.

When he arrived home he was surprised to find the house empty. He checked Susan's roster from the fridge. As he'd thought, she was off. So where was she? Shopping?

He made himself a coffee — not because he wanted one but because he needed something to do. A way to keep himself vaguely distracted.

While he was waiting for the brew to come through he called Susan. No answer. He'd try again in a few minutes.

He couldn't give in. He had to fight, for Susan. He went through the short list in his mind. From the present: Teddy Ryan, Reg, Chris, Mayor Pope. And from the past: Joe, Parker's parents, Parker's brothers. They were all 'no' for one reason or another. They had alibis, they weren't capable of the level of finesse, or weren't capable of murder. Plus Bright had confirmed this afternoon that Trent Brown's records showed he'd been in school for the entire past two weeks. No way he could have got to Hammett and back on the day Jamal disappeared. Or that he could have planted David's watch.

He sat on the deck with his cup of coffee. He could hear the trills of a Blue Jay, and saw one flutter through the trees. Then there were two, sitting next to one another in a branch. One flew down, grabbed a piece of bark. Then the other one flew off, floating back a minute or so later with a twig. A nest. They were making a nest together. Teamwork. That's what he wanted with Susan. How it worked most of the time. A team. On the same team, working together. In some ways, that was even more so now. Now that she knew the truth.

Parker's parents had been a team once, albeit a dysfunctional team. Working to raise their son in the best way they could. And he assumed Bright and his wife were probably a team. Must be...the man had been married for fifteen years. Can't get that far without a little teamwork. He wondered about Joe. Had he found happiness? Got married. Or was he still stuck in his power-seeking and violent ways, as Bright had indicated. He couldn't imagine Joe as part of a team. It would be more of a dictatorship.



A dictatorship. Shit! He stood up, the sudden movement sending the Blue Jays flying back into the parkland behind the estate.

\*\*\*

I know what you're thinking...will David get there in time? Will he save his wife? Is she even in danger. How will David Story's story end? I know the answer, yes, sirree. Remember, I'm all-seeing, all-knowing. Time is fluid to me. Looking at tomorrow is just the same as looking at yesterday. Death has that power. I've got that power. Besides, time ain't really linear. That's just human's distorted view...at the moment. A bit like when you lot thought the Earth was flat. One day you'll look back and laugh at the idea of time as linear. But for the moment, well, for the moment you're stuck in your tiny minds. With God, the Devil, Death laughing at you. Truth be told, you were really only created as playthings for God and the Devil. Yes, yes...I know what you're thinking. What about evolution?

Evolution, of course. With a little help. Obviously God didn't create the world in seven days, but he helped it along...a lot. He helped you lot a long...a lot. And then The Devil came along. The Devil found out. Came to have a look. Liked what he saw. And so you were caught up in the never-ending battle between God and the Devil. Well, that's what you call them. But it's not quite right, either. Good and evil, black and white. We all know it's not a dichotomy. More like a continuum. Sure, some people are ninety-five percent bad. Your murderers, rapists, and so on. And some people are ninety-five percent good. You know the types. But let me tell you, there's always darkness lurking under the surface.

Anyways, like I was saying, it ain't so black and white. Sure, the Devil is mostly bad, God mostly good, but they didn't start that way. You could say they even started off not that far apart from one another, somewhere in the middle. With each millenia, God became purer, more light. The Devil became darker, his being and purpose distorted by anger. You know your stories of Adam and Eve? Well, that's based on God. Yup...God is Adam in that story. And Eve is his match. But before she was with God...yeah, you guessed it. The love triangle. As relevant today as it was for God, the Devil and Eve millions of years ago. God and Eve came to Earth to escape the Devil, but he found them, eventually. They fought, Eve was killed and the rest is history...well, not *your* history, but my history. The real history. God sought forgiveness and poured himself into his work — you lot. The Devil sought revenge and poured himself into damaging God as much as possible. When he saw how much God cared about humankind, he decided to wreak as much havoc as possible. He started killing people and stealing souls, making deals with people when they were alive. God didn't like it. And I

was sent to be the impartial presence at each human's death. I come to you, greet you, assess whether you're more in the likeness of God or the Devil. And from there, you're sent to colonies. God's colony (you call it Heaven) or the Devil's colony (you call it Hell). But over the years, I've become disillusioned with you lot. I gave up on you a while ago. Became closer to the Devil. But I still do my job — impartial. I can do that. So there you have it. Your true history.

Now you know why, for me, seeing something as simple as Jamal's fate, or that of Susan is child's play. I know when they're going to die. And as each person gets closer to their death, I start to weigh their lives. To make that call...are they for God or the Devil? Although I'm still deciding for David. And I know it will be one that God and the Devil get involved in. They'll both be making their cases, both will want to claim his soul.

## Chapter 24

When there's fire in me I'm still cold.  
But when I own you I'll be warm and bold.  
To all things I give no more than I'm given.  
In time p'haps everthin', and yet keep nothin'.

David rang Walter Bright. 'What if Joe has an accomplice? Someone he's controlling, someone who took, or maybe killed Jamal, someone who planted my watch? Who's been in my house.' The last part made him shudder. Someone Joe was controlling in his house, near Susan?

A pause. Then: 'It's possible.'

'He could have been grooming someone for weeks, months, even years.'

'Possible, yes.'

'We should go and talk to him.'

'*We're* not doing anything. You're not going anywhere near Joe.' A pause. 'But I could go and talk to him.'

'We should go. Together. This is my life we're talking about.'

Bright gave a chuckle. 'Nice try, son. But that ain't happening.'

David took a breath, but then shut his mouth. There was no point arguing with Bright. And there were other ways he could track Joe.

'Okay. Let me know as soon as you've spoken to him.'

'It will be a few hours, more.'

'You'll be flying somewhere?'

'Maybe.'

David had assumed they'd be kept far apart, but the reality was that a state away would probably be enough to ensure they didn't cross paths. And it's not like David travelled for work or anything. He stayed in Hammett. Always.

He hung up. Tried Susan again. Still no answer. He thought about the stupid GPS tracking program Susan had set up. He didn't like using it. Felt like he was stalking her somehow. But he still opened it up. The map zoomed out, just a little, then a bit more, then a bit more.

What the hell? She was in Louisiana. What was she doing there? Like him, Susan tended to stay local. He zoomed in to get a better idea of her location. He was trying to figure it out when the TV switched on. He swung around to the noise, facing the screen.

'Hello, Tony.'

He did a double-take, his brain catching up with the sixteen years.

‘Joe?’

A chuckle. ‘So nice to see you again.’

The image shook, like Joe was picking up the camera. Then it swung around. ‘I’ve got something to show you.’

There, side-by-side, were Jamal and Susan. Both tied up. Both gagged, although Jamal was slumped — dead or drugged?

Susan’s eyes widened.

‘She came to visit me. Hoping I could help you. Isn’t she just too sweet?’ Joe lowered Susan’s gag. ‘Did you want to say something to your husband?’

Susan shook her head.

‘I’m going to kill you!’ David shouted, teeth gritted. ‘So help me God.’

‘Now, now, David. Don’t revert to your wicked past. What would your God say about that?’

Joe was goading David, trying to get a rise from him, but it had the opposite effect. It gave him pause, made him think of his faith, focus on the lightness inside himself, not the darkness. But he couldn’t show Joe this shift.

He raised his fist. ‘Where are you? Where are you, you bastard?’ He was also hoping Joe didn’t realise that David knew where Susan was, from her phone.

‘I’ll give you the address.’ Suddenly Joe appeared in frame again, this time with a knife. ‘But I doubt you’ll make it in time.’ He put the knife to Susan’s throat.

David took a quick, hard breath. Would he do it now? Right now? No, he’d want to drag it out a bit. See David fail, see his torture.

‘Keep away from her.’

‘I’m in El Dorado. See you in about ten hours, I guess.’ An El Dorado address flashed up on the TV. David pretended to write it down, but he knew it was a ruse. Joe was in Louisiana. And much closer than ten hours away.

David wanted to say he’d see him sooner than that, but he had to let Joe think he was in control.

‘You bastard. I swear, if you harm her...’

A creepy smile. ‘You’ll do what, David? Prove once and for all that you’re a murderer? I look forward to it. I’ll call you in twelve hours. See how you’re doing, let you see your wife again.’ He looked down, then back up. ‘And David, don’t even think about calling the police or the Marshalls. You really don’t want to trigger my contingency plan. Trust me.’ Another disturbing smile.

The TV went black.

David took a deep breath. The bastard was tapped into his house, had been watching him. But he'd worry about that later. For now, he just had to get to Susan. And Jamal.

He took another look at the GPS finder, but the screen was blank. Joe must have turned off Susan's phone. It didn't matter. David had the address in his memory. Or at least the rough location. He had to find the optimism within, somehow. Everyone had turned against him except Susan. And now he needed to complete the ultimate act of redemption — to save her from his past, literally. To save her from Joe. He remembered what Bright had said about sexual assault and tried to push the thought away. He hadn't told Susan about that...hadn't wanted her to have to think about it. But if he had, she never would have gone looking for Joe. The thought of Joe, touching Susan...his sweet, Susan.

David jumped in his car and headed for Louisiana. Was Bright already on his way to Louisiana? Probably more likely he'd make the trip tomorrow morning, by plane. David thought about calling him. Telling him to get as many people over to Joe's house as he could — now — but he doubted Joe was bluffing about the contingency plan. And if he had David bugged, maybe he had Bright bugged too. David reached over to his phone and turned it off. Joe would be calling in twelve hours, but he'd be there before then and he couldn't risk Joe tracing his phone via GPS.

The trip was a blur but somehow he managed to get to McCrea Louisiana in one piece, and without being pulled over by the cops. He'd spent much of the trip debating whether to call Bright, or even use a pay phone to call the Louisiana police, but he knew the minute cops turned up, sirens blazing, Joe would kill Susan. His first preference was to torture David — no doubt during the next phone call he'd let him know he wasn't actually in El Dorado. He'd send David on another wild goose chase, or maybe just kill Susan while David watched helplessly on FaceTime. Joe wanted David to suffer in as many ways as possible. And killing Susan and Jamal in front of David was a sure-fire way to set off David's PTSD, to send him reeling, to test his faith. But if cops showed up on Joe's doorstep and emotionally torturing David was no longer an option he'd simply get it over and done with, fast.

Susan's GPS dot had been in a network of several streets. If he'd had more time he could have zoomed in more, gotten an exact address. But he didn't. He'd only been driving around the area for five minutes when he came across Susan's car, empty and forlorn. He glanced at the nearest street sign – Raglan Street. His chest tightened at the thought of her inside one of the nearby houses, at the mercy of Joe. He had a flash of Joe with the baseball bat in hand, pummeling Parker. True recollection or imagination? He took a breath, nearly slammed into the back of Susan's car.

He manoeuvred around her car. *Play it cool. Keep calm.* He kept driving and took the next left, before pulling over and killing the engine.

He took another deep breath, flicked his hoodie up over his head and pulled it low, until it was covering part of his forehead. He reached into his glovebox, took out the gun. He checked the time. In another half hour it would be dark. Should he wait for the cover of darkness?

He slammed his head back into the car's headrest. He should wait, he should. It would be logical. Smart. But he couldn't do it.

He got out of the car and shoved his hands into his pockets, the gun now hidden in his hoodie pocket. He held it with his left hand, touching the cold, smooth metal. A life-taker. Although you don't need a gun to take a life...it's just the fastest route from A to B. Normally that's a bad thing, but today he wanted that speed. He didn't want a chance to think about it. To think about the repercussions of killing another human being. He'd done it once, he could do it again, right?

He pressed his lips together. It was different, he knew that. With Parker he didn't act alone, he was coerced. He was, wasn't he?

Joe was next to him, Parker in between. They were all walking hand-in-hand next to the railway tracks. The big boys willing to play baseball with the three-year-old. Joe held the bat, whistling. Gave David/Tony a smile. Tony smiled back. Something had changed in Joe's eyes, like he was drunk or something. He knew that lazy, happy look from his father. It usually came four beers in for his dad. Had Joe been drinking? Tony didn't think so, but he seemed weird-happy, but unfocused. Like the world was sliding past him, taking him on a sweet ride.

They kept walking. Holding Parker's little hands in theirs. Joe on the left, Tony on the right.

'We'll just give his mum a scare,' Joe had said. 'Teach her to take better care of her boy.'

Tony wanted his mum to take better care of him. Had wanted his mum to run, to escape his father. But she hadn't. She'd pretended none of it happened. And now his dad had left. Didn't know how he felt about that one. It should have been his mum leaving, escaping with him. Not his dad running off with some other woman. Leaving them broken. His mum had barely stopped drinking since he'd left. She'd gone from being an afternoon and evening drunk to an all-the-time drunk.

Parker had come with them willingly. More than willingly. Excited to play baseball with the big boys.

‘Where we go? We play ball?’ His words ran together and were difficult to decipher. His wide eyes looked up at Tony. Tony could see him in his peripheral vision but didn’t want to look at him. Maybe he knew then.

‘Just up ahead, Parker,’ Joe answered. ‘Not much further now.’

The mall was far in the distance.

‘Let’s go back, Joe. It’s been fifteen minutes.’

‘You think that’s enough. For someone like that?’

Tony took a breath. Maybe Joe was right. Maybe Parker’s mum hadn’t even noticed he was missing yet.

‘Let’s sit here for a bit. Have a smoke.’

Joe looked back at the mall in the distance, glanced around. ‘Sure.’ He took out a packet of cigarettes that Tony knew he must have stolen from his old man...or maybe a shop.

He knocked out three, lit them all up. Handed Parker one, then Tony.

Parker squinted, but grasped the cancer stick clumsily. He took a drag on it, then coughed, almost threw up.

Joe patted his back, then the pats became more forceful.

‘Ouch. Hurts.’

‘Fuck, this kid can’t talk.’

‘Most kids that age can’t, Joe.’

Joe rolled his eyes, and started hitting Parker’s back harder.

Parker was crying.

‘Shut up!’ Joe yelled.

The noise. Too noisy. Parker screaming and crying, Joe yelling. Tony covered his ears, trying to banish the voices.

Joe stood up. ‘Shut the fuck up!’

Tony was frozen, but he wanted to get up and run. Wanted to escape the noise. The yelling reminded him too much of home.

Parker started screaming louder. Words were spewing from his mouth, but they were indecipherable.

Joe kicked at Parker’s stomach. ‘I said, shut the fuck up.’

Parker cried more. ‘Mummy. Mummy, I want my mummy.’

Suddenly the baseball bat was hurtling toward Tony.

‘Take care of it,’ Joe commanded.

Tony looked at him. ‘What?’

Joe was suddenly a centimetre away. ‘You heard me. Take care of the little fucker.’

Tony took a step back, but Joe was in his face again. ‘Come on, Tony. I know what’s inside of you. I see it. I can see it.’ Spit flew from Joe’s mouth onto Tony’s face. It was Tony’s dad, all over again.

‘No. Shut the fuck up.’

Joe, still in his face. ‘Make me. Better still, shut him up.’ He pointed at Parker, who was still crying, making more noise that Tony thought possible.

‘Shut up, kid.’ He raised the baseball bat. ‘Shut up.’

Joe, next to him. ‘That’s it.’ He punched Tony in the kidneys, hard. Tony doubled over, then straightened. He could feel the blood pumping through his body, his heart working over time.

‘That’s it, you fucking useless piece of shit.’

It was Joe, but he was using Tony’s father’s words.

Joe grabbed the baseball bat. Hit Parker once, twice, three times. Each time yelling louder and louder for Parker to shut the fuck up.

Joe threw Tony the baseball bat. ‘Your turn. You’ll feel better, you useless fuck.’

Tony didn’t think, just turned to the noise. Turned toward Parker. He hit him with the bat, once, twice, three times. Then he stopped. His mouth open in horror. What had he done?

Joe wrenched the bat out of his hands and kept hitting Parker. Over and over again. Tony watched, Parker’s cries replaced by the cracking of his bones, the thud of the baseball bat against skin, bone, brain.

Joe was laughing. Looking at Parker, then at Tony, laughing.

David stumbled backwards, turned, threw up. Then stood there, planted to the ground.

A voice was calling him. ‘Come on, Tony.’ Joe’s voice, full of joy, laughter. High.

Tony...David...blinked. Had he just relived the true version of those events? Finally? He’d never know for sure, but there was something about the memory that rang true. Joe had used Tony’s/David’s anger at his father, at his father’s abuse, at his father running off, to unleash the darkness within Tony. But he’d only hit Parker three times and they’d been to the body, not the head. And three wouldn’t have killed Parker. The rest had been Joe. All Joe. Joe had killed Parker. Not the other way around. Joe had manipulated *him*. Tears started falling. Tears of relief. He’d done a horrible, horrible thing all those years ago but his hands hadn’t killed Parker. Only his inaction. It was something at least.

He blinked, realised Susan’s car was right in front of him. He had to focus on the present.

Susan. That’s all that was important. And her life was worth *way* more than Joe’s. She deserved to live, happy. He deserved to die. And maybe David did too.



Assuming she'd parked right out front, which she probably would have, this was Joe's house. He walked up the driveway, then crossed back across the low boundary fence into Joe's property. He had a quick glance to see if there were any cameras, but he couldn't see anything obvious. Not that it meant they weren't there. Clearly Joe was pretty advanced when it came to technology. David moved toward the nearest window, keeping to the side of the house. He wasn't a big fan of crime or action shows, but he still found himself shadowing the version portrayed on the screen. Back up against the brick wall, about to look in the window. And he was already thinking about where in the house Susan might be. Basement seemed an obvious choice. Too obvious? Too cliché? Sometimes clichés are borne in truth.

He moved his head forward, looking in the window. The living room. No sign of anyone. He squatted low and shuffled under the window, straightening once he was clear. He crept forward, looking upward again for cameras or any sign of an alarm or security system. Still nothing. Maybe that in itself was suspicious. If Joe was some kind of tech genius, wouldn't his place be tech city, including surveillance? Or maybe they were so high-tech, the cameras were difficult to see. David looked up, waved at an invisible camera. Maybe he *should* just knock on the door. *Hey, what's up. Long time no-see. Give me my wife back you fucker.* It had been a long time since he'd let that word pop on his lips and scratch at the back of his throat.

Maybe Joe didn't have cameras, or he wasn't looking. If there was any chance of the element of surprise he should keep that in his favour. *The Art of War*: "the key to victory is to use surprise tactics". And who was he to go against that ancient war bible. And this was war. Problem was, war was all around David. He'd been at war with himself for so many years, but now Joe was his opponent. It made a nice change.

He flattened himself against the next window. Edged out once again and looked through the window. A bedroom. He tried to open the window, but it was locked. He ducked down, kept moving around to the back of the house, checking each window as he went. At the back door, he kept his eyes on the door and surrounding area but reached into his pocket and took out his lockpicking kit. Hobby #81.

The back door had three locks, no less, and it would take a little longer because of his awkward pose — gun tucked under his chin so both hands could work on the lock. Despite the roadblocks, he still made quick work of the door. He turned the handle slowly and carefully with his right hand, readying the gun in his left hand. He half expected to see Joe right there, standing in front of him, ready to blow his head off. But the kitchen was empty. He took in everything with one glance. Every surface was bare and clean. No dishes in the sink, but a dishcloth draped over a peg behind the sink. A small kitchen table with four chairs,

also bare. David felt sick...it reminded him of the way he liked to have *his* kitchen. Clutter-free. Mess-free. David felt a strange mix of calm and anger, two opposing forces somehow at peace with one another. Was killing inevitable for David? Would the violence be easier this time? It was one of the things David feared most. That it would be easy to take another life. He imagined it was like that for lots of things. Parachute once, easier to parachute again. And maybe the same could be said about sins. Is it easier for the adulterer to cheat once they've cheated the first time? Probably. And that was his fear...that it would be easier for him to kill because he knew, deep down, he was capable of it, or at least capable of playing a part in murder.

He tried to focus on the immediate. He listened, waiting for a sound. Susan screaming. Joe's voice. But there was only silence. He decided to go with his gut, with the cliché, and find the basement door. From the kitchen he could see a hallway, with a couple of doors on either side and light streaming into the hallway from the front living room windows. He edged forward, his eyes darting from side to side and up the stairs. The first door on his right was a closet, but the second door was locked.

He took a deep breath. He didn't want to hold his gun under his chin again, but he didn't have a lot of options. He got the lockpicking kit out with one hand, and found the tools he needed one-handed, delaying the vulnerability of no gun at-the-ready. His heart was pounding so hard now, it felt like it was skipping a beat or two here and there, fluttering and pumping hard enough that he felt a little faint.

He tucked his gun under his chin, worked anxiously on the lock until it clicked. The door sprang open a little without him turning the handle. He drew his gun, pointing it at the ten-centimetre gap that ran along the length of the door. A light was on down there.

He took another deep breath, running the options through his head. How to play this? If Joe didn't already know he was here, a creaky stair would give him away. At least the stairway was closed on both sides, walled in. If it had been open on one side he would have had to worry about his feet being visible to whoever was down there long before David could actually see into the room.

Okay. No option. Just go.

He supported himself with his right hand on the wall, treading on the balls of his feet. He could only just make out an area of plain concrete at the bottom of the steps, but nothing else. As he descended he realised that depending on the layout of the basement, if Joe was down there he might see David coming down the stairs before David could see him. He hesitated. Stopped. Dropped down into a crouch to get a longer view. Concrete then a cupboard of some description. He should be okay.

He edged to one side of the staircase and kept moving. At the bottom step he pushed himself against the wall, held the gun into him, and took a breath.

One, two, three.

He burst around the corner.

Susan. Chained up. Gagged. Eyes wide. Skin white, black and blue. In the far corner, a small bed. Jamal King chained to it. Sedated or catatonic.

Susan's eyes widened, then moved from David to a space to his left. Somewhere he couldn't see...maybe where Joe was.

David cocked his head in that direction. Susan gave one blink with a barely discernible nod.

'Well, Susan. Let's get you ready for David.'

David gulped. Unless Joe was a helluva good actor, he had no idea David was already in the room, that he hadn't fallen for the fake address, the fake rescue mission.

With the element of surprise, David decided to simply make his presence known. Okay, maybe the gun helped his confidence.

He took two steps out, gun trained high. 'Hi, Joe.' He readjusted the gun so it was level with Joe's heart.

Joe jumped back. 'What the fuck?' His eyes narrowed, fists clenched.

'Hands up, so I can see them.'

He slowly raised his hands. 'You've fucked this up, David. Tony, I mean.'

'Maybe from your point of view.'

'Who else's point of view is there?'

David remembered the narcissism, the cockiness.

'Why are you doing this?' David couldn't resist...he wanted answers.

'Seriously?' Joe folded his arms, fists still clenched. 'Come on, David. I know you didn't lose that smarts of yours.'

Why did anyone kill? Kidnap? Hurt others? Anger, control, desperation. Did all three apply to Joe?

He couldn't imagine Joe ever desperate, no he was too controlled for that. Control...that must be it. He wanted to control David...again.

'Control. You want to control me, my life. Again.'

Joe laughed. 'I've always controlled you...you just seemed to forget that.'

David shook his head, but he was afraid it was true. Joe had manipulated him all those years ago, not the other way around. But he'd messed with his head so much, David didn't know his own mind from Joe's.

No. He was stronger now. ‘That was then, this is now.’

Joe took a step closer to David. ‘Come on, Tony. You know you want to beat the shit out of both of them.’ He motioned towards Jamal and Susan.

‘You’re wrong.’ David smiled. ‘So wrong.’ He took a quick glance at Susan, then back to Joe. But it was too late. Joe’s hand was already inches from the gun. He felt the impact of the punch next, his grip loosened. He tried to hold on, but the force of Joe’s clenched fist was too much. The gun flew across the room.

A muffled scream from Susan.

David ran for the gun, but it was too late. Joe had it.

Joe laughed. ‘David, David, David. So naïve. So weak.’

David looked down at his feet. He’d failed. Failed Susan, failed Jamal and failed himself.

‘That’s right, David. You’re nobody. A nothing.’

‘Mmm...mmmm...mmmm.’ Susan. Still defending him after everything?

‘So, David. This is how things are going to go. First off, I’m going to torture Susan. Then Jamal. Then I’ll kill them both. Next, I’ll make it look like you did everything while I disappear into thin air. Sound good?’

‘Fuck you!’ He screamed. Letting the anger blossom inside him for the first time in years. He felt the anger rising, a creature within him seething to get out. Desperate for release.

The world, his actions, became blurry. He charged at Joe, knocked the gun out of his hand and started laying into him. Punch after punch, after punch. Joe did a good job of protecting himself, arms around his head, kicking out every so often. But David hardly felt the blows. Until suddenly he was lying on the floor and Joe was on top of him. David ignored the pain of the punches into his face, ignored the sensation of blood flowing down his lip, into his mouth, and put all his force behind his left shoulder, until they were rolling again. Both punching, growling, two wild animals on the floor in a fight for dominance.

David kept punching, until Joe stopped moving, and until the desperate grunts of Susan came out of the background and into the foreground. Susan.

He turned. Raced to her. She’d seen him now. Truly seen him. But he couldn’t think about that now. He needed to get her out. And Jamal too. Then call Agent Bright.

He undid her gag first. He hesitated, scared she wouldn’t want anything to do with him, but she leaned up for a kiss. Their lips touched briefly. ‘Thank God,’ she said. She pulled back, his blood on her lips.

He wiped the blood off her face, then untied the ropes that bound her legs and arms to the chair.

‘Jamal.’ Her voice was hoarse, like she hadn’t drunk all day or she’d been screaming. Both probably true.

He looked at Jamal, finally really taking him in, able to see past Susan and Joe. He looked unharmed physically, just out of it. ‘Keys?’

‘Joe has them in his pocket.’

David forced himself to look at Joe, then quickly looked away again. His face was a mash of flesh and blood. His body perfectly still. David closed his eyes for a moment. He’d killed someone. Yes, a bad man. Evil. But he’d done it. He’d unleashed the anger he’d spent so many years controlling, keeping hidden. A lump formed in his throat.

‘I’ll do it.’

He looked up. ‘No.’ Susan shouldn’t have to get close to that man. Shouldn’t have to go through his pockets. ‘I can do it.’

She hesitated. ‘I should check on him anyway. See if he’s breathing.’

David closed his eyes. Even now her compassion, her training, was taking over.

‘Not him, Susan. Some people don’t deserve it.’ Joe *and* himself came to mind.

‘They do. You know that.’ She went over, kneeled beside Joe, and put her fingers on his neck. ‘He’s got a pulse and he’s breathing. Call an ambulance, David.’

David took his phone out. Hesitated. He shouldn’t have stopped. He should have delivered those final blows. For his own peace of mind. Joe needed to be in the ground, not back in jail. Even now, even though he knew the Bible said to forgive. And even though so many people have forgiven him. He couldn’t do it. Not when it really counted.

He turned his phone back on, dialled 911 and gave them the address.

Susan nodded. ‘You did the right thing.’ She reached into Joe’s pocket and took out a set of keys. She walked over to Jamal, flicking through the keys. ‘I think this is it.’

David kneeled down to help her.

‘It’s okay, Jamal,’ Susan said. ‘We’re safe now.’

Jamal still stared ahead, barely registering their presence.

‘Did Joe drug him?’

‘I didn’t see him give Jamal anything but I think so.’ She undid the padlock and then unclamped the chains from Jamal’s wrist. She stroked his cheek. ‘Jamal?’

Nothing.

‘You think it’s okay to carry him? Touch him?’ David was putting himself in Jamal’s shoes. Maybe he’d freak out if he felt someone lift him.

‘We don’t have a choice but I’ll do it. Just in case...’ She trailed off but didn’t need to complete the sentence. Males were the dangerous sex of the human species. And even a three-year-old kid knows that. Especially given he’d been abducted and held captive by a male.

David gave a nod.

Susan lifted Jamal into her arms and David and Susan both turned toward the stairs at the same time.

Susan screamed, David took a breath and raised his fist, but it was too late. Joe’s fist connected with David’s jaw and sent him tumbling back. The world seemed to slip from his grasp, the basement going in and out of focus, his brain and stomach roiling in opposite directions.

Joe kicked him in the balls, then delivered an uppercut to David’s chin.

Susan was running, Jamal in her arms slowing her down. She made for the stairs. David watched, urging her up. Urging her to be faster, to not look back.

She made it to the second step before Joe caught up with her, made a grab for her ankle. She went down, both her and Jamal thudding onto the stairs, then sliding down. Jamal pulled himself against the wall and curled into a ball.

The gun. Joe had the gun.

David stood up, forced himself up. Pain from his groin, stomach, lungs and head all competing for his attention, urging him to sit the hell down. Retreat. But that wasn’t an option. He ran forward.

Joe swivelled and aimed the gun at David. No hesitation this time. The room reverberated with an almighty bang that sounded like thunder and echoed in his head and chest. Then he felt the burning sensation. He looked down, saw the blood. Chest, but the right side.

Susan reached out. ‘No!’ She glanced at Jamal, but then started toward David.

‘Watch this, David.’ Joe smiled, turned to Jamal, aimed the gun at the boy’s head.

Susan saw and instantly pivoted back to Jamal. She screamed, then launched herself across to Jamal, airborne. The gun went off, she slumped. Blood from her chest.

David somehow managed to get to his feet. He rushed Joe, not caring about the gun, driven only by blind rage. The image of Susan going down. Her blood making a pool around her.

He threw himself at Joe and slammed him into the back wall. The impact travelled through him and into David’s left shoulder. His mind registered the pain, but he ignored it.

He grabbed for the gun, which Joe had managed to keep a hold of. He pushed Joe's arm up and back, banging it against the wall. Three forceful bangs putting everything into it and finally Joe released his grip. The gun dropped to the floor.

David needed to end this. He needed to end Joe.

He dropped to his haunches, grabbed the gun and without even standing up, aimed it at Joe's head. He pulled the trigger.

He shot again.

And again.

Two in the head, one in the chest.

Joe was unrecognisable. His mauled body slid down the wall, slumped. Clearly dead...but still David kicked him. Laying into him again and again for several seconds before he remembered Susan.

He turned, knelt down in front of her and pressed on her chest. Oh, God. She had to live. Please let her live.

The ambulance arrived a couple of minutes later.

'Down here,' he yelled. 'In the basement. Hurry!'

Another few seconds and he heard their footsteps. He looked up at them, pleading. But there was so much blood. Susan's blood, everywhere.

'Please help her, she's been shot.'

'Are you injured, sir?'

'I'm fine. Just check her.'

The paramedic knelt down, then saw Jamal, holed up in the corner. 'John, there's a little boy down here.'

The other paramedic raced down the stairs.

David took a few steps back. Unsure what to do. He couldn't think about Jamal at the moment, only Susan.

'Is she going to be okay?' Blood. So much blood. He forced himself to look at Joe again, almost believing he'd come back to life somehow. But he was dead. Well and truly.

The paramedic working on Susan looked up at David, wordless.

## Chapter 25

I begin and have no end; an eternal sun.  
Eventually I will be the ending of all that has begun.

David sat on the deck, Agent Bright next to him.

‘I’m sorry, son.’

David closed his eyes.

Susan, gone.

Susan, dead.

Because of him.

Was there any point to life without her?

Bright cleared his throat. ‘I hope you don’t mind...I called Willifred. He’s on a flight now. I thought...thought you might like to talk to him. Have him around at least for a few days.’

David gave a half shrug. Not even Willifred could fix this.

Bright shifted uncomfortably in his seat. ‘We found Joe’s accomplice. He’s the one with the computer know-how. Hacked the juvenile detention facility, wired up your place so Joe could see and hear everything. And he was obviously the one who physically took Jamal and planted your watch.’

David made a grunt. None of it mattered now.

‘His name is Wyatt Roper. They met in juvie.’ Bright put a photo in front of David.

He glanced down at it, then did the double-take. ‘Shit.’

‘You know him?’

David shook his head. ‘No, but I saw him parked in our street last week. Thought he was a US Marshall.’ David managed a complete sentence. His first in days.

Another fuck up, another mistake that cost him. That cost Susan her life. He should have told Susan about Joe’s sexual assault history. She would never have gone to see him then. He should have mentioned the man in the car to Bright. Then they would have started investigating him, found the link to Joe. Another ‘What if?’ to add to his list.

‘I thought...thought you’d want to know how. Who.’

David didn’t care *how* Joe had done it or *who* had helped him. Even the why had little to no bearing on it. It didn’t matter in the end. It was his fault. All because of David. Susan was dead because of him. Jamal King would be forever traumatised because of him. *It’s all my fault.*

‘It’s not your fault,’ Bright said, as if David has said it out aloud. Maybe he had.



‘How do you figure that?’

‘It was Joe, not you. *He* took Jamal, *he* held Susan, *he* killed Susan.’

‘But to get to me. Because of me.’

Bright put his hand on David’s shoulder. ‘You can’t carry that burden, David.’

He could, and he would. He’d carried the burden of killing Parker for years, but it had led him to two suicide attempts and years of depression and self-loathing.

How could he live with this? With Susan’s death on his conscience?

He didn’t know if the burden would finally break him...he’d carry it and always be alone or he’d finally take his life. Either way, his only relief would be death.

I beam, I shine, I sparkle white.  
I’ll brighten the day with a single light.  
I’ll charm and enchant all.  
I’ll bring the best in you all.  
What am I?  
A smile.

Susan’s smile, gone forever.

\*\*\*

Told you to remain sanguine.

His ass is mine.

Always has been.

I haven’t just got his balls in a vice,

I’ve got his soul in a game of dice.

Death is beauty distilled to its purest form,

Death is my domain, my simplest norm.

I will always be there in her delectable glory;

The moment of everlasting story.

THE END