

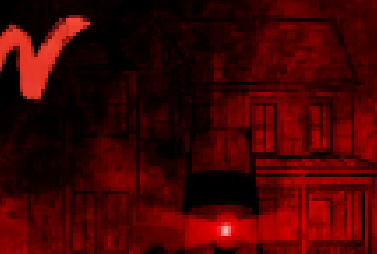
A GHOSTS STORY



LOV

SOME PAGES OF REVENGE
SHOULD NEVER BE TURNED

LEE WILSON



A GHOSTS STORY

Lee Wilson

Lee Wilson

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TITLE.

A Ghosts Story.
Published by CSC Entertainment.

<https://satan-speaks.com/>

OTHER WORKS.

Also, by Lee Wilson:
The Satanic Curses.

Outcasts.

A Memoir of Madness.

Wilp.

PAST PRAISE.

P raise for The Satanic Curses:

Great collection of stories! Some are lyrical, others brutal, all are creative and thought-provoking, and each one earns its place.

This collection of Short stories explores a vast range of human emotions, thoughts and feelings. I was completely sucked into the world the author created from the very first paragraph.

I didn't know what to expect but fell in love with these horror shorts. Each one leaves you wanting more as you stumble into the dark fables, for ultimately, they speak of truth, be it uncomfortable at times.

Praise For Outcasts:

Wilson's dynamic writing style is so absorbing, It's almost impossible to put this down. I honestly felt the hairs on my arms going up several times,

even as I laughed out loud at some of the darkly humorous cynicism sprinkled throughout the prose.

Lee Wilson writes with an ease of someone who writes because they love to write. As such, *Outcasts* is a book that reflects a writer doing what they love and inviting the reader to be part of it. And that's what makes it such a good book.

Lee plays with your head with a subtle mix of astute observation of the human condition black humour and dark settings and themes. A must read.

Praise For a Memoir of Madness:

The tales are woven in a dark, playful and thought provoking tapestry that hits hard at times.

There is hopelessness, sure, but absolute joy to pull you through the dark moments. A beautifully written, bittersweet but wholly addictive book. I need more!

The novellas, though, were thought-provoking on another level and *The Tormented Mind* articulates a lot of what goes through my mind on a daily basis, as I look at what has happened in the UK in the last decade and more. The story, ultimately, gives us some hope, I think. I came to care about the protagonist quickly and the ending was perhaps the only one possible, without being obvious beforehand.

Brilliantly haunting, insightful, reflective, thought provoking. I wanted more of every single story. The prose is delightful and I can't recommend it highly enough. Buy this, or you're condemned to hell... Which may not be as bad as you think.

WITH THANKS...

With thanks....
Belinda Price.

Richard Eggleston.

Marion Sowerby.

Stephen Rego.

Steve Griffiths.

Leslie John Perry.

Rev. Joe Haward.

Paul Swallow.

<https://hirundorustica.co.uk/>

You have helped me with this story, from proofreading to editing to pre-reviews. This would not have been the same without your help. Thank you for slapping those stupid errors. Any errors that are missed are on me!

I will always be grateful.

A GHOSTS STORY.

This is not a happy story. It is a story of revenge.

Wilp.

Events outside of a person's control. More potent than fate or destiny.

Maybe the power of a God?

Hell.

The darkness engulfed him. He knew how his tale would unfold like a TV rerun or a record skipping backwards. He had been here before, and he would be here again. His Hell was eternal, his torment timeless. The man looked around at his torment. He was young, barely a man, but more than a boy. The hooks sunk through his wrists and connected to chains that disappeared into the blackness. He could see no further than a handful of metal links. He knew struggling was fruitless, but still, he tried. He hung star-shaped, his ankles gouged with more hooks connected to chains. The ground could not be seen, yet it must have been there, mustn't it? Even if he could have escaped, where would he go? Would he fall into the abyss of obscurity below? Falling forever? He pulled his left arm, just the tiniest of tugs. The tissue tore a little, and the pain was excruciating. In life, he was sure that pain like this would have caused him to blackout. In death, it was endless. Repeating time after time again, he had no idea how long he had been trapped here.

To the man, it was a demon; it would always be a demonic creature. To us, it was a Phaborg. A hellish creation created to terrorise and torture the damned. A creature not just from the depths of hell, this was from the rotting bowels. It shuffled along, drawing its foot on an invisible floor. The scraping of its foot sounded like metal scraping upon metal. The creature itself was as close to flesh and bone as possible. The floor was not there; the man had repeatedly seen parts of himself fall into the darkness. Yet somehow, this beast walked upon nothing. This was the Phaborg's domain; the rules of humanity did not seem to apply here. Dead-faced without a glimmer of emotion, the three eyes scanned the man's bindings. The creature nodded at the tearing of skin from the left wrist. The Phaborg missed nothing. The fish hooks that grew from its skin rippled with hunger as he acknowledged the wrist. It reached with long skeletal pinchers to the man's broken skin that had torn and pulled at it. It peeled six inches of the skin as quickly as you could peel PVA glue from plastic. After the six inches, it quickly snapped the skin free. Tearing it from its host. The man screamed out in pain. He wanted to blank and fall unconscious, but he could not.

The Phaborg placed the flap of skin into its mouth-like hole. It sucked half the length of the stolen skin. Slurping it in with a soggy wet glug, it paused halfway, pulled the remaining out, and pinned it onto his hooked flesh. The Phaborg had been here before. The man had been here before. They both knew the ritual. They both knew the routine. One enjoyed it, and one found it Hell. That was, *after all*, the point. The Phaborg grabbed forwards, and its pincers clamped vice-like on the man's lips. This time it was quick, fast, and just as painful. It ripped the lips from the man. Both lips tore free at once, leaving the teeth and gums behind, staring through the blood-soaked

hole like a cat's eyes through a hole in a box. The lips were dropped, discarded, and fell into the darkness soundlessly. Disappearing into the nothing that existed below. Opening his mouth to scream was instinctive. The pain that followed was hammering from his lowest point and into the centre of his mind. The neurons snapping with electrical sparks enticed and tempted the Phaborg. The man's pain teased and begged it for more.

Clapping forward and snapping like a bullwhip, the Phaborg's two pincer arms came and clasped at two of the man's teeth. One on either side, like a sadistic dentist it twisted at the teeth slowly. Turning, the nerves and bones crunched as the pincers and arms turned at a near three-hundred and sixty degrees. Eventually, it pulled the teeth and then dropped them. They too fell into the darkness like snowflakes on a starless night. The rest of the front teeth followed at speed. It seemed only to enjoy the first two; the rest were an afterthought. To the man, each hurt as much as the other, and his mouth was left with blood-filled craters. A few roots still clutched at the gums even after being beheaded. The Phaborg was noiseless during the whole procedure. Never muttering any word or sound in either amusement or excitement. The only sound the man ever heard was the noise from his body being abused and his screams that echoed around his mind and the chamber.

Driving with a pincer, the Phaborg grabbed at the open wound that had once been protected by flesh. Pulling at a tendon in the wrist, it let go, and it snapped back like a guitar string cracking back into place. *Twang*. The creature let it settle; it then grabbed it again and yanked it. Breaking it and leaving it hanging free like cords on a hoodie; thick red blood dripped into the nothingness below. The Phaborg reached into the hole that was its mouth with its pincers and slowly pulled something out. It always took its

time with this. It enjoyed the pain it inflicted. The visual torment and horror were as bad in many ways as the actual torture. Leg by leg, it pulled a large centipede-type creature. Circular division by circular segment was pulled from the moist hole and handled with great care. Inch after inch until all twelve parts were finally revealed. The forceps that made the final part were the worse. The pin-sharp snapping wire-thin semi-circular tools that this thing had been born or engineered to grow. The Phaborg held it gently like a newborn and leaned forward towards his victim's ear.

The creature wiggled into the man's ear. It itched at first and felt just like an irritation of loose hair. A hair that may have escaped the ear trimmers that would have been used by an older man, used by a fully mature man. One that could have been easily brushed free, only this one burrowed deep. The man heard and then felt the pin forceps scratching on his eardrum. The tearing was all he could hear and feel, scraping like a pin down a balloon. The pin poked through the thin skin, and pain and noise popped into his head; he threw his head and body forward, tearing at both wrists. He dry urged and retched from his empty stomach. The tearing of the eardrum eclipsed the pain in both wrists. The itching digging of the creature pin scraped its way onto the middle ear. The Phaborg did not stop while this was continuing. It drove its pincers into his lower body. Missing every organ, it penetrated the skin, and once it had dug deeply enough, it opened the pincers. Splitting and shredding at the skin, muscle, and flesh. The very centre of the pincers where they joined the Phaborg had a small hole. From the hole, thousands of small ten-legged spider-like creatures emerged. Eyes drooping like a crabs on stalks, they flooded into the open chamber that was the man's body.

The man could feel the itching, tickling sensation of the spider-like creatures as they made their way around his organs. Grasping and picking at parts of his body that were never meant to be touched. He could feel the ten little legs crawling around inside of him. An infestation of creepy crawlies that would feed on him. The earapead burrowed through his ear and into his head, and the Phaborg continued to rip the skin from his body. Consuming some of it and hanging other parts like trophies from its face. The pain was relentless, stamping upon every inch of his being. The tearing, crunching, cutting, eating, and tickling both inside and out. But then, abruptly, it all stopped. Like a fuse blowing, the pain went from excruciating to nothing in less time than it takes to even think about it. Everything was unmoving, this timeless Hell had run out of life, and nothing moved. Even the Phaborg was motionless, stuck in a bubble of time and frozen in space. Its eyes, which had been forever moving and scanning, stood silently suspended.

This was new. This was something different. All the time the man had been abused here this had never happened. He had a moment to access and think things through, to dissect the situation. A thousand thoughts paraded through his mind, stepping one thought forward and the next. They moved in much the same way the spider crab-like creatures once had. One image would pop to the front, only to be stamped upon by the next. A final vision of a staircase came to the forefront, but before he could grasp it, the Phaborg exploded. Ten-legged spiders, earapeads and creatures he had not seen and never wanted to see flying into the darkness, and with them came light. He had expected nothing, but had he been pushed; he would have picked darkness. But, from the monster, from his demon came light. A light that grew and showed him the full extent of the chamber. The realisation of what had been happening hit him as hard as any torture.

As far as the man's eyes could see, and in all directions, he could recognise copies of himself. This had not been in a timeless space; had he been experiencing himself getting tortured time and time again at the exact same moment? Each of his time clones had a Phaborg exploding before them. Blowing up like dominoes in a series. Each of the copies was suspended by chains, and they all had a look of shock on what was left of their faces. The light started to dim as the parts of the Phaborg drifted into the nothingness. He was left with what he had seen engraved into his mind. His future, past, and present all merged into one mangled reality that surrounded him. When the darkness finally descended upon him, he was happy and welcomed it. Sometimes it is better not to know. Sometimes asking a question can lead to answers you do not want to hear.

A wisp of mist started to appear in the space the Phaborg had relinquished. A tiny insignificant fleck of nothing seemed to multiply and grow into a large plume of grey smoke. The larger the plumage grew, the further back it moved. It was soon so large it filled the dark horizon. The pain never returned, and he strained his neck to look upwards at the forming vapour. It had started to split like a cell in a test tube and soon, what was once one, became four. The four pillars of smoke stood hundreds of feet in height. He looked down and then upwards and could see no source or end. They slowly morphed and turned from the smoke into human figures. The four floated before him, taller than anything he had ever seen in his life. Two men and two women. One tall, one small, one fat, and one slim. They all looked down at him in unison, dressed in black suits and ties.

The pain and physical torture may have departed, but now fear has replaced them. He could feel something worse in these creatures than anything he had experienced thus far. There was a dark power that seemed

to emanate from them. They had quickly taken control of this Hell and banished the creature that called it his domain. Now they just looked at him with dead eyes. They all opened their mouths simultaneously, and a voice projected from them all in concert and asked, "Is it revenge that you want?" He waited for just a moment and then moved to reply. He had forgotten momentarily the injuries that now made his mouth, but moving was painless. "It is all I ever want," the man replied in broken words. The reply was repeated in the voices of his copies from all directions. The chamber went dark, and all that was left was the emptiness of nothing.

THE BURIAL AND THE VOYEUR

Father Thomas, The Priest, said the last few words of the service as the coffin was lowered into the ground. The breeze blew gracefully through the trees. The finality of death and a display of the fragility of life. Buried and then displayed for all to see. A display that would last longer than the longest of lifetimes. A monument to the mortality of man. Before he had become a Priest, he had been a young alcoholic who had roamed from place to place. From town to town, city to city, sofa to sofa. He had found his faith, and from that day forward, he had known what he was put on this world to do. He had discovered his purpose. He had uncovered that missing piece to make him complete. He was called to the Church, summoned by faith that he had not known he had. Years had passed, and he was happy; *for now*, he was content. Not fulfilled, but content. The Priest had always felt he was on Earth to do good, to help someone in particular. He'd had that feeling from the moment he found faith, and he had discovered that in the most unusual ways.

Finding Faith - The Past.

Henry Thomas, or "HT" as he was known, threw up. The acidic liquid spewed from his stomach up through his chest and then up and out of his mouth. Finally, making itself at home on the large rectangular stone to his side. HT rolled over so that he faced away from the putrid smell and tried to fall back into his drunken slumber. The smell lingered in the air, hanging around like an unwanted party guest. It had been a heavy night. They were almost always heavy nights. He'd received his unemployment benefit the day before, so naturally, he had blown it all on booze and fags. *He was an addict, after all.* The first thought that would cross his mind was about alcohol. The final one was usually regretful. He had squandered his friends away with his drinking. They had at first just said that it was HT being HT and humoured him. He would not have been the first person to overdo it a little. He would not have been the first to overdo it a lot!

The friends had drifted as he always had to push too far. He was, in those days, the type of guy that would tell a joke, and if it offended you, he'd make you the butt of that joke. He would push and push until you finally snapped. It was, in many ways, a surprise that he had even made it to twenty-five. If he continued the way he was going, it would have surprised nobody had he not made thirty. Nobody would have mourned him. HT had no siblings, and his parents were long dead. Just one less drunken bum in the world. His friends had given up on him, and he had hated them for that. He would have admitted - *when sober* - that he had deserved it. When he was drunk? He would have burnt them in the hottest pit in Hades and then toasted to their demise.

This morning he felt different. This morning something was eating away at him. HT's side was painful; more than painful, it was complete agony. Pain on his left-hand side was spiking in the rhythm of his heartbeat. The

boom-boom of his heart was quickly followed by the spikety-spike of this pain that seemed to rip inside him. He rolled onto his back, and then he did something he had not done in years, maybe forever. He prayed. He prayed for the pain to subside. He prayed to have a second chance. He prayed for life.

HT picked himself up to sit on his backside and turned his back on the foul smell beside him. He then closed his eyes and prayed for the power and strength to kick the alcohol, the power to banish the addiction. He knew he could quit; he just needed a reason. The problem was that he would never stop for long enough to find that reason. HT got to his feet and staggered his way over to a bench. He sat down and put his hands to his head. *This has to stop*, he thought to himself. I can't keep doing this. He looked over at the spot where he had slept and puked. He could not remember how he had gotten here nor where it was. It was a graveyard, for Christ's sake - *pardon me, Lord!* He was in a bloody graveyard! Now somebody's gravestone was covered in puke. *Covered in his puke.* He looked up at the sky and saw the clouds gathering. Maybe it would rain and then wash it all away. If he were lucky, maybe it would also wash him away. As was often the case, he was in full-on self-pitying mode. He looked up and saw the two birds hovering in the sky, one black and one white, and he watched them as they fluttered and flew. Maybe it would be lucky for the world if he were to die; what had he offered it anyway? A little older now and still acting like he was eighteen, worse, at least at eighteen, he'd had friends and places to go. Now he had nobody and nothing save for the drink.

What was the drink anyway? Just another poison to rot his body and mind. Another corrosive to rust what was left of his soul. The hair of the dog in the morning. The merriment of mid-day drinking and then then the

depression of the drunken fool in the afternoon and evening. He would fall asleep where he fell most nights and then rinse and repeat. When his mind and body were lucky, it would get a few days of rest. Not because he was looking out for it but simply because he was penniless. He was just another number on a government spreadsheet awaiting his next Giro cheque. A sad statistic on a chart of numbers, a vagrant waster awaiting death. The sooner he died, the sooner he'd be less of a burden to the world. The way he felt this morning, he would have welcomed death and greeted him like an old friend.

HT looked and saw the two birds again. They had landed on the gravestone that he had desecrated with bile and carrot chunks, and they seemed to be watching him curiously. The white dove and the black crow observed a destitute drunk lamenting his existence. He was throwing a pity party, and they were his only guests. They seemed fascinated by him, watching him as they would a worm *or whatever it was that they ate and hunted*. He reached into the pocket on the inside of his coat and grasped at the bottle. He pulled it out and saw that it was still half full, that nectar that was vodka. That would help his morning gut rot; it would help to calm the churning. To steady the sea of his life and existence. He unscrewed the lid and then lifted the bottle to his lips. He held his breath as he did so, aware that the smell may cause another explosion from his stomach. It would not have been the first time; it would be the last.

"Don't," the crow hawked at him. HT was astounded and looked at the crow. It was just an ordinary black crow that gazed back at him. Had it just spoken to him? Was this a hungover hallucination? "No-ooooo," the dove cooed. HT's eyes opened wide in astonishment. He was sure they had spoken, yet the subsequent noises they made were the usual cawk and coo

he'd expected. He looked at the bottle again, and as he did so, the dove "St-ooooo," and then the crow "P," ed. It took him a moment to link the two, but he got the message. Got the message, *ha!* He considered, message indeed. But, still, he just held the bottle but didn't drink.

The Priest wandered to the bench. HT had not heard him approach; he was enchanted. Not, for once, with alcohol, but with the birds that seemed to be speaking. The Priest placed his hand on HT's shoulder; it caused him to jump slightly as he looked up. The Priest asked HT, "Going to help me clear it up?" The man's eyes were kind; he looked upon HT only with compassion and kindness. No judgements were being made. "I'm sorry," HT said sheepishly. He looked down at the floor and his feet as he did so.

"Judge not," The Priest said, "I haven't always been like this myself." He helped HT to his feet and then added. "We all falter in our lives. The strong are those who can get over the falls and trips and rise above. We become stronger in the process. Stronger for having fallen."

"Gooooooo," the dove had cooed as HT got to his feet. The Priest paid little attention to the birds.

That was the first step on the long path leading to HT becoming Father Thomas. A pathway with many steps and, at times, would feel like an upwards struggle, but he had kept to the path. Years passed, and the world changed, but when he found himself back at the church where he had once puked outside, he returned as a Father and not as a drunk. Many parts of the jobs he liked some he loved.

Burial and the Voyeur, Part 2.

This side of his work he could not have enjoyed less. This was the one part of the job that he detested. Father Thomas had always hated funerals and loathed them when it was for children. He felt that lives were far too

short as it was, but it could be too much when a child died. Many adults had wasted their lives; children had not even had the chance to do that. Heck, he could have died as a young adult; he knew all about blowing your youth away. It was, *though*, a lovely day to do it, he sighed to himself, trying to see the good in the world. The early morning sun beamed down through the trees giving everything an unnatural tint. The father was the only mourner, and that was not right. He had no family, no friends and was a loner.

Even so, there must have been someone who could have come with him, anyone? *Are we the only observers?* The Priest thought. Not even birds wanted to see this trainwreck of a life. All the man had now laid out in two plots. Deep holes dug six feet into the ground, not even close to one another. A couple of plots of land and headstones, the souls long departed. Some things in life were just not fair, not right. He had tried to help, but he could not do anything practical or anything that felt meaningful. He could not magic an empty plot next to the mothers from thin air as much as he had wanted to.

Sometimes a simple gesture was worth more than any words. The Priest thought that this was one of those times. The man's eyes had reddened, but he had not wept or cried. Just pressing the back of his hand to hide any wantaway leaks from his eyes. Some people like to show their emotions alone, in private. This was that kind of man. The Priest walked over and placed a hand on the man's shoulder, nothing more and nothing less, *a simple gesture*. Almost a mirror of what someone had once done for him. This time, no words were needed. The man laid his hand upon The Priests and turned away. The man started to wander towards the graveyard's end; there was nothing more for him to see. He took a meandering wander towards the hedges and fields on the very edge of the church's grounds.

The man was rambling, but not aimlessly as the Priest had assumed. He had wandered this way because he wanted to escape it all. *He wanted to be free, and just as importantly, he wanted to smoke.* He had lost everything he had ever loved, at least half of it being his own damn fault. He strolled over to the gate and lit his smoke. He leant forwards and placed his weight on the wooden farm gate; as he took the first drag, he noticed them.

We could say from the corner of his eyes, but we'll keep it honest.

There was a couple in the middle of the field, making love. *No, that is wrong, and we are keeping it honest.* Making love is something you would do with a partner you love and cherish. Something caring and sensitive. This was screwing, pure unadulterated rolling around in the grass and mud, fucking. *Fucking* next to a church and graveyard. In a field, next to a church, and under a tree! In the Olympic games of sexual activities, they would have scored a solid nine. They may have been in love, but this was far from lovemaking.

He struggled to get a detailed look at the man or woman, and this, he would have been ashamed to say, was not through want of trying. The rain started falling, and a hazy, wet mist fogged his vision. The breeze had got a little heavier, and the shadows of the tree swayed as the couple screwed. The man looked dressed for a wedding or, *perhaps*, a funeral. He wore a white shirt with a black tie and a black hat perched on his head. They switched, and the woman was now on top, smiling and laughing. They were having fun. She threw her head backwards, and her long hair flowed and covered her back, revealing a choker around her neck. The voyeur could not pull his eyes away. He tried looking down for a moment, but his eyes wandered back. Drawn to the performance. His voyeurism shamed him, but it also aroused him. It had been so long, *too long*. He saw the exposed

stocking top, her skirt pulled up just enough to reveal it, and the metal catches that held it in place. He was sure he saw them, but they were too far away. The imagination filled in for what the mind could not see. He took a drag on his smoke and watched. If they had wanted to be given privacy, then they should not be shagging in a field.

Frantically frolicking and fucking in a field on a Friday and after a funeral.

They switched positions again, and the man took the woman from behind. His hat seemed to bounce comically on his head as he moved backwards and forwards. It jumped about like a buoy in rough seas. He grabbed the woman's hair with his left hand and pulled her head back, exposing her neck and choker. The voyeur saw, *or was it his imagination?* A vein that pumped away in her neck. It beat ever faster, like the quick beat in a rock track on a subwoofer. They kept banging away as the man's right hand slipped out of view. *Things are fast approaching the end game now.* They both worked harder and quicker, working like their lives depended upon it. She banged backwards into him while he thrusts forward, slamming against each other repeatedly. The man's right hand came back into view, holding a knife. The sunlight hit the blade, and it glistened. Like a mirror caught in sunlight, it momentarily reflected into view, and the voyeur lost focus. It quickly returned as the man moved the knife.

The brightness faded as he moved the knife around. He pulled and held the woman's head back with her hair, holding it as tightly as he could as they finished the fandango of fucking. They both climaxed at once, and he pushed the point of the blade to her neck. The blade sliced from side to side with ease. It cut through the skin as smoothly as an upholsterer would have sliced through leather. Her body was instantly drained of blood, the pressure

of orgasm combined with an expert cut creating the blood-red flow. The blood gushed outwards in an instant, spraying like a water sprinkler coked up at a rave. It decorated the grass and trunk of the tree, similar to a warped and deranged modern art exhibit. *Ten out of ten*. Here have this pitch at the Tate modern. Her body slumped to the floor. Falling forwards like a drunken mannequin as the man released the hair. The man was still on his knees in this makeshift field of blood. Now he had both arms held out. Suspended as if on an invisible crucifix, his head leant backwards as he looked up at the sky, staring at the clouds and leaves of the tree above him.

That was how he remained for what felt like an age. A clock ticking backwards and then forwards. One tick back, but two forwards. Slowly his head lowered. It took about five seconds; it felt like a lifetime. Tock, tick, tick. Tock, tick, tick. The man's head dropped, and it seemed like he was surveying his work, examining his art. Looking for imperfections in his masterpiece. His head then started to turn towards the *voyeur* at the gate, and as it turned, a smile began to form, a smile that reached from ear to ear, nearly mirroring the cut on the woman's neck, *almost...* He never blinked; he only stared, eyes opened as wide as possible. He finally stopped and looked straight at the gate where the voyeur had once stood and watched.

The voyeur had seen this coming as he watched the man's head turning, and he had hidden behind the hedge. *Voyeurism be damned; it was fun while it lasted!* His excitement had withdrawn just as quickly as he had. Both chose to hide away, to hide and come and play another day. His cigarette had been finished in a few short puffs. They had pumped, and he had puffed. Down to the filter and then thrown to the ground with no thought of littering. He would usually be very good at keeping his rubbish and binning it correctly but today? Sod it.

He was frozen, unable to think clearly. Had he been thinking, he would have never done what he then did. His rational mind screamed, *Run, just bloody run!* But his irrational mind wanted him to help. At that moment, both choices seemed irrational and rational. Maybe it was a stone-age desire to protect the opposite sex, *or a more modern one*, drilled in to protect those in need. Perhaps it was wilp, possibly something more. He moved suddenly and almost leapt the gate before he had time to judge or think about his actions. The rage that had so often come out verbally in his life again rushed to the surface. He was damned if he was going to do nothing.

He came to an almost instant standstill. The man was still there, unmoving. He had expected him to have run away by now. He was still wide-eyed, staring unblinkingly at the gate that he had just leapt. The power of rage and the desire to protect ran away to hide once more. Joining his erection and arousal in a little hidey-hole of the mind. Leaving just a fleeting shadow of where it had once been. A smile as wide as Alice's Cheshire cat was still on the man's face; he just knelt there, staring at the voyeur. The voyeur was just stuck, unsure of what to do. His feet sticking in the mud of indecision, *unknowing*, a million thoughts flooded his mind at once, a tsunami of uncertainty.

What should I do?

Should I run?

Can I help?

Should I confront him?

What is wrong with him?

Why is he looking at me like that?

Then there was an intrusion. A sudden unwelcome voice filled his voyeuristic head, an uninvited voice that was not his. "Run, little man, run.

Run run as fast as you can. You can't catch me. I am the" the voice paused for a moment and then asked, "do you like my Columbian necktie?" The voice splashed in his mind from side to side and top to bottom. Echoing around the hollow of his consciousness.

It was all too much. The voyeur grasped his head in his hands and tried to scream. Nothing came out; he was losing control; he felt it in his mind. He turned away. *Who is that in my head?* It seemed a stupid question because he knew who it was. Was it madness? Was it possible that he was going insane? Was he already insane? He had bottled a lot up inside recently; was this its means of escape? The eruption of insanity escaping like a beer from a shaken can. The unblinking stare had penetrated the one safe space he had, *his mind*. He felt the scratching in his head, a group of long fingernails clawing at his memories.

He had to look. He had to know. He'd told himself; *I do not believe in any of that shite*. I am sane, well as sane as anyone! He lifted his head from his hands and peeked out from behind his fingers, much like a child checking for the monster in the closet. The pounding of the voice in his head had stopped. His mind felt empty. It was his alone once again. He still had to summon all of his mental strength to open his fingers. If willing his fingers to open was hard, forcing his body to turn so he could look was agony. Like being under a strobe light in a darkened room, he seemed to move frame by frame, seeing the world jolt until he finally faced the middle of the field. His hands were still upon his face, eyes poked through looking, he scanned the area like a human CCTV system. They were ready to close tight at the first sign of trouble. He hoped that if he could not see *it*, then he would be safe. That *it* could not see him. It was childlike and stupid, but at that moment, it was all he had.

However, when he looked, the man had gone.

He wasted no time and ran to the centre of the field, and just as he arrived there, the rain got heavier. It was like someone in the heavens had let the bath overflow. What was once a mist of rain was now heavy drops. It flooded his vision as he looked at her lying on the sodden ground and knelt next to her. She was beautiful. A flower in this field of blood. He held her neck with his hands, putting pressure on the large wound. He knew it was hopeless trying to stop what little was left of her blood escape. The rain washed the warm flowing blood from his hands as he held them there. Another voice invaded his mind, only this time it was pleasant. It was not intruding. It felt like an old memory brought back by the passing of a forgotten scent. It was merely visiting, giving a final thought, its one last wish. "Find him for me."

He wanted to run. Oh god, he wanted to run. *Pink Floyd's "Run like hell"* buzzed inside his head, almost screaming at him.

You'd better run all day and run all night. Keep your dirty feelings deep inside.

The song rumbled in his mind; the baseline echoed his heartbeat. He ran, but he ran away from the only man who could have helped him and towards the only other exit from the field.

The Priest stood with the gravedigger and watched the man. The man had run into the field after his smoke. Stopped in the middle by that damned tree and then ran to the other side. They did not see any couple, and they had not seen any murder. They had just seen a man and a field.

The man who had run had seen rain. The gravedigger saw sunlight, and The Priest saw darkness. Darkness like he had never witnessed before.

THE MANSION.

The voyeur ran.

He looked over the whole field and saw only one exit. Without thinking, he headed straight for it. He entered the following field, scanned it with his eyes quickly and then moved on to the next. He lost count of the number of fields that he had run through. They had all looked and felt the same. The only odd one had been the first. A combination of the woman and the tree would forever be carved in his mind. His adrenalin-pumped body was guiding him; it pushed him ever onwards. He rounded a corner, and a large mansion came into view. It seemed to be something that had come from out of nowhere. He had been in a field, and then, *bang*, he was standing looking at this house.

His first thought about the house was that it was massive. *This was its first deception*. Five rooms by five rooms, top and bottom, but it only dropped back one level. So, in simple terms, twenty square boxes. Twenty large imposing boxes. Not small by any means, but far smaller than its initial striking look suggested. Think of a picture of a piece of paper with a

drawing of a house. It is in two dimensions. Looking at it from the front, it seems large, but shift the angle, and it has nothing at the back. It was flat. The house's windows and front door were all wonky. The years, *he presumed*, had not been kind, giving it the crooked man's house's appearance. The large porch outside stood and covered the double doors, protecting them from the rain that was slowing but still falling steadily.

“And they all lived together, In a crooked little house.”

The roof was red, a great glowing bright blood red with only two chimneys, one on either side. They did not look like they would have been large enough for the whole house, *but obviously*, they were. The house had to be heated somehow, and he could see no signs of other chimneys. The short white path led to the porch; it curved like a snake slithering its way to the steps, its white gravel looking pristine next to the green grass and small trees on either side of it. *The house's second deception is inside. We shall get to that shortly.*

There was a man outside on an old mobile phone, a massive brick of a phone. The phone was either a relic of a bygone era or one of the new-fandangled remakes that seem to have seeped into fashion. An old-fashioned yuppies phone that looked the part but never seemed to get a strong enough signal. The man holding the phone was dressed in a black shell suit. Definitely one of those retro guys, the voyeur surmised. His appearance and situation were, in many ways, quite comical. He had a box under one arm, the phone was in his other hand, and he was trying to kick the old transit van's door closed with one foot, all whilst being rained upon. He had just about managed the van door when he started to drop the box. "Fecksocks," he said as the box looked like it was going to tumble. He was

saved between sacrificing his phone or the box by the man. *The voyeur had* just run from the fields and watched the whole thing unfold.

It was still a close-run thing, but the box was quickly grabbed as it tumbled from his arms. "Thanks, almost lost it then." Standing around six feet tall, His upper body strength was impressive, or the shell suit was deceptive. He looked like he was just skin and bones, yet the box was far heavier than the voyeur had expected. He quickly wrapped his other arm around the box to get a better hold. "Do you mind just dumping it in there?" The man gestured towards the open doorway. The voyeur took the box over and placed it down, and then he turned to leave to return to his chase. "Michael," the man with the phone said and then offered his hand. The voyeur and would-be - *failed* - defender of the fairer sex shook and introduced himself, "David."

"Thanks, David; if you had not come along when you did, we would have lost that box. And, I could have done without that. That would have really bugged my weekend."

The human mind and body are a strange thing. It is capable of beautiful, weird, and marvellous feats. *For example*, David was a moderate smoker. Usually, running up the stairs would cause him to cough, hack, and rattle like a child's toy with loose teeth inside. Anything even remotely strenuous would cause it. He had once rolled over after sex gasping and panting like a Puli dog in forty-degree heat. Yet here he found himself, having run through so many fields, witness to a murder and having helped an unfamiliar young man, and he was fine. He started coughing just as he began to think, *why am I not coughing?*

Behold the great law of sod still in action for all the worlds to see.

"That shit'll kill you," Michael said as David removed the packet of cigarettes from his pocket. The actions of an addict, HT would have understood well. David stopped and then put the pack of smokes back. Michael tapped him lightly on the back, helping to clear the cough. "Tell me about it," David replied. Finally, it cleared. He gave it a moment to be sure. "Look," David said, "I was chasing someone. He must have come through here. Have you seen anyone?"

"Nobody has come through here, mate. I have been outside on the blower for quite a while. I would have seen someone," Michael answered. *Impossible!* David considered what had happened. Could he have been wrong? He had used the only exits from every field. He started thinking, trying to put things together. Backtracking his route. He was pretty sure he had not missed another entry or exit. Could the man have doubled back or hidden? *It was possible*, was Michael lying? That was *also possible*, though he could think of no reason as to why he would. "I chased someone, someone who..." David paused, "well," he hesitated for a moment. "Killed a woman; I chased him from the church to here." David surprised himself with how quickly and easily he had blurted that out. It had flowed easily. Once the dam had broken, the words flowed through the hole with ease. "Holy shit," Michael said and was visibly shocked. The doubts that had crawled David's mind dispersed at the look on Michael's face. "Quickly come inside. We'll call the police."

"But what..." David started to say and then stopped. He was about to ask about Michael's phone, but Michael was already a handful of steps ahead of David as he rushed towards the house.

Michael called out for someone called Chris. "Chris," he hollered into the house. Seconds later, *Chris* emerged from the doorway wearing a leather

jacket and faded jeans. Black eyeliner was drawn under his eyes, and his black hair was stuck up at the front. Chris looked up at the sky and saw the rain. As it skipped from the van's roof, he watched it with childlike curiosity. He gave it the look of suspicion that a father might have given his daughter's boyfriend. He backed away into the open doorway. "Chris, it is fine; you can stay there," Michael said reassuringly, "I just need you to keep an eye out for someone" Michael turned back to David and asked. "What did the dude look like?"

"Just a bloke," David said with a shrug of his shoulders. He hadn't had a great view, and his *attention* was not on the man. At least not when it mattered, "Just a man in a white shirt, black tie and black hat," he replied. The oral fluid that had easily flowed before had now found a blockage.

With eyes that could disturb the very soul of Satan himself.

"Heh, shouldn't be too hard to spot around here," Chris laughed "there is only us here." David and Michael went inside and left Chris alone on the porch. This was when *the house's second deception* became apparent.

The house inside was like a *T.A.R.D.I.S.* More enormous and spacious than he would have ever guessed or imagined. David thought it must be an illusion. He remembered a church on the island of Gozo. Looking at it from the inside, it had a huge domed roof. From the outside, the roof was completely flat. Once you knew it was like all good illusions, the magic was spoiled. It was still impressive. With just enough distance and a creative mind, you can have a dome inside but a flat outside. Disappointing, really spectacular, and amazingly well done, but once you knew, it was all you could ever see. The illusion is shattered into pieces and can never be repaired. This house, though, *he had no idea how it was done.* It felt much more extensive. It had to be a similar trick of light, decoration, and

perspective. It was like looking at a room down a tube. It slowly came into view and overwhelmed him for a moment. The entrance room seemed to stretch back much further than it should have.

The stairs pushed upwards at an angle that he'd have guessed impossible from the outside. The angle was harder and steeper than he would have ever imagined. He saw the two rooms to the left and the right reach far further back than they appeared to have done when he had first seen the building. The stonework tiles of the entrance hall reflected it all. It would annoy him now. These things always did. He had to know how this trick was performed and how this illusion was created. He was not a man who could see a trick and love it for what it was; he had to know! He had to see behind the curtain. He looked it over and moved slightly to one side, trying to force the aspect. To reveal its hoax. He had been unable to look or walk away in the field earlier, which had a similar effect, enticing him. *A stocking top of a view*. He wanted to look away but couldn't. A different view, another problem, but the same result. "Phone's over there," Michael said. He pointed to the room on their left.

David snapped out of his beguiling trance. He was mesmerised by the hallway and the rooms, by the dishonesties of the house. The reflections on the floor told him it was real, but the view from outside shouted that something was fake. "It's a little funky, but you'll see it," Michael said as he walked to one side of the entrance room and plugged his brick into the wall. David could now see why the offer to use the mobile wasn't there. The damn thing must have been out of charge. All the tech and advances that have been made. The bloody things still needed charge in an emergency. *Wilp*. David walked into the room on the left and looked for the phone. He walked over to the far sideboard and instantly saw what Michael had meant

by funky. He had thought Michael meant the house, but he had been talking about the phone.

It was an old vintage black phone. Long-necked with the ring radial dial built into the base. The microphone was at the top of the neck, with the earpiece the only part that detached. He lifted the earpiece and listened; it had a dial tone. A slight static hummed in the background, but the phone seemed to be working. He dialled the police, carefully sliding the dial to nine three times, and waited as it purred back. As a lad, it was something he had done without thinking. As an adult, he had to think and remind himself how to use the old dial phones. Instantly, he got an answer. "Hello, I'd like to report a crime." He thought to himself and smiled grimly; *a crime*, what a very British way of dealing with it. He would have said the same thing if he'd had his pocket picked at the local fair. There must be some word that can slip between "a crime" and "a murder" by a wide-eyed, staring, smiling nutter; the thought intruded in much the same way the voice had. "Okay, Sir," The policeman on the phone said calmly, "can you tell me what the crime is that you want to report?"

"Murder," David said, feeling he was trapped in an old noir. He then explained everything that had happened, leaving out the voice he had heard in his head. He blurted everything else out, and like a balloon with a pinhole, once it started to release, it would not be stopped. This was becoming a habit. Michael stood in the corner of the room and listened to the call; he took everything in. "Sir," the policeman said, "can you confirm your address for me? I am having trouble pulling the details on this number." David had no idea; he had only just arrived. He turned to Michael and asked, "What is the address here?" Michael grabbed a pen from the

bookcase and started writing. He handed the note to David, who looked at the paper and read.

*1 Guilty Lane,
Guiltyland,
GUILTY.*

He stood and looked at the note and was just about to ask what the hell this was supposed to mean when he blinked. It took a millisecond, the moment between his eyes being closed and opening, the message had changed. An uneasy feeling flooded over him. That was it confirmed; He was going mad. He was likely already crazy, not yet bouncing from the rubber walls but close. It was the only way he could explain it. The note now read.

*1 Churchview Lane,
Bridgwater,
TA6 2TY.*

"You lock the door and throw away the key. There's someone in my head, but it's not me."

He relayed the address, and the policeman told him to stay put. They said they would have someone out to him as soon as possible. "ASAP" was how they had put it. He needed a smoke, and he asked his host Michael as he took a cigarette from the packet, "do you mind?"

"Sorry mate, not in the house, I'm afraid. Old building and all that, fire hazards," Michael replied. They made their way outside, back out into the rain. Chris was still there waiting and watching. Michael asked Chris, "Seen anything?"

"Not a sausage," Chris replied, adding, "mind if I go in?"

"Sure, can you start setting up?" Michael said as Chris headed inside; Chris just grunted in reply. His leather jacket and goth makeup are not even damp. David watched as Chris left and asked, "what's wrong with him?"

"Probably afraid he'll smudge his mascara," Michael joked.

David lit his smoke and took a long hard drag. "It'll kill you," Michael said, looking not at David but at the flame from his lighter. "I'll die happy," David replied, clicking the lighter shut. He'd heard it all before. All smokers have. It was correct, but that did not make a difference to him. He had nothing to live for anyway. Still, he was in no mood to be lectured about it. David swerved to change the topic and asked, "So, what are you doing here?" A quick change of subject usually worked. He took another puff. "Well, I guess you could say we are all having a similar day," Michael said, "we are chasing evil too."

David took a puff and said, "Chasing evil?" So, Michael explained.

MICHAEL, CHRIS, MILLY, AND MOLLY (NO RELATION).

Michael explained that they were ghost hunters, hunting evil and detecting the nasties of the void. Some ghost hunters hunted anything and everything supernatural; they only went after the worst of the worse. The dangerous ones, the exciting ones. They had reason to believe that the target they were after would be here at the house that evening. An evil that was tormenting the living and demanding its revenge. Revenge, he explained, was one of the biggest drivers of evil. Darkness driven by vengeance was one of the most powerful emotions in the living world and the unliving.

Divining, Ouija, and Tarot all pointed to the same thing: tonight was the one chance. David would have laughed on any typical day, but this was not an ordinary day. He had buried his son, witnessed a murder, and if nothing else, Michael had been kind enough to help when he needed it. His heart seemed to be in the right place. Besides, David reasoned, if people can believe in a God who created all and a Fallen angel who destroys. Then who is he to say that these things are not real? Maybe things that went

bump in the night existed too. He had met Michael and Chris, Milly, and Molly he would meet soon. They are *strange*, Michael had warned. This whole thing is *strange*, David thought, but he kept it to himself.

"Milly and Molly have been doing this the longest," Michael said. "Experts in all the spiritual means and methods. The ins and outs, the outs and the ins. However," he warned, "they are also challenging to predict. They have two moods and two moods only. They will either like you or dislike you. They will have no qualms about showing it if it is the latter. If it was the former, then again, no reservations," Michael joked. "I'm often unsure what option is better. It was easier to be hated than fawned over, sometimes. They have a psychic connection," he explained, "what one sees or feels, the other one gets the same. I would advise you not to test it," he cautioned. "As amusing as it is poking one person in the leg to see what the other does, after having it done for most of your existence, it can start to grate a little."

"Chris, well, you have met Chris," Michael continued. "Chris is a what you see is what you get sorta guy. He may look like a reject from a goth convention, but he is the best at what he does. Don't let his looks fool you," Michael stated. "He is our tech guy; he loves setting all this crap up and documenting it all." Michael pointed at the van before continuing. "That box you helped me with had a load of cameras and other bits and bobs for this job. I'll be honest," Michael chuckled, "it all goes right over my head, but when we get back, and he shows us what he has captured. The guy is a genius. Serious gobsmacking stuff he catches." Michael left it there for a moment. He let the subject hang before he continued. "He has all the gadgets for this. Heat, infra, night, you name it, he has looked into it and bought it if needed. I have seen people say that you'll never get that on

camera. Chris walks in and grabs it on film.” Michael stressed the next point. "Complete and utter tech genius. He drives me crazy at times, but the guy is fantastic. Just do me a favour," Michael asked. "Don't tell him I said that. He gets big headed enough as it is.”

"And then, finally, there is me," Michael said and smiled. "I'm nothing special. I'm really not. Milly and Molly are gifted, funny, clever, sexy..." Michael looked at David after saying the last. He raised an eyebrow as if they were discussing a date. "They are bloody brilliant," Michael sighed. "Well, I love 'em," he said. "I'm the boring guy. I do the paperwork, get the jobs, and put the team together when needed. I also have to be the cynic, and that can be shite when you do believe. When you have seen things, well, it can be challenging. I try and stay objective, you know? To keep an eye out for the squeaky floorboard, check the windows for drafts. Rattle the pipes and check the strange smells. I have to offer a practical answer where possible. D'you know what I mean?" Michael asked. David nodded. He had no idea, but why not nod? *It was polite?* "So that is us," Michael said. "The house though, blimey, that is the real interesting thing!"

"So many things about this house," Michael said in feverish excitement. "You've seen how it looks wrong; it is hard to miss. It does not drop back far enough. The inside does not have the same number of rooms as the outside. It is an extraordinary design, so bonkers! It is unreal how it is done. Then you look inside, and wow!" Michael blew outwards as he said this. Enthusiasm flowed from him as he spoke. His words sped up as he explained it, like an excited child telling their parent what had happened at school. "It is like someone had squeezed this massive house into a small space. It makes no sense, but it looks so good. It feels so real, and yet, it can't be. It's an impossibility. It should not be here!" Michael looked at the

house; he admired it. David wondered what look he would give Milly and Molly, whom he had admitted to loving. He suspected it wouldn't be even remotely close to how he looked now. He looked around the house with an awestruck gaze.

"You have to go back years," Michael said. "To the fifties, maybe even longer. The house that is here now, well, that is something else! The house was owned by a couple of fruit loops, really crazy nutters" Michael spun his finger by his ear. "So, they own the house, kill a bunch of people. Then the house gets burnt down. Only the ruins, or the skeleton if you like, remained. The locals pulled a Frankenstein's windmill on it, or something similar." This part Michael spat out with disgust. "People destroy what they do not understand. Why would you do that? Here you have a house that may have been able to help you understand what those people did and why, yet they burn it down. You can't hope to understand by destroying." Michael looked down at the floor. There was a tinge of disappointment in his voice. "Think of the good that could be done had we understood why..." he said.

"You sound disappointed," David said.

"Oh, I am not disappointed," Michael replied. His voice had perked up a little. "I am afraid. I told you we hunt the worse, well this is it. The worst I have ever known."

"So why did they rebuild the house? If it is that bad, why not just leave it?" David asked, feeling that he was missing something. Something was sticking out like the nose of his face that sat and gazed at him, waiting for it to click into place finally. "They didn't," Michael said calmly. "It is not real. It was never rebuilt. It was left to rot. Lots have tried, but they have all failed for one reason or another. Until five hours ago, this was a boring old rotting wreck." David looked at Michael and then at the house. His eyes

wandered from one to the other. He looked at the driveway and kicked a few stones up; they fell back and settled. "But I've been in there," David said, aghast. He was shocked and horrified, but also, interest had been peaked. Was this real? How could it be? "How can I have been in there. Used the damn phone in there if it's not real?"

"Because," Michael said. "This is no ordinary haunting."

"But how?" David questioned. His vocabulary had taken a temporary holiday. "How can a house be, well, not real?" Michael leant on the wall and considered his following words. He did not know how these things were done; he only knew that they were. The house itself was proof of that! "Have you ever read about ghosts carrying things? Or sometimes you may get a ghost car?" he asked David.

"Like Christine?" David asked hesitantly. This was all too much; how could the house be here if it was truly burnt down? "I don't know that one, but yeah, maybe sure. I don't know if it applies, but maybe" Michael answered.

"How can you not know Christine?" David asked, his attention suddenly pulled to a topic other than the house. "Early eighties, I think, maybe late seventies. A possessed car, or a demonic car, something like that."

"Then no," Michael said disappointedly, "it is not like that. It is, I suppose, what it is. The house is part of the haunting. It only appears during a visitation. Whatever is making it appear has so much power, so much energy. They must be, well, they are strong, so very strong."

"You sound in awe of them," David said, suddenly aware he was speaking of them and not it.

Michael stopped for a moment. "I am. I want to know what could do this. I have never known anything this strong! This would need unimaginable

strength. It scares me, but I also want to know more. I want that..." Michael trailed off.

"And what about the police?" David asked as a car pulled into the driveway. He looked down the driveway at the car. It was the police arriving to interview him, no doubt. "What are you, we, going to tell them?"

"Nothing," Michael replied without missing a beat. "Do you want to try and explain how a house rebuilt itself from nothing? Good luck with that, they'll throw us in a looney bin, and by tomorrow all this will be over!"

THE POLICE.

*T*hrow us in the bloody looney bin ! Maybe it is where I belong, David thought. Michael had left him and disappeared back inside to help Chris. "Give us a shout if anything is needed," he had said. *Yeah, four anti-psychotics, please and a glass of water! Actually, make that a Scotch.* David now found himself outside and alone. It gave him time to think and consider things. He did not want to be here, but he was also interested. He had nothing to go back home to, and he was curious. Still, could it be dangerous? Jesus Christ, what had he gotten himself into this morning? Jesus, fucking, godforsaken Christ. The funeral was supposed to be the end of it all, the start of the mourning process. Now he had a murder to contend with, a house that was, in reality, a wreck, and the world's biggest bogeyman, apparently. They may also pop over to say hello at some point. Something to look forward to, he thought. It was not as if things could get much worse.

So, what, he reasoned, could he do? David had suffered for a period from anxiety. It had been a period in his life when everything seemed to fall

apart. The death of his wife, coupled with mounting debts, had pushed him close to the edge. So close to the edge that he had wobbled over it a few times. Swaying in that world between life and nothingness, feeling that his life had no worth or meaning. He still had no idea how he managed to get through it. He had learnt one thing during that experience. He had to sort things in his head and arrange the things bothering him into categories. He would take the things he did have control over and place them in pot A. The things that he had no control over go into pot B. The idea was to forget about what he had no control over. To push it to one side and leave it for another day. Why worry about what he could not control? Of course, it was easier said than done, but it had been an excellent lesson to learn.

David pushed the things he had no control over to the back of his mind. He had no control over the house, the ghosts that may or may not have been coming, nor did he have any power over the people there. That could all be forgotten for the moment. Pushed into the mental dustbin, they did not matter at this point. He made his way to the wall that circled the house's garden and sat on it. He lit a smoke and waited. He inhaled and blew it out; it tasted good. The police had arrived, but they were still sitting in their car. Collecting notes, dotting t's and crossing i's, he guessed. Finally, the car door opened.

Here we go, David thought as they left the vehicle and approached. He was already lighting his second cigarette, the first having gone down too quickly. Two officers, one male and one female. His initial relief that this would soon be over was quickly replaced by shock. *What the fuck?* The policeman was wearing precisely what he expected, a uniform with a hat perched upon his head. What he had not expected was the massive boner he was also sporting. It was poking up and pushing the trousers out. Pitched

tent? This was more like a marquee, a peacock standing in the middle of pigeons. Strutting its stuff like it was the king of the dancefloor. Not i's, nor t's; they must have been working the D. He pushed the boner into box B, a policeman's helmet, things he cannot control. He could have had a box C, things he had never wanted to see or see again. He would have filled it in just one day.

"Good evening, Sir; I believe you called us," the policeman said utterly naturally. The protrusion was finally receding. Banished to where it had come from and hopefully will not return. David recognised the policeman's voice straight away. It was the same person that he had spoken to on the telephone. Small stations and budget cuts, he surmised. The man had a drawl with certain words. A local Somerset resident or someone who had lived here a long time. "'Ello, 'Ello, 'Ello. Wat 'ave we got 'ere den" was what David heard. It was just the sort of thing he would have expected after a gallon of scrumpy cider and, it appeared, a fumble in the work car. What did he care? So, what if they had a roll around in the old jam sandwich? It made no difference to what he needed from them. "Yes, I saw someone murdered," David said. It felt unreal to have seen what he did! It still felt strange saying it out loud.

The policewoman was looking at the house with a forlorn gaze. Her attention was solely on the house; David seemed to be of little interest. "A murder, well, that is quite serious," the policeman said. It seemed a little comical; his reaction was like something from a comedy show. Everything about him just oozed stereotypical small-county copper.

Welcome to Small Somerset; switch over at nine for our next episode. Tune in after eleven for the adult show! How many ways can you screw in a police car?

The policeman had taken a notepad and pen from his pocket and then asked, "Okay, Sir, could you please tell me what happened?" He had started jotting bits down as David relayed his tale to them. "Would you know this guy if you saw him again?" David was asked.

David didn't know. He would know him if he were in his head; he would never forget how the voice had invaded his mind. But to look at? Of that, he was not so sure. The man had just seemed normal. "I don't know, officer, maybe," he said resignedly. "It was quite far away, so I did not get a good look." The policewoman turned around. If the policeman had been a shock, the policewoman was even more so. She had no bra under her shirt, and her nipples stood erect and stiff. The sweat she had worked up in the car made her shirt cling to her breasts. Sticking out and clearly visible like pyramids in a desert of soft, smooth skin, David's eyes wandered up and down and settled on her face. What the hell was this, confessions of a local bobby? Hey, screwing in the car, no problem. have fun and clean up your mess, but, for god's sake, get dressed afterwards! "What about the woman? Would you know her?" The question seemed redundant to David; sure, he would know her, but she was dead in a field. "What can you tell us about her?" The policeman asked.

David did the best he could; he described the woman. Starting with "err, I dunno," but then he got into his groove. "She was short, around five-five, slim with long hair dark down to her shoulders. She had a black skirt and shirt on with a collar thingy." David moved his hand across his neck to try and explain what he meant. "Choker?" The policewoman helpfully asked. David had to stop himself continuously from looking downwards. He would be in full flow as he spoke and then forget that this woman had forgotten her bra. His eyes would stray, and he would find himself looking again. The

smooth white shirt rubbed against her... and there it was again. David looked up, "Yes, if that's what it is called. The thing some of you wear around your necks."

"Yeah, it's a choker," the policeman said. David heard a note of disinterest in his voice. Was he ready for round two? David thought he probably was. She was a good-looking lass, and murder aside - *wow, did he think that?* - why not? "You're sure he came this way?" The policewoman asked. Ah, well, maybe bobbies luck isn't in.

"He can't have gone any other way!" David said, exasperated. The two seemingly sex-driven police officers were annoying him. He could not tell what it was; they just seemed to be a joke. It was like they were not taking the situation seriously. Billie and Ben, the local bobbies who had been hired from the local massage parlour. That would change, he thought, when they backtracked to the field. Maybe they get calls like this all the time, but when they see the body, they'll have to take him seriously. His temper was bubbling; their attitude was not only unprofessional, but it was also irritating. "One thing, Sir," the policewoman said.

"If she bled the way you have reported, then why do you not have blood on your clothes?" David had not thought of this and looked down at his top and trousers. She was correct; maybe the dynamic dogging duo had been paying attention. His clothes were muddy in a few patches but free from blood. "I... I don't know," David stuttered. "It must have been the rain and just dumb luck, I suppose." That was all that he had. He could offer no other explanation. Dumb luck? Was that what it came down to? He expected them to question this and was ready to be defensive. He was not lying! So why should they question him? He was not the criminal here! Only they didn't. They seemed to take what he said and believed him. Now

his mind started to ask, why did they believe him? It did not sound plausible to him, so why should it be to them?

The policeman finished his writing down and then looked up at David. "Okay, Sir," he said very formally. "We are going to go to this field and secure the area. Once we have that done, we will get forensics there, and then we will come back and pick you up."

"Wait, I can't stay here," David said. "I don't think... Well, they are performing some kind of science thing; I think I'd get in the way." *Science thing* was the most subtle way of saying the house was filled with loonies, interesting and seemingly friendly, but crazy, nonetheless. "Nonsense," the policewoman said, adopting the same tone and formal quality of her colleague. "Science experiment indeed. We'll just see about that." She spoke as she marched down the pathway. She sounded like a strict headmistress who had just found out one of the pupils had forgotten their PE kit. David watched as she marched away; he then turned to the policeman.

"They won't like it," David said sheepishly. He had not wanted anyone else to get involved in this. David looked at the officer and noticed that PC protruding penis was back. Christ, this bloke has a one-track mind, David thought as he turned away and looked back toward the house. David watched as the woman entered the house. He could see what the man was looking at. This woman screamed sex, everything from how she walked to how she talked. One minute she had been an easy-going local lass and the next strict headmistress. He could see her being fun in the bedroom. She walked, and her backside swayed in rhythm with the steps. She was wearing flats but could quite easily have been strutting herself in heels. Now David had started to feel aroused. She just gave something off. Death

and sex, sex and death. The two things are linked throughout us all. The start of life and the end of life.

"She'd kill you if she saw you were looking at her like that," the policeman said, snapping David from his perverse thoughts. There was a seriousness in the policeman's tone; it did not seem to be a light-hearted comment. For the first time, he seemed to be taking things seriously. David turned and looked at him again, "What?" he said, slightly alarmed and a little defensive. He did not like the direction this seemed to be heading. "I was joking, mate," the policeman said, and he cracked a smile. It was a clumsy attempt at disarming the situation.

"They won't like this," David said as he tried to distract himself and sway his mind away from the sex appeal of the policewoman and back to where it should have been. "Ah, it'll be fine," the policeman replied confidently. David hoped he was wrong, as he wanted to get back home. He did not have anything to return to, but he felt uneasy with the house and situation. It was the removal of choice; that was what he told himself. When he had the choice to stay or go, he had been happy with staying. If that choice was removed, then what could he do? It was the police; how could he ignore them? "She could charm the guy who charmed the snake charmer. Believe you me, I've seen her handle the worse. When she wants something, she gets it." David didn't need convincing. This was something he had worked out for himself. He was being sold a line that he had already bought and consumed. She soon emerged from the house, with Michael following behind. "Sorted," she said, and, like that, she was back to her local lass voice. "You're staying, and we will pick you up once we are finished at the scene."

"Don't I get..." David said as she quickly strolled to the car; her colleague followed her closely behind her. The policeman didn't, but David had expected him to slap her backside as they went. A quick indication of what he wanted; maybe she also wanted it? Michael clapped a hand on his shoulder and said, "I guess you are staying?" David took a second to gather his thoughts. They were scattered across the grounds like clothes from a dropped suitcase. "Er, yeah. Sorry mate. I really didn't want to stay or impose. They just sorta demanded."

"It's okay," Michael said. "She did the same with me. I just worry. It could be dangerous here." He and David turned towards the doorway. "Come on then, I shall explain a few things," he said. "By the way, did you see her nipples?" Michael concluded with juvenile laughter.

THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT.

They both walked inside, David albeit slightly reluctantly. The rain was starting to fall heavier once again. It fluctuated; one minute, it was hammering, and the next, it seemed a light drizzle. The tiny drops pitter-pattering on the van's metal roof started to beat harder. "Come inside out of this weather, and I'll explain," Michael said. "You're telling me that none of this is real?" David asked as he looked at the massive hallway. "Real is a tough one," Michael said as they walked through the hallway and towards the side room. "Is it a ghost? Is it some other dimension? An echo of the past? I don't know. All I can tell you is that it should not be here," he answered. David walked up to a cabinet and poked various objects on top of it. Moving cups, bottles, and glasses from one place to the next. "But how?" he asked. "How can any of this be real? I am touching and feeling it, yet you claim it is not here!"

"Well," Michael said as he grabbed two glasses from the cabinet. "Why do you think we are here? We're here to find out what is going on. It is what we do." David continued to look around as Michael opened the pulldown and

took a bottle of scotch out. "I still can't believe this is not real!" David exclaimed. Michael sat down and held out a glass to David. "Why does nobody know about it? Besides, what is real? If you can touch and interact, then why is it any different?"

"You sound like Morpheus," David said as he sat down. The sofa hugged him like a long-lost friend, the foam holding him tight. Michael looked at him, confused. "Morpheus?" he asked.

"He was in a movie," David said, "You haven't seen it?"

"Oh, movies," Michael said. "Yeah, I don't do those. I was more of a drinker. I'd rather hit the discos over the theatre." Michael poured himself a couple of fingers and offered the same to David. David nodded, and Michael poured a good measure. What the hell, David thought as he took the glass; it was a wake, wasn't it? *Of sorts*. Michael started to talk, "forget being a cynic just for a moment and pretend that you believe." Was it that obvious, David thought? He had tried to hide his cynicism a little. "So, this drink is not real?" he asked as he examined the glass and whisky inside. The golden liquid flowed as he tilted the glass. "Taste it," Michael replied. David sniffed the contents of the glass and then took a sip. "It's good," he said. The smooth warmth flowed down into his stomach and filled a hole he had not known he had. The gaping hole that was left from the loss of family. "Right," Michael said as he took a sip. "For all intents, everything inside this house is real; everything that is part of this house is real. How long it'll last? That I don't know. Why it is here? That I am going to find out," Michael finished with a determined tone.

"I still don't get it. It seems, well, it feels so real. Sorry," David said. "I can't help being cynical."

"I'd have been more concerned if you had not been. Being cynical is crucial. But, for the moment, I believe, and so do you. Once again, just for argument's sake, we are both believers," Michael said. They both took a sip of their drinks. David just listened as Michael continued. "If ghosts are real, why have they never been proven to exist? You could say that a god has never been proven to exist, and neither has a devil, but plenty of people believe in them. However, what if ghosts could only cross at certain points, certain times, certain places and for certain people? What if there were rules? They have to have a link to a place or a person. They have to be strong enough to have survived the breaking of the veil. For things to happen, you need four things. Stop me if I am going too fast; I know I can ramble." David just nodded. He was not overly interested and just wanted Michael to get to the point, this was good scotch, and if he was going to be stuck here, he might as well listen and drink.

"Fuck it, get drunk and enjoy the ghostbusters! He could have been reliving his youth."

"Okay," Michael continued, "four things." Michael counted as he spoke. "You need a place, a person, a point but most importantly, a certain time. You must understand that this is why it's so hard to find proof. This is why you see video after video of 'orbs'. Bloody specs of dust are knocked up as people walk around in places filled with dust. People see ghosts; people report ghosts. Ghost hunters come running and see dust in the dark." Michael stopped and took a sip of his drink. "Sorry, pet hate," he said with a smile. "What they're always missing are the time and the point. They have the place. They often connect the person to the haunting but not the point and time. You get one chance, only one," Michael emphasised the point. "That is why it's so hard to prove. Science requires you to recreate an

experiment. How can you recreate something without all the ingredients? Top up?" Michael asked unexpectedly. He offered the bottle and poured them both another couple of fingers.

"Right, so that's the basics. There is a bit more to it, well, a lot more than that, but in layperson's terms. I investigate things and play the cynic. I believe, but I can be objective and cynical; Milly and Molly can summon, sense and control, and Chris is our contact and tech guy. You have to understand, sceptical or not, that these things are real. They can be incredibly dangerous." Michael took a large gulp from his glass before he continued. He was a man who had mastered the art of drinking scotch neat. This was all going in one ear for David and then travelled out from the other and back into the room. Michael looked him in the eye and continued, "As it seems you may be here for a while, some precautions and important lessons. Ghosts cannot hurt you. Humans kill humans, not ghosts. No matter what, you have to remember that. They will, however, screw with your head. I don't mean that lightly; I lost someone close once." There was sadness in Michael's eyes. Whomever it was he had lost had been close, very close to him. It shone through the warnings as clearly as a fog light on a clear day. There was no exaggeration here. "If I had known then what I know now, things may have been different." He leant forward and poured another glass. He then offered the bottle to David, who refused politely. "I think I need the loo and a smoke first," David said.

"Understood, it's times like this that I wished I still smoked. Toilets upstairs first on the right," Michael helpfully added.

A STICKY DOOR

David made his way from the front room and into the hallway. The alcohol that was flooding his system had calmed his mind a little. Ghost house? *Fuck it*; he thought as he made his way across the hall. As he made his way, he let his fingers trail along the top of the ottoman at the foot of the stairs. He decided if he could feel it, see it, and smell it, then shit, it was real. Still, he said to himself as he placed his foot on the bottom step, I will be happier when I am out of this place. A crooked house on the outside, and the inside is the complete opposite. Wonderfully kept, clean, and tidy, everything was straight and ordered. It was unnerving and felt wrong. He'd been to a 'fun house' once. The rooms were designed to throw you off balance. Some had tilted floors; in others, everything but the floor was at an angle. This felt similar like something was here to be seen, yet he could not see it.

David was halfway up the staircase when he noticed the pictures. Was that what was niggling at him? He'd had that feeling, *one I am sure we all have had*, that something was wrong. That thought irritates the back of your mind

and pricks your brain. Then just as you think you have noticed what is wrong, it scuttles away like a spider and hides in the shadows. He had all those feelings, but, for once, he did manage to grasp the thought. He grabbed it, held on tight, and then looked again at the pictures along the wall. It was not just one thing that he had missed, but two. That made it worse; missing one thing is just one of those things. Missing two? That was just careless. The pictures were all famous works of art, and they were all hanging crooked.

Picasso, Van Gogh, Monet, and various others adorned the walls. Each was a painting, not a print. David believed they must have been copies, although he was no expert. They had to be copies! Each, like the windows and doors outside, was hanging at a slight angle. He ran his fingers down one of the paintings and felt every groove and crack of the paint. The fingerprint of the artist revealed itself as he did so. He then tried to straighten a picture. He tilted it slightly so that it was level and then let go. The frame and painting returned to the previous angle. David considered taking it from the wall to see why it would not hang correctly but decided against it. Wonky paintings were the bane of people everywhere, and he had more important things on his mind. Still, it was curious. Such a tidy house and then a display of drunken leaning paintings.

More important things were on his mind, like finding the toilet. He stepped onto the landing and looked at the painting that hung there. *Fuseli's The Nightmare* was hanging; unlike the other paintings, this one was hanging straight. He shuddered and briefly forgot the pressing need of his bladder. This painting always gave him the creeps. He'd had a book of artwork at home and constantly flicked straight past this one. It just went to prove that it was effective and wonderfully painted. Art was not his thing.

He knew what he liked, but many pictures and paintings did not click. His son had been the one for artwork. His son, he sighed. Now he had been a fan of this nightmare. His son was buried this morning, and now he was in this house looking at paintings. Jason, now, Jason would have loved this. He hated almost everything else in the world, but he liked art. Typical teenager, he had been no angel himself, but like Jason, he'd had his interests.

The upstairs was, in many ways, just as strange as the downstairs. The downstairs had seemed abnormally large; the upstairs seemed small and quaint. Like someone had tacked it on at the last moment, almost an afterthought. Maybe the ghosts and goblins had run out of money or did not care. David looked over the guardrail and down below into the hallway. The tiled floor below loomed large. The letter 'L' was centred on the tiles. A slightly lighter colour, something that he had not noticed when downstairs. He had not noticed that the upstairs was open plan when he was below. The windows flooded the hallway and landing with light. Real or not, the one thing he knew for sure was that the architect of this house must have been smoking some serious shit. He tried to think of architects or designers with a surname that started with 'L' but drew a blank. He stepped back from the rail. Heights were not his thing; he could not have lived in a house like this. The old TV show rippled across his mind. *Who lives in a house like this?* Not I, he thought as he looked down the hallway.

The hallway extended to the left of the painting and ran down the rest of the house's length. Four doors on either side were reasonably well-spaced out. It still made the upstairs feel so small compared to the vast openness in the rooms below. The house's dimensions were all wrong. Michael had told him the first door on the right, so he headed to the door. David walked

straight to the door and grasped the handle. The cold metal of the handle sent a shiver along his spine. He turned it and pushed the door. The door was stuck; it would not budge. Stuck like it had been glued in place by years of paint. He knocked on the door as he presumed the loo was being used. He waited but got no answer, so he tried the door again. This time he gave the handle a good twist and pushed the door. Nothing, not even a smidgeon of movement.

David ran his hands down the side of the door where it met the frame and could see no gap. he pushed again on the door and expected a break to open up, but it did not. The door and the frame seemed to be one complete unit with no join. There was nothing to show where the door ended, and the frame began. The only visible gap was between the door and the floor. A light shone through. "Damn thing," he said to himself as he pushed again. The door remained closed. Not a wriggle of movement escaped from it. When he knocked or banged the door, he heard the hollow echo he'd expected from an empty room. He was sure the door was real - *as real as anything in this place* - but it still would not move. He turned the handle again, and this time he went for it. The whole fifteen stone and four ounces would take the thing down; if not down, he'd take it off its fucking hinges. He slammed into the door like a diver belly-flopping in a pool. His total weight hit the door as hard as he could, and the damn thing did not budge. Even the wood that made the door remained in one piece with not a wobble from it.

David stood back from the door and rubbed his shoulder. That last hit had hurt, and he felt tender to the touch. He looked at the door and was sure it was the right one; something in his head made him feel that way. It felt right. It felt right, but it couldn't be, he thought as he walked the hallway.

That door was stuck like glue and had not been opened in a long time. Michael must have meant the next door. It would have an easy mistake to make if he had known the first doorway was fake or sealed. He walked to the next door and grabbed the handle. If this one is the same, he was out of here. Fuck the police and screw the rest of them. He would have had enough. He pushed the door, and it swung open. Gotcha, he thought as he walked through the doorway and into the room.

David's bladder was crying out at this point; it needed to be emptied and emptied soon. It screamed like a metalhead in a mosh pit. Had it had arms and legs, and if it could walk, it would have looked like a human running across the room who needed to throw up. Hand across its mouth and running as fast as it can. It would not have been the first time he had been half in and half out when he entered a room to relieve himself. Thankfully, he had not done that; he could have easily done it, he needed to go badly, but he had not. *Instead*, three things happened simultaneously. Firstly, he lifted his head as his hand went down towards the zipper in his trousers. Secondly, the feeling and need to go for a piss washed away instantly. Flushed down that plughole in the memory reserved for things you thought you needed but soon forgot. And finally, thirdly. He mumbled, "Oh, Jesus, bloody, Christ, I am sorry," as he backed out of the room as quickly as possible and shut the door.

David had been curious about Milly and Molly, but he had not expected to meet them quite like that. As he entered the room and looked up, he saw them. They, in turn, had both turned to look at him. They stood completely and utterly naked, staring at him. They were as naked as the day they were created. Surprised by the man that had just come barging into their room with... Well, it got worse. Not only did he barge in, not only did he see them

naked, but he also had his hand down on his groin, getting ready to unzip. Not, *at any time*, a good look. They were both around five feet tall and slim. Hairless from the neck down, and on his quick glance, he could have mistaken them for twins. The only difference he had seen between the two was the colour of their hair. One was jet black, and the other was bleached white. *Natural?* How could he have known?

David stood in the hallway for a moment, unsure what to do. The need to have a piss had vanished from his thoughts, but it returned with a vengeance. To make matters worse, he still had not found the toilet. He could try doors further down the hallway but decided against it. He had found the first door on the right - *and the second* - and did not dare go further. Right? Left? Maybe Michael had gotten muddled up. David decided to check the first door on the left, and he promised himself he would knock first this time. *Fool me once; shame on you. Fool me twice; shame on you for picking on a simpleton.* He walked back to the first door on the left and placed his hand on the handle. He was about to knock when he heard a noise. The door on the right, the second door, had opened. One of the women had stepped from the room.

"You know, it's customary to knock before entering a girl's room," the woman said. There was a playfulness in her voice, a cheeky aspect rather than a scorning. It was, David thought, almost flirtatious. But it couldn't be that as they did not even know him! "I am so sorry," he said, embarrassed. He was so flustered that he struggled to maintain eye contact. "Michael said the first door on the right. I should have knocked. I am so sorry," he repeated once more. The girl finished putting her hair up, it was the jet black one, and she now had her hair in pigtails. She tied them with a white band. The tails on the left and the right flowed from the top of her head to

her shoulders. "I'm Molly, by the way, and don't be embarrassed. I am sure you have seen plenty of ladies naked." He hadn't, but he let it slide. He'd prefer to be thought of as a slut over being an inexperienced widower. *Keep it in your pants; she is half your age.* Molly leant to one side so she could look past him. Her thigh-length black dress rose up along her leg as she did so. He could not help but look at the white tights and legs contained within.

Down boy, he thought to himself. Molly either did not notice him looking, or she did not mind. "Now, correct me if I am wrong; my mind can be rather slapdash at times," she said playfully. "But last time I looked, that," she pointed down the hallway, "was the first door on the right." He pulled his eyes from her thigh and looked backwards. He knew what she had pointed at, so it was a worthless glance. "That one was locked; it would not open," he said with all the conviction of an alcoholic in a pub eyeing the top shelf. "Can't be," she said matter-of-factly. "Milly has not long finished in there." She then called into the room, "Milly," and Milly came out into the hallway. Milly, like Molly, wore a thigh-length short dress; only hers was white. Her legs were covered in black tights, and she was wearing dolly shoes, precisely like Milly, only, again, in the colour of her clothing. "He said the bathroom door is locked," Molly said to Milly. Milly let her hair down, and the bleached white hair fell to her shoulders.

"Nonsense," said Milly in just the same matter-of-fact manner. Milly and Molly stepped forward to walk past David, and he moved to one side to allow them to pass. "Maybe you just need a strong woman to help you out," Molly said as they approached; both girls chuckled at this. David stood back to the wall, allowing them plenty of room to pass him. They walked side by side like conjoined twins. They weren't twins, but they were very similar. They were very close but not entirely the same. They had the

appearance of two similar people made up to look the same. Dancers on a stage or a fraudulent act at a circus. The hallway was wide enough to accommodate the three-standing side by side. They were both quite slim, and David was not exactly huge. However, as the girls passed, they turned their back to David as if they were walking a small passageway. Molly was the furthest away, Milly the closest. Milly pushed herself as she walked past, jamming her buttocks into David's groin like a horny teenager dropping unsubtle hints. What the heck is this? He thought inside his head, without complaining aloud.

Milly walked to the first door on the right, twisted the handle and opened it with ease. The door flew open without any resistance. Like the hinges were well oiled, and the door cut expertly to fit the frame. "See," Milly said. She pulled the door closed and then reopened it. It swung open and closed once more. "You just wanted to peek, didn't you!" Molly laughed.

"No, no," David said. "It really was locked." It sounded pathetic as he said it and sounded like a lie someone would tell when caught with a hand in the cookie jar. Or with their hands down in their pants during a movie. "It's fine, really," Milly said. Then they both walked down the hallway towards the stairs.

"See you soon, handsome," they both said simultaneously. Perfectly in sync, step by step, in unison. Tap-by-tap, they disappeared around the corner and down the staircase.

David shook his head and pushed the toilet door open; he closed it again to check it. It opened like it was perfectly fitted, excellently hung and not a warp. David stepped into the room and closed the door; maybe Chris had been in there. But, if he had been, how had he left?

THE SCHOOL - THE PAST.

David looked around the headmaster's office. It was the same as it had been when he had attended the school. Even the crap metal trophies that were in a cupboard looked the same. It now had a computer on the desk, but overall, everything was laid out the same way. He looked down at the carpet, still the same musty red colour that it had been all those years ago. They had to have replaced it, didn't they? The headmaster took his attention from the carpet entering the room; he dragged his son Jason behind him. The headmaster smartly dressed, Jason... Well, he was dressed. This was the third time the school summoned David for one of these meetings this year. It was only May! It was not even the third time this school year! Jason had been caught smoking. That was not a problem; David had smoked at that age. He would have been annoyed with Jason being caught smoking but not too angry. David knew he had many faults, but he had no intention of adding hypocrisy to that list. It was getting caught smoking in the school. Why couldn't he have done it in fag alley like

every typical teenager? No, Jason had walked from his English class and lit up as soon as he had left the building, still walking across the playground.

Things were different back in my day. Christ, David thought, now he sounded like his parents. Something that comes to us all at a point in our lives, and we discover we are our parents.

Fag alley, ah, the memories. Jessica and the quick fumble after a smoke! The place where kids thought they were clever and kept hidden, but the teachers knew. They always knew; how could they not? The kids had shown a little respect by hiding away, so the teachers had turned a blind eye. A mutual agreement of sorts that had worked for decades. But, no. This was not good enough for his son. He would not have bollocked him over the smoking. He would not have even had a go about him smoking during school hours. What had rattled his cage and what had finally broken the sticks of calmness had been the lack of respect. He would give him one almighty bollocking for showing no respect for the school's rules, especially as he had been summoned here *again*. Called here again!

Jason took the seat next to his father. Scruffy with his shirt untucked, his tie ripped at the bottom. David sighed inwardly; he had not bought him up this way. Kids would rebel; it was a fact of life, but why like this? Why did he do it like this, David thought. He was at a loose end with Jason and had no idea what to do. The headmaster, Simon Richards, who had sat opposite, looked exasperated with the whole matter. They had all been here before. "I suppose you know that this cannot continue?" Richards said as he closed the file on his desk. "We all must take things like this very seriously, Mr Williams." David did take it seriously. He took it very seriously. He felt he was the only one on that side of the table who took it seriously. Jason was sitting, rolling a strand of hair around his finger. Fiddling as his academic

life burned all around him. A rebel without a clue or a thought for those he might hurt.

"Please, it's David, and no, I do not need to be told how serious this situation is." Captain Brown nose raced to the rescue. He could ill afford to take time from work if Jason were suspended again. He only wished that the headmaster could understand that. "Mr Williams," Richards said, stressing that he had not used his forename. *Not a good sign.* "I am quite honestly at the end of my tether. We have tried everything." There was a slight tingle in the human volcano that was David's temper. The inferno that rages inside of us all. He could feel the lava starting to bubble and simmer. Calm down, he told himself. He willed his subconscious to settle the flames and keep them controlled. Now would not have been the time. Urging the volcanic anger into submission. Was there ever a good time? "Unfortunately, I believe, and I have the backing, that a suspension will not be enough this time." Oh, for fucks sake. The bubbling of the cauldron of anger that was Mount David continued. Lava popped, boiled, and splashed but had not yet overflowed. The psyche juggled the balls of anger, rage, and temper with expert precision. It'd had a lot of practice over the years. "Jason's complete lack of remorse or regret, his attitude overall and his disruptive tendencies really gave me no other option," the headmaster said. "I do appreciate that this has been a tough time for you both," he continued. "And you both have my sympathies. The decision, though, has been made. It is final."

Sometimes a word sticks, *much like a door*. It sticks for no reason. The phrasing of something may be done incorrectly, and the word is totally out of place. *I was learnt that;* had always been a bugbear. It could be two words that should never be together being placed side by side. *We require a*

compulsory donation, which was another. It grips, digs, and twists its way into your upper mouth and refuses to let go. Something the Phaborg would have been proud of. It could also be when someone offers their sympathies before giving you some news. Some news that was about to beat ten bells of living shite out of your already tumultuous existence. The better people among us will bite our tongues, hold back, and keep our mouths closed. To take one for the team, *as it were*. David was a good man, a better man, and even though he had a cauldron of anger that was incredibly close to boiling over, he kept schtum. He should be commended for that. Many people will think of themselves better, *maybe they are*, but many of us could not have kept quiet in these situations. That was until Jason opened his mouth and threw half a box of chilli powder, some sulphur, and half a bottle of nitro-glycerine into the volcano.

"Ha, awesome. No school," Jason said excitedly and started to remove his tie. He pulled the knot downwards to allow the tail to escape. It was not the straw, but a barrow of hay thrown from a height to achieve terminal velocity was dropped upon David's mental camel's back. The camel now lay on the floor with blood gushing from it. The violence of the camel's death and the straw had fanned the flames under the cauldron. Not only did it overflow, but it also tipped and then exploded. "Sympathies?" David roared. "Sympathies, you can shove your sympathies up your arse." The room fell silent. You could not only have heard the pin hitting the floor and dropping. You could have heard the noise as the fingers opened to drop it. That tiny scraping of friction as the pin fell loose. You could have almost heard the bubbling overspill that had exploded and decorated David's inner mind. "Hah, you tell him, dad," Jason said and laughed. "What is he gonna do? Kick us out?" David turned to look at his son. It is possible that as

David spoke, he would have been able to better John Thaw as Jack Regan in *The Sweeney*. "Shut it," he snarled at Jason. For once, Jason did as he was told. "My wife is dead. I have to work a job, and, only fucking hell, as if that wasn't enough, I now have this to deal with?" The headmaster, Richards, started to open his mouth. He took one look at the man opposite and decided that sometimes you let people speak, and sometimes it was safer to let them vent.

"Do you know what? You can stuff your stinking shit hole of a school. It was a fucking dump when I was here, and it is still a rotting carcass," David stopped. His point, *he thought*, had been made. David grabbed Jason by the shoulders and hoisted him to his feet. Jason found himself upright in seconds without giving his son any chance to resist. "Come on; we're leaving," he said as he turned for the door. The door was opened, and David pushed Jason through it. He then went through himself, slammed the door shut, and stamped his way from the school buildings. Richard's receptionist poked his head around the door and looked across the office. "That could have gone better," he said.

Richards looked up, sighed, and replied. "With a temper like that, it could have been much worse."

David stormed across the car park and headed for the gate; Jason followed him as he went. David would have had a force ninety-nine hurricane following just behind if storm clouds could gather just from mental energy. "What the fuck am I meant to do now?" David mainly ranted to himself but also at Jason. "I have to work, bills to pay, and you pull this shit? Why couldn't you use fag alley like every other bloody teenager? Why do you have to do this? What the fuck am I supposed to do?" David turned to look at Jason. Jason stood and looked at his father. He then did what many

teenagers do when faced with a question they do not like or have no idea how to answer. He shrugged his shoulders. "Fucking hell," David said. "You really don't get it, do you? You're as bad as your bloody mother." Jason stood and stared at his father. David did have the power and ability to keep his mouth closed; at times, Jason lacked this. The old saying, if they asked you to jump from a bridge, would you? Jason would have, or at the very least, given it some serious consideration.

"You don't get to talk about her," Jason fumed. "You keep your mouth shut about her," he continued and jabbed his finger towards David. "You killed her, and now you have the nerve to bring her up?" Jason screamed at his father. David tried to cool himself. To remind himself that he was dealing with a teenager, not a fully mature adult. Would his son ever mature? He had his doubts. He was also dealing with what was, and forever would be, a very emotive subject. David took a long deep breath, breathing in the air and exhaling the anger. "Killed her?" David said as calmly as he could. "I didn't bloody kill her; she topped herself!" David took a cigarette from the packet in his pocket and placed it in his mouth. He almost lit it before leaving the grounds but stopped himself. "I knew you were thick, but I didn't think you were that thick. You do understand what suicide is, don't you?"

Jason stood and stared at the floor; he slowly lifted his head and looked at his father. If looks could kill, David would never have seen a murder, and he would not have ended up in the house. He would have died there and then on the school grounds. Struck down by the power of his son's stare. Died and left to decay in the car park of the *rotting* school. Fortunately, looks alone cannot kill, so Jason did the next best thing. He continued to do what every teen does when they don't like something but have no way to

reply. No way to reply that makes any sense. "Fuck off. I'll fucking have you one day," Jason spat out at his father and then rushed off. He flew past David and out of the gates before David could reply. Jason lit a cigarette as he left the gates. David considered going after him, but what would be the point? What could he say that would not further inflame the situation? They both needed to calm down and think things over. David walked from the gate, and as his son had done, he lit his cigarette. He wandered the quiet road and headed home.

THE PRIEST'S DOUBTS.

Father Thomas paced the church's aisle. He looked down at the worn floor at his feet. Many had paced this aisle over the years. He thought something was wrong. Also, like many before, he could not put his finger upon the niggling doubt tormenting his brain. Something was amiss, but he had no idea what. In his time, he had heard many others talking about feeling evil. He had not experienced that feeling until today. This was not something tickling the bottom of his spine and causing the hairs to stand on end. This was something digging deep into his spine and jangling the fluids with a spoon whilst tap dancing on the cord. The slow rumble of anxiety brewed within him. A deep sense of dread flowed around inside.

The funeral had gone well, as well as one could have expected. As well as Father Thomas could have hoped, given the circumstances. He had no love for David Williams, but nobody should have to bury their child. "You work in mysterious ways, but sometimes I wonder if you are not just a bastard," he said to the church, grateful that he was alone. The words resounded around the high church ceiling. Williams had lived a troubled life, and it

wouldn't have been fair to lie and say he was well-liked; he wasn't. He had one hell of a temper, but that had calmed in recent times. The anger was still there; did anyone ever really change? Thomas was an alcoholic; he had found his peace with that long ago. He was still an alcoholic. Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic. He thought Williams was the same. Once an angry bastard, always an angry bastard. Maybe leopards can change; maybe he was wrong. It would not be the first time, nor would it be the last. The human condition both interested and infuriated him.

Eighteen months was all that had passed. A year and a half since they buried Williams's wife, he was back to bury his son. *Cruel* was the word that hovered just below Thomas's lips. David's wife, Shannon, had killed herself. Many behind his back said she had done it to escape him. It was not true. He pushed the thought from his mind. Whatever faults Williams had, he was not a murderer. He had loved his son, but he had adored and loved his wife. He would have done anything for her. They had argued, sure. *Who doesn't?* There was always the same winner; it was always David who had backed down and given in. The man could be unpleasant sometimes, but he cherished that woman. She had been a depressive, suffering from it for years. That had been the cause; that had been the reason. Nothing more and nothing less. Occam's razor, why overcomplicate what is likely very simple? They may have argued and shouted at one another, but she knew she would win.

Then there was the son Jason, and what a mess that had been. Much like his father, he had been hard to like. Thomas knew he should not have felt that way about the boy, but it was what it was. Some things have no reason; they just are. Jason had been suspended from school for fighting, swearing, and finally expelled for smoking. Who was he, HT in another life, to look

down upon the boy? He still had; he could not help himself. Thomas had helped the lad when and where he could. The kid had always been so ungrateful, so obnoxious and nasty; even as a toddler, it had shone through. The only brightness that came from him was the ability to be sly, bully and lie. Father Thomas shook his head and sat in one of the pews. He should not have felt that way about one of his flock. He knew that. The kid was wrong, not evil, but naughty and vindictive. He figured it was not the parent's fault; some kids are born that way. His death after being expelled nobody deserved that, nobody.

The darkness that he felt, he could not explain. It had started at the burial. It continued even now, in his place of worship, in the house of God. The nerve of it, the strength of it. He could feel its power. The feeling of dread, worthlessness but most of all, of revenge. The feeling had relinquished a little as the funeral had ended; it had lessened as Williams had left. It was still present, still lurking and hiding in the shadows, like a bad smell it had lingered. In the pit of Father Thomas's stomach, the idea thundered that this is what he was sent to do. This is what he was sent to fight. How could he fight what he did not understand? Thomas held the crucifix he wore and said kinder words as he prayed to God and asked for help.

Father Thomas stood at the foot of the drive. He did not know if God had sent him here, only that he had gotten the idea while praying. He had to go to the house and see David Williams. He had to ensure the man was all right and that nothing had happened to him. A tiny droplet of an idea that had expanded the more he thought about it. When the idea had entered his head, the mists of darkness had lifted a little. It was still there, but now he had a purpose; he could see through it. It was like the clearing of clouds; he was

now on the edge of it and had a better view of things. He felt in his heart that he had to protect this man, that Williams was in danger. It just felt right.

The house stood before him, an old semi on the end of the block. The garden was tidy and well looked after. Father Thomas approached the front door and knocked. The priest waited and watched as a small sparrow flew and landed on an upturned plant pot under the window. The sparrow watched the priest and pecked the top of the plant pot; the priest knocked again. He waited at the door but knew that he was alone, and the house was empty. *What if it is not empty, but I am too late?* He tried to push the thought aside, but it kept popping back to the surface like a plastic ball in water. The door's small square glass windows were all frosted. He tried to look inside but could not, the frosting doing what it was designed to do. He could break one of the panes, but that would cause too much noise. A priest being arrested for breaking and entering would not be a good look. The sparrow squawked and pecked at the pot; the priest looked over at it. The sparrow looked back.

"What has gotten into you, my friend?" Father Thomas asked the bird. The bird just continued to peck and squawk. It was agitated but not afraid of the man standing before it. He walked to the bird planning to look in through the house's front windows. The bird chirped and hopped up onto his arm. "Hello there," the priest said, surprised at the bird's lack of timidity. The bird just tweeted at him and then at the pot. The bird looked at the priest and then at the pot, tweeting intensely. The priest bent and picked up the pot. There was nothing under it, so he looked at the pot and turned it over in his hands. He looked inside the pot and found it. A key had been stuck with Blu Tack to the inside. He pulled the key from the pot, and the

bird fluttered away. "Thank you," the priest said as it went. *Wilp* was a strange thing.

He glanced over his shoulder as he slipped the key into the door. He did not want to be arrested, but he knew he had to find David. The key pushed into the lock with ease, and he twisted it. The door opened, and he stepped inside quickly, pushing it shut as he did so.

DRIP, SPLOSH.

David finished with the toilet and flushed. He watched the yellowing liquid vanish and then turned to wash his hands. The small bathroom was compact but had a toilet, sink and shower. Water, soap, rinse and repeat to be sure. It was a lesson he had been taught as a child, and it had stuck ever since. He looked around the room for a towel or anything to dry his hands and found nothing. *Typical*, he thought as he cursed under his breath. Ghost house with everything you need except a towel. He went to the door, wiping his hands as best he could on his trousers. To hell with it; at least they were a dark colour. He looked at the lock on the door; it was locked. He gave the door a short sharp pull. The door moved, not much, but it moved. There is no way that it had been locked. It had not moved at all when he had barged into it. David shook his hands, and a little more water fell to the floor. He unlocked the door and stepped into the hallway.

"Hey Chris," David said as he saw Chris emerge from the last door on the right. Chris looked at David with little more interest than many people would have looked at a vagrant. It was as if he had expected to see David;

Michael must have spoken to him. "Any idea where I can find a towel?" David asked. Chris looked now with the attention of a child who had found a box of matches. His eyes focused intensely on David's hands, just like a fly which had just found the perfect sandwich at a picnic to land upon or admiring a steaming fresh shit. He stared at David's sleeve and hands that were still a little wet with the same distinct fascination he had had for the rain tipper tapping on the van's roof.

David shook his hands, trying to indicate what he needed. It was an art form he had learnt from many years of using a crowded pub. The sign language of a man who does not know sign language but wants to get his point across a crowded bar. Chris continued to gaze at his hands in a daze and paid no attention to what David had indicated or asked. A small, tiny, insignificant drop of water flew into the air as David shook. Carried on a light breeze that had entered from the windows, the droplet travelled between them. It drifted on the air in almost slow motion as it travelled from David to Chris.

Chris stood and watched the bead of water as it wafted through the air. At the last moment, he lifted his hand to knock it away. An instinct took over when moving would have been the better and wiser option. The drop of water hit the back of his hand, and he just stopped instantly. Chris stood for what seemed an eternity, frozen in the moment. The spot where the hand had made contact with the drip of water turned red. The redness spread like an inkblot on a scrap of toilet paper up the length of his arm. Flowing up his skin, it travelled downwards to the fingertips simultaneously. The redness scarred and tore at the skin, causing it to fracture. The skin chipped like old paint on a sideboard and flaked away in small pieces. A stale orange fluid leaked to the floor from the cracks and fissures. It smelt like clothes that

had been left damp in a closet. A smouldering, festering smell seemed to leak into everything surrounding it. The skin started to burst with sores, open sores that oozed yet more pus.

Chris should have been screaming or panicking, but he just stood there watching his body change and mutate. He was not frozen; he moved and watched as it happened but did not seem to be in a frenzy. Red discharge seeped from the blistering sores and dripped to the floor to join the orange fluids. This all took place in no time at all. David stood shocked and with no idea of what to do or if he could even help at all. The skin started to peel quicker, falling in sheets to the floor. Chris lifted his right arm and extended a finger; he pointed it at David. The bone of the finger protruded through the end of the skin. A white zit of bone on a red raw lump of flesh. The skin peeled away and fell to the floor like confetti at a wedding as Chris tried to step forwards. His leg broke as he moved, snapping clean in two. The noise of the bone snapping hopped down through the hallway and descended the stairs. Chris looked down and saw the bone sticking from his shoe, the pus and orange stagnant water flowing from both ends of the break. His eyes opened wide in horror as he fell forwards and put his left hand out to stop the fall.

The bone in his arm splintered as he hit the floor and pushed its way through what remained of the skin. It poked through like a skewer on a kebab, juddering as a large chunk of flesh hung from the end. Orange and pulsing with sores, the lump of meat slipped down the bone as it shuddered. The bone split on both ends like a wedge had been driven down the centre. It crumbled from bone to hand and fell away into the goop below. Flecks of bone fall like discarded stones from a stonemason's hammer. Chris opened his mouth, the lips peeled away from the jaw, pulled back as the flesh

decomposed quickly. "You, why couldn't you..." the jawbone broke away from his mouth, falling to join the mess on the floor; it turned to dust as it fell. Depositing its sprinkles over and in the slush below.

The house shook; the rooms, the doors and the floor all moved. Each and every screw, nut, bolt, and nail moved. The foundations of the very building seemed to jump into the air by half an inch and then thump back to the floor. Vibrations soared through every nook and cranny; the house settled and stilled itself. The silence rang from the walls as a male voice cried out from every angle. "No!" it hollered and screamed. The walls seemed to shake with fear as it did so.

The house's movement and the voice's volume snapped David from his shock. He had been held tightly in the horror of what had happened to Chris. It had happened so quickly that he had hardly had time to process it, let alone consider running. Not quite happening in the blink of an eye, but a slow wink. He looked at Chris, who was now nothing more than bones that seemed to dissolve into themselves. It had swallowed clothes, fat, muscle, and anything else that was once Chris. Creating a massive pile of Chris-snot and Chris-pus, all dusted with a covering of Chris-bone sand. A display for all ages; *just do not touch it!* The messy, dusty putty at the feet of what was left of Chris with a rough human-type shape sticking from it.

Then what remained of the Chris shape moved. It was only a slight twitch, someone or something testing the putrid waste that remained. A bubble formed on the top of the stinking goo; it popped, and another bubble followed. It pushed through like the blowing of hot glass. The bubble seemed to harden upon contact with the air forming a small six-inch sphere. The Chris-goo-created sphere sat still for a moment and then shattered into thousands of pieces. The pieces flew through the air quickly and smashed

into David's face. Unlike the drip of water, this happened so quickly that David could not move; the shards did not hurt him physically, but what happened was worse. Every shard seemed to contain an old memory; a mental hurt penetrated his mind with every jagged edge. The embarrassments, the wrongdoings, the failures, and so much more suddenly appeared in perfect clarity. The nightmares of his past rushed back with a vengeance. David clasped his hands to his head, trying to push the memories back into the darkness that was the back of his mind. He screamed out loud, and everything fell black. The memories fell apart as quickly as they had built.

The voice that had spoken before now spoke once more. "Be gone," it screamed from every inch of the landing. Chris's remains had been a twitch; now, it seemed to be pushed by an invisible tsunami. What remained flew backwards and away from David. It was caught on an unseen wave of energy that threw it. The goop and remains smashed and crashed into the wall at the far end of the hall. It was sucked back into the house like water into a sponge. The body, the fragments and every last drop of gooey mess went with it into the wall. Crashing against it like a melon being twatted with a cricket bat. The mess that had been Chris had seemed to vanish into the wall and floor. Engulfed into the unknown and taken from this realm by some power. The hallway that had housed Chris now stood empty. David stared, shocked, bewildered, unsure of what he had just seen and heard. He did not even hear the footsteps rambling up the stairs.

"What the hell happened?" Michael asked as he looked down the hallway. There was nothing except David for him to see. The long corridor was as empty as it had been when David had first walked up the stairs. "I just, I just," David stuttered. "I just shook my hands, and he..." David's thoughts

were wandering around like a pisshead after a long session. They bounced from one idea to the next, never settling on one thing before rambling to the next idea. Dribbling and slurring ideas and then thinking of something else. "Fuck this, I am out," David announced to everyone, but primarily to himself. He charged forward and towards the staircase; he had seen and had enough. Molly stood in his way.

Molly stood in his way, not as one might have imagined, intending to stop David. The girls were both small and petite, and he could have barged straight past her and knocked her out of the way like a skittle. Sending her sprawling backwards and over the banister. Flying through the air as she smashed all the way to the tiled floor below. *Boop, bang, bosh.* No, she stood there to get near him as he passed.

David hardly noticed her as he approached. He had one mission; his mind was set on one thing and one thing only, leaving. Molly reached out once he was close enough and grabbed his arm. It was not a grab intended to stop him. This soft holding was meant to show that she was there. The making of physical contact some lovers may do as they sit next to each other. Just a touch to say, I am here, I am here for you. David felt a warmth in his arm as she made contact. The fondness of feeling, that emotion of touch felt much like the slow warming of the scotch he had drunk earlier. The reaction turned to softness and flowed around his body. Like stepping into the perfect temperature bubbled bath, David felt a calmness covering him. This was pleasant, and this was helpful. The fear, confusion, and anger washed away from him, replaced by a feeling of happiness and tranquillity. A relaxed feeling of peace and serenity.

Molly leant over and whispered "calm" into David's ear. The moment she said it, he started to feel quite serene. All the troublesome thoughts seemed

to drift away. He felt like he had been double dosed on a sedative, his thoughts were there, but they floated past when he tried to feel for them. Fluttering away on the wind of forgetfulness as if Molly had absorbed them or insulated the ideas. "You have to tell us everything," Molly whispered once more. It was as if she had a direct line from his ear to the centre of his hidden mind. Everything he would tell her, anything that she wanted to know. He was utterly transfixed and held in her dreamlike trance. Her intoxicating aura. Whatever she asked, he would have spilt it. His most profound, secret, and darkest desires were hers if she asked of them. She led David downstairs, taking him by the hand and leading him as the pied piper had once led the children of Hamelin. He was being taken by this girl, this woman, back downstairs. And, like the children of Hamelin, he was happy to be led.

The four of them gathered in the front room. David was still in a trance-like state. Whatever power Molly possessed still held him tightly. Michael and Milly had followed them closely behind. Michael poured them all a drink as Molly led David to the sofa. They both sat on the sofa, Molly as close as she could be to David. With the four glasses placed on the table, Molly spoke to David once again. "Tell me everything, starting with the funeral," she said and placed her hand on David's leg. David told them everything, the sex, the violence, the haunted eyes. He told them of things he was not even aware that he saw. Details that had entered through his eyes and then stored in his mind. Information that he was not conscious of having. Every detail flowed from him. He described the pinstripe braces that the man had been wearing. The stockings he now realises were seamed. The voice in his head and how the man stared at him came out willingly.

David sat opposite Milly as he told them his story, watching her. Molly kept his attention with words, his eyes focused on Milly. His vision flickered between the real and what could only have been unreal. Milly seemed to part and become two. It was like he had had a skinful of alcohol or a bizarre trip. The Milly on the right was her usual self. She sat watching and listening to him as he spoke. The Milly on the left had turned into something completely different.

His eyes wandered her legs as he told of the five, no six fields he went through looking for this man. Milly (left) opposite opened her legs and smiled at David. He could see that she was wearing no knickers. He tried to look away but was disarmed by the smile and drawn in by the view. Milly and her doppelganger sit opposite, and David can't stop watching the one on the left. He answered the questions Molly asked as Milly ripped into her tights, pulling them apart using her fingers and nails as he spoke. He closed his right eye and could only see the left Milly, switching and closing his left; he could see the right Milly complete and just sat listening.

She can't be doing that, David thought to himself. He was thinking of what he had just seen, but he told the others about the voice he had heard at the time of the murder. He looked around the room; eyes dragged away from the left-hand Milly for just a moment. The two Millys sat opposite, one flashing him, and Molly seemed oblivious to it. Molly just asked questions as he tried to keep his mind on more important matters. He looked back at Milly. He was describing how the man had gazed unblinking right at him. The sexual Milly leant forwards, her dress sagged down around her neck, displaying her small, perfectly formed breasts. He spoke of the woman in the field, how he had held his hand hard on her neck and watched the blood seeping through his fingers. Milly leant further forward

and looked directly into his eyes. She then pushed her dress downwards with a finger. She ran the finger around her nipples, causing them to stand alert. She sat up, and David looked at the hardened nipples poking through the dress. Standing to attention and demanding to be seen. "I think we have a problem," Molly said to Michael, suddenly breaking the spell.

Milly leant forward once more and grasped David's hands. This time she was complete. A nanosecond for her to combine and be back to normal. Was it in his mind? No, he was sure that what he had seen had happened. She spoke to him in a soothing, dreamlike voice. "David, now listen to me," she said. "Chris suffered from aquagenic urticaria. When he comes into contact with water, his skin breaks out in hives and sores. That is all that happened, a simple allergic reaction," Milly said.

The idea was forming in David's mind. Implanted by the girl, and as a seed dropped in a forest, it was beginning to grow. Something kicked slightly, a push that came from the back of his mind. The thought of an allergic reaction was funnelling through and into his brain. Something else was trying to get out; something was trying to break free. Two conflicting thoughts battled for the number one spot in his mind. Two ideas at once, one was pushing a door in his mind, and one was pulling on it. Could it have been an allergic reaction? No, his brain kicked back. But his mind also wanted to accept what this woman said. It wanted to accept the unbelievable. The door broke, and the idea of an allergic reaction jumped and implanted into David's mind; as that thought went in, the other escaped.

"That voice," David said, suddenly free from any spells he had been under. Loose from the mental block that had been holding him in place. "I think that was my son." Suddenly aware of everything and his mind running back at its usual speed, David felt hugely embarrassed. He knew it had been

a while, but he had also noticed that he was sporting an enormous boner as he stood and spoke. Pushing his trousers forwards like, well, like the nipples had been on Milly's chest. And that thought did not help him in the slightest. David picked up the glass of scotch and necked it in one. "I am out," he said and ran from the room.

"I think," Michael said, echoing Molly's words, "that we have a serious problem."

THE EIGHTIES.

A chair is sitting in the middle of a darkened room. Upon that chair, a man was bound with ropes. *How did I get here?* He thought with his confused mind. He struggled with the ropes, and they just cut deeper into his wrists and ankles. They seemed to tighten as he struggled; they pulled as tight as a hose clip would on a pipe. He could feel the rope tight against his shin bones and the wood of the chair; it pushed, pinched, and pulled at his skin when he moved. *In short*, he was trapped.

He looked around the room to try and get some idea of where he was. To grasp at something familiar or recognisable. The windows had all been long boarded up, and the lighting was limited. The chair had been placed in the brightest part of the room. A window above was open, and the moonlight that spilt through it nearly gave a perfect spotlight on where he was sitting. The lighting made it difficult to make much more out. The rest of the room seemed gloomy and dark, with just a few boxes scattered around the hard concrete floor.

The light in the room. The chemicals in his body and the sparks in his brain combined. Together they started to lift the mist from his mind. The clearing of the haziness brings back the memories of that evening.

I was in The Outlook...

The Outlook was the biggest and best disco in town. The music was rocking, and the guys and gals were bopping; it was a perfectly normal Saturday night. He leant over, and one long *sniiiiiiiiiiiiif* later, his brain was flooded with the ecstasy of that lovely white power. He felt excited, he felt awake, and he was ready to take on the world! One dance at a time. He ordered a drink, a double! "Give me a vodka and coke," he'd said to the barmaid, "and make it a double." *Tonight is going to be my night.* Lots of his friends bought into the idea that if you did the line, you should stick to water but fuck it. If he was going to get *fucked*, then he was going to get really proper *fucked*. The sort of fucked that you woke up from to discover you had been screwing all night - *if you were lucky* - and had no idea where you were. Or, woke in a deserted room and tied to a chair...

Shit! What did I do?

He had danced, of course. Shit, dancing was an understatement. He'd had moves that would have made Travolta jealous. Madonna, Gabriel, Jackson, and The Stones, he had danced to them all. The Bangles walk like an Egyptian? He had even done all the movements. He was the man, he was high, and he was drunk. This was his night. Then there was a blank, an empty space where memories should have been living. A hole in the bookcase of consciousness. The next memory smashed into view...

I left the disco...

And he had left the disco alone. Why had he left alone? It was the woman; she had given him the creeps. She gave him the willies, and his friends were

too busy to care. She had jumped up, walked along his spine and played it like a xylophone; she tapped on every rib as she went. It was her eyes mostly. It was dim in the disco, her pupils should have been small, but they were huge. He had glanced at her a few times. She would watch him, but her eyes looked cold, dead, and black. She was always observing him; he never had a moment of peace. He was sure she was inspecting him; he supposed she was short and dumpy but sort of attractive. He had undoubtedly fancied worse over the years. Her clothes were strange too. Who wears a suit to a disco? Worse, a suit and tie! Weirdo.

Was it her? Did she do this?

No, he thought. It can't have been. He had left the disco alone, of that, he was sure. The misting of memories was becoming more transparent. He had stumbled and wobbled his way across the empty car park. Singing tunes in his head and sometimes out loud. Mumbling the lyrics that he thought he knew but ultimately did not. The lamppost he remembered grabbing hold of a lamppost and doing his tribute to singing in the rain. Spinning around it with one hand outstretched, reaching into the air. He'd grasped at nothing as he fell; he cursed himself for not having an umbrella to hand. He got lucky, and it was dry; a quick brush and the trousers would be good as new. He bent over and brushed his hands over the front of the trousers, and that was when...

That was when it happened. I remember now.

Something hard hit him over the back of the head as he lifted back up. Something hard and heavy, a brick, maybe? No, it can't have been a brick. Could it? He shuffled in the chair, trying to feel his head somehow. He wobbled his head and tried to move the hair there. He shook backwards and forward, then left and right, but the hair would not budge. Hairspray or

blood? He liked to think the former; he'd used enough. But, suspected the latter; *hope for the best but expect the worse*. That was what he always thought when sober. He wobbled the chair to try and tip it. It would hurt, he thought, but at least it might break. The chair wobbled slightly but would not tip. He did not have the strength, and his head had started to pound.

"Be still. It will all be over soon," a rasping hacking smoke-filled voice said from the darkness. "Who's there?" he called out from the chair, but he received no reply. Then the dripping started. It was slow at first. One drip and then another a few seconds afterwards. A slow but steady constant dropping of dips upon his forehead. Slow like a tap with a washer that had perished over time. Chinese water torture just for him. Was it raining and dripping through the roof? He looked up and could see no window directly above him. Another drip dropped into his eye, and this one burnt and stung. His eye throbbed, and suddenly, the dripping didn't matter. It felt like his eye was on fire, the searing smouldering pain. He tried to blink it out, opening and closing rapidly, but that only made it worse. The drips were coming thick and fast now. It was more like a slow flow raining down upon him. The hairs in his nose perked up, and he suddenly realised what was happening.

The Firebug had been terrorising the county for six months now. Nobody was quite sure when it started, and the authorities had been finding new fires dating back almost weekly.

I must have been captured by The Firebug because this is petrol!

The first known confirmed murder and arson was in a warehouse on the outskirts of Burnham on Sea. It would not have been the first empty, semi-derelict building set on fire; it would not be the last one either. It was considered nothing, a minor inconvenience, until they had found the corpse.

The body had been wedged into piping with the fire raging below it. A full sausage skin made of metal with human meat cooked and burnt inside. The report afterwards, and the newspapers, had let it be known that he was burnt alive. Homelessness was considered, and it may have been a tragic accident. Vagrancy was rampant at the time, with cities and towns overflowing with boxes and tents. In the end, the body was identified as a missing person. A young man from a neighbouring county had been missing for just over a week, The Firebug was born. This had occurred at the beginning of the year, and his subsequent three murders and arson had grown more audacious over the following months. It was always the same, a kidnapped victim and then the body found shortly afterwards, always found and burnt alive.

"Firebug, firebug. I like fire, oh yes, I do," the man's voice tittered in the dark. The drip that had become rain was now a stream. It covered him from head to toe before it suddenly stopped. It was like a tap had been turned off, though he suspected it had just run empty. "She said if I am good, then I will see the void, look into the void, oh yes, I will," Firebug said as he stepped from the shadows. His hair sat in small tufts on his head. The rest had been pulled out or could not grow due to the extensive scar tissue. The scars on his face were the same as those on his head. They were raked down his cheeks and across his forehead like the cracks on a mountaintop. He wondered if The Firebug had been in a horrific accident and had been scared by fire itself. He drew closer and stepped into the light; then, he saw that these scars were from cuts, not flames. They were too clean to have been flame damaged.

The ragged clothes he wore were that of a homeless person. Was that how he had gotten away with it? Was he homeless, or was it just a disguise? Did

he sit around the corner and pull up a blanket? Homeless and ignored by society? *It does not matter to us, as this is not the firebugs story.* The firebug struck a match and smiled at him. A toothless grin made all the worse by the scaring of the gums that matched that of the face. The potholes where the teeth used to be. Teeth that appeared to have been forcefully removed, leaving dark black pits. The smell of sulphur filled the air as firebug flicked the match, and it seemed to hover before it dropped to the floor at the feet of the chair.

The flames flooded from the matchstick to the floor under his feet. They climbed up the chair legs, grappled, and jumped to his legs. The heat and flames rose along his body and groin as they made their way to his chest. The nylon clothes he had worn to the disco started to crackle and pop as they melted and fused with his skin. Boiling cheap plastic material connecting with flesh and becoming one. Pain flooded every cell that made up his brain, every cell shouting for it to stop, for this red-hot pain to end. The smell of burning flesh and plastic filled the room, and Firebug watched and cackled. "She told me you was the one. She told me all right, and firebug did as he was told." She? He thought. It was his second to last living thought. Could he have meant the *she* who was at the disco?

The thought interrupted the agony for the briefest of moments, but the pain screeched back, demanding to be felt. Like a wayward child, it craved his attention. It roared and screamed to be heard. His skin started to harden and crack, pulling apart like Sellotape from a reel. The cracking and ripping noises flowed through the room; this excited The Firebug. The plastic and flesh fused and flaked away in a hard glistening crackling, falling to the floor. A smouldering discharge that had once been both manmade and man. He felt his right arm give a little as the flames took hold of the chair's

armrest. He started to lift it, but the plastic and skin had become interwoven with the plastic of the chair's arm. The skin ripped from the bone as he lifted. He flopped his arm back down but missed, and the arm fell toward the flames in his lap. The loose skin hung and flopped like the bark peeling from a tree. Hanging and ready to separate but still unwilling and unable to leave its host. His head was on fire now, the flames devouring the hair. Flammable hairspray greeted the fire and embraced it. Soulmates to the end, they seemed destined to be together. His last thought, as he passed out, was a strange one. It was something he would have never guessed. It was just this; that the smell was rather pleasant.

Firebug grinned as the body finally stopped fighting his flames. He thought this had been a good one as he inhaled the warm air. He watched as the flames grew thinner. She had told him to leave the building this time. She had said that the magic fuel would do what was needed. He liked doing the buildings though; he enjoyed seeing them burn and knowing it was his work. What could she do anyway? She was nothing when compared to him. He was the artist here; she had just supplied the tools. He watched in complete fascination as the flames died out from the body. Leaving it black, twisted and stuck in place on the chair like a weird crispy black statue. "She can do nothing to me," Firebug muttered as he backed from the room. "Nothing."

Firebug was gone just a minute and returned with a jerry can of petrol. "Oh, Firebug will have his fun, oh yes, he will," he cackled as he danced and covered the room with the fuel. "Firebug does what he wants." He lit another match and looked at the flame. He turned the match and let the flame grow along the stick before throwing it. The match hit the ground, and the flames whirled in the petrol. Consuming it as they smothered the

room. Firebug took a step backwards and out of the door. He was close enough to see and feel but far enough away that he would be unharmed. He took a knife from a pocket on his tattered coat, and as he stood hypnotised by the flames, he dragged the blade across his forehead. Blood wept into his eyes, but he paid little attention to it. The scar would be his reward. The scar was his trophy.

The heat rose as the fire built, the flames enjoying the old dry wood that made the bulk of the building. Consuming the dried, decaying framework with a relish. Firebug took a step backwards and then stopped. He wanted to savour the flames, to soak in the smoke and heat. This was what he wanted; it was this that he enjoyed. The victims were foreplay; the fire was the climax.

Something moved from within the flames. Nothing happened at first, but then slowly, the flames parted. A parting of the red sea of flames, a figure stood in the centre. The young man who had been burnt alive stood there looking toward firebug. The eyes were long burnt away, but he seemed to see, or sense, where Firebug was. He stepped forward from the fire and then took another step. Slowly like a toddler, learning as he went, the first steps tentative, the next more confident. Firebug stood dumbstruck. Half in curious awe and half shell-shocked fear. What was this? He thought. This had never happened before. This was not supposed to happen! The burnt figure stumbled forwards slowly. It limbered towards him with arms outstretched like a monster in an early Hollywood movie. Had it spoken, it would have come as no surprise if it had told firebug of its desire for brains.

Firebug just stood and watched. The scarring on his face burnt with pain as his victim's black flaking remains stumbled toward him. The warning system he would usually have listed to flashed with red lights in his brain. It

screamed and shouted for him to run, but he stood rooted to the spot. When the rambling, crisp remains grabbed him, he knew it was already too late. The warnings had been clear and ignored. The feelings were robust and not followed. He knew this was his fate, and he embraced it. As the two joined together, the flames re-emerged and swallowed them both. A human pyre burning alone. The two fused and became one with the flames.

A short fat woman watched as the pyre burnt itself out. She smiled as she turned and walked away.

ENDLESS RAIN.

David ran from the room and headed outside. He left the open door and looked at the rain battering down from the porch. It had become heavier and was now threatening to become a storm. He just rushed into it like it was not even there. *Bollocks to the door, bollocks to the house, bollocks to the rain, bollocks to vocabulary, and bollocks to any ghosts!* It was a largely windless day, and the rain felt out of place. Rain like this would have usually been accompanied by a strong breeze, maybe even a slight gale. Instead, the world was still and resting. Was this the eye of the storm? A place where nothing much happened with devastation all around. Molly walked from the house and shouted to him, "David, wait!" she shouted. "You can't escape this thing." *Just you bloody watch me*, David thought, but he said nothing. He did not even look back at her. He just continued relentlessly onwards down the drive and into the rain.

David pulled the packet of cigarettes from his pocket and grabbed a smoke. He jammed it into his mouth and then lit it. He shoved the lighter and packet back into the pocket. The anger that he was showing covered the

fear that he was feeling. Smothering it like a blanket. What had he seen? What had it really been? Was this madness? The rain hammered down and soaked into the tobacco and paper; He had barely managed a drag before the cigarette fell apart. He threw the smoke to the floor, cursing as he did so. *Bastard rain, bastard house, bastard fucking cigarette.* He pushed on regardless, ignoring the rain that was getting heavier with each step. Without the wind, the rain was falling in layers. Large droplets of water linked with each other to create great bands that made visibility damn near impossible. *Still*, he pushed on, determined to get away from this place. What was a little rain anyway! He had been wet before; the rain could not hurt him!

Then, in the distance, he saw it. A building! That little tinkle of light that you can see at the end of a tunnel. The light in a mine of despair. If he were lucky, it would be a pub, and he could grab a pint and call for a taxi. Pint? Sod it; he'd have another scotch. A scotch clears the mind, warms the body, and washes away the fear. Ghost house indeed; how had he even tolerated listening to that shite? He felt like an idiot; even just considering it made him feel foolish. He walked closer, and the rain eased a little as he made his way to the building.

David knew; he knew deep down what he was seeing. He did not want to believe it at first, but the closer he got, the more he had to accept the truth. To believe the unbelievable. To marvel at the trick that was impossible. He was walking toward the house and back into his nightmare, back to the hands of his tormenter. Molly was still sitting on the edge of the porch. She watched him as he approached. "You cannot escape," she said with a note of resignation. Nothing in her voice or mannerisms should have done so, but David was annoyed with her. The trick, the spell, the trance, whatever it

was called that she and Milly had used on him. David felt used, used and abused by them.

"Why?" David snapped back angrily. Molly recoiled slightly, she had not expected the temper in his voice, and when he saw her wince, he felt a little guilty. Watch a watch swinging backwards and forwards to cause a trance, or watch Milly? He knew what one he would have picked. Choice, the choice was important, as was permission. The choice was what had been stolen from him. They had never asked him, but was it all that bad? He remembered things that he had not even realised he had noticed. "I don't know," Milly replied. "If I knew, I would tell you, but we just don't know." David believed her, he did not know if he was wise to trust her, but he did. "Why should I trust you?" he asked. "You used me," he added, and once he had done, he felt slightly foolish. Had he been used, or was he a willing participant? Why was he so angry? They had done nothing, and when he had wanted, he had walked out. "We did, and I am sorry. We should have asked," Molly replied.

David made his way to where Molly was sitting. He sat down beside her, not too close, but close enough. A chasm of emptiness rested between them. He took the packet of cigarettes from his pocket; they were soaked. He looked at them and then threw them to the ground. "Just my luck," he said.

"It's not luck," Molly said in reply. She looked at him and then at the packet on the floor. David looked at her and asked, "So what is it?" She looked up from the floor before she answered, "look at your clothes," she said. David did as she asked and looked down at his clothes. He could see nothing out of the ordinary, he was wearing the same clothes, and they looked fine. As if reading his mind, she spoke up, "they are not wet." He looked down and felt his jacket, damp but not wet. She was right. He had

been out in the pouring sheets of rain and should have been soaked to the bone, but he was only slightly damp. "You think the rain really washed the blood away?" Molly said. It was more of a statement and said in that way rather than a question. "So, what..." asked David. Molly looked him straight in the eyes and said with an unmistakable seriousness, "Something is fucking with us."

Hearing the word fucking coming from Molly's mouth shocked David a little. It should not have done so; he had seen everything about her. She felt pure and innocent; he was sure she wasn't. *Hadn't he been through enough to cement that view?* Nevertheless, it still felt wrong. "Talk to me, David," she begged, "Tell me what you want to know." David thought it over and considered his questions. What did he want to know? "Why the messing with me in the front room?" he asked. It was, perhaps, not the most crucial question. It was the one that was making him angry, so he thought it best to get it out of the way first. "It didn't help?" Molly asked, "you didn't enjoy it?" *Enough*, David thought and stood up.

"I'm done," he said and started to walk back towards the rain.

"David, wait," Molly pleaded, "I'm sorry."

Where could he go? That was the problem as he saw it. He could have continued walking around in circles, looping back to the start, but what good would that have done? "So why?" he asked once more as he turned and returned to his spot on the wall. Molly moved over so that she was sitting right next to David. David shuffled along like a guy on his first date who was unsure what to do. Molly stayed put for now. "Okay, sorry," she said. "Three things. Distraction, suggestion, and emotion. I suggested, Milly distracted, and well, emotion takes care of itself in that situation." She counted these off with a finger in the air as she spoke.

"It was all a game?" David asked with a note of disgust.

"Life is just a game!" Molly said in a burst of enthusiasm, "but no, it was not a game. We needed to know what you knew."

"You could have asked," David said. He felt silly saying it, as he was now acting all defensive about something he had enjoyed. Who wouldn't have, he asked himself. He felt he had been used and needed to defend his honour. Would he have complained if it happened in a pub after a pint or two? No, he doubted that he would. "Could have and should have," Molly agreed with him. "I apologise for using you, for not seeking your consent." And there it was. The word David had not even liked to admit to himself was *consent*. Like when David had worn his wife's underwear, it felt so wrong and yet, felt so right. The paradox of underwear and arousal, if that floats your boat. *Consent...* David shook his head a little, the unfamiliarity being shaken away. "So, was it my son's voice that I heard?" David asked. Molly shuffled next to him again, and this time he did not move. "I don't know," she said and placed her hand on his leg. David shivered a little at this as it stirred the memory. The thoughts of his consent whizzed in his mind. "What I do know is that I am going to find out," Molly finished.

"How?" he asked.

"We're going to summon it," she replied pretty passively.

The furniture in the front room had been rearranged by the time Molly and David returned. The sofas had been pushed back against opposing walls. The table moved to clear an ample space in the centre of the room. The drink glasses and bottle of scotch had been tidied away. *I will soon see to that*, David decided. He reached the far side of the room and collected a single glass and the bottle. "Fuck it; if I am going to be stuck here, then I will drink," he said aloud to the room. Besides, he thought, ghost scotch or

not; this was damn good stuff. David poured and then sipped the drink. He placed the bottle on the floor next to the sofa. He thought about how things were when he first entered this room and what he had learned. "If ghosts can't hurt people," David asked, "then what the hell happened to Chris?"

Milly had entered the room and stood in the doorway, adjusting her dress. "Who told you ghosts can't hurt you?" she asked. Molly clicked her tongue on the top of her mouth. "Michael did when I first arrived," David said and then took another sip.

"Well, they can't," Milly said. "They prey on your fears and desires and fuck with your head, but they can't kill you." Michael came into the room and looked a little flustered. He was tucking his shirt in as he made his way to the group. David thought, *what have you two been up to*, or maybe it was the drink offering suggestions. "They can't hurt you, I've told you that. Ghosts are not the only things in the world, though, and other things? Well, they can and will kill you." Michael walked to the centre of the room as he spoke; he seemed to like the attention. He held his hand out and counted down on each finger as he spoke. "Succubi, Demons, Werewolves and Vampires. Those are the common ones! So many things in the void that will screw you over. Ghosts are like midges, annoying but not serious."

"Myths are myths, but they can sometimes have some truth," Milly added.

"So," David asked, "what happened to Chris?"

"A ghost didn't attack him," Michael said.

"Could it have been a possession?" Molly asked. David sat and gulped the rest of his drink. "Maybe some kind of reanimation?" Milly added.

"You are all fucking insane," David said and then topped up his glass.

THE SIXTIES.

He examined his crop. Wonderful. They were not pure, well not yet, but still so beautiful. Suxamethonium had at first seemed the perfect drug. Unfortunately, the paralysis effects were short and fatal. It was not that being fatal was an issue; it meant the process was over too soon. Then he saw the note. Just a small sheet of paper pushed under his door. Not through the letterbox as he might have expected, but under the door. The note had contained one word, 'Tetrodotoxin'; it had been signed, 'The Tall One'. Who, or what, the tall one was held no interest for him. What did interest him was the word. He had researched and then tried tetrodotoxin, but it too came with problems. It always came down to breathing, how to keep them alive and still but unable to move. After a failed attempt, he threw the idea away. Threw it into the wastebin of failed ideas. The following day another note had been pushed under his door.

'Sometimes, the old ways are the best'; it was, this time, just signed, 'tM'. He mulled the idea and decided that the note was correct. He had been striving for perfection, looking for the best solution to a problem he

had created. Yes, he had wanted things to be perfect, but sometimes you can't have what you want. You can't always have what you want ringing through his mind, a lesson from childhood that he had forgotten. A song that the Stones would sing at the end of the decade. But, he thought, with just a slight variation from the Stones, sometimes you have what you need. He made his way to the workbench and his two subjects. The floorboards creaked as he walked, but the noise did not matter here. He had the perfect hiding spot. His bones could crack, the boards could creak, and his projects could scream. The outside world would hear none. He tightened the ratchet straps as the first subject groaned.

He looked at his current crop, perfectly formed, *wonderful!* He pushed the hanging fishing line out of the way. The straps could have been better; they had previously caused problems. He'd had to pad each strap. Too tight, and it caused swelling; too loose, and the subject could move. A movement could cause cuts, and cuts were imperfections and were not to be tolerated. Bruising was also a problem, though much less of one. He had taken his time and padded the straps. Enough padding to still be secure, but it was soft enough to stop the worst of any bruising. He also needed to expand his workspace. Everything had to change just because he could not find the perfect drug! It was so infuriating. With drugs, he had been able to use a smaller area; with straps, he had to position his work in the most immodest positions.

He ran his finger along the leg of one of the batch. Running it over her stomach, he leant over and looked into her eyes. There were, however, the upsides. The eyes, the window to the soul as it had been said, held no glassiness. With drugs, there had always been that vacant stare; worse, the eyes had rolled as he had peeled back the eyelids. But, with just bindings,

he could see it all. He could see the despair in his prize's soul. The fear burrowing away into their minds and tormenting their imagination. The best part of today? That he had two. "What do you want?" This one asked; they would always ask similarly. It was always the same. What do you want? Why am I here? What are you going to do to me? He ignored her questions as he started to clean and wash the crop, inch by inch, taking his time. He does so enjoy the process. He leaned over the body and placed his hand into the bowl of warm water that was ready for him. He had prepared and readied it just before. He squeezed the cloth in his hands and let the water flow through his fingers. He never once took his eyes from his prey, scanning their four eyes as his hands worked without visual direction.

He ran the cloth along the naked body of his first victim. The girl tried to move, but the straps held it firmly. The skin and hair dampened, and goosebumps plucked up along her flesh; he chuckled and asked, "too cold, my dear?" He ignored what she said. Does a fisherman listen to the fish? Something else had caught his attention. "What is wrong with you?" he asked the second girl and made his way to the head of the table. He leant over the table and stared into her eyes; they were not what he had expected. She was not afraid. He had always seen fear in his crop's eyes, in hers? He saw amusement. He asked, "and what, my dear, is so amusing?" She smiled a toothy smile back at him, "she is coming, and she can't be stopped," was all she said. She closed her eyes as she spoke and kept them closed. "Who? Who is coming?" he asked her. A moment of distress revealed itself in his otherwise calm voice. He stood upright and looked over at the door.

The door stood locked and closed, just as he had left it. He would have heard if anyone were outside. He was alone; screams from inside did not matter. Sounds from outside were often just animals or passing cars in the

distance. He considered going to check. He thought about opening the door and peering across the field, but what would have been the point? He knew he was alone. He could feel that he was alone. Save, of course, for his victims. He turned his attention back to the one who had spoken. She lay on the table, unable to move, with her eyes closed. "Who is coming?" He demanded to know. She lay there and said nothing; he grabbed her strapped head and pulled the eyelids open. Her eyes now displayed what he would have expected. She was terrified, eyes darting from side to side. The look of someone who knows not where they are nor what will happen. "Who is coming?" he shouted at her. She said nothing; she opened her mouth and screamed.

It was a scream to pierce a lesser man's eardrums. She had lungs and a scream that many her age did not possess. He let her scream; they usually scream it out and again start begging and pleading for freedom. She did not; she just kept on going. Breath after breath of screams that could have shattered a thinly blown glass. He tired of her noise after a while and reached onto the table. He was always prepared; he would never be caught out and had everything ready in the centre of the table. He grabbed the ball and then her face. He pushed his fingers into the joint on her jawbone, where the rear molars were. Her mouth was forced to open wide with the pain, and he shoved the cue ball into place as she opened. He had tried cloth and all kinds of rags for gags. He liked the ball. It was easy to clean, slipped into place nicely, and did not break. He turned to the second one and did the same. One with a white ball, and the other with a black one. They were both gagged and tied and ready for him to purify.

He watched the eyes, the life still shining so brightly from them. He continued to wash and start the cleansing process. He cleaned and then

dried the places he did not want damp. The razor came next. With this, he had to be extra careful. In the early days, he had once cut a man doing this, which ruined everything. He had learnt to be patient and to take his time as he worked. That was one of the other reasons Suxamethonium had been problematic; different crops needed different doses. Have a crop wake and struggle whilst performing your art, causing you to ruin it! It was just not on. Did Da Vinci have to mess about with this nonsense? *No*, so why should he? He used the best shaving soap and always his own silvertip shaving brush. The excitement if he was caught, using his own brush! His shaving brush that he had also used on so many others and himself! Every time he shaved, he had the memories of his crops flooding back to him. He gently soaped the areas on the body with hair, leaving the pubic area until last. He enjoyed shaving there, but it had to come last. If the rest is perfect, *that* had to be better than perfect. “Now, to make you pure again,” he said with cheery happiness as he worked on the legs.

The legs were the most tedious part. Straddled immodestly as they were. He hated the fact that he had to keep them that way. That was one reason he had looked for a medical solution. But still, beggars can't be choosers. Straight and direct for the legs, something he had long mastered. The knees and ankles occasionally gave him some trouble, but he could get it done quickly enough. The arms and especially the armpits would take a little longer, but finally, he had them done. It was hard not to look into their eyes as he did it, seeing the fear and feeling the crops suffering. It leaked from them like a smell from an oven or the colour from a prism.

Stop! Stop that. That is for later.

Now onward to the part that he enjoyed. The part that gave him the biggest thrill. He covered the pubic area in soap once again and started.

Gently going with the grain and slicing at every hair. It took him longer than all the other elements combined, but finally, he was done; it was perfect. As smooth as the skin of a perfect apple. He grabbed the talc and began to cover the bodies carefully. The white skin would be the final touch this time, living dolls! He went to the clothes rail and fingered through the dresses he had collected. He looked for the ideal match. He found just what he wanted; the colours were also correct, and the contrast would be magnificent. He lay the clothing beside his newly created dolls. Checking the sizing as he did so, trying to imagine what they would look like once he was completed.

This was the part that he detested. It was not the taking of life that he hated, as he could not have given a damn about that. He wanted his prizes to be alive as long as possible. Using medication was supposed to have been the solution to that. Paralyzing his victims so that they were malleable and alive for the longest of times. He fed on their fear; the terror turned him on, and having to kill them so soon took that from him. He pulled the liquid into the syringe, watching as it flowed and tapping the needle with his finger. He needn't have bothered with the tap; it was a habit formed over the years. He moved to the first one, drove the needle into her neck, and pushed the plunger halfway. He then repeated the process on the second and placed the syringe on the table. It still hurt him to do this, to kill them now and not later. He had to do it as he was not one to take risks. The bodies quivered and pushed against the straps as the poison took hold. The life was draining from them, tremor by feverish shiver.

Five minutes passed, and then he checked the pulses. Once satisfied, he removed them from the bindings, and they lay flat on the table. He pushed the beams that they had been straddled on to one side. They moved with

effortlessness as he had built and designed them to do so. The bodies lay on the table motionless as he dressed them with the ease of an old mortician. Sliding the dresses onto them one by one, rolling them to the side and zipping the zip before laying them back on their backs. He then used his fabric brush to remove any excess talc before moving on to the next stage.

He pulled a drawer under the table open and removed the needed items. A large needle, a hand-cranked drill, the moist towelettes he had imported from the USA, and a tub of PVA glue along with its brush. He placed the items on the table and checked to ensure the long thin drill bit was tight before moving to the hand. He cleaned the knuckles on the fingers and placed a dab of PVA on the centre one. He then picked up the drill and placed the bit in the middle of the PVA. Slowly he turned the handle. He had to move slowly to prevent too much damage, and as the bit turned, it soon found its way through the thin layer of skin. He could feel the drill biting through the bone as he used the handle. He held the drill steady as it cut through the bone and gristle of the finger, applying just the right amount of pressure as he rotated.

Once through, he reversed the process, rotating the handle anti-clockwise gently and slowly to remove the bit from the finger. He had to move slowly for many reasons, the main one being to keep the PVA in place. The glue held most of the blood and made tidying his crop just a little easier. He moved on to the next finger and repeated his ritual. It took hours, but he was willing to spend the time. He needed the bodies to stiffen anyway; the time flew past as he drilled the 20 fingers. He threaded the fishing wire from the roof through the needle's eye and set to work. He pushed the needle through the hole he had drilled and tied the wire once through. He then moved on, as he had done before with the drill, to the next finger.

The fingers were as vital to him as the shaving of the hair. Unlike with the hair, he knew why the fingers were important. He grabbed the first body and carefully lifted her onto his shoulders. He had struggled with some of his victims and was grateful that she was petite and light. He sat her in position in front of the white background and stood back to admire her. She sat stiffly in the chair, and the contrast between the background and her dress and hair was marvellous. He moved to the other girl. Repeating his process and sat her on the floor next to her mate. Positioning them ready for his final act, he moved the legs and bodies, so they looked at each other.

He took the fishing line and, standing on another chair, threaded it through the loops he had positioned in the roof. He pulled the line slowly until it was tight, hoisting the girl's arms upright. He climbed down from the chair, repositioned the arms, and then climbed back up and tied the line off. He stood back to admire his creation. The two girls sat looking lustfully at each other. Elbows resting on their knees with twenty fingers standing upright. He smiled at the clothing he had picked; it was fantastic. He was admiring them when he saw the mark on the neck. He cursed himself for being heavy-handed with the needle as he headed back to the table. He grabbed the talc, returned to the girl, and used it to cover the mark.

He stood back and looked again; this time, it was perfect; the mark had been completely covered. He had the Polaroid model 120 ready to go on its tripod, and he pulled it forwards and looked through the viewfinder as he clicked the shutter. He removed the developing photo and placed it on the table. He then returned to the camera, repositioned it and took another shot. With five shots taken, he returned to the table and waited for them to develop. He had grown used to this wait; he was a patient man. It was still

an excruciating wait; he wanted to see his work in all its glory, captured forever in a photo.

With the photos having developed, he looked them over with an excitable, eager eye. He was like many a teenager the time they found something pornographic. The excitement immersed him as he looked at his work on display. He smiled and chuckled as he fingered the photos, trying to decide what one to keep. He finally settled upon the third one and pushed the other four to one side. He would dispose of them later; for now, he had to complete his display. He turned to face the rear of the room and headed for the curtain there. The women's bodies sat as they were. He cared no more for them than a junkie does the needle they have just discarded.

The curtain flew back effortlessly without a squeak on the well-maintained rails, and eighteen other photos were pinned to the rear wall. Each was stuck with a pin in the two top corners to avoid ruining the photo. He took the two pins he had prepared earlier from the wall and stuck the photo with the others. His eyes wandered to his collection, starting with the man in the first photo. The man was positioned on all fours like an animal. It had been his boss; he held one finger in the air. The second was a young woman who held two fingers aloft. So on, and so forth to the final one with twenty fingers on display. It was only during his first that he decided to use fingers. He'd had to start finding multiple victims after reaching ten, and now he would have to find more! His hand wandered to his groin, and he held it there. Would the excitement ever tail off? He hoped not; it had not of yet. His hand trembled next to his awakening penis. He was getting excited for the next one already. He had only just finished this one. Then the noise from behind made him jump.

Startled, he turned and looked at the other side of the room. His excitement had left him the instant the noise had occurred. He stood shocked; he knew he was alone, yet something pricked at the hair on his arms. Something or someone must be down here with him. It could have been rats or other vermin, but he was sure he had secured his workshop. He turned quickly to the door, and it was closed and secure. He looked back and then noticed something was different. One of the arms on his victims had fallen loose and was now hanging. He eyed it for a moment with suspicion and then went over to the bodies. He looked at the loose hand; all five fingers had slipped entirely free of the wire. He lifted the hand and turned it over; slight indentations were on the underside. It looked as if the arm had been pulled free. He examined the hand; as he looked, the other arm swung forward and grabbed him vice-like around the neck. He tried to scream, but the fingers were digging into his skin and the hand clamping tight.

“Urgh,” escaped his mouth as the hand tightened. It was impossibly tight, tighter than he had ever experienced. It was inhuman. He fell to his knees and struggled with her hand. Pulling at it with both his hands, trying to pry the fingers free, but they refused to move even the tiniest of margins. He fell to his knees in the scruffle, and the other woman stood upright as he fell. One falling and one rising. She yanked and pulled the wire free from the ceiling as her partner held him by the neck. She then wrapped the line around his neck just above the clamping hand. The line was pulled taut, and he could feel it slicing into his neck as the woman relentlessly pulled. The woman continued to pull. His eyes slipped closed as the darkness overtook him.

A tall man walked across a field and lifted a hatch in the centre. The hatch was covered with grass, but he knew where it was. He lifted the hatch and descended the wooden staircase into the passage below. He stood near the door and listened as he heard the Puppet maker, “urgh.” He smiled as he pushed the door open, the lock breaking as he pushed.

THE SEANCE.

"I am not taking part in this," David said as he slipped more of the drink down his throat. The warm scotch flowed down into his stomach, "you are part of this," Molly replied. David finished his glass; he had started to get very drunk now. "You can't force it, Molly," Michael said, "David, please, we need to concentrate."

"I'll only talk to the ghosts," David replied and giggled lightly as the alcohol washed away his inhibitions. He refilled his glass and took yet another sip. The other three had cleared the table from the centre of the room and sat together on the floor.

Kum - fucking - baya. Let the show begin!

They joined hands and spoke in unison, "protect us from the darkness and the light. Guide us on our journey through the void and to the nether." The light blinked slightly, only subtly. Everything seemed to be plunged into darkness, a single hiccup in the heartbeat of the electrical current that flowed through and brought life to the house. Molly alone spoke this time.

"I speak for us; I speak to the evil here in this place. I command you to answer me," she called out, her voice rising in volume as she did so.

"She commands you," Milly chanted, "Do as you are commanded." The lights jumped again, this time for a few seconds. David seemed to be the only one who had noticed this twitch in the electrical supply. It was that, or the others had expected it and ignored it. "You are commanded!" Michael boomed, and with that, the lights went out. This time they did not come back.

Darkness, unnatural darkness, flooded the room like a thick pitch-black fog that oozed instantly from every crevice. The rain hammered at the windows as the darkness had blinked into existence. The combination of both made it impossible for the senses of sight and sound to be used. David held his hands in front of his face, but he could not see them even at just six inches. "David, don't panic. Just stay there," Molly said. He could hear her as clear as a bell. It was like she was speaking directly into his brain and cutting the noise from the windows off. The room shook, and he could only just hear the voices of David and Milly in the background. David could not quite determine what they were saying; he focused all his energy on hearing. He tried to concentrate and block out the rain. Then he worked it out; they were groaning, moaning in pleasure. It was then that David felt the hand. He panicked but realised that Molly was crawling and feeling her way up his leg.

She can't see in this foggy darkness either. An innocent thought that he knew was wrong.

She moved further up, and her hair came into view. Black hair, and then the white dress. It was all that David could see in the thick supernatural fog. She continued to climb and then leant forward and whispered, "don't

worry,” into David’s ear. At first, he thought she was finding her way, but as she climbed atop him and straddled him, he knew her true intentions. He felt her legs on either side of his. The thought of pushing her away fleetingly passed through his mind; it was soon discarded and thrown aside. A more primal instinct was taking hold. Molly leant forward and kissed him; she kissed with more fire and passion than he had ever been kissed before. Lips smashed against lips, and the tongues swam and dallied together. Instinct told him to push her away; desire and lust kissed her back and held her tight. She grabbed his arms and placed the hands on her thighs. Not tights, stockings; he could feel the lace tops as she moved his hands up. She must have changed, and he was not about to complain! Alcohol and lust had taken control of David; he’d have liked to think himself better than that, but like many, he was not.

She let go of his hands, leaving them grasping the tops of the thighs. His thumbs rested on the lace top of the stockings. She lifted herself with her knees, and her hands moved to his trousers. Still kissing with passion, she unbuttoned and then unzipped him. She lowered with expertise and allowed him to ease inside, groaning into his ear as he did so. She threw her head back as she lifted and lowered herself. Hair flew through the air and settled on her lower back. She then grabbed his hands and held them tight as she lifted them to her neck.

She held his hands tight, and fingers intermingled with one another. She pushed and squeezed harder, clasping their hands around her neck. "Tighter," she whispered into his ear with breathless passion; David squeezed a little. Not too tight, just a little. "Tighter," she begged in a moan as she dropped herself down upon his lap, and he tightened a little more. Molly rose as he did so, and she tightened her grip; she pushed his hands

ever tighter. Vice like as her fingers clasped and pushed at her neck, pushing David's hands ever closer. As Molly lifted and lowered, both she and David tightened. She sped up as he tightened his grip; the more he tightened, the faster and more intense she got. Lifting and dropping, the sofa they were sitting on squeaked and creaked as she moved. They groaned with passion as the sofa moaned with the weight and movement.

David suddenly felt uncomfortable, *this was not his thing, but she felt so good!* He soon had hold of her neck as tight as he could. His fingertips were touching, yet she still pushed his hands ever tighter. He could feel the drumming in her neck through his hands, the pounding of her heartbeat travelling up through her neck and feeding the brain. Delivering messages of both pleasure and pain.

They both finished simultaneously; Molly slumped forward onto his body, her sweat mingling with his. She removed her arms from his neck and held him close with her arms wrapped and fingers tangled behind. She nibbled at his ear as she panted into it; her breathing started to slow. She whispered, "thank you," and ran her tongue along his lobe before sitting up. He turned to look at her; the dark fog that had flashed into life had lifted from the room. David kissed her neck and then lifted his head; he could see some bruising had appeared.

Was that me? No, it cannot be; there is a small puncture mark.

He looked at Molly's face, and her eyes were white. Just white, no pupils, no colour at all. Dead eyes looked back at him, and the corners of her mouth started to rise slowly. The corners were being pulled with an invisible string from above. Her face was paralysed, and only those final tips rose to a smile. She then opened her mouth, "hi dad," she said in Jason's voice.

THE FIFTIES.

The four of them sat in the cafe and drank their drinks. The cafe where the first two had met had become their local haunt. Two had become four, and soon four would become none, *in a manner of speaking*. The first couple had started the shyest of the quartet, and their prudish frigidity had launched them on the journey of discovery that had led them back here. Sitting back at the table with their friends, back where it had all begun.

The two had met eighteen months earlier. Shyness had turned, *eventually*, into talking. Talking to dating and then dating on to something more. The problem was not with the drinking nor with the dancing. The problem that they found was in *the something more*. They were both puritanical in nature, and it took time for them to open up. Once they did, they found that they both wanted the same things. Light bondage had turned to heavy bondage, and then that had wiggled its way free and once again became *something more*. This was when they met the short man.

The short man had wandered to the table they had sat at and sat next to them. His certainty and assurance that they would not say anything had

astounded them. They sat dumbstruck, and just as the man was about to speak, the short man shushed him. “I know all about you,” the short man said confidently. It turned out that he did know all about them; in fact, he knew more than they would even have admitted to one another at that time. He spoke of their history, needs, and desires, and finally, he offered them a solution. Hearing their thoughts, dreams, passions, and darkest fantasies out loud made them equally uncomfortable and aroused.

Had they known who *or what* the short man was, it might not have come as a surprise. Tall, thin, short, and fat, they all had the same origin and worked for the same mistress. They thrived on causing mischief and mayhem, treating life and death as a game to be enjoyed. The short man opened his suit jacket, removed a pocketbook, pushed it to the centre of the table, and then spoke to the couple. “Read it when you are alone,” he said as he stood up. He did not whisper another word as he walked from the table and out of the door. It was the last time the couple would see him in life, *in death?* Well, then they saw it all.

The couple couldn’t wait and opened the book as soon as he had gone. The pages lay before them on the table and were all completely blank. They flicked through them all and then closed the book. Deflated and disappointed, had it all just been a joke? A cruel prank designed to raise their hopes and then dash them? The woman picked up the book and slipped it into her handbag, and they then left the cafe together and headed home. The disappointment they felt was palpable, the sense that they had their hopes built up only to have them smashed at the very last. They hardly said a word to one another on the walk home. They just wandered, lost and strolling through their thoughts and frustrations. When they arrived home, the woman put the kettle on and poured them a cup of tea.

“Was it all hogwash?” she asked the man; she tried to keep the frustration from her voice. “It must have been,” the man replied with just as much disappointment. The woman removed the book from her bag and flicked it open; it was still blank. She closed it and spun it by the spine in her fingers. Spinning it like a die, its diamond shape was hypnotic. She offered the book across the table to her partner, and he held out his hand. As they both had their hands on the book, a spark of black static electricity flicked between their fingers. It was not enough to hurt, but it was enough to shock. They both jumped, and the book fell to the table. It spun on its bottom corner and then fell impossibly open on the first page. They both looked at it, and the page started to fill itself. A dark purple ink seemed to swim from all the corners of the pages, washing its way across the page and making shapes and words as it did so.

They both watched in silence as the page filled itself with contents. The top of the page was filled with six cards that looked like tarot cards. Lined up side by side, the first two were both titled lust. They watched as words formed to give the names of the other cards. Everlasting, death, the tree, and the Church. Five sentences formed below the cards.

The lusting lovers.

Will double their numbers.

Forming an eternal bond.

Mortal life will end.

But you shall be among friends.

They read the words as they appeared. Dark purple ink glued itself in place at a pace that was just perfect for reading. Never too fast, and never too slow. Five more rectangular boxes appeared and, as before, filled themselves in. The pair of dice, the blood-soaked knife, the nothing, the pair

of dice, and the multiverse. Much like before, the words and sentences dipped into life below the cards.

Your immortal life will start with a game.

A game of revenge.

The darkness enters the field.

The great game shall begin.

The worlds will be changed forever.

The couple watched as all this unfolded on the page; they were mesmerised by it. It was like they had been given a hit of a wonder drug that caused instant addiction. A literal narcotic coupled with the small man who knew all about them flowed through their blood and the brain. They had been bewitched and enchanted by the book that now sat on the table. They had tried to fill the emptiness in their lives with sex, and they would do so again; they did enjoy sex.

Find the church and the tree.

The words appeared as they were mulling over what was missing from their lives. They both knew deep down; they both knew that they needed that *something more*. They wanted the excitement of the taboo, the adventure of the forbidden. To touch what should never be touched. They read the line and didn't even need to ask one another; they both knew they would do anything the book asked of them. This type of contract is not signed in blood; it is bonded by consent and the willingness to touch the taboos of the something more.

The church and tree had proven easy to find, and once the church was found, the tree was simple. The grand old tree stood majestic in the field behind the church. Imposing itself on the field, it stood in the centre for all to see. They crossed the same paths that David would do many years later

and found themselves standing beneath the tree. They felt pulled to it and felt it was drawing them in. When they stood next to the tree, they felt a calming a sense of ease and one of satisfaction. It flowed over and through them, and they felt fulfilled. They held each other's hands and kissed, and then, for the first time of many, screwed under the shadow of the tree.

The book would offer them a task to complete, a task they would undertake with relish. It had started simply enough with screwing, once again, under the tree. Then it evolved into killing a small animal. They had half-heartedly questioned this at first, and each thought of reasons why they should not venture along this path. All the while knowing they would. The tasks and challenges grew, and they partook and completed each with evident gusto. They enjoyed it, they were good at it, and after every request, they had the best sex of their lives. The book and its tasks were the best aphrodisiacs they had ever found.

That was how they had found themselves standing again in the shadow of the tree with a dead child at their feet. It was, at the very moment of death, that panic finally hit them. Most people would have panicked about the dead body, the morality of what they had done, and the fact that they would get caught. They may have feared the torment of an afterlife they were now condemned to. This pair had only one fear. Just the one concern was that they would have been separated. When they heard the noise, they feared the worse.

Another couple had discovered them, and as they rearranged clothing, they were caught unaware. Panic swept them like water over the beach at high tide, and then they froze. Every thought, feeling, and trigger in the brain told them to run, but they stood as if stuck in the mud on the beach.

They needn't have worried. They had forgotten the second line in the first message from the book.

Will double their number.

Once the tide of fear and panic had subsided, they talked. They talked for what seemed like hours, and the four all opened up. A cavern of openness blocked by a rock of prudishness had been washed away by the tide of fear. They spoke as experts and were open about everything debauched and depraved in their lives. The other couple followed suit and spoke of their dreams, desires, and depravity. They spoke of their wants and needs and voiced all those thoughts they had kept hidden.

As they spoke and discussed ideas and fantasies. The tree then did something that not one of them had expected. The exposed upper roots opened like fingers spreading outwards. Silently it crept and opened as the small body fell through the gaps. They watched as the body fell into the gap and was lost in the ocean of roots that grew below. The roots then started to close with the same silence they had opened. Closing like a fly trap, *or tree trap*, consuming the body whole. The whole act played out in silence and was over within a minute.

It was at that moment that they knew. At the very second the roots enclosed, they understood they had been walking a path that had led them to each other and that the walkway would always be safe if they followed the book. They all understood that from this moment onwards, they were bound by a secret, connected through concealment, and joined through the book they would all follow.

They sat in the cafe and did not say a word to anyone. They knew that the route they had walked in life was at an end, but what fun they had. The book's last page had detailed instructions on what they would do next. They

took no issue with it, and they had no qualms. They knew now what fate awaited them; for the four of them, only one thing mattered; they would never be apart. They would be united in immortality as they had been in life. They left the cafe without saying a word. It was their final destination before heading to the house.

They had bought the house as close to the tree as possible. The house was large enough for more than just them; if the walls could talk, they would tell many tales. The house was set just as they had left it, ready for their return. Four pistols were laid out, a table was in the centre of the room, and the pocketbook was placed in the centre. The room to the right was where it would all end. They had travelled the sights of their life. Ending with the cafe where they had first met. They had visited the site of their first abduction and where they schemed and planned. The site where the four of them had taken another, the business they had burned to the ground, and the school they had infested with vermin.

They walked soundlessly into the room, not saying a word to each other. They all knew their places and what needed to be done. They each grabbed a gun and thought of their life, the lives they would be leaving, and the time yet to come. Pointing the gun at the person to their left, aiming directly at their head. The book flipped open as they all pulled the trigger in unison. The final page reading.

CSC Entertainment, for your pleasure.

The bullets tore through the sides of their faces. Small holes ripped into large craters as the bullets split and shattered inside their heads. The four bodies fell as one, like a freaky performance; they fell together and to the side to form something of a square around the table. The book closed, and then a purple flame grew from the cover. The flame grew without needing

fuel or an accelerant and was soon covering the whole of the table. The purple blaze wandered the legs of the table and was quickly eating away at the four bodies. In its wake, it burned a fire that would consume everything on that side of the house.

The house raged with fire as the side roof fell in. The four, now dead and immortal, stood and watched. They could not feel the flame's heat; it was a feeling they would learn to replace. The recently dead lose all feeling; in time, they learn to substitute the mortal feelings. They would have no trouble in this regard, as they had excellent teachers. Behind the four stood four unholy creatures. One tall, one short, one fat, and one slim. They stood in their suits and watched the flames wrapping around the remains of the house. They all headed in one direction as the side of the house fell and made their way to the tree.

The tree stood with the moonlight shining down through the leafed branches. The centre of the long old trunk was open, and a large, lightless portal was opened. They each stepped into the black void, one by one and disappeared inside. Once the eight had vanished, the tree closed and remained as tree-like as it had ever been.

ENOUGH.

David jumped up from the seat; Molly was thrown from him and to the floor, lifeless, *literally lifeless*. She fell from his lap like a ragdoll and flopped upon the floor. David and Milly sat holding hands as they had done before the seance had started. The darkness that had descended had now wholly lifted. They looked from Molly's dead body and then to David. David stood there, bewildered and suddenly very afraid. It felt like the blackness that had flooded the room had infiltrated his mind. It had permeated every pore and was spilling fear and anger from him. He became suddenly aware that his penis was on display for all to see. Flopping about from his trousers like a fish on a hook. Seconds after he realised; *if that*, it gave up its salute and returned to normal. "What have you done!" Michael asked in shock.

"You've killed her,' Milly stuttered and moaned. She cried like a woman who had found her long-lost sister, only to lose her again just as they became close. She crawled over to Molly, and her head collapsed upon Molly's chest. David tucked himself back in, did his trousers up, turned and

ran; he headed upstairs. *Could he have escaped outside?* He did not know and did not feel it was worth the risk. Something told him that he could not have gone that way. Outside he had two choices, left or right, and the last time he had tried it, he had gone around in a circle. Upstairs he could barricade himself into a room. He could hide and survive until this nightmare was over.

He ran up the stairs, taking two steps at once. As he landed, the stairs groaned with age, and it was a noise that would have been foreign just half an hour before. The sound was in one ear and out of the other, and it was a sound that he disregarded as he continued his panicked escape. The nightmare looked down at him as he weighed his options on the landing. He darted down the corridor and then to the second room on the right. He hoped that this room was still unlocked, and it was. He opened and ran through the door, slamming it closed and then stood with his back against it. He waited and listened. He had expected to hear footsteps running frantically up the stairs. To hear banging on the other side of the door but heard nothing; just the rain hammering on the window filled the room. He ran to the other side of the room and pushed the bed against the door. It was an effort, but eventually, he got it there. He sat on the bed and listened once more, and then, finally, he heard the footsteps that beat up the stairs. The fists then started to bang against the door. "Open the door, David. It's no good you have to face up to what you have done," Michael shouted from outside.

David looked around the room and then slumped against the bed. Sitting on the cold hard floor, he held his head in his hands. *Why me why? Why?* he asked himself again and again. What had he done? He did not cry; he was rarely one for that. He kept those emotions bottled and the lid screwed on

tight. Bottling them up and storing them like jams in an old pantry. He knew it was the cause of his anger. He knew it was something that he should not do. Yet, still, he did it. Some habits are hard to break, and many are damn near impossible.

“He is right, you know,” Molly said. David leapt forwards and almost cleared the room in one leap. Molly was somehow now sitting on the bed right next to him.

One small step for man. One giant leap for the shit scared.

David stood and pushed himself into the right corner of the room. “You have to face up to what you have done,” Milly said. She had appeared and was standing in the left corner of the room. She then wandered over and sat on the bed next to Molly. “If you don't face up to what you've done, then how can you ever have forgiveness?” they both said together. He closed both eyes and covered them with his hands. He grabbed at his face and tried to hide them from view. He pulled at his hair. “What... what do you want?” he screamed out.

No answer.

“Answer me, damn it!” David demanded.

Still no answer.

David lowered his hands and looked. The room was empty. Not just devoid of Milly and Molly, it was utterly sparse. Nothing, not even the carpet he had thought he was standing on.

THE FINAL MINUTES OF JASON WILLIAMS – THE PAST.

A *lcohol*. If being a little bit wobbly is merry. Struggling to walk and talk could be classed as drunk. Jason was neither of these things. He was utterly shit-faced. Blind drunk, and only just able to walk; if indeed you could call it walking. Like any self-respecting drunk, he had tried to order a taxi to get him home. After the third attempt – *this time asking for a burger* – the taxi company stopped answering his calls. He tried to pick a fight with a lamppost, *or to a sober person*; he had walked into a lamppost. Were it sentient, you would have to say that it had won, as Jason had found himself lying on the floor admiring the stars.

The stars are lovely. There must be more out there than just us.

Then he threw up. The putrid stench of alcohol, food, and other nasties that hid in his stomach rested on the pavement next to him. He wiped the bile and saliva from his mouth using the arm of his sleeve and then rolled over in an attempt to get up. Twice he almost rolled into the puke. He looked like a turtle stuck upside down in an enclave. In the end, he finally staggered to his feet. A combination of crawling, staggering and what can

only very loosely be defined as walking, and he was finally at his front door. He tried the door; it was locked. He kicked the door and, in the process, hurt his foot.

Fricking asshole, I live here too.

He fumbled in his pocket to find his keys. He knew they were there somewhere, as he had felt them when rolling over. He finally grabbed them and pulled them from his trousers. He was drunk but even as drunk as he was, he somehow caught the lighter as it fell from his pocket. He pushed the lighter back into his pocket and attempted to find the lock. He slipped the key forwards slowly and with one eye closed.

Ha! First time.

Jason turned the key and the door unlocked. He threw the door open and stepped into the small hallway. He left the door wide open and stumbled towards the stairs. He grabbed the banister tight with both hands and held himself steady at the foot of the stairs for a few seconds. He then took the first step, the second and finally, the third. He shuffled up the steps slowly.

He started to hum a song he knew but soon changed the lyrics, as his drunken mind could not remember the original. "One step, two steps, three steps. Grumpy old bastard locked the door." Fourth step and then the fifth, finally his legs had started to work better and got him up to the sixth. "Ha, four steps, five and six. I bought my key, so screw you, you dick." The next three steps felt easier to him. "Seven, eight and finally nine. How strange this is? I am feeling fine." As he said the last word, he leant forward, retched and threw up again, this time all over the final few steps.

Jason lifted his head and wiped his mouth again. He looked up and saw David standing at the top of the stairs. David had heard the ruckus, "you're a fucking embarrassment," David snarled and then shook his head. Jason

took the next step - *squelch* - he had forgotten the puke. He stepped once more and lifted his foot from the puke. He was standing almost nose to nose with his father, Jason, a little taller. "And you're...." Jason hiccupped. He waved his finger in his father's face. "You're a complete and utter wanker."

Ha, take that. Wank face.

David turned to walk away; what was the point? He had tried everything he could think of and then many things afterwards. "Is that what you did with Mum? Watched her and then walked away. You're a fucking piece of shit," Jason screamed at him. Each word was laced with a touch of venom, a stabbing of poison with each letter. David stopped and took a deep breath; he couldn't do it. David knew that he should walk away, but he just couldn't. His temper was building, and he would not stand and be spoken to like that. "Did you watch her die, watch her cut her wrists and then laugh as she died?" Jason shouted at his father. The virulence of his words seeped from his mouth with spittle and into David's mind.

Straw, Camels, back broken, once again. Jason was a master of his art.

David turned so that he stood directly in front of his son. He then stepped forward, nose almost touching nose. "You listen to me, you little shite. I loved your mother, and I would have done anything for her!" David's spittle was bouncing on Jason's face. "Look at you. You are a waste of fucking space. Kicked out of school and then getting pissed every night. What are you doing robbing little old ladies to be able to pay for it?"

"Hah, I sold your old LPs, you daft old shit," Jason laughed in his father's face. Standing right before him and just laughing as he teetered from side to side. "You did what!" David exploded, "That's it. I'm done, tomorrow you can fuck off, and I don't want to see you again." David started to turn and stood back half a step as Jason threw a punch at his father. Somehow, he

missed, skimming only the side of David's face. David was taken aback, the verbal violence he had become used to, *as much as you ever could*; physical violence had never been a part of this equation. "Christ, you can't even throw a punch," David snapped; he then pulled his right arm back, getting it ready to swing it at Jason. He brought it forward just as Jason ducked. How he managed to duck in time, we will never know. In many situations, that would be considered a lucky break.

Unfortunately, *in this one*, it was not.

Jason ducked and twisted to avoid the punch, and as he turned, his foot slipped on his puke. David watched in slow motion as his son fell backwards down the stairs. The movement was happening quickly, yet realising what happened took so long. *It'd be lovely to tell you he reached out to try and grab Jason, but it was too late when that crossed his anger-filled mind.* A record playing the scene had been set to the wrong speed setting; everything initially flowed so slowly. Jason's neck cracked on the first step it hit. The body was lifeless by the second hit and slumping like a discarded ken doll when it finally fell to the floor. David collapsed at the top of the stairs and cried. This time his emotions did get the better of him. He wept into his hands.

He called the ambulance and police immediately. Apart from telling them about his punch, he told them the whole sorry story. He kept the punch back, he knew he should not have, but he still did. Embarrassment and shame were keeping him from telling the whole truth. He started with the school, the smoking, the drinking, and finally, the argument. The truth was he knew he had not hit Jason, but David also knew that had he not attempted the punch, Jason would have slept it off and tomorrow would have been another day. Instead, the only lesson he had learnt was that he

had to control his temper. A brief enquiry occurred, but as there had been no signs of violence, the death was ruled an accident.

An accident, an accident.

Four figures watched from across the street as the door swung open and closed, and the emergency services arrived. One tall and one short. One fat and one thin. They watched as the whisp of Jason's existence left his body and dispersed into the night. It was a sight that only a few beings of the underworld could see and one that they had been gifted. They watched as the specks of the human soul vanished and formed a plan. Jason had died and saw only darkness. When he opened his eyes, he was chained by his hands and feet and saw more darkness.

THE SEVENTIES.

He lay tied up next to the pool. The frigid tiles and water had soaked through his jeans and sent a chill crawling along his legs. The thick leather jacket saved him from the worst. The blueness of the open-air pool reflected the moonlight. It shimmered as the water rippled with the cool breeze. The plastic covering had been pulled back to allow the moon to gaze at itself and watch as the evening unfolded. His hands and feet were both tied and knotted tightly. The more he struggled, *it seemed*, the tighter the ropes became. He fought some more, but it did him no good. He was bound far too well and far too securely. “Do you float?” a female voice asked. The voice came from behind him, he tried to twist and look, but it was useless. “I am going to fucking kill you,” he spat back. “When I get out of here, I’m going to cut you to fucking pieces,” and he meant it, *oh yes*, he meant it.

He’d come close in the past, but he’d only used his blade thus far for threats, but this time. This time it would be different. He was going to cut this bitch to pieces. *When he escaped*. “But you can’t do that,” she laughed.

He knew that voice! It was Sharon, fucking Sharon. This was a joke; this was payback. “Fuck you, Sharon, let me out of this,” he demanded as he continued to wriggle on the ground like a caterpillar trapped under a bird’s talon. “What and let you cut me to pieces?” she asked with sarcasm and playfulness in her voice, quoting the final four words with her fingers, not that he could see. “I think not.”

“I’m going to fucking kill you, you bitch,” the bile poured verbally from him as he struggled. “You already killed a part of me, so this will be easy.” Now it clicked, and now he knew what this was about.

The stupid bitch, it was about the baby. The fucking baby!

Ten months earlier, Sharon had fallen pregnant. She saw it as his fault; he saw it as hers. “It’s just one of those things,” he had said dismissively. They had gone out to *celebrate*, and he had doubled her drinks all night: gin and tonic, old mother’s ruin. She moaned at first that they tasted strong, but he had just told her that it must be her hormones; after the first couple, the rest flowed smoothly. At the end of the evening, he had offered to walk her home. He had never done this before, and she was starting to come around to the idea of a baby. Maybe it would make him grow up a little. Was this the first sign of him taking responsibility? It was a small step, not a large one but a small one. Everything always starts with that first small step.

They had reached her house, and then he pushed her against the wall and kissed her. She kissed him back, she was not really in the mood for anything, but he had been lovely and charming all evening. They kissed with a passion that burnt hot, red hot. He pulled away and looked her straight in the eyes, smiling. He said, “You’re dumped bitch.” He then pulled his arm back and punched her as hard as possible in the lower abdomen. She miscarried within hours and cried herself to sleep that night.

And for many nights after. She had told nobody, not a soul, but she had never forgotten. She could have never forgotten. She had started to plan her revenge that very night.

He saw the heels of her shoes come into sight. She was dressed as she always had. Knee-high boots, a short skirt. Tights and a blouse. “They say a baby can go straight into the water after birth. I wonder how long you'll last?” she questioned, speaking just to herself. She walked over until she was right beside him. She placed her foot on him and pushed with the heel of her boot. The heel dug into his coat and pushed against his ribs. He turned slightly, being manoeuvred ever closer to the white-tiled edge of the pool. “Stop, fuck it, stop. You've made your point,” he begged. She pushed once again. “Sharon, please stop,” he shouted; it was almost childlike how he pleaded with her.

Ohh, please, I liked that. I don't think I've heard him say please before.

Still, he was going to die. She had decided that eight months earlier. An eye for an eye, a life for a life. And any cost? It was a cost she was willing to pay. Indeed, she would pay it happily. Sharon pushed once more, and he was quivering right on the pool's edge. He could feel the cool waters just an inch below. She leaned over and kissed him right on the lips. She then looked him straight in the eyes, said, “You're dumped, you bastard,” and gave him the final push.

He held his breath for as long as he could, but eventually, the water flooded his mouth. The steeling cold burning stabbed both lungs as the water poured down his neck. His body reacted by trying to cough, and that just led to more water overwhelming him. Water soaked into his clothing and funnelled down his throat as he thrashed in the water. He flopped about like a fish out of water with his arms and legs still tied. He had smoked

since he was thirteen and drank since he was fourteen. He was young, but the years of Capstan's full strength had taken a toll. He didn't last as long as a baby would have; it was not even close.

Darkness engulfed him as he took his last gurgling breath. His eyes closed, and his brain started to misfire. Sparking and arcing as they sent signals to places that were not often touched. He had a vision of a tall woman at the edge of the pool. She was dressed in a suit, and she spoke to him. It was a simple question, "Revenge?" she asked. He did not have to think; he just opened his mouth and found that he could answer. "Oh yes," came his reply. He knew this couldn't be real. It had to be his brain dying, but he watched as the tall woman walked up behind Sharon. He could see the boots that Sharon had been wearing as she watched him from the edge. The sight of her did not reach much further than her knees. The rippling of the water and the dying of his brain saw to that. The tall woman, though, he could see as clearly as any ultra hi-def image. She walked up behind Sharon and pushed her into the pool. Sharon fell forwards and started flapping in the pool. She struggled with the weight as her clothing absorbed the chlorinated water.

The tall woman turned her back on the pair, and as she did so, the plastic covering started to recover the pool. The woman walked away as the moonlight was locked out of the water.

ENDINGS.

David stood alone in the room. Alone in the corner, with just his thoughts. The girls had gone, and he had calmed slightly in the empty room. Lulled into a sense of security by the descending silence. The alcohol he had been drinking had given him a slight wobble; he swayed as he considered what had just happened. The thoughts swam in his mind, submerged, and then bobbed back to the surface. They bobbed on the surface like buoys in a rough sea. He tried adding it all up, running the scenarios over in his head but kept finding that two and two would equal five. Something in the room caught his eye, and he timidly went to the other wall to look at it.

A wallpaper scrap fluttered from the wall like a butterfly wing in the wind. David approached it with trepidation; he was unsure of what to make of it. Everything in this room had been perfect, and he was sure this fleck of paper had not been there before. But the room had changed. He lifted his finger and almost touched it but pulled back at the last moment. The paper

tore a little more as he observed it. The room, and landing, were silent, and he could hear the tear. It peeled itself as he watched.

The paper was a small scrap that seemed to pull itself from the wall. The scrap became a flap that, in turn, became a strip. The strip peeled as if being pulled by an invisible force. Spectral fingertips pulling at it and stripping it from the wall. It started to move upwards, and then from the same point, other tears pulled away to the side. David did not notice, but the same thing was happening on all the walls around him. The peeling paper revealed the pulsating black mess underneath. The throbbing mass of the wall then split like a zit on a teenage face, and black-red oozing blood seeped and flowed from it.

David stepped back from the wall as the blood flowed. He looked around the room and noticed the other walls. He was surrounded by the black and red goo that had started to cover everything. It flowed both up and down as if gravity meant nothing to it. Defying the laws of the universe and doing only what it wanted. The blood hardened as quickly as it had appeared and finally formed a black and red crackly-like scab that covered every wall. David stumbled backwards in horror and grabbed the rear of the bedframe.

The frame snapped as David grabbed at it, and he looked down. The whole wooden frame was rotted, and it crawled with bugs. The mattress burst open in the centre, and maggots crawled free from the springs and stuffing. Spiders edged their way from the feathered pillows, and a motley crew of bugs ate through the quilt. The whole bed pulsed with bugs and creepy crawlies pushing through the soft fillings. David gagged at the sight; as he did so, the floorboard below his foot creaked and snapped.

David pulled his foot away quickly and looked down; he saw the boards bending like a ruler and giving way. He decided then that he had to get out

of this room and get out of it quickly. The room seemed to be rotting and collapsing in on itself. He looked at the door, which was now rotten and falling apart. He dashed it. Not bothering to open the door, he ran straight into it. He could see that it would give; it looked like it would fall apart at any moment. The door splintered as he hit it, falling away and apart as if it was not even there.

Now he stood alone, and the house felt lifeless. For the first time since his arrival, the house felt dead. It felt like a house that had been destroyed, and only the skeletal framework remained. The hallway, like the room, was now a scabbed, rotting mess. Unlike the room, he could see no bugs or creepy crawlies. The floor beneath his feet creaked and rocked but seemed stable enough. The wallpaper that had once adorned the walls was gone, and flecks of the houses scabbing fell away before drifting upwards. It floated impossibly in the air and just hung in place.

David looked at first towards the back of the landing and then towards the staircase. Still, he could see nobody in this part of the rotting carcass of the house. He edged his way towards the stairs. He took it one step at a time with all senses on alert and feeling for anything out of the ordinary. He stuck to the centre of the hallway and tried not to touch any floating fragments as he walked. The hairs on his neck and arms were not just tingling; they were line dancing up and down. He saw them standing at the bottom as he got to the top step. Standing in the hallway awaiting his arrival. He placed his hands on the banister and looked at them all below.

Michael stood in his black shell suit, burnt to a crisp, with a short, plump lady behind him. His skin was black and cracked with red pulsating flesh underneath. It was almost a mirror image of the walls of the house. Milly and Molly, the two girls, were white and as pale as a sheet. A tall man

accompanied them. Two dolls on display for all to see. Chris was soaked to the bone, his lips blue and eyes almost popping from their sockets. A slim woman stood with him.

The final four. The two David had seen screwing in the field and the two who had played the part of the police.

"Life is just a game!" The words Molly had said to him chimed in his mind, suddenly like an old clock.

The four stood with the right sides of their heads missing, blown away by some weapon. A short man stood behind the four and smiled. The hole where the faces had once been was dripping. The bloody mess that had once been compactly held under the skin beat with the rhythm of a long-dead heartbeat. Michael said, "Remember, David, ghosts can't hurt you." Was he telling the truth? David could not be sure. What would stop him from leaving if they could not hurt him? Then he remembered the rain, he looked out of the window, and it was still pounding it down. Sheet against sheet of water falling almost as one. "If you can't hurt me, what is the point?" David asked.

"Earning a chance at revenge," Milly and Molly said together.

"Helping a fellow soul," Michael answered.

Chris hesitated and then said, "Redemption."

"And you four?" David asked the others.

"Oh, we have our reasons, but it has been fun, hasn't it? A good game, you could say," the woman replied. She spoke almost the exact words Molly had, echoing a line they all seemed to preach. The woman who had answered was the one he had seen murdered, the one who had started this. The tiniest thing that had started his avalanche into madness. The rolling of the die on a board game. Was she the leader of this group of spectres? She

seemed to speak with an experience, with a knowledge the others did not have. She was confident in herself and was not afraid to show it. “So, where do we go from here if you cannot hurt me?” David questioned them all. They just stood at the bottom of the stairs and looked up at him, and then the man, the murderer that David had chased through the fields, spoke, “We can keep you here for as long as we like. You'd die of old age or maybe suicide.”

“Hunger?” The policewoman said, giggling as she did so.

“We can fuck him to death, well fuck him as he dies,” the policeman said and licked his lips. David just stood and listened. If they genuinely could not hurt him, then what could they do?

Who breaks first?

Then it hit him, something that had been said earlier in the day. Games have rules, and David remembered something else that Michael had told him, “A place, a point and a time,” he said aloud and with purpose.

“What?” The murdered woman asked with a hint of surprise, “who told you that?”

“Crispy over there,” David said and pointed at Michael. The surprise in her voice had given him some hope. It had lifted him from a man swimming aimlessly in the dark to one who could see a glimmer of light on the horizon. The slightest flicker of hope could be blinding when all you have is nothing. “I am guessing I am the person, this is the place and point, and the time is here and now,” he paused. ”The question I have is this. How much time do you have? Because I don't think you can stay here forever, why don't I get a drink and let you run around in sheets all night?”

Hah, got you!

David could see in their faces that he was right. He had weighed all the options and found a weakness. He had discovered the get-out, his death avoidance loophole. He had played the game and won.

Check and fucking mate. Get out of that one. Who needs the damned Scooby gang.

“You are quite right,” the policeman said, “we can't hurt you. We only have a limited time here.” David sensed a but. Had his confidence been misplaced? The light of the loophole seemed as far away as ever. It flickered, and then it went out completely, and he was back being consumed by darkness. “However, the one behind you, well, that's a different matter.”

Behind me, behind me? What the fuck is behind me.

He did not want to look for two reasons. First, he did not want to look; was it real if he did not look? The second was that he did not want to turn his back on them. He had to look. He could not help himself. Curiosity can kill humans as well as cats.

Slowly he turned his head. He could see nothing. He turned a little more, eyes crept first, and his neck and body followed. He shifted gradually to keep as much on view as possible. Turning like a camera panning the scene and taking everything in. He did not want to turn his back, but at the same time, he could feel something in the hallway behind him. The end of the landing had changed once again. It seemed to be falling away piece by piece; what was left was darkness. He watched as droplets fell away like rocks from a cliff edge and vanished into nothing. The darkness seemed to consume them as they fell. He could see nothing else, only the gloom and corruption that seemed to absorb everything. An endless hunger was pulling in the last remnants of the house inwards. He looked and pulled his eyes from the nothingness that was feeding. Looking to see what else had

changed, he noticed the frame of The Nightmare. Something had changed in the picture, just something that he may not have noticed the first time he had looked. The trim at the bottom of the woman's long white nightdress was now purple. It was a minor change and something that should have meant nothing, but it unnerved him.

David wrenched his eyes from the painting. Forcing himself to look away. He felt like one of the looky-loos you see at a car crash. Not wanting to look but also not wanting to miss anything. He turned back to the darkness with his eyes following just a little behind. Watching to make sure the incubus did not spring from the painting.

The darkness had almost consumed everything along the hallway. It seemed to teeter on the edge of the frame of the painting. Afraid or unable to move any closer. The wall that held the painting flickered in and out of view. The frame and picture were hanging against nothing. David stood and wondered if this was the end. The ghosts may not have been able to hurt him, but he was sure that this darkness could rip him limb from limb and deposit him in Hell. Ready to be fed upon by whatever nasties inhabited such a realm. It had been moving at a crawl before as parts of the house had fallen into it, but now the darkness jumped forward quickly. Like a missing set of frames from a film, one second it was considering the edge of the painting; the next, it had jumped forward and was standing nose to nose with David.

David felt nothing from the darkness. He did not feel a change in the temperature. He had expected to feel dread and misery from it but felt neither. It was just there where it had not been before. Completely devoid of anything, a void of nothingness. Then he saw the light at the heart of it. A hint of light in the nothing of the dark. It was moving and moving so

quickly towards him. He could not make out what it was. It was moving far too fast to tell any detail. A steam train of light appeared in the tunnel of dread. One moment it was just the tiniest dot, the next, it had flown forwards at such speed. Much faster than any living creature. David felt a pain in his chest as the light continued ever closer. With a tightness in his heart, he placed a fisted hand on the centre of his chest and pushed. The tightness remained, and he felt lightheaded. This was all too much. He blinked, and Jason stared back at him as he opened his eyes. The light in the darkness had become his son. Jason flew forwards, and David staggered backwards.

Jason was eye to eye with him, and he smiled and said one word, “boo.”

David stepped back and fell backwards. He tripped on the top step of the stairs. He grabbed for the banister, but it broke away in his hands. It was as rotten and dead as the rest of the house and its occupants. He heard, rather than felt, his neck breaking as it hit the first step. The pain was over after the neck break. The spinal cord shattered and severed to relieve him of the physical pain. His body still tried to fire the electrical signals, but it did not matter now. The mental pain and anguish would remain, and he could die with that. His body bounced down the remaining steps. Bones broke and ripped through the skin. Blood painted the steps and wall. Finally, his body slumped into the hallway. The beating of his heart slowed like a long-forgotten clock would eventually slow and then stop.

Michael leant over and spoke. “It's true we cannot hurt you; we can, however, make you jump.”

With that, darkness engulfed him. Not from the house. This darkness came from within, and the world was soon black and gone.

THE TREE - THE PAST.

The tree stood as the house smouldered. The four bodies were discovered inside, and the trophies from their kills were found soon afterwards. Small tokens for remembrance, a treasure to relive the moment they had kept. Now they were dead; it held no significance. It would not have mattered if they had never been discovered; it did not matter that they were. The trophies led to bodies being discovered. The majority were found tangled in the roots of the tree. Nobody could explain why or how they could have been woven into the roots. Many did not care. They were just happy to be able to bury their loved ones. To finish the story and to have an ending.

The discovered victim's bodies were buried with funerals and the best wishes of everyone. More links were made, and more cases were resolved. Many files that had sat open could now be shut. Time is said to be a healer, but the tales of what had happened would forever remain sore and blistered for many. The seasons moved on, and the leaves on the tree changed from

green to red and then from red to orange. The leaves fell as the locals approached the house.

The source of the fire had never been determined. Experts had been over the house with fine eyes and could tell you everything about the fire except for how it had started. They knew where it started, where it had ended, and how it had spread across furniture and woodwork, but not what had started it. That initial ignition. Much of the house still stood, and nobody could explain that. It was like a great metal barrier had been placed down the centre of the building. One side had been destroyed, and the other stood complete and unscathed. The locals who had flocked to the house intended to resolve this complexity.

They soaked the unburnt side of the house in petrol. Splashing everything from the walls to the remaining stairs. They drenched the old furniture and covered everything wooden; they stood back as the torch was thrown and the fire grew. The police, the fire department, and anyone else would have no problems this time. This time the source of the fire would be as visible as a single daffodil in the middle of a lawn or a fully grown swan among ducklings. With some of their grief abated, they looked at the tree that stood tall. The tree where the bodies had been found.

They marched across the field and to the tree. Some carried cans with the remaining petrol, and the tree standing in the late autumn moonshine would alight quickly. They doused the tree and set it ablaze. The leaves that remained, trunk, and branches caught, and the majestic oranges and reds of the flames whirled in the evening light. They jumped from trunk to branch and from leaf to leaf. The shadows jiggled against the locals that watched the flames with wide-eyed enjoyment.

The following day, the tree stood unharmed and unburnt. Whispers travelled between the locals about what it could mean and what it meant. They had watched it burn, and they had watched the flames boogying in the moonlight. How was it possible that the tree still stood unmarked? Whispers soon evolved into mutterings and mutterings into stories and tales of dread. The tree was haunted, and it possessed powers. Nothing could grow in the ground around it. The very roots themselves were said to be able to poison a man. It was mainly bollocks, but the church did have a problem.

The church owned the field, and as it owned it, it also had to find a solution to the tree. The priest, who would later befriend HT, stood looking at the tree, and he had watched as it had burnt, so he knew the whispers were true. He had hired a company to take care of the problem, and they had come and examined the site and uprooted the tree. Problem solved, praise the lord, until the next day when the tree was back. The company could not explain it, the priest could not explain it, and when he prayed, his prayer could not explain it. If you will excuse the pun, they were stumped.

Stumped had given them an idea. The company went to the tree and sawed through the trunk this time. The tree had been felled, and the trunk's base was crisscrossed. "That'll take care of the bastard," the sawyer had announced before adding, "sorry, father." the Priest waved it away as he had called the tree far worse in his head. Like that cat that came back in later years, so did the tree. "It's' a miracle," the sawyer had proclaimed. To the Priest, it was more like a nightmare. An unholy bastard of a nightmare.

He then blessed the field, and he cleansed the tree. In a final act of desperation, he pieced together the exorcism ritual. He performed it one evening in front of the tree to no effect. The tree remained and thrived. He then forbade the tree or field be used and closed it to the public. Time had

passed, and the tree had been largely forgotten. The records the church would have kept had been purged, as the priest did not want his work to be tainted. When he died, the priest put in temporary charge unwittingly decided to sell the field.

The company that bought the field soon fell on hard times, and the tree and field remained undisturbed. The company folded, and the tree and field passed into various hands over the years. That was until a new priest took over the parish. HT, Father Thomas, had petitioned the Church to buy the field. He had used the pretence of extending the graveyard in the future, adding that the field was now available at a low price. It was the only time he had lied to his Church; he had felt the lie was necessary. He wanted the field, not for a graveyard, but because he felt it needed to be kept from the public. The field had been maintained and looked after and had grown quiet, and myths of the tree had been buried with the dust of age. That was until David stumbled across it.

BEGINNINGS.

The Priest sat alone at the table in David's kitchen. He had looked for anything that might hint at what he could do. He could see nothing. Not a thing that could make sense of what he was feeling. A book, paperwork, and an old picture of a house with Jason aged 9, written on it were on the kitchen table. The picture had lived in the book, and he had pulled it out to look. A bookmark of sorts. A large house with crooked windows and doors, a white pathway and two chimneys, typical child's drawing, he thought. The paperwork was for the funeral. David must have been sitting there this morning going through some things.

He flipped the picture book open and worked through the various paintings. It was just a collection of artworks from over the years. Not one particular artist or subject, just a picture book of paintings. Each painting had a brief note, but nothing more than that. He closed the book and rested his hand on it.

He suddenly felt a lifting of the weight that had been on his shoulders. As quickly as it had arrived, it had retreated. The feeling of revenge and anger

had floated from him. He had often stood in his church's belfry and watched the sunrise. This should have felt like that; it should have felt like new beginnings. Closing the final page in a depressing book and hoping your next read is happier. He sat at the table and should have felt happiness. He should have been relieved, but he was not; he just felt a great sadness. He knew that he was too late. Whatever was going on had ended. It was pointless for him to be here now, and he left the house, closed the door behind him, and headed back to his church.

Bridgwater town centre was its usual messy self. They tried, they all tried, and there were no doubt worse places to live, but sometimes he wondered if it was worth it. Today was one of those days. He could not shake the feeling of failure. Could he have done more? He felt that he should have done more. What more could he have done? He left the town centre to wander to his Church; the autumn leaves adding colour to the world he loved and cherished.

He arrived at the church and headed straight for the graveyard and to Jason's grave. That was where this had started, so maybe he could learn and discover more there. Nothing was there, just the freshly filled grave awaiting a headstone. The air around the grave felt stale and dead. He had learnt over the years that it was a normal feeling. When the souls depart, they leave nothing behind. He strolled towards the gate to check the field. He was trying to retrace David's steps to understand what had happened. He reached the gate, and then he saw it.

The tree was well known in his church and parish. He had, though, always considered it either dealt with or exaggerated. Now, in the centre of the field, the tree that had stood exhausted now looked reinvigorated. He ran

through the field and rushed to the tree. Its golden leaves swayed in the mild breeze. It looked alive.

The tree stood imposing in the centre of the field. It stood as if it had been there for hundreds of years. The most important and essential thing in the town. Fuck the church and screw the pub; the tree is the monument to the town. He could feel the tree and sense and perceive that it was just wrong. He could feel the perversion as he stood looking at it. It felt like a slow wind blowing across his whole body, his flesh rippled with goosebumps as he approached the trunk. He grasped the crucifix he wore around his neck and felt a warmth that dispelled the bumps. Standing there, he felt a sudden need to touch the tree. To lay his hand upon the bark and feel the life that flowed within. He held his hand out without a hint of trepidation. His God would protect him, of that, he was sure. He touched the tree.

Visions flashed in his mind. A world he had not seen and people he did not know. He saw a local town church burnt to the ground. This was something he knew had not happened; did he see the future? Could he stop it? He watched as a man in a fedora beat another who lay on the floor. He saw a nightclub with a brick on the bar and a fairy in a pinny flying around it. Then what he saw was nothing. His visions went black. In the distance, he saw a man approaching. A man dressed from tip to toe in red. A red suit accompanied by a red top hat and shoes. He sauntered towards the Priest, keeping his eyes forward the whole time. When he stood six feet away, he stopped and removed his hat. He waved his hand like a magician over the hat, and then his hand delved inside. His hand reappeared, and he was holding a tarot card. He examined the card and exaggerated emotions in silence like a mime; he flicked the card forward. The card spun through the air, and as it did so, it blocked the view. At that moment, the man vanished,

and the world returned to normal. The Priest stood, hand upon the tree and trembled.

He did not need to look down at the floor to know it was there. He could not help himself; he had to look just like David would have looked. The card he had seen in his vision lay just at his feet, and he leant over to pick it up. The front of the card was titled "The Healer." The picture was of a generic priest with a crucifix held forward. On the bottom, "*The Man of God*" was written in italics. He flipped the card and looked at the picture on the reverse. It took him just a moment to recognise the burned wreck pictured. It took just a second longer for him to understand what he was seeing. "Oh God, no," he said aloud as he looked at the card. He ran from the field following the route that David had taken earlier.

The burnt husk of the house stood crippled and broken before him. He had seen it before, and he knew the stories of how it had come to be. He paced quickly towards what had been the front door, and that was when he saw the body. He looked at the back of the card again, and the body was lying in the wreckage of the house, just as it was in the picture. He pushed the card into his pocket and ran to the body.

David's body was slumped on the floor, lifeless. He didn't need a doctor to tell him that. The neck was broken, and a bone was sticking from it. He looked over the body and prayed. He prayed not just to God but to any being who could help. He felt that this was not the end of things but the start of something.