



THE DARK

TENTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Don't close your eyes



WRITTEN AS A 'NOVEL IN A DAY'
ON AUGUST 14th 2021

The Dark

written as a
Novel-in-a-Day



THE DARK

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Time is no substitute for talent

Ten years ago, the idea for Novel in a Day was born. It came about in August 2011 when someone made a post on the Literature and Latte forum complaining about an article they'd read on how to write a book in three days.

In a testosterone fuelled moment, I responded: *"Three days is nothing. It's rubbish. Easy. Three days is the slow option. The one taken by wimps and amateurs. The trick is MANPOWER..."*

I suggested, therefore, that we group together and see what we can do in a day. A handful of enthusiastic responses got momentum going before I could change my mind, and within a few short weeks we'd scheduled, planned and ran our first event: 2011's "The Dark".

We've kept going since then. We've produced 10 full NiaDs and one special edition Novella in a Day, and today we've celebrated our anniversary by re-running our very first event, to create a special 10th anniversary edition of that first book we wrote together - The Dark. Massive thanks to everyone who has been a part of this book, whether in helping write this 2021 version, or working on that first one back in 2011.

I hope you have as much fun reading it as we did writing it!

Tim

14 August 2021

The Dark

chapter one

Julia Ward

DETECTIVE SERGEANT NICK SCOTT kept watch on the ambulance in his rearview mirror as it sped the opposite direction. At least one person survived, or wasn't dead yet.

He followed the narrow country road through a picturesque countryside of rolling hills and farmland, taking turns as directed by his GPS. The final turn took him into a wooded stretch and to his destination, a holiday cottage.

As he climbed out of his vehicle, he kept an eye on the fire brigade as they wandered what was left of the structure. Smoke, or more accurately at this point, steam, rose from the charred remains.

It was a shame. He'd brought his wife Mary out to a little spot like this not long after they'd been married. Recently, he'd been thinking maybe some time away together might be good for them and that he ought to do it again. But the scene before him had him more keen on a trip to the coast.

A couple in their late forties, early fifties were talking to a member of the fire brigade, Watch Manager Ballister, according to his name badge.

Pulling his own badge out and showing it, he joined them. “I’m Detective Sergeant Nick Scott. You are?”

“Watch Manager Edwin Ballister of the Fire Brigade, DS Scott. This is Mr. and Mrs. Henricks.”

“Oh. DS Scott. We live up the hill there.” The man pointed up the hill to what Scott assumed was another cottage hidden in the trees. “We saw the flames and phoned 999.”

The wife went pale, causing DS Scott to turn around. A bagged body on a gurney was wheeled from the house to a waiting SUV.

He returned his attention to the couple, hoping to distract the woman. “Anything else you can tell me? Were they loud? Partying?”

“No. Not at all,” Mr. Henricks offered. “The owners tend to be very careful about who they rent to. Usually people who like the outdoors. This group... They were quiet. Seemed quite nice, really.”

“Did you notice anything else?”

“We were just telling the Watch Manager Ballister here that we’d heard a loud bang.” Mrs. Henricks stopped talking, blinked, and covered her mouth as she looked away.

DS Scott could hear the wheels on this one. The gurney with another body. He wondered briefly how many there were. But at the moment, he focused on the couple so they could go home. “A loud bang, you said?”

“Um, yes. A boom really.”

Mr. Henricks took up the narrative. “We thought they might have gotten hold of some fireworks. Until we looked out and saw the flames.”

Mrs. Henricks turned away, wiping her eyes, as the gurney came out a third time.

“You might want to get her home. Here’s my card if you

think of anything else.” DS Scott was quiet as he spoke to Mr. Henricks, who then herded his wife away from the grisly scene.

“Anything more you can tell me?” he asked the watch manager.

He shook his head as he flagged down one of his crew. “Is it clear?”

“Yes, sir. Just watch your step in there.”

“Shall we?”

DS Scott wasn’t certain he wanted to enter the building, but the watch manager directed him to a truck first. “Here. Let’s get you properly kitted up first.”

After donning gear, Scott followed Ballister into the ruin as the gurney rolled out a fourth body.

“They’re still looking for anyone else. But there were five in the cottage, according to... well, the one survivor, Michael Jones. We’ve sent him to hospital. We couldn’t get much from him. The man was hysterical, babbling...” He cut himself off as he glanced at DS Scott. After a shrug, he led through what was left of the cottage. “You can see what’s left of rooms, a hall. The fire gutted the place.”

“Sir, we found something.” A firefighter stopped them and then led them through to what had once been a hallway and backdoor.

In the hallway, Scott shuddered and was glad to step out onto the back patio. It was strange since there was no roof left, but the hall... Gloomy came to mind.

“See here, sir. Gas barbecue. We’re not entirely sure yet that this is where the fire started, but it certainly ignited and exploded.”

The propane tank was blown apart, as was a good bit of the barbecue. Lounge chairs had been blown upside-down.

One even landed in the creek. The hot tub was scorched.

Another firefighter stepped outside. "Sir, we found the storage cabinets contained plenty of matches. All right between to the boiler and the firebox. Doesn't take a genius to know what happened. Wrong place at the wrong time."

"Hastings, I don't pay you to guess."

After a contrite nod, Hastings retreated.

"Any sign of arson or foul play?" Nick asked Ballister.

"None so far, sir, but we're not finished investigating yet."

"What's the word on the bodies?"

"They were all friends here on holiday from university. Michael Jones, the survivor... While he didn't say much that was easily understood, we did get the names of his friends. We found them in the bedrooms." He led into the hall and then through another doorway, or what was left of it. "This is where we found..." Squinting at his clipboard, he said, "John Avery and Claire Holloway."

A box spring and sodden ash were all that was left of what had been a bed.

A soot-smudged porcelain toilet and sink indicated a bathroom sat at that end of the bedroom. Nothing looked amiss. As he turned to his right, out to the wooded area that had once been an outside wall, it occurred to him there must have been a hallway. Averting his eyes, he ignored the weird space. He could come back to it later, if need be, but in this instance, he highly doubted a hallway would affect the investigation.

"Ready to move on?" the watch manager asked. This time, he didn't bother with doorways and just stepped from the bedroom over the remainder of the wall into what appeared to be the kitchen, based on what was left of the appliances. After crossing another room, they stepped through another wall.

“This is where Dave Wilson was found and there,” he pointed to the next room. “Is where Andy Phillips was sleeping.”

“Where was this Michael?”

“Michael Jones was through here.” They walked down a small hall to the fourth and final bedroom.

“When we got here, Michael was outside, crying, babbling incoherently. The medics took him straight out. You probably passed them on your way up.”

Absent-mindedly, he nodded. “Is it safe for me to look around?”

“Sure. Just watch yourself. There are likely to be hotspots here and there. The floor seems okay, but Waylons marked off a spot where it wasn’t sound. Other than that, do as you please, detective.”

“Thanks.”

Scrutinizing everything, he wandered the house, toeing debris and kicking aside what little was left of beams. He checked the rooms he and the watch manager hadn’t walked through. That hall, though... He was happy to get outside again after crossing it. It was weird. He wasn’t one to get the screaming abdabs, but that hallway brought him close.

When he was satisfied he’d seen it all, he returned the gear. Happy to get the helmet off, he rubbed his short hair, unsticking it from his scalp, and found the manager. “Ballister, I’ve seen enough here. Keep me posted on what you find.” He handed him a card. “How bad was Jones?”

“Smoke inhalation. They put him on oxygen immediately. So he might have more to say by now.” Eyebrows high, tipped his head. “I’m not sure I’d put a lot of stock in him, though. It’s my belief he’s a bit... unbalanced. Wouldn’t be surprised at all if he did this. Went on and on about light and darkness and such. A pity really.” With a shake of his head, he straightened.

“Poor fellow. Might just be that the fire is what unhinged him, I suppose. The medics took him to Addenbrookes Hospital.”

“He’s my next stop. Thank you, Ballister.” Nick wondered about the man’s gossiping. Was that typical? He was in the country. Not much to do out there, so maybe that’s how they passed their time.

The ride back to town felt like it took forever as he passed again the farm land, but rather than watching rolling pastures, he considered: Had the boy started the fire? Was his initial babbling a ruse? Or had the fire been an accident? Had they all just been immensely unlucky? Were the Henrickses involved somehow?

He needed more coffee. This day had started too early and was going downhill. A stop wouldn’t take more than a couple of minutes, which would give the doctors a little more time to get Jones settled, he reasoned.

At the edge of town, he found a café and got a cup of black coffee to go before continuing on to Hill Road.

chapter two

Anna-Lisa Taylor

THE RIG DOORS OPENED with a jolt. The frigid early morning air seeped in, circulating through the stale atmosphere of the ambulance and clearing the charred smell that lingered with the ghost of antiseptic. Under normal circumstances, the breeze might have offered some relief, refreshing and calming the senses. Instead, it triggered a wave of anxiety accompanied by burning pain through his left hand. A natural reaction would be to draw his arm in towards his body, perhaps to cradle it in a protective gesture, but he just sat staring out of the rig door with wide, unblinking eyes. His breathing rapid and shallow whilst his eyes darted around. For a few minutes, his view was obscured whilst one of the paramedics lent over him, carrying out clinical observations and noting them down before readjusting his oxygen mask. Instinctively, he took a deep lungful of the air being pumped through it. He took the opportunity to blink as quickly as he could in short succession, not sure how long he would be sat here, safe in the interior lights. Focusing on an emblem on the paramedic's green uniform allowed his eyes to fixate and stop searching. That

simple action granted him a reprieve and eased the thumping headache.

Much too soon, the same paramedic was looking him in the eyes and saying something to him. When he shook his head to try to tune out the noise of the oxygen to better focus on the voice, he caught them explaining that they had arrived at Addenbrookes A&E and “Not to worry.” How could they say that when they were about to throw him into the jaws of the beast? But instead of begging them not to take him out there, he just stared hoping that they would understand telepathically. *Please don't take me out of here.*

A tremor took hold of his body, rattling him and making it harder to keep his eyes open. It had already been a struggle. Both eyes were itching and felt dry. He dare not rub them because it would keep them closed for too long and if he irritated them any further he'd be forced to blink more. It wasn't worth the risk. He needed to be able to see. The grit and soot around his waterlines had migrated to the corners of his eyes and formed a glue like substance, black and tacky to the touch. Even his body was performing a mutiny, trying to seal his eyes closed from the horrors out there. His eyes were trying to heal and clean themselves, track marks of his tears evidence of that. It was a feeling he'd experienced last year when he'd worn some eerie contact lenses for the Fresher's Halloween ball. He'd vowed never to drink again, to take better care of his eyes and never wear the hideous things again; He'd fallen asleep in them and woke the next morning with them glued to his retinas. In hindsight,(well, at least he still had his sense of humour...)Halloween had been uncomfortable and left him needing eye drops for a few days, but this, this was torture. Unadulterated torture.

Everything was so loud. The metal catch and release mechanisms of the second door and breaks on the gurney ricocheted like gunshots through the night. Even the wheels screamed beneath him on each revolution. He sympathised with them and would have joined in if he hadn't been struck dumb. Since leaving the security of the ambulance, he couldn't emit a single sound, even to save himself.

The tremors increased as the crew began to move him from the ambulance bay and into a&e. He could see the light of the doorway glowing like a beacon of safety, but it may as well have been on the other side of the world. It was as if a chill had entered his blood stream and was making him shiver pressing all around them?

His fight or flight response kicked in and he was trying to undo his seatbelt to get off of the gurney restraining him. Why were these paramedics trying to immobilise him? He wanted to scream at them to release him, but he couldn't make a sound and they wouldn't have heard him over the din. There was a keening howl coming from somewhere. It was really close and it made the remaining hair on his body stand on end. It sounded like a wailing child and it was relentless. Where were they? They obviously needed help; They needed saving from the darkness too. The sound drove him to a fever pitch and he started clawing at the paramedics to let him go. The wails became frenzied before they'd transformed into a howl. A feral, pained and terrified sound that rend the air.

At the sound of the ruckus, additional staff had rushed out of to department to help the paramedics subdue him.

"Michael Jones, aged 20. Suffering from shock; burns to his body - localised to the left hand and smoke inhalation. Male was calm in the rig but became agitated and unmanageable in the ambulance bay. Possible psychosis - page

the Mist team. Now!”

As he fought to defend himself and save the victim already caught in the darkness, the green elastic keeping the oxygen mask to his face snapped, causing it to slip from his nose. He choked as it became difficult for him to breathe. Coughing and spluttering but still battling for freedom, he began to lose consciousness. Limbs still flailing, slowly relaxed, as his body forced him to succumb to the very thing he’d been fighting to avoid - Being vulnerable, outside in the darkness. His final thought, as the staff let out a collective sigh of relief, was that he had been mistaken; the wailing he had heard hadn’t been coming from a child at all. It had been coming from him.

Khyra’s heart broke for the man. As one of the first paramedics to the scene she had witnessed the devastation. The guy was only a month older than her - she’d been the one to write his chart. He’d been so traumatised that he couldn’t remember his own name, and they’d been forced to use ID recovered at the scene by the firefighters. Jesus. It hit home for her because it could have been her. Michael could have been one of her friends. In any other circumstance, Michael would have been her type. He was a bit nerdy looking thanks to the pairing of a 6” frame and slight build, but his lean muscle definition suggested he exercised. In another time and place, she knew she would have found his eyes to be kind and caring and adored the way his short brown hair had a slight wave in it. It probably drove him nuts, but she found it softened the angles of his face. That was it: Michael Jones looked like the kind of geeky 20-something you’d find in any average coffee shop, awkwardly laughing whilst flirting with a girl, like her, over hot chocolate with all the toppings.

Khyra blew on her hot chocolate, without any toppings.

They always told you that after a challenging call you should stop, debrief and have a sweet drink. Hot chocolate was her go to because she couldn't stand caffeine. The only problem with that was that the hospital vending machine made it with thermonuclear water. The Human Torch's dishwasher by the taste of it. Nine times out of ten, another call came in and she ended up lobbing the drink away before she got to actually drink it. Tonight was the first shift she'd ever had where she needed the ritual of this drink. The piping hot water might be able to cleanse her soul of what she'd witnessed. Her brain just kept coming back to his eyes. At one point she'd stood in front of him just to block his view. Eyes permanently searching for something but totally blind to anything in front of them. Khyra wasn't even sure Michael would recognise her. It was as though he hadn't been able to see features, she and the team had just been figures to him.

More haunting than his eyes though were the sounds. Khyra wasn't sure that she would ever forget the noises Michael had made when he was trying to get away from them. It had been a test of her professionalism. Squat here against the hospital bay wall, she could release the tears that had been threatening to fall for hours for the broken man. The sound he'd made had been so gut wrenching, even to his own ears, that he had convinced himself that a child needed to be rescued. Harrowing. That was the best word for it.

Leaving him in a&e had been a struggle and he had weighed on her mind all shift. Every time she returned to a&e with another patient she'd felt compelled to ask for updates. According to staff, when he had come back around he had behaved like a wounded animal, but instead of cowering in secluded, dark places, Michael had done the opposite - running from any shady patches, shadows or curtains. It had

taken the Mist team three hours to respond to their urgent page. In which time he had been sedated twice by a&e staff. It wasn't his fault. In his fear and shock he couldn't differentiate between those there to heal or potential threats. At one stage, he had begun hissing at a curtain because of the way it cast shadows on the floor around his bed. Eventually, staff had decided to keep Michael under. They claimed it was purely for his own benefit, but he'd begun scaring staff and patients by screaming at the top of his lungs about, "the demons lurking" and crying for help because "they were coming for him." Mental health was still grossly under staffed, funded and empathised with.

The next couple of days were a blur to Michael. He found his memory was playing tricks on him and he was exhausted. His left hand was now bandaged and the doctor had said he may need a skin graft in the future. The same doctor had also explained that he may suffer some shortness of breath or coughing, but that the smoke inhalation had been offset by the oxygen they'd been administering. On the face of it, it had sounded as though he would be discharged soon. It was just a matter of addressing the impact of the trauma. For that they had referred him to a specialist based in psychiatry. When Michael had asked how long that was likely to be, the Doctor had gently explained to Michael that he had been detained under Section 1 of the Mental Health Act and he was to be transferred to the psychiatric unit within the hospital. A nurse was by his bedside to support him until they could arrange the move, but due to the section, Michael would be on the new ward for 28 days. The Doctor explained that it would be the responsibility of the specialist to discharge him when they were ready. Michael just nodded, apathetic.

At this point, he had little to no recollection of what had happened but he was scared in ways he hadn't been before. It felt like he didn't know who he was anymore. One moment, he was Michael Jones, second year English Lit' student with his whole life ahead of him, and the next he was a quivering wreck, hyperventilating because there could be someone lurking under his bed in the shadows.

It didn't help that staff would come over and reassure him there wasn't anyone or anything there, that it was all in his head. All it did was prove to him that it was a big conspiracy and the staff were helping the darkness carry out their nefarious deeds. It couldn't all be in his head - he had physical symptoms, so why wouldn't they believe him? He'd see things or just know in his gut that they were there waiting for their opportunity to pounce. They weren't around in the light. They needed the dark to thrive and it didn't matter how little darkness they had. The minute he saw them, they made him feel sick. Cold sweat would bead all over his body, his heart would start pounding, vision would blur and it felt like his blood was humming. Literally vibrating. It was a warning to get away from whatever was there. Sometimes he even passed out or had pseudo-seizures because of the fear. There was no escape from the darkness. It was everywhere.

They had transferred Michael to the new ward in his sleep and ensured that his bed was away from any windows so that he couldn't see outside. Since the move he had felt safer. To him it was common sense - they just had to keep him away from darkness. Which they had and voila! They said he was stable. Every ward round, the nurses asked how he was feeling; did he feel suicidal; have thoughts of hurting himself or others. Michael kept telling them he wasn't depressed or suicidal, just scared.

Michael was starting to think that they didn't know what to do with him. Even on the new ward.

An unfamiliar woman stood in the office. Michael could see her through the window even though her words were muted by the locked door. Everything was locked here. For safety. Michael wasn't sure if it was just an illusion though. Keys suggested doors. Doors gave places for monsters to hide. The nurses told him he needed to "interrupt the thoughts" so he wouldn't obsess and panic. It was worth a try, so Michael focused on the woman instead.

The way she was interacting with staff and looking his way was a dead give away that she was the Doctor here to see him. Perhaps she was the specialist. If it weren't for the focal point of the office, the trouser suit and air of authority she exuded, he may not have noticed her. Compared to the other staff, she was fairly short - no more than 5'5" but her height and stature were worlds apart; What she lacked vertically she compensated for in confidence. Her hair was in a French plait. It wasn't a surprise that she chose an orderly style like that, psychiatrics didn't lend itself to fashions that could distract or put staff at risk. He'd bet she preferred a chignon or simple twist and clip. Uniform, like the plain trouser suit and mousy hair.

Michael made no effort to hide his assessment of her as she strode towards him. You could tell a lot about someone's sincerity by their resting face. This woman didn't carry herself with a fake smile, there was no attempt to put people at ease using emotional manipulation, he respected her for that. Equally, she didn't come across as hostile. There weren't any severe frown lines marring her forehead, or pinched lines around her mouth to indicate a regular scowl. Her pace was neither rushed or hesitant. Upon arrival, she held her hand out

to introduce herself, “Hello Michael, my name is DR Lisa Warne and I am a specialist Psychiatric Doctor here at Addenbrookes’. How are you today?”

Michael was gob-smacked. This was the first time that he felt like he’d been treated with respect and dignity since his arrival. He took her hand and shook it, moved that someone in a position of power over him had offered physical contact, “Hello, DR. Sorry, I’m a bit taken aback that you’re shaking my hand instead of injecting me and that you’ve told me your Christian name.”

DR Warne nodded and indicated to the chair beside him, “Do you mind?”

“No, please.” Perhaps he should warn her that the chairs were created as some form of medieval torture device, but elected to keep it to himself.

“Well, Michael, my name is Lisa and I believe it’s only fair to let you call me by whichever name or title you feel comfortable with and manners are important.”

Michael nodded, his mother had always taught him something similar. He’d reserve judgement on what he called her, but it was likely that he’d show her professional respect by using her title. ‘Lisa’ felt too informal to him.

Dr Warne spent an hour or so discussing Michael’s thoughts, feelings and experiences with him. It felt healing to be seen and she certainly seemed to want to help him. Michael was picking at the cuticle of his right thumb as he answered her questions, but he couldn’t hold off the urge to start pacing. He’d found that perpetual motion helped him to process information, but he became more agitated as Dr Warne began to ask probing questions about the incident or what was in the darkness. He stopped talking. Sat down and began rocking back and forth. It was a subtle movement and to those looking

on, Michael seemed to be cuddling himself for comfort.

“Michael, I think I know what is causing this and how to deal with it, but it may take some time.” Her hands were resting together, nestled on her lap in a flat palmed prayer position, “Can you nod or give me some indication that you’re listening and understand what I am saying, please?” Her voice was regulated, calm and reassuring, but there was an authoritative tone that he felt compelled to answer.

Michael nodded.

Continuing on, Dr Warne explained her diagnosis, “It’s called, Nyctophobia, Michael. It is a pathological fear of possible dangers concealed by the dark. Until we have had more sessions, I can’t be sure of the root, but it could have been triggered by the trauma of the fire. It seems that your mind has tried to process everything that happened, the fear, loss and anxiety by manifesting it this way. It’s why you aren’t always scared of the dark in and of itself.”

Michael swallowed, “Is, is that why I can keep my eyes closed to sleep and things?”

“Yes, I believe so. Have you ever had a problem doing that, Michael?”

“Yes, in the ambulance. I didn’t want to close my eyes. But, it was, I needed to, to keep alert. You know? Because we were going outside and it was dark. It was so dark.” It had been hard to admit that, but he didn’t feel judged by her. Dr Warne was transforming from a plain, unremarkable woman, to a saint in his estimations. A human willing to listen and help him. Someone who cared. They discussed medications, talking therapies and strategies to manage his symptoms.

“Michael, I would like to switch you to an informal patient. That means that I would be removing your section, BUT...” she gave him a stern look and raised her eyebrows as she

continued, “you would need to stay under my care voluntarily, until we come to the agreement that it is safe for you to be discharged. That would mean that your Nyctophobia would be stable and everything would have been set up to keep you safe. What do you think?” As she waited his answer, Michael noted her prayer hands rocked backwards and forwards. It could have been misinterpreted, but he felt it was a mark of hope. She wanted this, maybe she was nervous he would refuse.

“Yes, please, Dr Warne. I need help.” He swallowed hard. It hurt to say that aloud. As he raised his eyes to meet Dr Warne’s she was smiling, “Then that’s what I will do, Michael. Is there anything I can do to help you feel safer or more comfortable?”

“Please may I have a well-lit room without windows? Can you ask them not to turn the lights off? Ever?” His voice was small and it felt like his body had folded in on itself to make him smaller in his chair. Dr Warne took Michael’s hand and looked in his eyes as she said, “I can’t promise you that the lights will never turn off, Michael, because sometimes that just isn’t practical, but, I can arrange the room for you.”

He’d made sure to check that the lights couldn’t be turned off in his room or the corridors. That’s how they would get you, you see. It only took the tiniest bit of dark - the wisp of a shadow, for every known evil to hide and ensnare you before you knew what was happening. A simple spark and the world could come falling in ashes around you. He didn’t even trust his own shadow not to mutiny against him. You were safe all the while you were in your room - with every light on, but the staff forgot you were still in danger in the corridors! They couldn’t trick him! When he’d told Dr Warne about it, she’d ensured the matter was dealt with, she was good like that. The

only promises she made were ones that she could keep. So when she'd said he wouldn't be sedated on this ward, under her care, she had been clear that it was with certain conditions; she couldn't promise him that it would never happen. What she could promise was that he would only be sedated if he became a danger to himself or others. That made sense to him. When he had explained about the lights needing to be on all the time, she'd promised that he would be in control of the lights in his own room, and the lights in the communal spaces were motion activated. She'd been adamant that nothing could move in those corridors without the lights coming on. Dr Warne had even sat with him while he tested them. For hours he had thrown a squash ball around the corridors under her careful assessment. Dr Warne never rushed him. They'd agreed to swap questions and answers, one for one. It had helped. He'd been able to ask about the ward lighting specifications and if there were backup generators should there be a power cut. Dr Warne had assured him that there were procedures in place for such situations and when he had demanded to know how long it took for the generators to kick in, she had found out for him.

At the end of today's session he'd sat on his bed, feeling confident. It could change at any moment and it often swung like a pendulum, but he felt safe here under Dr Warne's care.

He was safe here. For now.

chapter three

Jeanette Everson

“MICHAEL? MICHAEL JONES?”

The nurse jiffles a stack of files and doesn't look up. “No visitors, sorry.”

He coughs, steps closer, flips open his ID and lays it on the top of her folders. “DS Scott.”

Now she looks up. Sighs. Scott senses the curse words in her thoughts, gagged by her professionalism. Her eyes are black-ringed in reflection of his own. He's not the only one tired today. He softens, slumps a little, and starts over.

“I'm sorry, it's been a long night?” It's both a statement and a question. “We really do need to speak to Mr Jones about the events that brought him here. I believe he wasn't badly injured, so I presume he can speak?”

She meets his eyes, a flash of sympathy mingling with the tiredness he already saw. She nods, and punches at the computer keyboard with quick, two-fingered jabs. “He's not here. Hang on.” She squints into the screen, her brow crumpling in concentration. “Psych ward. He was moved over there pretty fast after initial treatment for his burns.” She

punches more keys and gestures him to look. He leans across the desk. She traces her finger across the map on the screen. “It’s signed, easy enough to find.”

Now it’s his turn to sigh. He knows the way; he’s been there before. “Thanks.” He’s already turned and is heading to the lifts.

At the front desk, DS Scott repeats the rigmarole. Says his name, flashes the ID, shuffles his feet while a keyboard is tapped. He should’ve got a coffee. He stifles a yawn, ignores the vibration in his pocket. It’ll only be Mary, wondering if he’s going to get home for dinner. Or tomorrow’s breakfast. Or anything, ever. It’s not been twenty-four hours yet but it feels like weeks. His clothes cling to that acrid smell of charred house and human flesh and he thinks he should have gone home to shower before coming here, but that would have stolen more time he didn’t have to give. He should’ve got a coffee, if only to give his nose something better to process.

“Actually,” Scott mutters to the bent head of the keyboard-tapping nurse, “I’ll pop to the bathroom first – can you get me in to see him when I get back? Five minutes.”

He splashes water on his face, tugs a wodge of blue paper towels from the dispenser, soaks it and squishes soap into the damp make-shift sponge. He scrubs around his neck, under his collar, yanks his shirt from his trousers and rubs the soapy, disintegrating paper towels into his armpits. The bin lid crashes against the wall with the force of his foot on the pedal, and the sodden blue paper makes a tidy goal, and lands with a heavy splat. The lid clunks shut, and Scott splashes his face again, pees, washes his hands, and leans his weary forehead against the pock-marked mirror. Breathes in. Out. In. Out. Maybe it’s time to rethink this job. Get a desk job. Push

papers somewhere. Is thirty-eight too soon to jack it in? He texts Mary. *Sorry love, you know how it is. This one's gonna be a killer. Will call later if I can. Love you X*

He shakes his hands dry, dabs them on his smoke-scented trousers, and drags himself back to the guy at the desk.

“Better?” the guy is world-worn but sympathetic. One of the better ones. Perk of the job, perhaps? Does working in a psych make a person kinder, more understanding? The nurse doesn’t wait for an answer — perhaps another trait of the job. “You can’t go in until the doc is here. She’s on her way, but it’ll be twenty minutes. I can find you a broom cupboard to wait in?” He grins, but it contains more sadness than humour, and waves at the doorway behind the desk. It’s not a broom cupboard but a poky office, small-windowed, cluttered and uninviting.

The DS shakes his head, “I’ll go find a coffee.”

“You can use the staff room?”

“I’ll go to the canteen. If I sit, I’ll nod off.” Scott rubs his stubbled chin, shrugs, and turns away. “Back in fifteen.”

When he returns, the nurse has gone, the desk unmanned, the corridor silent. DS Scott slumps into a hard plastic chair that creaks in protest, and sips the coffee, eyes closed, head against the wall. The coffee does little to dislodge the persistence of the smoke. Almost immediately Scott flickers open his eyes; the images of the burned-out cottage are imprinted on the undersides of his eyelids. Goddammit, you’d think he’d get used to it, one of these days. He stares at the wall opposite, trying not to blink.

“DS Scott?” The doctor’s voice is as clipped as her heels and reaches him before she does. Scott rises to his feet, the barely-drunk coffee slopping onto his leg, and holds out a

hand.

“Nick. How’s he doing?” He doesn’t ask from pleasantry, and she doesn’t answer, but gestures him to follow.

It’s not a ward she leads him too, or even a private room, but another office, a little larger than the one behind the desk the nurse had offered previously. A polished plaque on the door reads, *Dr Lisa Warne, Psychiatrist* and matched that on a name tag pinned to the open lapel of her white coat. Dr Lisa Warne points at a chair marginally more welcoming than the one in the corridor and sits opposite him on the business-side of the desk. She’s elegant and upright, her posture ballerina-straight, and Scott fights off his urge to slump.

He slurps from the cardboard coffee cup and waits for her to speak. She smooths down her jacket, selects a file from her desktop, and asks him if he knows what nyctophobia is. Before he has even started to shake his head, she is explaining.

“Aside from the shock, Mr Jones seems to be suffering from an intense fear of the dark. Or what the darkness contains, more likely. We had to sedate him eventually, so he — and the rest of the ward — could get some sleep. He is awake again now, I believe, but highly traumatised and not able to receive any visitors at the present time.” She closes the folder, places it neatly on the desk, and tilts her chin upwards, anticipating Scott’s protest with a steely gaze.

“You are aware that four young people are dead?”

“You are aware that a young man who is *not dead* is in shock and suffering from the after effects of a trauma?” Her emphasis is on not dead, and her gaze doesn’t waver.

DS Scott has learned to use honey rather than bullying tactics. He leans in, confiding and friendly. He puts the coffee cup on the table, lays his hands open and palm up, an appeal he guesses she’s trained to see through. “I understand, I really

do. But so do you. We've been in this game long enough to know how it works; jobs to do, blah-di-blah. You have yours; I have mine. I know you don't want me to see him. You know I need to. I've been up since the call came in, and I'm already exhausted. Can we both save little time here and make this work?" He tries to stifle a yawn; contain it, not have her think he is faking it for effect, but the tiredness is bigger than he is, and the yawn gets out.

They haggle, but despite her obvious reluctance, she knows she has to give. "You can't see him alone."

He'd not expected to. It's not his first go at this kind of thing. He's winning, as soon as she says this, so he doesn't need to push for a one-to-one.

The doctor glares at him, "It will have to wait until tomorrow though." She stands, ready to dismiss.

He remains seated. "It should be today. Now." He says it calmly. He's not arguing, but stating the fact.

"He's not well enough."

"We may not have the luxury of waiting. We don't think this was an accident. If whoever started this fire is out there still, others may be at risk." Now he stretches the limited facts the forensics have initially gathered. "We have found reason to believe others are in danger. If Michael can talk now..." He tails off, because she knows the tricks he'll try.

Dr Warne gazes out of the window, making him wait, her back to him as she appears to think it over.

The argument passes back and forth, unspoken, but as present in the air as the putrid scent of smoke in the fibres of his crumpled suit. He can't shift the smell of burned flesh and he wonders if she recognises it.

Eventually, she turns, smoothes her own immaculate trouser suit once more, and nods, a movement so slight he

almost misses it. “Wait here.” She stalks from the room in a subtle waft of something that momentarily battles with the smoke.

Minutes later she returns. He is led to another room. A barer, clinical, disinfectant-hued room with a table, more of those plastic chairs, and a window with safety bars breaking the view into four separate rectangles.

“Wait here,” she says again.

When she returns this time, it is with a nurse. The nurse has a hand on the hospital-robed arm of a young, red-eyed man with dirty blond hair and a haunted expression. He glances around with jerky movements, his eyes and right arm as jittery as fleas on a dog. The left hand is swathed in a dressing as fat as a boxing glove and held across his chest in a defensive stance, as rigid and still as the other is not.

Dr Warne nods at the nurse, who propels Michael Jones to a seat. Once he is seated, the nurse exits the room, but leaves the door ajar.

“Michael,” DS Scott keeps his voice soft and low, as if coaxing a kitten from under a bush. “Can you remember what happened last night?”

Michael speaks little, but nods as Scott relays the names of his friends.

“Claire Holloway. And John ...” Scott glances at his notepad, “John Avery?”

Michael’s head tilts imperceptibly, *Yes*.

“They were a couple, is that correct?”

Yes.

Scott checks his notepad again. “Dave Wilson? Andrew Phillips?”

Yes. “Andy.” Michael’s voice is barely audible, but Scott catches the word.

He nods, and offers the correction, “Andy. Claire Holloway, John Avery, David Wilson, and Andy. Phillips. Those four, and you. Was anyone else there?”

Michael becomes agitated, bashes his un-injured hand in a fist on the table, his thighs, the table, his chest. “What was it? What was it? What was it?” His voice is louder now, increasing and rising. The nurse reappears in the doorway.

Dr Warne speaks, soft and calm, “It’s okay, Michael, it’s okay.” Scott can see in her eyes that she doesn’t believe the lie but has practiced this voice so many times it doesn’t matter what she believes.

Michael stills, but his voice does not. “They didn’t get out. They didn’t get out.” His eyes claw wildly around the sterile room, and his voice drops to a whisper. “It was my fault. I shouldn’t have let the dark come.”

The nurse has stepped into the room, pats his shoulder, holds him into his chair with the gentle pressure of a reassuring touch.

Scott lets the silence fall before disturbing it once more, “Go on,” he suggests.

Michael is anchored by the nurse’s hand. His voice is tremulous, yet certain. “Because we let the dark come, I had to light the candles. Once we turned off the lights, and they wouldn’t turn back on, I lit the candles. I had to light the candles.” His hand clenches. He bites down onto the whitened knuckles. “I lit the candles. It was me. I did it. They didn’t get out did they? They didn’t get out?” He flings the question into the room, but the desperate hope Scott hears in the tone belies that Michael already knows they didn’t.

“The question is,” Scott looks straight at the patient, his

words clear and precise, “How did you?”

The patient is led back to wherever he came from, taking with him the nurse’s nodding agreement at Dr Warne’s suggestion of, “Something to help him rest?”

Scott tips back on his chair, rocking the legs an inch from the floor. Only once the door’s fire safety mechanism has done its work, bringing the door to a slow, silent close, does he let the chair rest. “So, five university friends, holed up in a remote cottage, one admits to setting the curtains on fire. Four friends die, and the one who started the fire walks out barely scathed? What’s under the bandage?”

Dr Warne fumbles with her ethics, decides there’s nothing to lose, and explains about the burnt hand.

“What do you think?” Scott asks her, raising his bagged-down eyes to search hers.

She shrugs, doesn’t answer.

“If he started the fire, and left them to burn, we’re looking at manslaughter, minimum.”

“He said it was an accident.” It’s all she’s got to offer.

“It wasn’t.”

“We’ll keep him here, anyway. For now.”

He nods slowly. “Probably best.”

She raises an eyebrow as if he were arguing rather than agreeing.

“You’ll share what he reveals? He’s hiding plenty.” He forms it as a question, but they both know it’s a demand.

She should argue, but she sees his point.

I’ll keep him here for seventy-two hours, for starters. That won’t be problem. He’ll need sedation to get him through the night, if this one’s anything to go by.”

“Faking it?”

She shrugs again, one shoulder lifting the jacket momentarily from its perfect symmetry.

“He caused enough disturbance either way. We don’t often see such acute displays of nyctophobia, tell the truth. It’s never fully dark on the wards, but even without full darkness, he couldn’t settle. The shock will wear off, but that ... that was something else. Even after the sedatives kicked in, the night duty reported that Michael remained agitated; tossing and turning, moaning. When he woke this morning the first thing he did was start yelling about something coming, what was it? where was it? turn on the lights! and so on. It wasn’t even dark by then. Lights on, curtains pulled, daylight shining in ...” She tailed off. “Hmm.” Scott caught the unspoken realisation that she’d said more than she’d intended. “Seventy-two hours,” she nodded firmly. “See how he goes.” Dr Lisa Warne stood. The meeting was over.

“Call me if there’s any change. If he says anything more.”

She took Scott’s card, tucked it in the inside pocket of her jacket, and held open the door for him to exit.

“I’ll be back in the morning, most likely.” He picked up the empty coffee cup, dropped into another foot-pedalled bin that waited expectantly against the corridor wall, and walked away in the opposite direction from Dr Warne, her heels clacking with decreasing volume as the distance stretched between them.

chapter four

Katie Quintero

AN INSISTENT RINGING WOKE DS Scott from a deep slumber. It took him a moment to orient himself, realizing the sound didn't exist solely in his dream. Also disturbed by the noise, his wife shifted in her sleep, allowing Scott the opportunity to carefully untangle himself, having wrapped his arms around her sometime during the night. Quickly rolling over, he tapped the green accept icon as he noiselessly walked out the bedroom door into the hall.

"DS Scott," he whispered.

"I apologize for calling so early, detective. This is FBIC Clive Farthington. There's been an incident at a holiday house in Cambridgeshire. I was told to apprise you of the situation and request you meet me at the cottage."

Scott rubbed a hand through his short blond hair in annoyance.

"It's the middle of the night. Is there a reason this can't wait until the morning?"

"Well," the Fire Brigade Incident Commander said, coughing hesitantly. "When a fire results in the death of four

people and one person sent to the hospital, it typically warrants immediate attention.”

“What’s the address?”

Upon receipt, Scott said he would be there within a half an hour. Scott slunk quietly back into his room, gathered his clothes and gear, carrying them into the tiny guest room so he didn’t wake Mary. After a quick shower, he popped a kettle on the stove while he dressed. Armed with a thermos of tea, his laptop bag and a grim outlook, he headed out the door.

Dew had formed on various chunks of grass and spider webs, giving them a bejeweled appearance from the glow of the lamppost. The predawn hours were silent, as most of the world still slept. Treading lightly so as not to alert the neighbors’ loud and overeager watchdog of a beagle, DS Scott climbed silently into his car and proceeded to the address given him by FBIC Farthington.

Arriving only five minutes later than promised, DS Scott pulled up to the incongruous scene. Situated on a creek, the otherwise picturesque environment was hazy from the still dissipating smoke. While the fire itself had been extinguished, it was still somewhat chaotic around the smoldering holiday cottage. Fire engines were weaved between the stands of trees which nearly hid the cottage from view, the flashing lights casting an unearthly hue to the house and grounds.

Climbing out of his car, DS Scott headed toward the cottage. Asking one of the firefighters where he could find FBIC Farthington, he was pointed toward the back of the house. Though he couldn’t see it due to darkness, DS Scott could hear babbling from the creek as he walked around the house. As he passed a hot tub on the side of the house, Scott couldn’t help thinking what a nice spot this would have made for a quiet holiday, enjoying a hot cup of coffee with his wife along

the creek or a nice glass of wine in the hot tub at the end of a lazy day.

Several men were clustered beside the gas bbq, surveying the exterior damage. As DS Scott approached, one of the men broke away from the group to meet him. Extending his hand, he introduced himself as FBIC Clive Farthington.

“What a bloody mess,” he said, nodding his head toward the cottage.

“So what happened exactly?” Scott asked as he moved to finish his circuit around the house.

Farthington walked beside him, pointing out general damage as they went - cracked and blown out windows, burned window and door frames, a few places where the flames had leapt high enough to blacken some of the branches close to the cottage. Once they reached the front door, FBIC Farthington handed DS Scott a disposable mask, donning one himself before leading the way into the interior of the one story bungalow. He continued to identify the damage as they went, through the kitchen and dining room, into the sitting room.

“To the left is one of the bedrooms and bath, and this way are the three other bedrooms, bathroom, storage, boiler room and fuse box,” FBIC Farthington said, as he moved gingerly in that direction. “At first we thought the fire must have been electrical in origin, since we discovered the fuse box had shorted. But as we moved through the house putting out fires, we found bodies and several other points of origin throughout the house. That’s when I called it into homicide and they said to contact you.”

DS Scott nodded and leaned into the room which housed the fuse box. The wall around the box was darkened to a sooty black, tendrils of burnt plaster climbing up from the

casing. The fire had traveled toward the ceiling, expanding to the right and burning its way toward the doorway where he stood.

“You mentioned four people were killed,” he said. “Where were they found?”

Farthington nodded toward the fuse box.

“One was in here, we presume checking on the fuse box. Perhaps the lights went out or they smelled smoke, came in and were overwhelmed. I’ll show you where we found the others.”

Turning right down the hall, Farthington stopped between two doorways, pointing at both of them as he turned to face Scott.

“These two rooms are bedrooms. We learned five students had rented this cottage for a holiday. There are four bedrooms, so three of them had their own rooms and the two who were a couple stayed in the room on the other side of the kitchen. We found bodies in both these rooms, one in each. While we’re awaiting confirmation, we believe the occupants were Dave Wilson and Andy Baker.”

Farthington opened one of the doors and took two steps into the room. Scott followed, moving to one side to inspect the damage. Beneath the window seemed to be the fire’s point of origin, the damage streaking up the wall, fanning toward the bed. The coverlet was completely drenched, soaking wet from the firehose spraying it down to extinguish the flames. Beside the bed was a small table, which had been knocked over, strewn the contents on the floor. A bedside lamp was among the wreckage, the bulb having smashed on impact. In the far corner was a small pile of luggage, damaged by both water and smoke.

“That’s where we found one of the boys,” Farthington

said, pointing to beneath the window. “The room across the hall nearly mirrors this, with the damage and where we found a body. At the moment we’re assuming the occupants are who died. We were able to read the tags on their luggage, which would make this Andy’s room and across the hall Dave’s.”

“That accounts for three of the bodies. What about the fourth?”

“We found it in the other bathroom, by the fourth bedroom on the far side of the house. This way.”

Passing back up the hall, Farthington moved toward the sitting room. Scott followed, treading warily between smouldering pieces of furniture as he made his way across the room. Farthington led the way past the bedroom and down a gloomy, poorly lit hallway to an isolated bathroom at the far end. There were similarities to the scenes in the fuse box room and bedroom, with the fire having spread from a point near the baseboard, expanding up and outward.

“We believe this last body was Claire Holloway, one of the occupants of the last bedroom. Hers was the last body found, since this was one of the last parts of the house where the fire was put out. If we’re right about her and the bodies in the two bedrooms, then the one by the fuse box belongs to John Avery, Claire’s boyfriend. Once the fire was extinguished we were able to check the luggage in those front rooms and the guestbook by the front door, so next of kin could be contacted.”

The two men made their way back through the house and into the front yard, shedding their smoke coated masks once there was fresh air to breathe.

“This property is fairly isolated,” DS Scott said, “Considering this is a holiday cottage and somewhat out-of-the-way, there was less damage than there could have been.

How were you alerted to the fire in the first place?”

Farthington nodded. “Fair question. The closest neighbor lives up the hill overlooking the property and called us when they saw smoke and flames licking out a window. It’s not far as the crow flies, but it’s set back far enough that they weren’t disturbed by house parties or the like, which means they hadn’t heard anything unusual tonight. They just happened to be up letting the dog out in the middle of the night and saw what was going on.”

“What of the fifth person, the one who was sent to the hospital?”

Farthington shook his head. “Michael Jones. We found him sitting on the front steps, talking to himself. When we started moving him away from the fire and smoke, he became frantic, saying he needed to stay in the light. He wouldn’t calm down unless he was in the headlights of the fire engines or in the back of the ambulance. He kept talking about darkness, the darkness, and how he needed light, that the fire was safe because of the light. He left shortly before you arrived, heading to the hospital to be checked for smoke inhalation and burns.”

After asking if DS Scott had any more questions, FBIC Farthington headed back to join his men and wrap up the scene. Scott was left to ponder what he’d seen in the house and the strange behavior of Michael as the lone survivor. Until more information came to light, his current hypothesis was Michael set the fires, out of some bizarre need to create more light, which likely ended up killing his friends. One question he was left with was whether their deaths had been a tragic accident or by design.

chapter five

John Walters

MICHAEL SEES THEM AGAIN, this time in the distance. Two, floating, red dots. No matter how much he looks away, pretends they're not there, they remain. He knows they're something sinister, something alarming, something ominous. He knows it, because they haven't moved while he's watched them. They just float in space, surrounded by a darkness that feels heavy. It's a heaviness that seems to hang on you like a shawl, dragging you down and constricting you without remorse.

However, this time is different. The eyes begin to drift closer, and closer, and closer until, to his dread, his absolute terror, he realizes they are eyes, violent, flame-ridden eyes.

Get away. Leave me alone. I beg you.

Michael lurches awake and screams as he falls, landing with a thud on the cold, cold ground, and his head hits something metallic.

"The light!" he screams. "The light! The light!"

"You idiots!" yells a woman nearby. "Why didn't you tell me he was afraid of the dark?"

Light floods the white walled room from fluorescent lights on the ceiling.

“Mr. Jones! Mr. Jones! It’s OK. The lights are on,” says the woman again.

Two orderlies arrive into the room as Michael thrashes on the floor. They grab his arms and legs, pinning him to the ground. In an moment, Michael is a rag-doll and doesn’t resist any longer.

“It’s OK, he’s OK,” breathes the woman, who has knelt next to Michael. The orderlies slowly rise up off him. “Michael, it’s fine,” she says, her voice attempting to pry calmness out of him. “The lights are back on. We won’t turn them off again. I promise.”

Michael nods through the pain in his head and hip. He massages his left hand, the wound beginning to itch. He groans and slowly rises, and the orderlies move aside.

“Let’s just talk, please,” says the woman. “No more hypnotherapy. We’ll just talk about what happened. Does that suit you?”

Michael nods, simultaneously trying to physically shake the image of the eyes from his mind.

“Please, sit,” she says, seating herself in a chair. “You can go,” she says to the orderlies. They hesitate, stare at one another, then depart.

Michael sits down and puts his head in his hands before looking up and out of the corner of his eye at the woman sitting across from him. “Who are you?”

The woman stares at him, perplexed. “I’m Dr. Warne. Don’t you remember the beginning of our session?”

Michael shakes his head.

“Ah, well — “ she marks something down in a notebook she’s holding like a baby. “Fine.” She stares back up. “Let’s

discuss what happened at the cottage. Is that fine?"

Michael nods, biting his lip.

"Walk me through Saturday."

Michael clears his throat. "Well, where do you want me to begin?"

"Any place is fine. Let's start with a description of the day."

He nods. "The others and I — "

"Sorry to interrupt you, Mr. Jones. The others were Mr. Avery, Mr. Wilson, Mr. Baker — "

"Yes, and Ms. Holloway," Michael adds. Dr. Warne nods.

"We got the place for cheap through a friend, so we decided to go up there, you know, to unwind on the weekend. It's been a busy term. We just needed to get away. We got there and didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. Well, the strangest thing was a broken light fixture in the hallway that made the place seem darker than it was. The other lighting was glorious. I still remember standing on the back patio, the sun streaming down on my face — "

"And what about what you did with your friends?" interrupts Dr. Warne, irritation in her tone.

Michael shifts in his chair. "We cooked, we had a few beers. We wished the hot tub was working but, hey, we got the place for cheap." He laughs once then grows stern.

"...those in the deepest reaches of Dante's hell were stuck in Cocytus forever," said Professor Lundwing, pacing in front of the English majors. "It was for those living out their worst torments, day after day, for their traitorous acts against another. The worst possible sin." Michael turned to Claire seated next to him. She smiled and wrote something on a piece of lined paper, and surreptitiously passed it to him. It read, "Ready for this weekend? It's going to be brilliant!"

Michael smiles.

"Mr. Jones?" says Dr. Warne. "What are you thinking

about?”

Michael shakes his head, putting his hands in his lap. “Nothing.”

She stares at him dubiously. “What happened after that?”

“Well, we were outside most of the night. I remember drinking a beer and chatting with Andy about the role biology played in the Divine Comedy.”

“What role is that?”

“Well...it’s boring, but I’d admit he had a good argument.” Michael’s voice rose. “Well, maybe I’d had too many, so I can’t remember — “

“It’s OK, Mr. Jones, that’s fine. Tell me about later that night.”

Michael sighs and nods. He grips the sides of the chair. “It got worse that evening. First, John and Claire turned in for the night, and then Andy said he was tired and wanted to get up early to go birding. That left me with Dave, who I haven’t really gotten along with as much.”

“Why’s that?”

“He just never seemed into the studies. He was always eyeing the women in class. Things like that.”

“I see.”

“Anyway, before we even start talking, I distinctly remembering hearing a whooshing sound.”

“A whoosh?”

“Yes, like a gas fireplace igniting. Or like the grill starting. It was the oddest thing.”

“What else happened?”

“We didn’t think anything of it. He finally turned in, and then I was left by myself out in the night.” Michael breathes deeply, running his hands through his hair three times as he rocks back and forth in his chair.

“Are you OK to continue?”

He nods. "It started out fine out there. I loved hearing the crickets. I looked up and saw the stars in all their glory. The majesty of it all. But, I felt uncomfortable being in so much space. There were no lights as we were so far from neighbors. I went back inside after that. I guess I was a little spooked just sitting out there by myself. I returned back in and headed for the loo, and that's when I saw that all the cupboards with the candles, torches, matches, and everything were wide open. Everything was gone."

"What do you mean?"

"They were cleaned out. The fuse box was sealed shut, but the other things were gone. I wanted a torch to help light the way to the loo but had to go to the other one since I was a little nervous to go down that corridor at night."

"Why?"

"It was dim. I couldn't see."

"That makes sense. I'd be scared too." She smiles and when he doesn't return it, she resumes her note taking.

"Well, I turned to walk past Andy's room, and that's when the lights went out. It was as dark as a tomb, and I was still down the hall from the loo. I felt around, and that's when I heard the scratching noises from the other side of the house. They came from where I'd just been, the cabinets past the dining room. And that's where my room was." He sighs. "I thought it was Dave or Andy playing a trick on me, so I snuck back the way I came, past the kitchen and the front door, through the dining room. I crouched really low and tip-toed along, trying to see if I could get the jump on them."

"What did you see?" asked Dr. Warne, scribbling in her notebook like a stenographer.

His eyes grow wide. "I *felt* heat. I *heard* another whooshing sound like a grill starting. I *smelled* — " Michael clutches at his

nose as if it is broken, breathing through his constricted nasal passages.

“What did you smell?”

“I *smelled* — “ He inhales deeply.

“What, Mr. Jones?”

“Smoke.” He coughs once, as if on queue. “But I couldn’t see any smoke. I was sure of it. It just smelled like a fire. Then, I heard something else.”

“What?”

“Breathing. Something breathing in air, breathing out heat.” *The red eyes.* “It was close, so I rushed out the patio entrance and toward the grill. I had to get away. That’s when I saw it.”

“What?”

“The hot tub.”

“You didn’t say you used it.”

“Right, we didn’t. There hadn’t been any water in it. It was churning and boiling underneath the cover.”

“Detective Scott said you didn’t use — “

“Detective Scott wasn’t there that night!” yells Michael as he shifts forward in his seat, his eyes shooting daggers. He nods then slowly sinks back into the chair, hugging it from underneath once again. “I didn’t have anywhere to go. I had to return back to the others, to wake them up, to tell them we needed to get out of there. So, I retraced my steps back toward the patio door, but something was there.”

“What? What was there?”

“It was just inside the door. It was like a shadow, the black outline of someone. It stood in the doorway.”

“Was it one of the others?”

“No, I’m sure of it.”

“Why?”

The red eyes staring back at me.

“It just wasn’t. That’s when I knew it was too late.”

“Too late?”

“I — I couldn’t do anything.” Michael’s breathing grows heavier, labored, and he grips the sides of his chair, his knuckles white. The chair rattles against the ground like a jackhammer, and he grits his teeth, attempting to suppress the scream, but it’s no use.

The orderlies rush in as Dr. Warne stands up.

“Fine, fine, I’ve heard enough,” she says as Michael yells, pleading for it to go away. “Michael, get some rest. We’ll talk again.” She strides toward the door and places one outstretched hand on a whitewashed wall, leaning against it like it’s the only thing holding her up from falling. She stands there for a second and takes a breath while the orderlies restrain Michael. She straightens up, smooths out her white coat, gives a quick smile back in their general direction, and leaves the room.

chapter six

Nick Calvert

NICK SCOTT TURNED INTO the unsigned morgue's small car park, pulled his car into a bay marked Medical Examiner 3 and turned off the engine. With a sigh of relief he closed his eyes, then massaged his temples to try and ease the tension headache that had been brewing for the last hour as he'd sat in traffic. He could have used his blues and twos, but the more you used them the less effective they were. 'Late for lunch' was the public perception, especially for Police. He logged off the car's comms, grabbed his bag, got out, walked to the nondescript entrance and rang the bell.

"Yes?"

"DS Scott to see the medical examiner." There was a brief pause, then the door buzzed. Nick pulled it open to an aseptic smell that made him wrinkle his nose.

"Bloody hell! Nick Scott! I ain't seen you in an age, mate." Nick found himself grinning as the large cadaverous man behind the reception desk got to his feet and proffered his hand. Nick gladly shook it.

"Malcolm Fender, as I live and breathe. It's got to be nigh

on fifteen years.”

“Close on, yeah. So you’re a DS now?”

“I am. Might make DI if there’s any movement, but what with government cutbacks and all that bollocks. Well, you know what it’s like.”

“Sure I do. I’m just happy to be a lowly DVIO.”

“DVI? I didn’t see you at the cottage.”

“I wasn’t there. Booked on a different shifts. Pity, ‘cause from what I’ve heard it sounds like it was a doozy.” Malcolm grinned and Nick found himself reassessing his old friend. They’d met at the Police college and while Nick had always found solving crimes fascinating, Malcolm had decided to become a Disaster Victim Identification Officer.

“Maybe our definitions differ, Mal. It was a fucking nightmare, with four dead. I’m still shaking.”

“I didn’t mean...”

“I guess you’re inured to it, mate.” Nick said. “Let’s grab a pint or two when things have quietened down, okay?”

“Sure, and I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to offend,” Malcolm said.

“No problem,” Nick said, though he knew it was. Malcolm had always been an oddity. “Who’s the medical examiner?”

“It’s Su Lee. I’ll buzz you through.”

Nick knew Su Lee from old. Su Lee’s family had emigrated to the UK when Hong Kong had been returned to the Chinese in 1997. She’d studied at Kings, then interned at Addenbrooke’s where she had specialised in pathology. She was, Nick knew, very well respected and he was more than happy that it was her, rather than the brusque know it all idiot he usually found himself with.

“Doctor Lee,” Nick said and smiled.

“DS Scott,” Su returned the smile. “Now that the formalities are over, how is Mary?”

“She’s well, thank you Su. I’m sure she’d have sent her love if she’d known I was going to see you.”

“Please give her my best, Nick,” Su said, somewhat absent-mindedly, Nick thought.

“Are you okay, Su?”

“Oh, I am fine, thank you. This case, on the other hand, is proving problematic. Follow me.”

“Should I suit up?” Nick asked.

“You can if you want, but it’s not necessary. I’ve finished, and taken all the photographs and samples I need.”

They walked down a short corridor that ended at a steel door. Su tapped at a keypad and the door slowly swung open. On the far wall was a bank of fifteen, body sized, refrigeration drawers. The main autopsy room held four trolleys, each with a sheet covered body. Above the last trolley a large circular operating theatre light hung from a rail on the ceiling. Su led Nick through into a slightly less forbidding conference room, with a large picture window through which Nick could see the sheet covered trolleys. She closed the door.

“Sit, sit,” she waved at the table. “Coffee? Starbucks kindly installed a baby vending machine, and though it’s not cheap, it’s a hell of a lot better than that old instant we used to have.”

“Let me,” Nick said, but was waved back.

“It doesn’t take cash. Hospital swipe card only. So... what would you like?”

“A cappuccino, please,” Nick said, putting his bag on the table and removing a folder of notes and his tablet. “I’m recording, okay?”

“Sure,” Su said, tapping buttons on the vending machine.

After the usual hissing and whirring, she brought the

coffees over to the table and sat down. "So, you think we have four bodies from what sounds like a pretty horrendous fire."

"Yes," Nick said, "that about sums it up."

"No, I'm afraid it doesn't," Su said, blowing over her coffee then taking a sip. "None of the corpses has any smoke in their lungs."

"What! None of them?"

"No. Which means that when the fire started they were already dead."

She half turned in her chair and pointed through the window. "From left to right we have trolleys one to four."

"One to four," Nick muttered as he took notes.

"On trolley one is a caucasian female. Claire Holloway. Late teens to early twenties with an athletic build. She's five foot four inches and was blonde, poor thing.

"On trolley two we have a caucasian male. John Avery. He was also athletic, and stood six feet one inches. He had dark blond hair.

"Trolley three: another caucasian male. Presumably Dave Wilson..."

"Presumably?" Nick cut in.

"Yes, the body is very badly burned. I would posit that it was nearest the seat of the fire. He was five foot ten inches."

"Dear god," Nick said, and took a sip of coffee.

"Finally, on trolley four we have Andy Baker. He was five foot ten, and overweight. Brown hair."

"And none of them died in the fire?"

"No," Su said, "and there is more."

"Go on."

"None of them had smoke in their lungs, but Claire Holloway drowned.

"What!"

“Claire Holloway’s lungs were full of water,” Su said. “She also had a skull fracture, but that, by itself, was probably not enough to kill her.”

“So to sum up: Claire Holloway, the girl who we thought died in the fire, didn’t. In fact she drowned.”

“Correct,” Su said. “None of the four died in the fire. They were dead before the fire started.”

“And the others? The men? How did they die?”

“Number two, John Avery, died of blood loss. There are signs it might have been suicide.”

“Which would open up the possibility of a murder suicide,” John said.

“Yes,” Su said, “but I think it’s very doubtful.”

“Why?”

“Let us finish, then I’ll tell you why.”

“That’s very mysterious, Su,” John said, raising an eyebrow.

“The mystery of the orient, perhaps?” Su smiled.

“Are you flirting with me, Doctor Lee?” Nick said, chuckling.

“Nope. I wouldn’t dare. I value Mary’s friendship far too much. Besides, you’re much too old.”

“Cheek! I’m thirty eight. Please, do go on.”

“Number three’s body, that’s Dave Wilson, was too badly burnt for a cause of death at this point. I’ve sent off samples for toxicology, but that, as you know, takes time.

“Which leaves number four. Andy Baker was battered. He was repeatedly struck on the head with some blunt object, possibly a hammer, though until I can get some time on the scanner I can’t be a hundred percent.”

“So,” John said. “Four students found dead in a fire, but none of them actually died in the fire. Which logically means the fire was started to destroy evidence.

“Do you have any idea of timeline?”

“No, sorry.” Su said.

“I’d guess that Claire died last. There’s a creek just behind the property. She could have been running away, got hit on the back of the head and fell into the water where she drowned. Is that possible?”

“Or, she could have been the first to die.” Su said, looking out at the trolleys and tapping her fingers on the table.

“Is that why she’s on trolley one?” Nick asked.

“No,” Su said. She pushed her chair back and got up. “Come with me.”

Nick swiftly finished his coffee, grabbed his notebook and followed Su into the autopsy room and over to the sheet covered corpse on trolley one.

“This is Claire Holloway?”

“Yes,” Sue said as she pulled the sheet back.

Nick gasped. Plainly visible on the poor woman’s chest, carved into her from her neck to her midriff, was the number one. “Holy hell!”

“There’s nothing holy about it,” Su said, as she stepped to the second trolley and pulled back the sheet.

John Avery had been classically good looking, Nick thought, as he saw the number two slashed across the man’s torso, from his throat to his groin. The top of the character had removed both of his nipples. Silently, Nick followed Su to the third trolley and the corpse of Dave Wilson. Here, the number was less obvious because of the fire damage, but Nick could still make out a carved three.

“Andy Baker?”

“Is number four,” Su said as she pulled back the sheet. Here, the autopsies re-sewn cracked chest, in its familiar Y shape, had split the carved number four into a peculiar shape

that reminded Nick of a puzzle he'd once seen in the local paper. As Su recovered the bodies he began to feel faint and stumbled back to the table in the conference room. He'd recovered by the time Su sat down. They stared at each other.

“So...” Su said.

“Yeah. Let's hope he stops at four.”

chapter seven

Heather Lovelace-Gilpin

“HOW ARE YOU FEELING?”

The hell does she want now?

“How do you think I’m feeling?” He demanded, eyes shifting up quickly when the light flickered.

Damn thing’s been doing it ever since he got here, his heart racing every single time, on the edge of a panic attack. He’s asked twice now for someone to replace it, listening to the irritating hum of the fluorescents before flickering again.

“I know you’re upset, Michael, but answering a question with a question is not helping us.”

He averted his eyes back to the window. There’s a walking bridge that connects two buildings, a stupid looking tower standing tall on the other side.

The fuck they need a tower for? What purpose does it serve? Is it part of a parking structure, an office building, or a lookout to keep the psychos in?

Looks like a fucking willy to me, Michael thought to himself.

“How is your hand?”

“What is that?”

“What is what?”

“That.”

He pointed out the tiny window towards the tower. He had to crane his neck to see it.

“We need to discuss Claire Holloway.”

He rubbed his eyes. Based on the chart notes, he hasn’t slept yet. Nurses have inquired if they should sedate him, but she wanted another session with him. To see if she can get more information out of him.

“What about her?”

“Michael...”

The sternness of her voice brought his attention to her.

“What happened to her?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Tell me what you remember. From the beginning.”

He took a deep breath.

“We were all drinking, her and John ended up in their bedroom to fool around. Dave, Andy, and I were playing cards. We heard them arguing, she came storming out, telling us John’s an asshole. As if we didn’t already know.”

Michael smiled for a moment, losing himself to the fond memory. It was supposed to be fun. A weekend with friends to get drunk and just hang out. A weekend to forget about academics, teachers, the pressures of being an adult.

“She found some candles in one of the cupboards, muttered she wanted some alone time, and locked herself into the bathroom. John came out and you know, we teased him.”

“Teased him about what?”

“He must not have been very good if she’s taking a bath with a candle twelve inches long.”

Michael went into a fit of laughter, Dr. Warne scribbled

something onto the legal pad she's holding.

"Don't you get the joke?"

She didn't respond, Michael rolling his eyes.

Bitch.

The light flickered, he sucked in a quick breath, bringing his hands up to run through his hair, pausing to stare at the white bandage.

They're all gone.

"Go on."

"We told him to let her chill out, she'll get over it. He sat down, took a couple of shots, and then checked on her. We can hear her screaming at him to leave her the fuck alone."

Dr. Warne watched him carefully. She had to shut down the first session, his nyctophobia getting the better of him, telling her he's next. The darkness will kill him when the lights go out. His case is extreme and quite disturbing since he didn't have this phobia prior to the scene of events.

"You going to tell me what the tower is for?"

"Just a decoration." Dr. Warne said nonchalantly.

"Like the stupid swirly thing I saw when I arrived?"

"It's supposed to be calming."

"It looks dark up there. Is it?"

She brought her head up.

"I suppose so."

"Bad things live in the dark. Bad things that want to hurt people."

"You don't believe that, Michael."

"You weren't there." His voice is barely above a whisper.

He turned to look at her. While he's tall, he's lean with short brown hair, and she thought for sure computer geek. He has this nerdiness appearance to him. She certainly did not take him as an English major.

“Back to the cottage.”

He used his good hand to swipe at his eyes again.

“We played a couple more hands, John sat next to me, but the whole time he kept looking at the bathroom door waiting for her to come out. We heard something fall, Claire said shit, and John’s back at the door telling her he’s sorry. She told him to go fuck himself. She was kind of being a bitch by then. I mean, we were there to have fun. So they got into a fight. Get over it already.”

Michael’s eyes darted to the lights.

“Why is it doing that?”

“Doing what?” Dr. Warne asked.

“Flickering. Like the bloody thing is going to go out. They can’t go out. It can’t get dark in here.”

“What will happen if it does?”

Michael narrowed his eyes at her, clenching his jaw.

“You know what will happen.”

“We discussed this already in our first session. There is nothing in the dark that can hurt you.”

He shook his head, hands trembling. Since he can shut down at any given moment, Dr. Warne relented.

“I’ll have maintenance take a look at it once we’re finished.”

“That’s what the nurse said and the nurse before that.”

He stood to his feet and moved towards the window. While it’s cold outside, a high of 55 degrees, it’s partly cloudy, the sun breaking out periodically.

“Then what happened?”

“She’d been in there so long. Must have been two hours. John knocked, but she wasn’t answering him. He asked one of us to talk to her. Dave and Andy weren’t going to do it.”

Michael sighed.

“I knocked on the door. No answer. I knocked again. Still no answer. John pressed his ear up to the door and said he couldn’t hear anything. No water splashing and we can smell the smoke of the candle. You know. Like it had gone out or something. I told her I was coming in. If she didn’t want me to see her naked, she might want to cover herself. We busted open the door and she was...”

They’re all gone. Claire. Dave. John. Andy. Every bloody one of them.

He sees it every time he closes his eyes, but only for a second. He can’t stay in the dark for too long. Claire slumped forward, her face in the cool bath water. He knows it was cool because he was the one who pulled her back. Stared into those dead eyes, her mouth open, her skin pale and cold. But that’s not what freaked him the fuck out. It was John’s screams when he dropped down beside her.

“She was what?”

“Gone.”

“Do you mean dead?”

Michael’s eyes rested on her. They’re void of all emotion. Not the first time she observed him “checking out” as some psychiatrists like to call it. Not unusual after a tragedy such as this, but Michael often displays normalcy just before the paranoia tendencies kick in. Dr. Warne made another note.

Uses the term “gone” rather than dead.

“Sure.”

“Why didn’t you call the police?”

He began pacing the small room.

“We didn’t have cell service and the cottage didn’t have a phone.”

“Why didn’t you drive somewhere to get help?”

“We came by taxi and before you ask the next stupid

question, we scheduled our pickup. 4:00 Sunday. That was the plan.”

“So the four of you were going to leave her in the bathtub until Sunday?”

He stopped to glare at her.

“We were drunk and when we finally got John calmed down, he hit the bottle hard. We remembered the other cottage on the hill, but it was dark and we figured we’d wait until morning. We didn’t know how far away it was and it’s not like anyone can do anything for her. She was gone. I checked. So did the others.”

The pacing resumed.

“Nothing bad was supposed to happen. We thought she hit her head and drowned. Or maybe she fell asleep and slipped into the water. How were we supposed to know. We thought it was an accident.”

“Was it?”

He narrowed his eyes again.

“You think one of us did it? We went in there and killed her?”

“No, Michael. I am asking questions to see if I can help you remember.”

“It wasn’t us. The bathroom door was locked from the inside until I broke it open. No one went in there until...”

He fell silent again, head snapping back when the lights flickered. Only it wasn’t a quick dim, but they actually went black before snapping back on.

Right on cue.

“FIX THE BLOODY LIGHTS!” He screamed. “THEY CAN’T GO OUT! THE DARKNESS WILL KILL ME IF THEY GO OUT!”

Dr. Warne calmly stared at him, taking note of the wide

eyes, the trembling of his body, the way his unbandaged hand clenched into a fist.

“There is nothing in the dark that is going to hurt you.”

He moved towards her, catching her by surprise, but if there’s one thing she’s learned, do not show fear and do not let your patients intimidate you.

“How the fuck would you know?”

Dr. Warne casually stood to her feet, straightening out her pantsuit. Another flicker of the fluorescents, causing Michael to retreat back to the small window to cower.

“I think that’s enough for now.” She moved towards the door, giving it two soft raps. “Get some rest.”

She stepped out, turning around to see the terror on his face.

“It’s coming for me.” He whispered.

“The darkness?”

“And whatever it is living in it. It took my friends. It wants me now.”

chapter eight

Annette Pateman

DETECTIVE SERGEANT NICK SCOTT manoeuvred his grey Nissan through the Cambridgeshire lanes. He always felt a little tense driving through these parts, as it brought back the bad memories of visiting friends homes. Friends who had more money than he and his family had. Those friends lived along lanes like these. Lanes that were sometimes private roads, and were always lined with the homes of people who were wealthy, or on the way to being so.

He lifted his hand off the steering wheel to run a finger along the edge of his collar. This was an unconscious habit he had developed, and one that increased when he was unsettled in any way. His wife Mary had noticed it. She had mentioned it to him once when they were at a large family gathering. DS Scott was forced to sit opposite his mother in law, with whom he had a relationship that could best be described as, 'tolerant bordering on tense.' It was then that Mary had first noticed her husband running his hand repeatedly around the back of his collar, in a light scratching motion and had mentioned this to him. Leaning in to whisper in his ear that he was making her

nervous with his scratching. He had stopped immediately of course. Feeling sure that his mother in law would have been sure to notice, and stack it up as a lack of good table manners.

DS Nick Scott pulled into the tarmac drive with its neatly manicured lawns on either side. Showcasing geraniums, tulips, roses and some fussy looking plants in baskets hanging either side of the doorway, on curly black hooks. The house was certainly not the largest he had passed on this particular lane, but the house had the look of a modest country house and had at least four or five bedrooms he surmised.

He approached the front door looking around and gaining his bearings. He noticed the drawn lace curtains covering the window nearest the front door, and rang the doorbell.

The door was opened immediately by a middle aged looking woman with a man. She smiled brightly at him. He introduced himself. The woman said that she had been expecting him, and that she was Jo Jones, Michael's mother. She then stepped aside to allow him to enter. She offered to take his sergeants cap, but he said he always liked to keep it by him. She nodded and invited him to follow her to what was the conservatory. She said they would sit in there, as her husband was already in there and that the garden was so lovely at this time of year, and they had to make the most of it.

A tall man got up. DS Nick Scott sized him up and noticed that there was something about him that reminded him of strongly of Michael. The mother less so. He introduced himself as Greg Jones, Michael's father.

DS Scott sat down in a comfortable wicker arm chair with deep cushions. A low table with women's magazines and a magazine on fishing and shooting lay on the low coffee table. The chairs were arranged so that they could all face each other, whilst having a view of the well tended garden.

He cleared his throat and started by saying that four young people have lost their lives and he needed to understand why, how and more importantly who had committed this arson. He watched as Jo reached for the teapot and offered him some tea in what he noticed were very nice China cups. He took the offered cup and helped himself to two sugars which was one more than he usually had. He felt he would need the energy that the extra sugar cube would give him.

He started, "Have you always lived here in Cambridgeshire?"

The husband Greg answered. "We are both born and raised here. My family owned this house and it came to me when my parents died. I have a brother but he moved away from the area. He settled in Northumbria."

DS Scott smiled shifted in his chair. He wrote a note in his police notebook. With the police issue pencil. He then continued with, "So you have both lived here in Cambridgeshire since childhood. Did either of you attend university? Maybe even the same one as Michael. Also, what did you study there?"

DS Scott wanted to get the measure of these people. He surmised that they wouldn't give anything away about themselves without him asking. These were people who likely knew the law and their rights. He wanted to sound them out before getting to more serious matters. He wanted to put them at their ease before asking about Michael Jones. Greg indicated that both he and Jo had attended university. She had gone south, to Kent university and he had stayed in Cambridge where he had studied English at the same college in fact, as his son. He said that he had met Jo at a restaurant in town on New Year's Eve. DS Scott asked them for the date and year of their marriage and where they had married. He noted that Jo

became very enlivened and more talkative at this turn of questioning, saying they had been married a long time and were due to celebrate their twenty fifth wedding anniversary. She was proud that they had made their marriage work and that it took communication and respect. At this she exchanged a look with her husband, DS Scott noted the look and made a mental note to probe the state of the marriage further.

DS Scott scratched the back of his neck under his collar and asked “Was Michael happy at university?”

He watched closely as Jo shifted in her chair and smoothed her dress, almost nervously he noted. Jo said, “I think Michael is happy at university. He is in his second year. He wouldn’t have stayed on at university if he wasn’t happy.”

Greg agreed with his wife.

DS Scott continued with, “What about friends? Does Michael have a steady girlfriend or partner, is there anyone he is seeing?”

He listened carefully as Greg indicated that Michael had not brought a girl home yet. He was too immersed in his studies for serious girlfriends. On further questioning Jo said Michael had in fact only ever brought one girl home. That had been at his high school prom dance when he had stopped by the house at the request and they had met the girl. She had been very pretty and she had blonde hair. Neither of them could remember her name. Nick silently noted that one if the victims of the arson was also pretty, and had blonde hair. He wondered if there could be a link. He made a note in his diary to look into it. Could Claire Holloway and Michael Jones have known each other in high school? Could Claire have thrown over Michael and ended things so that she could date the now victim John Avery?

John Avery was by all accounts handsome and popular at

university. He was by all accounts one of those people that no one has a bad word to say about. Rather everyone has a story to tell about all the fun things they did with John Avery who was also on the field athletics and soccer teams. So DS Scott's mind raced with the possibilities of a jealous and jilted Michael Jones, who had the opportunity and maybe motive whilst they were all in a rental unit, to strike at John Avery and Claire Holloway. Perhaps the fire had been meant for John Avery alone, but it had got out of hand, or perhaps Michael had decided to kill them all by arson, to remove possible witnesses. This line of thinking was DS Scott knew, pure speculation. He knew that he had to get many more facts and evidence, before he could draw any firm conclusions, about what happened. On a night where a house burned and four young people with everything to live for lost their lives.

The front door banged shut and a pretty young woman breezed into the conservatory calling out,

“Hi, mum”

“Hi, dad”

“Hello,” Jo and Greg called in response.

“It's our daughter, Helen. She is very close to Michael.”

DS Scott indicated that he wanted to speak to Helen. She came into the conservatory. She had an inquiring look in her eye. It cleared somewhat when her parents introduced him and said he would like to ask her some questions. Helen said she had just spoken to the psychiatrist Dr. Warne, at Addenbrookes hospital, but had been unable to see Michael as he is on the seventy- two hour hold. She had a slightly defeated look about her. Shoulders slumped at that point. DS Scott asked whether she thought Michael was happy at university, about any girlfriends or partners Michael had. Did Michael belong to any

groups online, at university or in Cambridgeshire that she knew about? He asked her whether she was close to Michael. Helen Jones said that she and Michael were close. That he is a wonderful big brother. Always sticking up for her at school, as they are close in age. Helen said that there was one girl named Claire, that he was really fond of whilst he was in high school. She said she had seen the girl in and around their area in Cambridgeshire quite recently, but they hadn't spoken. Helen said she wasn't sure the girl recognised her. Michael didn't have a girlfriend or partner as far as she was aware. She thought he was a member of the astronomy club at university, as he has an interest in space and the stars. Even though he has decided to study English.

DS Scott noted all of this down in his notebook. It seemed that there could be a deeper link than first thought between Claire Holloway and Michael Jones. Helen also added, almost as an after thought, that she knew that Michael was thinking about dropping out of university. She thought that the social side of it was difficult for him, and that he had become somewhat depressed in her opinion. Jo and Greg looked suitably surprised by this information, but made no comment.

Helen said she had just popped in to see her parents, before getting ready to go out to see a girlfriend of hers. So she had better get going. She said her goodbyes, and that she hoped her answers would be of some help to Detective Nick Scott and ultimately to her brother and the victims of the fire. She did not call it arson.

There was something that was niggling at the back of DS Scott's mind. He had made a note. It was regarding the look that Jo Jones had given her husband Greg, when she had mentioned respect. So DS Scott asked them both, was Michael a happy child and did he have friends at primary school?. Was

he in any clubs for sport or music for example. It was then that Greg said something that surprised DS Scott greatly, “Michael was adopted. I had an affair with a woman I met at work. She had a child, She didn’t want to keep the child. She wanted to travel. She knew we couldn’t marry as I was already married to Jo. So we adopted the child. Jo and I thought we couldn’t have children at the time. We had some tests and the doctors said it was unlikely. That turned out to be false, and we do in fact have a daughter. So it worked out quite well really.”

He watched Jo’s face and he saw some discomfort. Almost tears, which she brushed away very quickly. Disguising the move, by brushing her hair away from her face with both hands. So he immediately turned to Jo, “How did the affair effect you Jo?”

“Did it effect your relationship with your husband, and also your relationship with Michael?”

At this Jo replied in a very subdued voice, that herself and Greg had undertaken some years of marital counselling and therapy. She had to contend with the shock of Greg’s infidelity, and the joy of a child. But the child wasn’t hers, and was in fact the result of an affair her husband had been involved in for some time. The affair had started two years after they had got married. It had gone on for three years. There had been so many lies and betrayal. Jo said she had found it difficult to bond with Michael. Particularly in his younger years. She had found it hard to be a ‘mother’ to him. After he had turned seven years of age, she had found it more easy to talk with him and enjoy his personality. She did note that Michael was a quiet child. Greg agreed, saying Michael was an introverted child, who had to have a nightlight on at night. He didn’t like the room to be in total darkness.

DS Scott had spoken to the psychiatrist treating Michael, a

Dr. Warne.

He knew that Michael Jones was currently experiencing acute Nyctophobia, a terrifying fear of the dark. This disorder could it was thought, be a result of separation anxiety. If Michael's mother Jo Jones, had not been able to bond with him, then it was possible that he had experienced separation anxiety. Michael's own birth mother had also rejected him or so Michael might think. Maybe this had led to Michael's anxiety and relative lack of friends. DS Scott made some further notes in his diary.

DS Scott moved his hand to the back of his collar and scratched his neck lightly. It was time to leave. He didn't want to over stay his welcome. He had asked a lot of questions and gleaned a lot of information. It was time to get back to the police station and do some cross referencing and the other type of behind the scenes police work. The type of police work that was very necessary to get the job done. He drained what was his second cup of tea. DS Nick Scott retrieved his hat from the low coffee table without disturbing the magazines and stood up.

He thanked Jo and Greg Jones for seeing him, and for the refreshing tea. He commented on the timely appearance of Helen, and added that she had certainly helped with the investigation. DS Scott then said his goodbyes.

As DS Scott exited the house and walked towards his car. He patted his pocket which contained his prized police notebook, and marvelled at the ways of the seemingly more well off. He thought of the many secrets that manicured lawns and lace curtains can hide.

chapter nine

Michael Roberts

DS SCOTT WAS LUCKY.

There was a spot in the designated law enforcement parking area near the entrance, a rarity this time of the morning.

He stopped at the coffee kiosk, got himself a fresh cup—extra cream, half sugar—then headed over to General Admissions.

A somewhat elderly woman was at the desk, reading one of those romance novels, the kind his wife's Mum had stacked up at the house.

From the number of commemorative pins on the front of her blue volunteer vest, it looked like she'd been doing this a long time.

"Morning," Scott said, flashing his ID.

"Morning, Sergeant," the woman said.

"Could you tell me where Michael Jones is?"

The woman held up a finger to tell him to wait a second, then started tapping keys on her computer.

She stopped, stared at the screen for a second, then looked

up at Scott.”

“Could you be a bit more specific, Sergeant? There are three Michael Jones in the hospital right now.”

“He would have been admitted during the night.”

“Ah, yes,” she said, looked again, then frowned.

“He’s in the Psychiatric Evaluation Ward.... There’s a note here that says, ‘No Visitors’ but I assume that refers to just regular folk.”

“I would assume,” Scott replied.

“Well, it’s down the hall, a left, a hall and then on the right. You’ll have to talk to security...”

She paused and smiled.

“But of course, you know that” she said.

“I do, but always good to have a reminder...Thank you,” he said, smiling.

The smile disappeared as soon as he left.

“Still in bloody PEW is it? Whatcha hiding, Jonesy?”

The Psychiatric Evaluation Ward was a bit of a sore spot to a lot of cops.

Too many promising cases had been stalled when the suspect had been declared---or had themselves declared---mentally unstable.

After that, it was hard going to get anything out of them or have the kind of access to them that a proper investigation required.

If this guy was still in Psych, it’d be a bit more of a dance to get any information from him. Odds are he’d have someone with him, making any interrogation a bit more diplomatic by necessity.

He flashed his ID at the front guard---he knew from past visits that there was another one down the end of the corridor

inside---and was buzzed through to wait at the inside desk.

After a minute or so what looked like a doctor came out of a side door and walked up.

No white coat told him she wasn't regular staff but more than likely just had visiting rights.

Not tall, not short, with a haircut that told him she worked more hours than she wanted to and

She walked up to him but did not offer a hand to shake.

She just seemed to find a spot in front of Scott and then.... just came to a stop.

"I'm Doctor Warne."

"DS Scott."

"Didn't you just interview him?"

"We did," Scott said, "and we'd like to interview him again to get some information in addition to that which he has already given.

Which turns out to be a load of bollocks, he thought but didn't say.

"Well, if you'd like to schedule something later today or tomorrow."

"I'm afraid time is a bit of the essence right now, Doctor. The situation is a bit dynamic, lots of things happening and all that. Now, even a few minutes would..."

"He has a therapy session then he's off to Wound Care, then Dermatology for an assessment...I'm afraid he's quite busy today."

"Like I said, even a few...."

"And like I said..."

He knew that they were looking at two different people.

She saw a scared, burned kid who survived a tragedy.

Scott saw a potential killer who might be pulling a "Primal Fear" ---faking psychological trauma to worm his way out of a

criminal verdict.

“I’d appreciate anything....”

“Well, I’m off to see him in a few minutes, so...”

“I was wondering if maybe I could sit in, then...”

On her look, he added, “strictly as an observer, obviously.”

“As an observer,” she said, pointing a finger at him, the way a mother might, then turned and headed down towards the second set of doors.

She swiped her card at the door and gestured for Scott to come through.

“Michael’s been through a lot these past hours and days,” she added, over her shoulder.

Yeah, he’s been a very busy and potentially very naughty boy, Scott thought.

Michael was sitting in what looked like a lunch break room when they came in.

Scott also noticed that everything that could be used as a weapon had been removed and that the drywall seemed to have an extra, spongy cover on it.

So, essentially a swank padded cell, he thought... Interesting.

“This is Mr. Scott, Michael,” Warne said, “He’s going to listen in today if that’s OK.”

Michael nodded weakly, then turned to Scott.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hello, Michael,” Scott said, trying to sound a bit cheerier and more approachable than he usually was in interrogations.

“All right,” Warne said, glancing through her notes in a perfunctory way that told Scott that she was doing it for show; she’d already memorized what was in there.

She reached over and activated a small mic in the desk.

“Just so I can listen later, in case I miss something,” she

said.

Out of force of habit, Scott absently wondered how easy it would be to get a copy of the recording later, if he needed.

Michael nodded.

“Ok, let’s start, shall we? What happened after you found Claire in the tub?” Warne said.

“Ok,” Michael said and took in a long, shuddering breath, then began.

“John was freaking out. I mean, I know that’s normal, but there seemed to be more to it than just Claire being dead, you know? He thought something had been done to her.”

“Done to her?” Scott said automatically, earning him a look of rebuke from Warne.

You’re here to LISTEN, NOT TALK, it said.

“Yeah,” Michael said, “I mean, not like anything sexual, even though she was in the bath.... I mean, he thought the mark on her chest meant something, that it was a number... He thought it was a “1”.”

Scott was about to speak again---he found it hard not to want to interrogate---but a pre-emptive look from Warne told him not to even think about it.

“A one?” Warne said, fake consulting her notes again, “what made him think that it was a one and not just a slash?”

“He said it looked like a one.”

“Did you think it looked like a one?”

“I dunno what it looked like.”

“You weren’t sure what it looked like?”

“No, John told me what it looked like.... I never looked at it. It was on her chest...in between her.... you know.”

“Her breasts?”

“Yes, and besides she was.....naked.... I didn’t think I should look at her...like that.”

“Well, that was very.... courteous of you.”

“Thank you,” Michael said absently.

There was a pause that seemed to linger.

Then what happened? Scott silently asked, hoping Warne would sense that was the next question to ask.

“Is being courteous important to you?” she asked instead.

“Yes,” Michael said.

“That’s an important thing to be, I would think.”

“I would say it’s the most important thing.”

“I think I would agree,” Warne said.

She glanced down at her notes again, then looked back at Michael.

“So, who covered up Claire?”

“John did, with a towel...Then he said he had to get some air and think about what we needed to do.”

“So, he left?”

“Yes, he went out for a while.... Maybe ten minutes, maybe more or less?”

“And while he was gone?”

“Dave and I tried to get 999 on the mobile.... But we couldn’t.... No matter where we tried...Even the computer wasn’t letting us log on, even though we had a landline attached to it.... Then John came back.... And he’d been cut or something.”

“Cut?” Scott asked and this time Warne let him speak.

Michael nodded.

“His shirt was bloody.... right here.” Michael said, pointing to his sternum... “Like where Claire was cut.”

“Did he say what did it?”

“No,” Michael said, “I thought he might have done it to himself, you know.... because he was freaked out about Claire and what happened to her. I think Dave might have thought

the same thing but didn't say that to John directly."

"And John?"

"He said he got it in the bathroom: He was taking a pee, he said, and suddenly his chest started hurting...He thought maybe it was a wasp or something stinging him, but he said when he looked...it was a number."

"A number?"

"Two."

"Like he had a number too....as well, I mean."

"No," Michael said, shaking his head, "the NUMBER two."

"So, he's taking a slash and suddenly a number appears in the skin on his chest," Scott said.

"You sound like you don't believe me," Michael said.

"It's not that" ---it was that, actually---"But just confused how that would happen."

"Well, he said it did..."

"Ok, so he has this number on his chest.... Did you see THAT one or were you being 'courteous' that time as well?"

Apparently that comment did not go over well at all since both Michael and Warne gave him a look.

"Let me re-phrase that."

"Please," Warne said.

"Did you see the mark on his chest?"

"Yes," Michael said.

"Did you think it looked like a number?"

"Yes," Michael said, it looked like a '2'"

"Not a zed?"

Michael shook his head, "definitely a two. It looked like it'd been drawn on with a marker, but if the marker had a blade instead of an ink tip."

"All right."

Scott looked at Warne and made a “Can I?” gesture.

She nodded.

“After you saw the mark...What happened?”

“Dave had a bit of a spazz and ran outside... He was yelling something about getting the Police and Ambulance and the Army...I mean, he was starting to lose it. And yeah, he just ran off into the dark.”

“You guys try to follow him?”

“Well, Dave said we should, so he found a torch, one of those floodlights on a square battery thing? And then he went out after him.”

“How long was he gone?”

“About five minutes...and then he came back crying...with John’s...body.... he’d been slashed in the wrists.”

Scott knew about the slashed wrists from the ME’s report.

“He was still bleeding,” Michael added.

“Who was?”

“John,” Michael said, “he was still bleeding from his wrists a little...Dave was covered in the rest of the blood, I guess...it was all over his shirt and pants.”

“Dave’s?”

Michael nodded.

He paused and took in a deep breath of air, then continued.

“Then Dave started hurting...in his chest, said it was like a sting...then his shirt started to bleed.”

“His shirt was bleeding?”

“No,” Michael said, “I guess I said it wrong.. It was like he was bleeding into his shirt from behind. It just sort of started...Oozing out. So, he opened his shirt up...and...”

“What was it?”

“A cut.... like the others...only it wasn’t....it was...”

His voice broke a bit and he hesitated.

“What was it?” Warne asked.

Michael looked at her then Scott.

“It was a ‘3’.”

chapter ten

G.B. Retallack

DETECTIVE SERGEANT SCOTT STRODE through the hospital corridors, ignoring the occasional call for him to stop at one desk or another. He was in no mood. Neither the forensic team nor the pathologist had found anything conclusive to explain what had happened at the cottage or how, precisely, the four victims had died. They did, however, confirm that they did not die in the fire. They were already dead by then. What he desperately needed to find out was when and, more importantly, how they were killed. And the only man who could tell him was on psych hold, the only survivor, the only *witness*. And he'd already lied through his teeth about what happened.

He swung into the Psych Ward and immediately spotted the psychiatrist waiting at the far end of the corridor. She crossed her arms over her chest when she caught sight of him, then quickly dropped them to her sides again. Scott allowed himself a tight smile. Monitoring her own behaviour, obviously. Probably went with the territory.

“Doctor Warne,” he called as he approached. “Good

morning.”

She nodded her acknowledgement. “Detective Scott. I wasn’t sure you would show up. You must have a lot of other pressing things to investigate apart from one traumatized survivor.”

“One allegedly traumatized witness,” he corrected her. “And, as we’ve discussed, a potential suspect.”

“You can’t seriously believe that. You’ve seen him. He’s almost paralyzed with fear.”

The detective shrugged. “I’ve seen a great many things. Including psychopathic killers who fake trauma more convincingly than any actor.”

“He’s not faking!” she retorted. “He has severe nyctophobia.”

“And what’s that when it’s at home?”

“Fear of the dark.”

“And you’ll swear to that in a court of law?”

She took a deep, controlling breath and squared her shoulders. “Not yet. But I will.”

“I hope you do. I truly do.” DS Scott opened the door and stood back, letting her precede him into the interview room. “After you.”

It was a different room from the original interview suite, larger and much, much brighter. Unlike the soft, soothing pastels so often found in psychiatric facilities, this room was painted a uniform glossy white that bounced the light blazing from the ceiling fixtures and the half dozen free-standing floodlights.

“Jesus Christ!” Scott blurted, throwing up a hand to shade his eyes. “How can anybody see in here?”

“You’ll get used to it,” the doctor said, walking away from him.

As his eyes adjusted, the detective realized that the room was devoid of any decoration, and the only furniture was a single large table in the middle of the floor. There was a solitary chair tucked under one end, and two more facing each other at the other. Scott was under no illusion as to which was his. He made his way to the lone outlier and sat down.

Michael Jones was already ensconced at one of the chairs at the far end, rocking back and forth and muttering to himself.

“Hello, Michael,” Dr. Warne said as she sat down across from him. She casually placed her notepad and pen off to one side and leaned forward. “How are you feeling today?”

“OK, I guess.”

“How’s your hand?” She nodded at the ball of gauze at the end of his right arm. “Does it still hurt?”

Michael shrugged. “It’s not so bad, I guess.”

“Do you like this room better than the other one?”

He nodded. “It’s bright,” he said. “Not so much dark.”

“Good. So, yesterday you told us all about the cottage and how John and Claire died.”

Michael nodded again. “Number one and two,” he offered. “The first to go. Ripped up. Lots of blood.”

“Detective Scott here was hoping you could tell us what happened after that. Can you do that?”

“I guess so.” He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “After those first two...died..., the rest of us moved to the kitchen.”

“Why?” DS Scott interjected.

Doctor Warne shot him a dirty look but remained silent.

Michael’s eyes snapped open. “What do you mean, why?” he asked suspiciously.

“I just wondered why you went to the kitchen? Why didn’t

you just get in the car and leave? Or call the police?”

Michael started trembling, hunching over as if he were being attacked. “We couldn’t friggin’ call anybody, could we,” he said. “No cell service. And there was no way we were going outside.”

“Why not?”

“Because of the bloody dark,” Michael shouted. “We figured there was somebody out there who had slipped in through the back door and murdered Claire and John. Cut them open. Face, arms, belly — all over. Dozens of ragged cuts, all pouring blood. Dave, too. He was sobbing and clutching at us and begging us not to leave him alone.”

“Why did you say ‘Dave too,’” Scott inquired. “He was with you and — Andy is it? — wasn’t he?”

“Yes, but it had already marked him. Big number three. Right here,” he said, clutching at the front of his shirt, right over his heart. He started to frantically twist and pull at the fabric. “Right here,” he repeated. “He had blood all over his T-shirt. We thought it was John’s, at first. But it wasn’t. It was Dave’s own, his own blood soaking through from the number carved on his chest. Number three.” He nodded to himself. “That’s when we knew that the wounds on the others weren’t just random. They were the first. Numbers one and two, and Dave was next.”

“But he must have seen who did it to him,” Scott insisted.

Michael barked a laugh. “You’re not listening! The cuts, the *carving*, appeared *underneath* his shirt. No person could do that. No *living* person.

“All right. Don’t get excited. I’m just trying to understand what happened exactly.”

“What happened is that the bloody power went off, didn’t it? The place went so dark we couldn’t see our own hands, let

alone each other. I ran off to check the fuse box. Andy said he would scrounge up some candles and the hurricane lamp from the living room.”

“What about Dave?” Doctor Warne asked. “What did he do?”

“Nothing. He was a freaking mess. He started screaming that it was coming for him, that he could hear it. I didn’t hear anything, though. Not then. Not till we came back to the kitchen and found him.”

“Dave? You returned and found Dave?”

“Yes. He’d started screaming for real. Then he stopped. Just like that. But there were other sounds. Whispering. And wet, sucking sounds, over and over. At first we couldn’t see him for the dark. Then we realized he was encased in writhing shadows, like some weird mummy or something. They seemed to actually pause for moment before they swirled away. Then we could see him., still in his chair. He was cut up like the others. There was a lot of blood. One of his eyes was missing.” He broke off abruptly, trying not to gag. He swallowed hard a few times. When he spoke again, it was in a whisper. “That’s when I heard it. The dark was still moving, curling around the baseboards and weaving up the walls to the ceiling. And chittering happily to itself. No words. It didn’t need words. We knew what it was telling us. We were next.”

“So you’re telling me that something sentient was living in the darkness, and it was deliberately hunting you?” DS Scott tried to keep his voice neutral, but his skepticism much have seeped through.

“I’m not crazy and I’m not stupid,” Michael yelled, pounding the table in obvious frustration. “I go to university. I study English. So, I know that the dark itself isn’t some primordial, Lovecraftian emanation of mindless, ravening

hunger. It's something that lives *in* the dark that is doing this, something calculating and malevolent. That's what stalked us that night, picking us off one by one, slowly and deliberately, relishing our terror as we started to understand what was happening. And it isn't finished. You'll see!" He broke off and started crying.

"That must have been horrible for you," Doctor Warne said reaching out her hand.

"You have no idea," he whispered. "I know I'm number five. And it won't stop. Not ever. Not till it's done." He dropped his head onto his arms and sobbed uncontrollably.

"All right," the doctor said and stood up. "That's quite enough for today."

Detective Scoot started to protest, but shut his mouth when he saw the look on the psychiatrist's face. She wouldn't budge on this. And if he had any hope of another session, his best bet was to concede graciously. He thanked Michael and left the room. A few minutes later, Doctor Warne joined him.

"Well, Doc," Scott said. "What's the verdict? Is his nicotine phobia, or whatever it's called, the real thing?"

"It's nyctophobia. And you already know the answer to that."

He nodded slowly. "Surprisingly, I do. I believe he is truly and utterly terrified of the dark. The question remains as to how recent that fear is."

"Does it matter?"

"Oh, yes. If the events at the cottage triggered his condition, then he really is just an innocent bystander. But." He stopped and looked the psychiatrist in the eye. "If he already suffered these night terrors before they rented the place..." He trailed off, but held her gaze, watched as she thought through the implications, saw realization dawn in her

eyes.

“The cottage was in a valley and surrounded by trees,” she said slowly. “It would have been pitch black at night, and probably gloomy inside the house as well. So you’re thinking that the growing darkness both inside and outside might have triggered a complete psychotic break.”

“It’s possible, isn’t it?”

Doctor Warne nodded reluctantly. “Theoretically, I’d say it is.”

“But you don’t believe it.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Can you prove it?”

“With enough time, I think I can.”

“We may not have much time,” Scott said. “There are four grieving families out there who want answers, want to see the perpetrator caught and brought to justice. They’ve already engaged the press and started howling on social media. All of which puts a lot of pressure on the Commissioner to wrap this up quickly.”

“Even at the risk of convicting an innocent boy?” Warne asked sharply.

Scott bit back a retort. There was no point arguing. It happened all the time these days, somebody invoking the media-fueled spectre of police incompetence and corruption. “Think what you will,” he said finally. “But for what it’s worth, I’m on your side. But I need solid proof of his innocence. That’s up to you, doctor.”

With that, he turned and loped off down the hall, already cataloguing the other things he had to look into before he could call it a day.

chapter eleven

Conrad Gempf

NIGHTTIME IS WHEN THE dark reigns. It frolicks. It cavorts.

Where there is daylight, it splashes everywhere. But without the sun, the feeble light that humans throw on things stays where it's put. And apart from that narrow area, the dark does as it wants.)

Somewhere in Nurse George Bergi's scientific education, he will have been taught that, actually, there is no such thing as dark — not as an entity in itself; you can't, we are told, add “dark” to something, you can only add light or not. What we call dark is only an absence of light. Intellectually you might be convinced of this. But you would have a hard time convincing the truth of this to a neutral observer watching George Bergi working his night shift on 8-9 November.

Those who knew ‘Gig,’ as he was called, would find it unusual and ironic that the final minutes of this big, lazy man's life were spent doing his job — restocking tissues, towels, and disposable gloves for the nurses' station. If he'd acted truer to form and left that task for someone else to do, he might still be alive, might have fewer holes in him, might never have

fallen victim to the dark.

How different the static bright red pool of blood in the light of the hallway looked, compared to the black oozing horror in the shadow.

If you are the kind of person who can see ghosts, and you visit Cambridge's Addenbrooke's Hospital late some night, you might hear the metallic sound. You will think it to be chains at first, but it is actually the reverse of chains — keys. Keys fastened to George Bergi's waist and jiggling as he jerks back and forth. You will see an eerie glow in the shape of a large man at the stock cupboard near the Psychiatric Ward. You will be seeing the echoes of the life of a man who spent his final seconds putting his whole body into flicking a light switch on the wall of the stockroom over and over, trying to get the electric light to come on and chase the dark away. Trying and failing. And the dark does as it pleases. Click, click, click, jingle, jangle.

Wednesday the 9th was overcast but dry. Nick Scott had dragged himself to the kitchen where Jane already had coffee made for them both, bless her. His phone began to chirp and their eyes locked for a second — an unspoken “here we go, already.”

“Can't Denny give you just a few...?”

“It's not the desk,” he said, shaking his head. Then, into the phone, “Scott.”

“Detective Scott; it's Lisa Warne — Michael... he's gone!”

“I wouldn't have though a psychiatric ward would allow self-discharge...?”

“We don't. He must have snuck out in the night. And also... there's been a death here... a nurse was found this morning...”

“I’ll be right over,” he said. His mostly-full coffee cup was already behind him on the table and he was moving. As soon as he ended that call, the phone started chirping again, and this time it really was the desk. “I’m on my way,” was all he said on his way out the door. Behind him, Jane Scott shook her head and looked for the newspaper.

The hospital, when he got there, was infested with uniformed police. Dr Warne met him at the main entrance, but she knew next to nothing.

“When I got in early this morning, Michael was just gone. Noone seems to have seen him, nor do we know quite how me managed to get out,” said Dr Warne.

“What time did you arrive?” Nick asked.

“Six-ish,” she said.

“Interesting — is he likely to have ventured out while it was still dark?”

“I don’t know ... yes, if he felt it the lesser of two evils,” she said.

Gregory McKenzie was the first officer on the scene of the nurse’s collapse. Nick put on gloves and booties as he walked through the incident barrier tape. Dr Warne stayed behind.

“Hey, Nick,” said Greg.

Nick nodded acknowledgement and knelt outside the storeroom entrance to look at the body closely.

Greg didn’t wait to be asked, “Name is George Bergi, known as Gig. Worked here for two years. Would have been retrieving stock from the stockroom. Found by the cleaner...” Greg checked his notebook, “Roberta Hanford — Alf’s taking her statement now.”

“Anyone move the body?”

“Don’t think so. Not sure the cleaner would have the

strength,” chuckled Greg.

“Never underestimate a cleaner, Greg. They need to be tough, wirey, and resourceful.”

Greg stopped chuckling. But Nick looked at the bulky nurse and thought of Michael’s slight build.

“What are these? Cuts?” Nick used a pencil to point to the far side of the body.

“Weirdest thing, boss. They’re more like punctures than cuts... none of them look terminal.”

“Mmm... frenzied, but only on some parts of the body! Here, but not here. Down here, but not here.”

“Yeah, only the parts that are over the threshold, in the storeroom... like something out of Indiana Jones — the inside was boobytrapped with automatic dartguns...” Greg trailed off, realizing this wasn’t helping.

Nick had stood up and was posing his own body in different positions, “Not darts, Greg, or they’d still be in him... someone stabbed him over and over.”

Now Nick had his right arm across the front of his body and almost at shoulder height, “He would have been standing about like this... probably holding something in his left hand, and using his right to flick that switch on the wall right there...”

That’s when Nick noticed. The light switch was in the “on” position, but the light in the storeroom was out. He used the pencil eraser tip to flip the switch off and on again. Nothing.

“Hmmm...” was all he said. He looked over at Dr Warne who was holding her phone and gesturing. Nick went over to her.

“The Hospital Administrator wants to see both of us. Is ... what happened here ... connected to Michael?” she asked.

“We can go see the Administrator in a few minutes, I need to talk to someone else first. And, as for connection, it seems unlikely to be coincidence, doesn’t it?”

“Gig has nothing to do with the psychiatric patients...”

Nick nodded, and said over his shoulder, “Probably wrong place at the wrong time.” He’d seen Doc Grey and went over to get his verdict.

“Hal.”

“Nick. It’s a strange one.”

“Got a cause of death for me?”

“Nope. Lots of marks on him but none of them deep, none of them deadly, none of them defensive wounds, and no other signs of deadly force. I’m going to need to get him on the table before I can tell you anything useful in that regard. For all we know, it could have been a heart attack and all these marks unrelated, and just made postmortem.”

“Can you tell what kind of blade was used?”

“I can’t, for the simple reason that it was likely not a blade at all, but something blunter...”

“Like a screwdriver? A ballpoint pen?”

“Maybe a screwdriver. Not a pen — I don’t see any ink. Maybe a pencil? Something like that.”

George’s body had been rolled over now that the picture-taking and so on had finished. His shirt had been unbuttoned and

“Keys,” said Greg suddenly. “One of the other nurses came by and apologized but said that they really need the big ring of keys Gig carried on his belt... but we didn’t find any keys. They’re missing.”

Nick nodded.

“So was he already on the ground? Then the stabber found him, stabbed him over and over — but only the parts of his

body that were in the dark storeroom, not in the well-lit hallway. And then they took his keys... Ok, I've got to go and see the Hospital Administrator with”

Greg interrupted him, ran his fingers through his thinning hair and gestured with a jerk of his chin towards the victim's chest, “Then there's THAT...”

If you are the kind of person who can hear ghosts, you may hear George Bergi's tormented soul howling in frustration and anger about his desecrated corpse.

The dead nurse's shirt had been undone, and there in blood on his chest had been carved a crude numeral: “5.”

chapter twelve

Dañiel Garcia

LIGHT RAIN WAS COMING down while Detective Sergeant Nick Scott parked his car on the lot in front of Addenbrookes hospital. A faint echo from the blaring siren reverberated as he pushed open the driver door. The cool wind cleared out the stale air and coffee smell that hung around since late last night. From a distance he could see a woman with an umbrella standing just outside the entrance doors. Even though she was waiting patiently, an anxious look was painted on her face like graffiti on a church wall. Nick's coat kept most of the rain off as he slowly walked towards the entrance. Rain never bothered him much and he wouldn't let it start today

"You must be Dr. Lisa Warne." Nick gave the woman a mercurial glance. She wore a light grey trouser suit, close fitting. Not too tight to be seductive, but also not too loose to suggest sloppiness. Efficient and tidy as suggested by her shoulder length hair. It was long enough to remain feminine, but stayed out of the way of business.

"And you must be Detective Sergeant Scott. I remember your name from Michael's report. Please, come inside. Our

administrator wants to speak with you first."

She lead them to the second floor of the hospital, the psychiatric care station. On the way Nick asked her, "What made you want to become a psychiatrist in this place?" Her only answer was, "To help people." It was surprisingly quiet as they went through the double doors to the main ward. On the way Nick noticed his other colleagues as they interviewed people, and cordoned off areas.

Walking along the hospital halls Nick felt the white linoleum floor underneath the soles of his barefoot shoes. The floor was soft and they barely make a sound as they moved through the halls. Maybe Michael snuck out right under their noses, thought Nick. Hell, if he walked out on socks he'd have snuck by like a rogue on a nat twenty.

Dr. Warne noticed Nick's wandering gaze as he took in every nook and cranny of the dozens of doors they passed. "Were you expecting more screaming and people aimlessly wandering about?"

"Not quite, but I try to keep an open mind." He fumbled in his pockets for his notebook and pencil. "So, was Michael scared of the dark or not? Must have been dark if no one here noticed him leave."

"The preliminary diagnosis is nyctophobia. It is common with younger children and some adults. Usually it's not the darkness itself that they are afraid of, but the things they imagine that hide in it." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "As if you were walking along the street at night and imagined someone would jump out to rob you at every corner."

Nick looked up from his notes. "Is that a common thing you think of when walking the streets at night?"

Dr. Warne's face dropped into a calm stare. "For women usually more so than for men. In the case of imagined fears

the extreme cases need to be treated. That's what we were trying to determine with Michael Jones."

They reached the administrator's office and Dr. Warne gave a soft knock on the door. After a brief "Come in," they both entered.

The sight that greeted Detective Sergeant Nick Scott was unexpected. Standing behind the desk by a shelf was a big, barrel chested man with dark hair and a thick, scraggly beard. In contrast to the scraggly beard, his hair was well groomed and combed back. Not the type of image Nick had in mind when he thought of scientists.

Dr. Warne motioned towards the figure. "Detective Sergeant Scott, this is our administrator Dr. Aloysius Bane."

"You can call me Dr. Bane or Captain, if you prefer." A broad smile broke through his dark beard. "Sometimes it feels like an ocean voyage with all the ups and downs here. Please, take a seat." His large hand motioned Nick towards a pair of dark wooden chairs in front of the desk.

It was at this point that he notice that the office had nautical flair to it. A model ship took up space on a low bookcase, a bottle in a ship rested in the shelf, and there was even a pirate hat hung on the wall. "Right... Dr. Bane. I prefer to stand so I can get right to the task of finding your escaped patient, Michael Jones, and how he escaped from this hospital. He was on psychiatric hold and should have been watched."

Dr. Bane let out a low rumble from his chest. "That's not important. This hospital isn't a prison and Mr. Jones' hold would have expired today anyway. More important is that someone killed one of our nurses. I want you to get that business done with so we can get back to our regular work. That's what the police are here for, isn't it?"

Nick gave him a cold stare. "My colleagues are on the

scene as well. They're investigating the murder. My suspicion is that your patient, Michael, is the one that did it. How else could he have escaped?" He didn't wait for the incredulous look on Dr. Bane's red face to fade. "He was already spouting talk about something in the dark up in that cottage. I think he killed the nurse, because he thought she was it. Maybe you're just embarrassed that your staff overlooked something, and now you want to hide it?" The last bit Nick just made up to pry a reaction from the administrator.

Nick could see the red anger in the face of the administrator. He looked like a parody of a Japanese tengu. For a man of his stature he remained eerily calm and soon his complexion returned to normal. Dr. Bane looked over to Dr. Warne. "The patient was in your care. Anything you wish to say about his condition?"

Dr. Warne coughed cautiously. "As I told Detective Sergeant Scott, Mr. Jones suffers from an enhanced form of nyctophobia, not any volatile mental disorder. He did not show any signs of aggression or violence whatsoever. There may be a non-zero possibility that he killed nurse Gertrude, but I consider it highly unlikely. He would have more likely fled from her first."

"You see, Detective Scott, Mr. Jones is comparably harmless. Now do your job and find an actual murderer!"

Nick held back his reaction to punch the large doctor in the face. His imagination made it seem as if Nick could hit him straight through the wall. "My guys are on it. At least let me take a look at Mr. Jones' room. There may be some evidence of another person that helped him get out."

Dr. Bane merely nodded towards Dr. Warne. Taking the cue Nick and Dr. Warne both left the office.

Looking through the patient room didn't reveal much. Looks like he took all of his belongings with him, though Nick. I was almost expecting his shoes to be left behind, at least my sock theory would have been stronger. He take a closer look around. "The door doesn't look forced open."

"We are not a prison, detective. The patients are allowed to go out of the rooms to walk or get a drink. They of course aren't allowed to leave the floor without supervision. They also know we have cameras to watch the rooms and halls."

"Then you won't mind taking me to your security room?"

Dr. Warne nodded agreement and led the way to the ward's security room. She unlocked it. It was small, gloomy, without windows. Several monitors showed live footage of the cameras.

"No wonder he got out. No way to look after your patients from here."

"This is the room for the security footage. It's off limits for privacy reasons. We have nurses stations that overlook the halls."

Nick waved her off. "Okay, okay. Just give me a look at the cameras for his room and adjoining hallways."

Dr. Warne adjusted the controls at one of the screens and rewound the footage to the last time Michael Jones was in his room.

They quietly looked at the security footage. Michael sat in his room reading. He left a few times to get some drinks. It was boring, even though they were going through it at double speed Nick wished they could have sped through it faster, but then he would have risked overlooking something.

Nick felt his eyes dry out in the small warm room as Dr Warne looked at him. Her face was angled low, her mousy brown hair framed the soft skin of her face perfectly. He

heard a slight gasp of air escape as she bit her lower lip with her perfect white teeth.

"You asked me before why I studied psychology." Her voice was low, sultry.

"To help people." Nick felt warm and swallowed.

"I lied. Not to help others, but to help myself. I'm a nymphomaniac, I'm crazy about you, and I need a helping of you!" She suddenly wrapped her arms around Nick as a wet kiss pressed against his lips. He felt her greedy, hard tongue digging through his lips.

Just as Nick felt his teeth begin to give way and reach out with his own tongue, Dr. Lisa Warne began to lower herself. Nick felt her hands glide down. He heard the rickety click of the zipper.

"Oh, great Scott!"

Nick shook his head, his imagination was running wild again. He knew once he got back home tonight that his wife Mary would cure it, as she always did. Damn, how I love that woman, thought Nick.

As he glanced back at the video screens, past Dr. Warne, who calmly stood by the side, Nick noticed a shadowy figure walk through the picture. Was that my imagination again, thought Nick.

"Pause, and go back. Did you see that?"

Dr. Warne's hand already reached for the controls as he said it. "Yes, I saw someone walk by."

The time code was around 7:25am. It was right after Michael, in his patient gown, and a nurse were on screen walking side by side. They must have been conversing as they rounded a corner. When they were out of view the footage started to flicker as the lights in the hall turned on and off.

Suddenly a woman's hand jutted out from around the corner, on the ground. The image flickered more as a person, also in a patient gown, came around the corner, head low, face obscured by a pile of clothes, walked out of view.

"There must have been a powersurge," said Dr. Warne.

She switched views until she found the camera watching the main entrance. The same figure left through the door, back turned towards the camera. The time code showed 7:30am.

"Damn, that could be anyone." Nick quickly jotted down some notes before thrusting the notebook into his pocket. "Aren't there any clearer views?"

Dr. Warne was hastily switching between recordings. "No. Whoever it was kept their face away from the camera. The build and haircut are similar to Michael's, but the crouched walk and coverings make it hard to tell."

Nick's face showed a concentrated grimace. "Okay then. Then it's a good chance that someone else is involved. Get me a list of any other patients that may be missing. I'll have my guys make a search of the building. If that wasn't Michael, then he must be hiding somewhere in the building."

Detective Sergeant Nick Scott let out a sigh of frustration. He was back in his car on the way to the police station. He and the other officers had spent the better part of the day searching the hospital and interviewing anyone that was around the hospital that morning. Now he had to go back and report what he had found.

"Nothing!" Nick struck the steering wheel with the palm of his hands. He took a sip from the coffee he had gotten from the cafeteria. He hoped it would calm his nerves till he got back home to his wife. Damn, how I love that woman.

chapter thirteen

E. Kinna

SHIT! NICK GOT INTO his car, slammed the door shut, and grabbed the police radio. “Dispatch, this is DS Scott. I need a BOLO on a Michael Jones. He’s a witness in the holiday cottage fire case.”

“10-4 DS Scott. Go ahead.”

“The individual is a white male, twenty years old, six feet tall, with short brown wavy hair, a slim build, and a bandaged left hand from a burn injury. He escaped from Addenbrookes Hospital while under psych. eval., is presumed to be on foot, and was last seen wearing white hospital pajamas and slippers. He is presumed to be un-armed but is considered mentally unstable and has an irrational fear of the dark. Proceed with caution.”

“10-4.”

“Returning to the station. Scott out.”

The radio crackled with activity as several constables acknowledged the BOLO call out. Nick sped away from the curb and glanced at the dashboard clock. It showed 12:05. With any luck, most of his fellow DS officers would be out for

lunch. The fewer people around when he told his boss about the escape, the better.

Years ago, he thought he'd have achieved DI by now at least. At 38, it felt like time was running out. He now had to watch younger, more educated officers start their rise among the ranks. This case could be his ticket to advancement—if he could solve it. He knew that the media was whipping the public into a fear frenzy, and that meant that the detective who puts the murderer in jail would be awarded the status of hero—and potentially a DI badge.

Heavy raindrops splattered onto the windshield and Nick listened to the rhythmic sound of the wipers as he drove along the A14 towards the Constabulary. He thought over everything he'd done since responding to the fire and felt confident that he had done everything by the book. Surely his boss, DCI Bill Reid, would understand that Jones's escape wasn't Nick's fault.

By the time he arrived at the station and parked his car, Nick was feeling confident that Reid would have his back. Once inside, Nick nodded hello to the front desk sergeant, and headed upstairs. Of the four colleagues he saw seated at their desks, none looked up when he walked past.

"Lost yer suspect did ya, eh Scott?" The mocking female voice belonged to DS Shannon Miller. She was leaning against a wall across the room and smiling down at the newest and youngest member of the team, DS Joe O'Brien, who blushed and looked away.

"Not exactly." Nick replied as he tried to hold onto his confidence despite the cold wave of anxiety tightening around his chest. If Miller knew about Jones, that meant DCI Reid probably did too.

"Yeah, well good luck in there," she said, nodding towards Reid's office. "Otherwise, I hear Tesco is looking for door

security. I could have my nephew put in a good word for ya.”

“Piss off, Miller.”

She laughed as Nick knocked on Reid’s door and a gruff voice responded with, “Enter.” Nick took a deep breath and went inside.

“Shut the door and take a seat.” Reid motioned to an empty chair with his right hand, while twirling a pen with his left.

“Yes, sir,” Nick said, and did as he was told. When he was seated in front of his boss, he took another deep breath.

Reid leaned back, rocking in his leather executive chair. Nick couldn’t decide if his boss was doing that because of boredom or agitation. He hoped it was the former.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t remove you from this case.” Reid’s voice was calm and measured, and his hard stare didn’t waver.

In those few tense seconds, Nick felt as though his entire existence had been weighed and measured for value and found wanting. “Sir, I...”

“Jesus Christ!” Reid slammed the pen down on his desk. “How the hell could you let this happen?”

Adrenaline rushed through Nick's entire body, spreading the cold anxiety he'd felt earlier along with it. He blinked and swallowed hard. “Sir, the hospital...”

“Bugger the hospital. I want to know why you didn’t arrest this boy.”

“Please. Sir,” Nick shifted in his seat, hating that his face was growing hot and that he couldn’t stop it, “Michael Jones was under psychiatric watch in the locked ward. The hospital was responsible for Mr. Jones’s security, and it’s fair to say that...”

“Fair to say that they fucked up. Did you not interview

Jones?”

“I did, yes, and...”

“Then why didn’t you arrest him? I mean come on, Scott! Four healthy, young adults are brutally murdered and set on fire, and the one guy who somehow survives isn’t your prime suspect?”

Nick’s mind raced to form the right answer, but he could only stammer. “Y...yes. He is, er was.”

“Was?”

“Yes. My initial assumption, of course, was that he had to be guilty. Why would someone kill four, and leave one? But, after speaking at length with Dr. Warne, the Psychiatrist, it appears that Jones is suffering from a severe mental illness.”

“So?”

Nick’s stomach twisted into knots as he tried to explain. “Well,” he sat up straighter, “throughout my interview with Jones, he was often incoherent and unable to give reliable details of the events leading up to the fire. He was terrified. Beyond terrified. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Terrified of what?”

“The dark. Or, more precisely, what he believes lurks in the dark. Dr. Warne is convinced that Michael has what’s called Nyctophobia. It is an acute fear of darkness and the doctor believes it may be preventing him from remembering or articulating what actually happened.”

“Now that’s one I haven’t heard before.” Reid snorted. “And you believed this Nyctophooey crap? As in, end of story, case closed?”

“Well, no. Of course not, not just like that. But Dr. Warne is an expert, and she’s seen many cases of Nyctophobia. I asked her if she thought it was possible that Jones was faking, and she’s convinced that he is not. I was planning to do

another interview with Jones once she...”

“Oh, Dr. Warne said that did she? Well, alrighty then. I’ll just go tell the mob of journalists, who’ll soon be banging on our doors because the prime suspect in a brutal multiple murder is on the loose, that the public has nothing to worry about because some bleeding-heart doctor assured us that Jones is just a wee lad who’s afraid of the dark.”

Nick’s breathing became rapid as rising anger clashed with his anxiety. The conversation wasn’t going at all like he’d expected. Reid’s reaction was making him doubt his instincts about Michael, but even if Reid was right, Nick didn’t think he deserved to be treated like an idiot. Was Reid, right? *Oh God...*

“Sir, I understand this looks bad, but...”

“Bad? No. O’Brien hitting a mailbox with his police car looks bad. A seasoned DS bamboozled by some psychotic kid looks like incompetence and an embarrassment to this department.”

“I was *not* bamboozled,” Nick said with a louder voice. “During my interview with Jones, there was no indication that he was anything other than traumatized and terrified of what he saw that night. He’s convinced that it was the Dark, describing it as some kind of entity. Everything he said, how he said it, is exactly what Dr. Warne insists is typical of patients suffering from Nyctophobia. As such, I deferred to her expertise, *for the moment*, until I had exhausted all other avenues of investigation. I believe, sir, that I have done nothing but act in complete accordance with the standards and expectations of this department.”

Reid leaned back in his chair and looked at Nick for several moments, only this time Nick didn’t feel like he was being deemed so unworthy. Still, he figured his odds of being fired on the spot greatly outweighed the odds of being allowed to

remain on the case.

When Reid spoke, it was with his typical gruff but calm manner. “So, what you’re telling me is that you agree Jones is a suspect, and in fact, you fully intended to arrest him before he escaped, correct?”

Is that what I said? Nick glanced at the floor; his brow furrowed.

Without giving Nick a chance to answer, Reid continued. “Alright, then what’s your plan?”

Nick’s moment of confusion gave way to a surge of relief and confidence. The worst was over, and he had one more chance to get the investigation back on track. He leaned towards Reid’s desk and said, “Look, it’s November. It’s cold and Jones won’t go near any place that’s dark. It’s unlikely he’ll get far, and he won’t be on the move after nightfall. My guess is that he’s looking for a warm place with access to a lot of light to hunker down until morning. We also need to check if there’ve been any sightings.”

Reid nodded, picked up his phone, and dialed the number to speak to dispatch. “Yes, DCI Reid here. Any word on the BOLO for Michael Jones?” There was a short pause. “Right, thanks.” He looked at Nick and said, “No sightings yet. I suggest you get to work on fixing this mess. You have twenty-four hours to find him or you’re off the case. Understood?”

“Ah, yes sir. Understood.” Nick stood up, impatient to get out of that office. He waited for his boss to say something else, but Reid had already turned to his computer and started typing.

“Thank you, sir. I’ll keep you informed,” Nick said before closing the door.

Back in the main office, people were trickling back from their lunch breaks, and Nick noticed several pairs of eyes

trying to glean what had happened by watching his behaviour.

He shrugged off the shame of everyone knowing he'd been chastised by the boss, and instead addressed his fellow detectives. "Right. As I'm sure you've heard, the sole survivor of the cottage fire escaped from Addenbrookes and is still at large. So, I'm asking if you can please check in with your informants to see if they've seen or heard about anyone matching Jones's description."

With that done, Nick realized that there wasn't anything he could do from his desk. He'd be better served by heading back to the hospital and beginning his own search.

On his way to the elevator, he noted that all but one DS was on the phone doing what he'd asked; everyone but Shannon Miller. She was focused instead on getting Joe O'Brien's attention.

Nick watched her smile, flip her hair, and attempt to make eye contact with the younger man. There were few people Nick hated, but Shannon was one of them, and that's why he didn't hesitate to shout across the room. "Hey Miller! Be careful, eh. If you keep trying to screw the new guys, your nephew's gonna have to put in a good word for *you* at Tesco."

With a smug smile and raucous hoots of laughter erupting behind him, Nick strode to the elevator. He savoured his petty triumph all the way to the main floor. It was then that his thoughts sobered and turned to the task of finding Michael Jones. He was certain they'd find him, but he was less sure that it would be before the twenty-four-hour deadline.

However, that wasn't what bothered Nick the most. It was the idea that he'd been wrong about Jones not being the killer. But to be fair, he reasoned, he hadn't agreed with Warne that Jones was innocent, merely that it was possible. His first instinct, after all, had been that Jones had murdered his friends

before setting fire to the cottage. Now, all he had to do was find Michael and prove it.

chapter fourteen

Ian Philpot

DETECTIVE SERGEANT NICK SCOTT sighed and stared at the stack of case files on his desk — nine cases that had come in over the last 24 hours.

There was the male suspect in his mid-20s who had led a group of forty-five to trespass in a lumber mill. When the police arrived, the man, who had been there moments prior, vanished. His cell phone was traced back to the party, but no one could find him.

There was another male suspect, late-20s, who drunkenly wandered into a family's home, slept on their sofa, and was awoken by the growl of the family's schnauzer. The six-year-old was able to give a partial description, but the lab was still working on analyzing the portion of the man's pants and trousers that the dog had bitten off as he was leaving.

And there was yet another case of a man in his early-20s who had escaped Addenbrookes Hospital and had been a suspect in a recent arson investigation.

Detective Sergeant Scott ran both of his hands through his short, blond hair and mumbled to himself, "What is it with

young men these days?” Before his mind could get much further thinking through whether it was the parents, the schools, or society to blame, his desk telephone rang.

“Scott here,” he said using his deep professional tone.

“This is Officer Lorene Lake,” said the voice on the phone. “We have a report of theft at Uncle Dan’s Corner Shop in Sawston, and the suspect matches the description for your BOLO.”

“I have nine new case files, and seven of them have BOLOs. Could you please be more specific?”

“My apologies,” Officer Lake said. “It’s for Michael Jones, the hospital escapee.”

“Got it here,” said Scott as he grabbed Michael’s case file and pushed the others aside. He pulled up a piece of paper, but he couldn’t find a pen. “One moment,” he told Lake as he pinched the phone between his cheek and shoulder. He opened his desk drawers in search for something to write with, but there wasn’t so much as a highlighter in there. He checked his pencil cup, but it was empty. He stood up and tried to grab a pen off Detective Constable Marks’ desk, but it was just out of reach for him to pull the phone cord. He turned his body sideways and stretch with his fingers for a moment too long before he noticed Marks and Detective Constable Davis watching from a short distance. Marks walked up and handed the pen to Scott. Scott gave a thankful nod to Marks and asked Officer Lake “And where is your uncle?” as he sat back into his desk chair.

“Pardon?” Lake responded with a confused tone.

“Where is your uncle?” Scott said assuming she had misheard him.

“My uncle is in Swindon,” Lake replied with the same tone.

“I thought you said your uncle was in Sawston.”

“Uncle Dan’s Corner Shop is in Sawston.”

“Yes,” Scott replied as he wrote the note down. “And where in Sawston is your uncle’s corner shop?”

“It’s not my uncle’s shop,” Lake stated clearly. “It’s Uncle Dan’s Corner Shop.”

“Right,” Scott said as he sat up and placed his pen down. “Whose uncle are we talking about?”

“It’s no one’s uncle,” Lake replied. “Well, it’s likely *someone’s* uncle. Or — or maybe not. I think they’re a chain. I shopped at one in Summerfield once.”

“And the name of the shop is...?” Scott asked, pretty sure he had figured out the miscommunication.

“Uncle Dan’s.”

“Got it,” he said as he took went back to writing notes. “And you said it was theft. What was stolen?”

“An alarm clock,” Lake replied.

Scott sat back in his chair again. “They called in to report the theft of an alarm clock?”

“They said it was priced at £400.”

Scott leaned forward to his notes. “Where is this shop? I’m going to want to see this £400 alarm clock for myself.”

“It’s at the corner of Common and High streets.”

When Scott arrived at Uncle Dan’s Corner Shop, the shopkeeper took him into the manager’s office. It was cramped, had likely been used as a utility closet by the previous owner as it still smelled like cleaning supplies.

“So you were the one that saw the suspect?” Scott asked as he pulled out a pen and small notepad to take notes.

The shopkeeper squeezed along the wall and sat behind the desk that occupied half of the floor space. Though he was a pudgy man, anyone would have had a hard time getting into the desk chair. He plopped into his chair, and it gave a groan.

“I was the only one here at the time,” he said.

Scott noticed there was a nameplate on the desk along with partially eaten bags of crisps, a takeaway container, and a smattering of scraps of paper with scribbles on them. The nameplate read “Dan Reed.” Scott pointed to the nameplate with his pen.

“So you’re uncle Dan?” he asked.

“Erm, no,” the shopkeeper said. “I’m Don. Dan is my uncle.”

“Got it,” Scott said doing his level best not to sound condescending. “And you called in the theft of an alarm clock?”

Don stood up quickly and tried to squeeze around the desk again.

“It’s not just any alarm clock. It’s Breitling’s Oscura. Come with me.”

Don took Scott into the shop and showed him a display at the end of one of the shop aisles. There was a small screen playing a looping video of flying through the clouds and a woman with a deep voice saying words that were related to sleep. The display had a clear spot where one box of product would have fit.

“And you just let the £400 alarm clock sit out in the open with no security measures?” Scott asked.

“It’s right here in plain sight of the register,” Don said. “If I ever see anyone who doesn’t look like they can afford it touching it, I yell ‘Oi’ and they leave it be.”

“And you didn’t see the suspect touching it?”

“No,” Don said as he placed his arms on his hips. “I saw him touch it, and he was too young to afford something like that, so I yelled ‘oi’ at him.”

“And how did that go?”

“He turned and looked at me. He was tall with brown hair. It was a little bit of a mess and a little wavy.”

Scott scribbled notes as quickly as he could. “But the ‘oi’ didn’t stop him from running off with the alarm clock?”

“No,” Don said. “But I did see that one of his hands was wrapped in a bandage. I figured I could use that to my advantage when I was chasing him, but he’s thinner than I am and got away from me.”

“What direction did he run?”

“He ran east to the church and I lost him in the trees.”

Scott looked out the door and could see the church maybe 100 feet away. Looks like Don didn’t make it far.

“Do you have any other alarm clocks?” Scott asked.

Don made a strange face. “We’re a corner shop. With the exception of the Oscura, we don’t carry alarm clocks.”

Scott was back in his car compiling his notes with Michael Jones’ casefile strewn across the passenger seat. The description that Don had given fit exactly with Michael. But there was something else that didn’t seem right. The corner shop had all of the basics as far as food was concerned. If Michael was hungry or needed medicine, he could have snuck it into his pants and left without drawing attention. Blatantly stealing an expensive alarm clock in broad daylight just didn’t fit.

Scott moved some of the case file papers, and he saw a note about the doctor at Addenbrookes that had been overseeing Michael’s care — Dr. Lisa Warne. On a gut feeling, he pulled out his mobile and began dialing her phone number.

When she answered, he started with his usual line of introduction, “Hello, I am Detective Sergeant Nick Scott. I’m investigating the disappearance of Michael Jones, and I was told that you were his doctor at Addenbrookes before he

escaped, is that right?”

“Yes,” replied Dr. Warne. “How can you help you, Detective Sergeant Scott?”

“I was just called to a shop in Sawston where Michael had been sighted earlier. Did he ever mention anything about Sawston while he was in your care?”

“No.”

“He was seen with a bandage on his hand...” Scott said leading the doctor to an explanation that he already had in his notes.

“Yes,” she said, “his hand was burned in the cottage fire.”

“Right, right,” Scott acknowledged. “And are you aware if Michael lost anything significant in the fire?” Before Dr. Warne could reply, Scott continued, “That is aside from his fellow students from university. I mean more like a physical object.”

“Not that I am aware of,” the doctor answered.

“Hmm,” Scott said. “Let’s say you were Michael Jones, and you had just escaped from the hospital. You walk to another town and you go into a shop. What items would you be looking to get first?”

“Food and water,” the doctor replied. “Maybe some medicine for the burn.”

Scott nodded to himself feeling a wave of disappointment that his gut had been wrong. “Nothing else?” he asked.

“Maybe a flashlight,” the doctor replied.

“Pardon me? A flashlight? Why?” Scott flipped to a clean page in his notepad.

“To have a light at night,” she replied.

“Right,” Scott said as he deflated a bit. “Any reason he might have stolen an alarm clock?”

“Yes,” Dr. Warne said in a perked-up tone. “For the same

reason he might want a flashlight — to stay awake at night.”

“Excuse me. An alarm clock to stay awake at night?” Scott was confused but scribbled away in his notepad.

“During my interactions with Michael, he was exhibiting an extreme fear of the dark.”

“So why wouldn’t he have stolen a night light or something like that?”

“Michael isn’t a child. A night light wouldn’t help. The fear isn’t triggered because of the absence of light — it’s a fear of the imagined dangers that are hiding in the dark. We call it ‘nyctophobia or ‘scotophobia’ — fear of night or fear of darkness. If he stole an alarm clock, then he’s probably trying to sleep during the day so he can stay awake at night.”

“So he had a history of this nyctophobia?”

“Not that I have found in his medical records,” Dr. Warne answered.

“But,” Scott shuffled through some of the case file notes, “isn’t it possible that he was afraid of the dark and just dealt with it at home?”

“It’s possible but unlikely.” Dr. Warne cleared her throat. “If Michael had been so afraid of the dark that he had an alarm clock to wake him up at night, it would have affected his lifestyle and would have been problematic for his studies at university.”

“So what do you think brought it on?”

“It could easily have been the trauma he experienced with his friends dying in the fire. Freud posited that fear of the dark was a manifestation of separation anxiety disorder. I’m sorry I don’t have a clear answer. I didn’t get much time with Michael to fully understand what he was going through.”

“Or if he might have been the one to kill his friends,” Scott added as he scrawled his final notes. “Thank you for

your time doctor. I'll reach out if I have more questions.”

“Anytime,” the doctor replied.

Scott ended the call and immediately placed another call.

“Yes, this is Detective Sergeant Scott. I need to update the BOLO for Michael Jones, a 20-year-old male approximately six feet tall and ten stone. His left hand is bandaged and he is traveling alone. Suspect is likely to visit places that are open 24 hours — like bus stations, train depots, or airports.”

chapter fifteen

Cindy Pinch

THE AROMA OF ROASTED garlic and onions wafts through the air as Nick enters the kitchen. Mary stands in front of the stove. A pot of water boils on the back burner. In a saucepan, Mary uses a turner to break down ground beef. She looks up when she hears Nick. He wraps an arm around her shoulders and kisses her hair.

“It smells good.” He says.

“I thought that you could use some comfort food.”

“I could. Thank you.”

Nick leans against the counter while Mary continues cooking. He’s thankful that Mary has never been one to force him to talk, especially when he’s got something on his mind. The case was a mess. He has no idea how he’s going to solve it. It feels impossible. How had four kids died with no rational explanation? And now, the only lead was gone. Michael had escaped from Addenbrookes. Nick was surprised he’d managed. Addenbrookes’ security was strict. It was hard to get in just to speak to a patient, and even harder to get out. It should have been impossible. Especially for someone under as

deep a psychosis as Michael. And yet, somehow the kid had managed to escape.

Nick sighs and rubs his forehead, trying to clear his thoughts. Mary looks over at him, but doesn't stop stirring her sauce.

"I'm going to get a drink. Do you want anything?" Nick asks.

"I'll take a glass of that red. I've been wanting to open it for ages and I think it'll go perfectly with the pasta."

Nick locates the bottle that Mary requested and pours her a glass. He pours himself a glass of whiskey, enjoying the slightly sweet scent as he raises the glass to his lips. He takes a sip before heading back to the stove to offer Mary her wine.

"Thank you." She says, taking the glass from him.

She takes a long sip and closes her eyes. It's her thing to savor the flavor of the wine. Nick has watched her do this so many times over the years that the sight itself is comforting to him. At least with Mary he'll always know what to expect.

Nick sets the table as Mary finished cooking. When they sit down, they eat in silence for a few minutes. He can tell that Mary wants to say something. Twice she pauses, fork midway to her mouth. She puts down the fork and looks at him across the table. She opens her mouth as if to say something and then changes her mind and resumes eating. When she does it a third time, Nick puts down his own fork and picks up his napkin.

"What is it, Mary? What's on your mind?" He asks as he dabs at a bit of sauce at the corner of his mouth.

"Nothing." Mary says.

She shakes her head and takes another bite of pasta.

"It's obviously something."

"Nothing." She says and takes a sip of her wine.

She avoids his eyes as she sets the glass down and plays with the napkin on her lap.

“It’s just that,” she starts. “I’m worried about you.”

“Why are you worried about me?” Nick asks.

“I’ve never seen you this stressed about a case before. I know you don’t like talking about them, especially when you’re in the middle of it.” Mary looks up at the ceiling and then the table, her gaze landing on everything but him. “But you’re never this broody.”

“Broody? Is that even a word?” Nick asks, trying to make light of the situation.

The last thing he needs to worry about is Mary worrying about him.

“Nick. You know what I mean. You’re never this silent. I know you can’t go into the details, but is there anything I can help you with? Maybe it could be useful to bounce some ideas around?”

Nick gives up eating entirely and rests his head in his hands, elbows on the table.

“Strictly speaking I’m not allowed to discuss the particulars of any case with someone who is not a member of the police force, and who is not working directly on the case.”

Nick pauses to collect his thoughts.

“I understand.” There’s an edge to Mary’s voice that indicates that her feelings are hurt.

She picks up her fork and takes another bite. She chews slowly as if her heart isn’t in it.

“No.” Nick says. “You don’t. I’m not supposed to talk to you about a case, but you’re right. It might help me to at least say what I know. Maybe saying it out loud will help me realize something that I’ve been missing.”

Mary sets down her fork and leans forward. Nick can tell

she's trying not to look too eager even though she's clearly interested. He's surprised that she never joined the police force. She would have made a great detective. Her attention to detail and her inquisitive nature would have been a great asset to the unit.

"There was an incident in Cambridgeshire. Four kids died and we're not sure what happened. Although 'kids' probably isn't the best word. They were in their early twenties. Young enough to just be starting out. Too young if you ask me. There was one survivor, a kid named Michael."

"Did he kill his friends?" Mary asks, her voice hushed as if someone might overhear.

Nick looks up at her and shrugs his shoulders.

"I wish I knew. You see, things just don't add up. He's either the only witness to a horrendous murder, which begs the question of how did he alone escape. Or, he himself is the murderer. I can't make heads or tails of it. There's something about him. I'm not sure if it's the way he talks or the look in his eyes when he recounts what happened, but he's definitely hiding something. I just wish I knew what it was."

Nick picks up his whiskey and takes a sip. His hand shakes a little as he sets the glass back on the table. Flashes of his earlier conversation with Michael run through his head and he feels the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

"The problem is," Nick starts up again. "Michael is deeply disturbed. Mentally, that is. We had to admit him to Addenbrookes Hospital. The doctors said he's suffering from acute nyctophobia. They were supposed to hold him for three days. They were supposed to keep him safe. As it is, he's a danger to himself and others. Or, he is until we can rule him out as the murderer."

"What's neeco-, what was it that he's suffering from?"

Mary asks.

“Nyctophobia.” Nick sounds out the word. “Basically, he’s afraid of the dark. Although, that kind of minimizes his behavior. Michael would jump at his own shadow if he noticed it behind him.”

“But you said they were supposed to hold him. What changed?”

“He escaped.”

“Escaped.” Mary repeats.

It’s not a question and Nick can see her puzzling it over in her mind.

“Now, my only lead is missing and I have no way of beginning to know how to track him down.”

“Do you think he did it?” Mary asks.

“I don’t know.”

“What does your gut tell you?”

“It’s hard to say. It seems like Michael is telling the truth. If he is, then there’s a madman on the loose and Michael might be his next target since he’s the only one who survived the cottage massacre. If Michael’s lying, then I have been in the presence of the most terrifying murderer I’ve ever encountered. Either way, I need to find Michael and sooner rather than later.”

Nick’s phone rings in his pocket and interrupts their conversation. He pulls it out and pauses long enough to register that it’s someone from the dispatch office before he swipes to answer it.

“Hello,” he says, putting the phone to his ear.

“D.S. Scott? This is Emily from dispatch. I know you’re off the clock but I was told to call you.”

“What’s happened?” Nick says.

He presses the phone closer to his ear, even though he can

hear her just fine.

“We just received a call from the manager at that 24 hour supermarket in town. He says there’s a man loitering and he needs police help to remove him from the property.”

Confusion knits Nick’s eyebrows together.

“I don’t understand why you called me. That seems pretty routine.”

“It does, sir.” Emily says. “But the loiterer has short brown hair and a slight build. And there’s a bandage on his left hand. In short, his description matches that of your missing perp Michael Jones.”

“I see.” Nick says as realization dawns on him. “Thank you for letting me know. I’m on my way. Tell the other officers to stand down. Do not engage until I get there.”

“Yes, sir.”

Nick hangs up the phone and closes the screen before he slides his phone back into his pocket. Standing up from the table, he offers an apologetic glance at Mary.

“Sounds like we’ve got a lead.” Nick says. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

He kisses Mary on the head before heading toward the door the night is dark as Nick makes his way towards his car. He climbs in and puts the key in the ignition. The engine starts with a low rumble. Backing out of his driveway, he glances up at the house and sees Mary standing in the window. She raises her hand in a wave as she takes a sip of her wine. Nick waves back, though he’s not sure she can see him, before heading up the street and towards the supermarket.

chapter sixteen

Sam Pynes

THE DARK ISN'T A physical thing, just like cold isn't really anything: it's just the absence of something else. Light and heat; without them you have dark and cold: space empty of those mysterious photons and excited electrons that make a space livable and navigable.

Crazy might be a sort of absence, too: an absence of hope.

Red light fell like a pool of blood onto Detective Scott's car as he parked near the tall lighted sign in front of the market where someone fitting Michael's description was making a commotion. The sign cheerily announced that the market was 'open 24 hrs,' underneath the vertical red letters spelling out 'Abners.'

Fluorescent lights streamed through the long row of windows showing the Tuesday specials in chalk, throwing a soft protective halo of light in an arc around the store.

Nick gave the window a second look as he considered the fact that it was Wednesday.

He squinted and blinked as he entered the store: day or night Abners was brilliantly lit. Scott suddenly realized why

Michael was here: it was never night in a twenty-four hour market.

The manager, a no longer young, but not middle-aged, man with bleach-blond hair and a nametag reading "Tim" was waiting for him near the registers.

"You better be here for the nutter, because I've had enough of him."

"Hello," Nick looked at his nametag, "Tim, I'm Detective Inspector Scott. I've come about..."

"Right," the clerk interjected, "He's in aisle five. We get some of his sort every couple of weeks, and usually we'd just take care of it, but this one's making a mess, and I've only a skeleton crew on the overnight."

Nick had already walked past the manager as soon as he had indicated the aisle marked breakfast cereals. "You were right to call, this fellow may be unstable and is wanted in connection to an investigation."

The blond man stopped walking and and looked uneasy. "What, is he dangerous then?"

"To a fine specimen like you? I shouldn't think so."

The manager nodded uncertainly before heading off toward the office. "I'll leave you to it then, shall I?" Scott waved off the manager with an 'I'll deal with this' gesture.

Michael was indeed among the breakfast cereals in that he had knocked dozens of boxes off of the shelves and had stacked them into columns, blocking the aisle in either direction. The wall was two boxes thick and nearly seven feet high. Everything from Weetabix to Cherrios.

He approached the wall cautiously. The student hadn't seemed like much of a threat before, but there were still a lot of unanswered questions, and there was another dead body back at the hospital.

Through a crack in the wall, Scott could see Michael lying under a pile of football jumpers on some floor mats, with his head resting on a bag of flour. He had made a circle of what must have been every torch in the supermarket, each switched on and pointing up, presumably to create a protective circle of light in case the bright overhead fluorescents went out, like some sort of druidic summoning circle. Michael appeared to be in a light sleep, with just his head and his bandaged left hand, now covered with an oven glove, sticking out of the pile of sweaters. Lying there he looked even younger than twenty.

“Hello there, Michael.” Nick spoke quietly and cautiously. He didn’t know whether the escapee had collected any weapons as well. “It’s Detective Inspector Scott. I need you to get up and come with me, please.”

Michael’s eyes immediately shot open and he started breathing heavily. “I can’t go back there, detective, they don’t understand.”

“Michael, they are just trying to help you.”

“But not you! You think I did it! You think I murdered them! And they don’t believe me either.”

“No one is accusing you of anything. I’m just doing my job, and part of my job is to keep you and everyone else safe.”

“But you don’t get it, do you?” Michael was getting increasingly worked up as he sat with his back to the shelves. His voice started coming in choking gasps as he ran his hand frantically through his brown, wavy hair. “I’m NOT safe! Maybe nobody is!” He expressed this with a wave of the oven glove, knocking over a few more torches.

“You’re safe while you are with me, I’ll promise you that. I just need you to come back to the hospital with me.”

“I can’t go back there! It found me!”

“What found you, Michael?”

“The Darkness, the thing in Darkness that carved the numbers and killed....Ohhhh...” He sobbed into his hands.

This was not going the way that Nick had hoped. Michael was getting increasingly agitated and he was going to have to humor him if he was to calm down and leave with him.

“You say the thing carved the numbers and then killed in that order? We found an nurse with a ‘five’ carved on his chest. It’s horrible, but doesn’t that mean you’re off the hook? See? It’s over. They ARE keeping you safe: he took your place! Is this any way to honor his sacrifice?”

Michael’s sob turned into a gurgle, and then, more disturbingly, into a chuckle, and finally into a hysterical gasping laugh. Suddenly he picked up one of the heavy torches and chucked it at Nick’s face before bursting through the wall of boxes on the opposite side. Nick ducked, and could see Michael darting away through the falling cereal.

“Michael, stop!” Detective Scott leapt over the piles of boxes in chase. Michael led him around the perimeter of the market, knocking off bags of crisps and a pile of oranges in his haste. When he reached the front of the store, with its large broad windows and the one cashier helping the one customer, he stopped and turned to face Nick. His was the face of defeat. Outside, it was too dark to see much beyond Nick’s car. Perhaps he had hoped that he had slept through the night.

“Michael,” Scott wheezed, “you need to stop running and come back with me to the hospital where they can help you.”

Michael wasn’t even breathing particularly hard. He was just standing there in defeated agitation. “He did take my place, sir. I’m not number five anymore. But I’m Not SAFE!” He shouted as he opened his jacket to show the red, bloody ‘five’ on his chest, now three days old and crusted over. But to

the left of the number was a fresh new vertical gash, turning the 'five' into a 'six.' "He might have taken my spot but I just get the next place in the queue!"

The old lady paying for her groceries dropped her purse in shock.

"And if I go back out there it will get me too!"

Nick considered his options. If Michael hadn't killed the nurse then there was something out there that had. Maybe this was as safe a place as any to wait until morning. In his excitable condition it probably wasn't worth forcibly removing the kid from the store anyway.

After a few minutes Nick convinced Michael that he wouldn't force him to go outside and soon they were both sitting in the manager's brightly lit office. A panel of security cameras displayed the inside and outside of the store, including the destroyed cereal aisle and the darkened carpark. The disgruntled Tim was replacing the bent boxes.

Michael curled up on a chair, hugging his knees to his chest and dozed. Detective Scott was tired, but his time in the service had inured him to sleepless nights.

Looking at the security screens Nick felt like the captain of a vessel traveling through the cold dark of space, the hazy street lights like distant stars.

Scott's hindbrain told him that there was something out there, a lingering doubt that an actual something, and not an absence, waited in the shadows beyond the carpark halo. Was the monster out there, or was it in here with him? Was insanity the absence of sanity, or was what looked insane just a reasonable reaction to something that other people couldn't see? He chalked the feeling up to lack of sleep. It wasn't a good feeling, and he felt pity for Michael who seemed convinced that the darkness would eventually find a way to

him, wherever he chose to hide.

Daylight was coming, and with it hope of figuring out this mess before anyone else had to die. Hope is sanity, and not a one of us is completely sane.

chapter seventeen

Ron Ward

MARY PULLED A GREEN parrot feather away from her face like a veiled dancer. Leaning over she whispered it along Nick's neck as if she were slitting his throat. Turning the feather Mary scribbled a love note behind his ear with the pointed tip. Scott knew this from the expository narration his wife was providing of her attempted seduction.

"Nick mumbled, pretending to be deep in the throws of sleep," Mary said.

"Mary remained unconvinced. Mr. Scott had a long history of playful obfuscation. She seemed determined, adding her best cooing dove impression to her arsenal of come-hither suggestions as she drew the feather over his ear and across his lips. Nick remained still this time, giving her no hope of eminent intercourse. Unbowed Mary turned the feather over using the tip to inscribe a long scratch from his collarbone to the top of his ear at the edge of his recent haircut." Mary said, a mild reverb adding to her allure.

Nick opened his eyes ready to give up the sleepy-boy game so they could begin the next phase. His lips betrayed his intent

by being simultaneously leering and stuck to the desk by an impressive pool of drool. He did not see his lovely wife. It was not their anniversary. They were not in his bed playing a bad cop dutiful wife routine.

Instead, a pair of men's pants giving off sweaty musk filled his entire field of vision. Reflexively he pushed back away from the pants. The chair was on rollers and close to the filing cabinet behind. The resulting crash had three distinct phases as chair met cabinet, which jostled the golf trophy coated in dust, but ever on display. The trophy teetered finally deciding to take another dive. Michael caught the falling trophy in his free hand.

The young man stood over him holding a letter opener in his right hand, the rescued trophy in the left hand. DS Scott's drool pool mocked from a distance.

"This is how I go out! This can not be the end of Nick Scott!" It could be though, easily, all the boy had to do was strike. Nick registered surprise that he was so accepting of the probability. That he had fallen asleep in the presence of a suspect seemed reason enough for the universe to cancel his subscription.

Michael did not look vengeful or what was that old word for it, 'crazy'. The blade did not have much for an edge it being the kind of tool found in the local office supply shop. The trophy did have a bit of heft but the boy looked calmer than usual.

"Dr. Lisa is here, see," Michael said pointing out the observation window of the manager's office. Nick found it difficult to take his eyes off the boy. Nick gaged that if he glanced he would be able to offer much the same defense as staying motionless, he took the peek. Dr. Warne was indeed walking up the aisle below and waving a coffee.

“The sun is up too, we made it Detective Scott,” Michael said sporting the happiest expression Nick had so far seen on the young man’s face.

“I took the liberty of buying you both a coffee.” Dr. Warne said as she walked into the room. Her eyes were darting taking in the scene. If she were not so fluffy in her ideas of justice she would make a devilish good detective.

“I believe we are all late for an appointment.” Dr. Warne said. Not letting up for a second both men were rounded up and headed for the door coffees in hand.

“I will take Michael in my car if that is alright with you Detective Scott,” Lisa said.

Nick was not fully awake but he was not about to be separated from his quarry again. Not unless he favored being back on the plod.

“A counter offer Dr. Warne, I will ride in the back seat while you and Michael talk. I can finish my nap.” Nick said.

“What about your car?” Lisa tried.

“Detective Scott kept the lights on so we were safe. I let him sleep a little, but The Dark stayed far away from all these lights.” Michael pranced as he walked lovingly pointing out the vast array of lighting in the store.

“I will take a cab, an officer will give me a ride back to the store. My car will not be a problem.” Nick said falling in behind the other two as they walked toward the exit.

Nick waited for the door lock to pop then opened the doctor’s car door. He began to pick up a ten-centimeter pile of folders from the back seat. “Let me get Michael settled and I will move those for you.” Dr. Warne instructed DS Scott.

Nick waited while she checked Michael’s seatbelt, removed the pile of folders Nick had begun to resettle, and then removed the pile behind the passenger’s seat and both piles

from the floorboards of the back seat. Having shifted all four piles to her rear storage she dropped her arm like a hand model with a new phone. "Please be seated, DS Scott."

Nick leaned in to take his seat. "What is that scratch on your neck, Dr. Warne asked? "It looks new?"

"I might have done it waking him up this morning," Michael said without looking back. "He was dead asleep. I had to try three times to wake him up."

"You could very well be dead." The doctor's eyes said building a frozen fury. Lisa kept her face hidden from Michael's view but lambasted the Detective Sergeant with a sustained violent stare.

Nick translated her glare. "We do not know the extent of this boy's trauma. He has certainly been exposed to a murder's wrath in the last few days. No matter if he is a victim or perpetrator his balance has been altered. All that needed to happen was a flicker of the overheads and you would be lying on the floor of that office with a letter opener in your throat. Number six inscribed in the flesh of your chest. Do you remember the nurse?

"Where are we going, Doctor?" Michael asked?"

Nick did not move. Unsure of his welcome.

"Get in Detective, you are my new good luck charm," Michael said.

"Well," Dr. Warne said breaking off her stare. Nick walked around and settled in behind the doctor. This morning was unpleasant enough without having to endure the emasculating stares of the lady doctor all the way to the hospital. She slid deliberately into her seat only looking back to check when the detective's seat belt clicked.

All respect was lost once again. Just when it mattered most, again. The Chief Inspector would have grounds to reprimand

him once he heard about his falling asleep in the presence of a wanted person of interest. The boy could have legged it and no one the wiser. The doctor would report the incident with all her other misgivings about the Detective Sergeant. His mismanagement of suspect interviews, the agitation of his only witness. Losing the only witness to four murders, maybe five. Finding the boy but not forcing him to return to the hospital. And then finally falling asleep in a room full of murder weapons. The boy could have just wandered off leaving him completely embarrassed. The maniac could have carved a crude six into the flesh of his chest. Thank the blue heaven that did not happen. How could he have done so many things wrong in so short a time?

With this pile of failings mounting hour by hour. It was no wonder he was ready for the blow, the gateway to the promised land, the release of all his stress. His first action upon waking up was not to subdue the boy. Even though he had begun to think of Michael as the suspect rather than the witness. No, he was awakened by the suspect. Once awake did he subdue the suspect? No, he bashed into a file, knocked over a trophy, and finally, sat cringing in the manager's chair body akimbo awaiting the fatal attack.

His misery was multiplied by the doctor's skill in controlling this volatile person. Michael did not want to return to the hospital. The Dark had found him there. He had escaped with his life but likely witnessed the murder of the nurse assigned to protect him. Yet every time the subject of destination came up. Dr. Warne deflected the question into some avenue for exploring the young man's history. Nothing about death, nothing about The Dark.

When finally the hospital came into view and their destination was certain she began with a description of the

extraordinary lengths the hospital staff had gone to, to provide Michael with the safest possible place to hide from his nemesis. They practically had to race the boy through the corridors to reach his newly remodeled safe place before the sun set.

“There was a lot of dark in those halls,” Michael said. All three stood panting in the flood of light. The extra illumination made it necessary to install an air cooler in the room as well. “It was in the corners did you see it? I bet not, no one ever looks in time. I saw some in that room with no lights on at all, the corridor that went left right out of the elevator was infected with Dark.”

“I am going to excuse myself, I have to find water.” Nick dreaded this next part. He had to interrogate a madman and find enough truth to build a case. Five grieving families wanted answers. All the answers were locked in a lunatics fevered brain. Finding water proved much easier than forcing his feet to start back in the direction of Michael Jones. “You can’t let the bad guys chew on your brain so much Nick!” The wisest words that were ever spoken by his wife. So what if she was shouting at the time. “Come on old boy you can do this, one step at a time.” Leaning forward to force a step Nick began his journey back to the over illuminated room.

Nick was about to knock on the door when he noticed that Dr. Warne had Michael half sitting, half leaning, on his bed. “Looks like they started without you,” Nick said. “Better get in there bud.” He said in reply.

Nick turned the door handle, pushed the door open, sidled in, turned, re-turned the door handle so that it would close silently, and turned once again to see Lisa smiling at him. There were signs that she was amused but not caustically. He’d take that these days.

“Michael you have been bathing in the light for a few minutes now. I do not think we can truly flood you with light, protect you fully without taking one more step.” Dr. Warne said. “I need you to close your eyes.”

“They won’t let me, the things in the dark, I can’t close my eyes.” Michael stood up straight chewing on an already minuscule thumbnail.

“Do an experiment with me, Michael.” Dr. Warne began not addressing his posture yet. “Look up toward the light bank, but just before your eyes hit the super bright ones close them and then turn your face immediately.” We can discuss what you see after the experiment. Now, remember only a moment Michael, close your eyes for only a moment.”

“Red, I saw red, a few different shades,” Michael said.

“I was hoping for that.” Dr. Warne said. “Red is not dark is it Michael. Red is life, red is human power, Red is your power, Michael.”

“Yes, Dr. Lisa red is my power!” Michael fell back against the bed staring into construction lighting with his eyes lightly closed.

“Now Michael so that DS Scott can finish his work and leave us alone, we need you to finish telling us what happened at the cabin.” Dr. Warne said.

“DS Scott is my good luck charm.” Michael began

“Yes, he kept you safe last night. Then we brought you to this very safe place. The Dark is near but under no circumstances can it enter this safe place. The whole staff of the hospital worked to make this a place where you can feel safe.” Dr. Warne lower both the volume and the pitch of her voice. “If I remember clearly Claire, number one, Claire died in the bathroom.”

“They were too noisy, John and her too noisy grunting,

Uh, Uh, Uh, they woke up 'The Dark.'

"I remember they were inconsiderate."

"They brought it all down." Michael opened his eyes. Looking for DS Scott.

"Michael, look into the light and breath it in, deep into your lungs. Hold it in, hold it, let it out now Michael. Let's do that again should we Michael. One more time Michael, please." Dr. Warne said.

"I can feel the heat all the way deep inside. It is working doctor." Michael replied.

"Number two and Number three are both dead now too. No use talking about the dead. Only you and Andy are still alive. Andy knows the truth, he believes you. What happened then, when you and Andy were the only two left." Dr. Warne said.

"The Dark broke all of Andy's lights, his lamp, the light in the ceiling. His room was full of dark things, all waiting. Andy came to my room. I said we should stand back to back, The Dark can not sneak up on us that way.

We did that for a while until Andy said this won't work. I asked why not. He said it won't work I can't stand here like this all night. I think it might have worked if he had tried it. I don't see how the dark can sneak up on you if you have eyes in the back of your head. But he said no, I need to get some lights. In case the dark breaks your lights to Michael. If it does that neither of us will make it out of here. I begged him to watch with me but Andy wouldn't do it. He said I have the four on my chest. I am next. We do what I say. I begged him to stay in my room, in my light, help me watch.

Andy said, am going to run to the storage closet and grab some extra torches in case the dark gets your lights too. Those light bulbs break easy, he was pointing at my lamp.

I want to argue about my lights but they do break easy. Andy might be right I thought. I stopped begging him to stay. I followed him to look out, watch his back.

Andy got to the door of the storage closet. He opened the door but the dark was not waiting like I thought it would be. The light in the closet worked. I got excited we might make it I could picture the sun rising.” Michael did not smile.

DS Scott felt his leg going to sleep. He started to stretch the leg but Dr. Warne put up her whole hand in a violent shushing motion. The policeman froze mid stretch. He allowed his weight to settle. The offending leg felt tingly. He must have done enough to restart the blood flow. Small victories add up, Grandmama Templeton used to say.

Michael stopped talking and Dr. Warne sent DS Scott another sharp stare. “Michael you are feeling good. Andy has the light on in the storage closet and you are picturing the sun rising. What happened next?”

“He found more than torches, he found candles, and kerosene lamps and a can of kerosene. Andy brought them to my room. There is more stuff in there he said, he went to get the rest.” Michael stopped talking again but didn’t stand up. He stared into the bright lights eyes closed feeling his power juicing up for the big push.

“Michael?” Dr. Warne prompted.

“We had enough to last he should not have gone back. I told him but Andy never listened, none of them ever listened. I watched it happen. Andy got close to the storage closet and a whip of Dark slipped out of the corner. The Dark loves corners.” Both members of his audience held their breath.

“The whip of the dark had Andy by the throat. Michael began unprompted. “I heard him choking like he was right next to me, so loud. Gaaagruah Gaakk.” Michale began

making gagging sounds and thrashing his upper body. DS Scott stood up but Dr. Warne held him back with her magic palm of stop right the fuck now.

“The door slammed, then the sound got worse. The light from under the door went out. There were more of those Dark whips in the closet. They were beating him, choking him. I banged on the door, tried the handle, it only turned but never caught, round and round it turned but never caught. Andy was thrown against the door, at least that is what I think happened. He fell against the door and The Dark beat him. Like the sound of mama hammering steak. Thunk, thunk, amplified by him leaning on the door. Some bottles fell off the shelves, crash tinkle bang his body slammed against the door. More beating how much could he take. I tried the door again this time the handle caught and the door flew open. Andy stood there bleeding, purple. I reached for him but The Dark thrust Andy’s head back into the storage closet. I flashed my torch inside the closet. The fuse box was covered in blood, maybe brains too probably brains too. I reached for Andy. I missed. The Dark hit him one last time right into the main fusebox. Sparks danced in the dark, the history of the universe in a moment. I stood transfixed by the mystery then, the whole house went dark.”

chapter eighteen

Sue Cowling

THE RING OF HIS phone was a welcome relief for DC Nick Scott, he needed a break from this madness, he felt his shoulders relax as he exited the interview room with some haste and an apologetic smile to Michael and Dr Warne.

That Dr Warne was an intense woman, he was sure that ten minutes alone in a room with her and she would know all his deepest secrets, not that he had many, still it was a scary thought, and just for a moment he had an image in his mind of Michael as a terrified mouse cornered by an extremely satisfied cat.

He felt a brief stab of pity for Michael, but just brief, there was something dark going on in that kid's head. Medical staff had to leave his room lights on day and night, because Michael was convinced that if the lights went off something would come and murder him. This was the person that had probably murdered four of his university friends and showed no remorse for doing it.

The door clicked close behind him and he was thrown into the sudden gloom of the corridor, with poor lighting and

sludge-coloured walls. A complete change to the brightness of Michaels well lit room with its stark white walls. He walked briskly along the corridor and through the psych ward security doors, back into the main hospital and the entrance, glad to have left the secure area of the building. His phone had stopped ringing, but he guessed it was someone back at the station wanting an update, it could wait. The phone ringing was a good excuse to get out and get some air, have a coffee, maybe a snack and then call in.

He just needed some fresh air first, and as he exited the building he breathed in a huge gulp of air, trying to rid himself of the smell of the hospital that seemed to linger in the back of his nose and throat, a mix of chemicals, piss and vomit. He knew it was probably all in his mind, but it happened every time he had to go into a hospital building. Perhaps an early childhood memory lingering in the back of his mind. He was sure Dr Warne could analyse that for him. He chuckled to himself, feeling more cheerful already.

There was a vendor just across the street and he walked over there, taking the time to get a coffee and a ham roll. He was bloody hungry now; he needed to eat; they could wait a little longer for that update.

He found a bench to sit down and stretched his legs out, taking another deep breath. After devouring the roll in a couple of bites, he started on his coffee, watching the constant flurry of movement in and out of the hospital. It was nice to watch for a while, just people going about their lives.

He would ring his wife; he needed some kind of normality, just for a moment. Mary answered almost immediately, as if she knew he was going to call, they had that sort of relationship where they seemed to know what the other person was thinking.

“Hi, love I thought I would give you a call before calling into work, how is your day going?”

Mary laughed, “It’s all the better for hearing from you Nick, everything okay?”

Nick sighed, “I am finding this case difficult those four kids, just starting out in life, and their families, what a bloody mess it is.”

“Why don’t we go out tonight when you finish work, take your mind off it?” Mary suggested.

“That’s a great idea love, will look forward to it, got to go love, phone is telling me another call incoming, love you Mary stay safe love.”

As he ended the call the phone rang again, he took another sip of his coffee, pulled out his notebook ready, and answered the call.

“Hello DC Nick Scott speaking.”

“Ah DC Scott, finally. Was there a problem with your phone, or maybe your just too busy that you are just not answering it?” His chief asked with a sarcastic tone.

Nick swore to himself but kept his tone neutral.

“Sir I was just finding a place outside where we could talk in privacy, hospital is a busy place, especially the psych ward, and I know how you like to keep things confidential.”

The Chief laughed at that comment, and Nick found himself relaxing a little more.

He still sounded irritable though as he carried on speaking, “So Michaels parents are here at the station, they want to know if they can have access to see him, very insistent they are, and I have no idea what to tell them?”

He paused as if waiting for some input from Nick but then continued, “I am assuming that Michael is there at the hospital? I mean how does a patient dam well escape from a

secure unit?”

This time he did stay silent expecting a response from Nick.

“Yes sir, he is safely locked up now. I was sitting in on the interview when the phone rang first time. Dr Warne calls it therapy, but either way she is very thorough, actually felt some sympathy for the kid just for a small moment.”

The Chief sounded slightly happier, “Yes, that would give me something to tell them, and at least we don’t have to tell them their son is wondering around out there, doing who knows what. How is the kid by the way?”

Nick did not have to look at his notes to answer that question.

“He is okay he has some burns on his left hand, they have been treated and are bandaged up. He has been diagnosed as suffering from acute nyctophobia apparently brought on by the events from last weekend.” Then he added quickly, “That’s a fear of the dark sir in case you were not aware.”

“I am fully aware of what acute nyctophobia is DC Scott, most children suffer from nyctophobia when they are small, it’s just a part of their development, but it’s when it gets out of hand and becomes extreme, we end up with the situation we have here.”

He defiantly sounded irritated now. Nick sat up a bit straighter on the bench.

‘Okay so enough of that can you tell me what the current situation is, I need you to give me a full update?’

Nick was expecting this, he opened his notebook and flipped back a few pages to check his notes,

“Sir, it looks at this stage as if it was defiantly arson, and with four dead students, and no other suspects, the natural suspect to the crime has to be Michael...” his Chief

interrupted him,

“That’s good news surely? yet you sound hesitant, why is that?”

“No Sir, it’s just there is no actual evidence that Michael is responsible for the deaths of the four students, Claire, John, Andy and Dave. What we do know for sure is that all four of them were dead before the fire started. So, we have to presume the fire was to try and cover the murder of them.”

Nick knew his Chief was waiting, expecting more information, so he continued,

“Evidence so far suggests that Michael has an absolute cast iron insanity plea, so his mental illness is going to get him off a murder charge. I am sure the bastard knew what he was doing though, and I would like to carry out some further investigations?”

The phone was silent, except for the ruffle of papers, and Nick waited, he did not have to wait long.

“DC Scott looking at the paperwork so far and the information you have given me I can find no reason to carry on flogging a dead horse, it’s a waste of police time and resources, this case is not going anywhere, that nutter is going to be locked up for the rest of his life in a mental institution. In the meantime, we have cases piling up, real problems that you need to be out there solving. Do you understand what I am saying to you?”

Nick cleared his throat before answering. “Yes sir, you want me to wrap this case up?”

“I want this case wrapped up, put to bed, buried and forgotten, and I want it done quickly one way or another, is that clear?”

“Yes sir, I am right on it, anything else sir?”

The phone had gone dead, so Nick guessed that was a no

then.

Nick finished his coffee and walked over and threw his rubbish in the bin. He could not delay this any longer he had to go back into the hospital, he walked a lot slower this time, reluctant to return. The security passed him through to the secure unit, and he walked back along the gloomy corridors towards Michaels room, he paused outside preparing himself for another long session.

He did have his evening with Mary to look forward to and the fact that once this interview was finished, he was basically off the case and could put it behind him. It just did not make it any easier when there were four kids who would never finish University, have that first job and families of their own. Then there were the families of those kids how do you explain to them that the person likely responsible for their deaths was never going to serve a sentence for what he did.

He took a deep breath, tapped lightly on the door, and entered the room, startled by the lightness after the more subtle lighting in the corridors.

chapter nineteen

Val

THE LIGHT IN THE room was as blinding as ever. It was not of nyctophobia that we should have been afraid so much as of blindness – Detective Scott knew that only too well, he who, during his not-so-distant past, had taken part (but had he really participated or was he just an inactive witness to the horror? One could not know; it was better not to know anyway) in the terrible acts of torture committed in the name of His Majesty in Afghanistan.

Doctor Warne had lost control of the situation. She was stuck. She was not up against the wall, but it was *ric-rac* for her patient. Michael had already fessed up most of it. That said, he hadn't incriminated himself, well, not yet, but maybe he would, one never knows – with mentally unstable people, the unexpected is a permanent ambush.

Detective Scott resumed the interview without giving Doctor Warne the opportunity to interrupt him – because he had to move on, and fast; Scott could feel it, he was getting close to his goal, the student was going to confess it all, this

story of monsters and darkness would soon be a thing of the past.

"Michael, Michael, let's go over the night again. Claire, John, Andy and Dave were taken by the monster or from the dark. Well, maybe, why not, anyway, that's not the point. What happened next?"

"Number five, Detective, FUCKING NUMBER FIVE!"

The survivor had stood up, in great anger and with fear on display; he had removed his shirt, on his body was engraved the number 5.

"FUCKING NUMBER 5," Michael continued, "5, 5, 5, and I couldn't see any more, there was no light, no light, no light, I was going to die, they were going to take me in the dark, yes, I was going to die, the dark, the dark, the dark, I could hear it laughing, it was grumbling in the dark, *you're next, we're going to take you away, there's no point in resisting*, it was saying, *you're going to join your friends*."

"Michael, Michael, it's all right, you're safe here," Warne tried to reassure. The nyctophobic man was sweating as a tropical rain, his heart was pounding hell – maybe this interview should be over, Warne thought. She took Scott to a corner of the room.

"That's it for today. We'll start again tomorrow," she said.

"Absolutely not, we're almost there, he'll crack, I'm telling you."

"It's not up to you."

"OK, OK, let's take a break," negotiated the policeman.

"Thirty minutes to cool off, what do you think?"

Warne took a step back – she did not know what to do, and out of spite accepted the detective's proposal.

In the courtyard of the hospital, a smoking area was set up.

Neither of them had any cigarettes left, and at this hour few patients dared to venture downstairs. To compensate, Scott discreetly grabbed his flask and took a sip. Then two – it was some Beluga; you could hardly blame him. In this kind of situation, vodka could bring up ideas, the right question to ask or could help you find the inconsistency in the interviewee's answers, something like that. He finally offered some to Warne, but she was definitely not belonging to the same school; she walked over to the vending machine and got the last available organic orange juice.

"So, what's your take on the situation, doc?" the policeman asked.

"He's much more shocked than you'd think. And whatever happened in that house is a lot more complicated than a fire. But what *it* was remains to be seen."

"You reckon the kid had something to do with it, or maybe he was just the unlucky winner of the worst student party in the country?"

"I don't know, Detective. Come on, let's go back, and this time go easy on him or I'll pull the plug."

"Hold on, hold on. Take some Beluga, it mixes well with your juice, you'll see. It will relax you, and will also help you, it's undeniable, to see things more clearly."

The psychiatrist finally agreed. After all, there was nothing to lose in trying.

Michael had calmed down, a little solitude under the blinding light had done him good. Detective Scott resumed the interview: "At the time the number 5 appeared, the house was not yet on fire. Tell us what came next, please."

After a short pause, the student replied: "Darkness, darkness, everywhere, in every room, it was gaining ground, I

could hear the laughter, the threats of the monsters. I *had* to do something."

More vodka. Not Beluga this time – the UK's three million heavy vodka drinkers sometimes have dubious tastes; Eristoff, then, Andy's favourite brand – he'd brought back a few bottles. "I aimed at the curtains in my room," Michael said. A bottle and a spark would scare the darkness away.

And it worked. At least, at first. The flames soon caught – it must be said that the curtains, 50% cotton 50% acrylic, made Michael's defence rather easy. In no time at all, the light had overcome the dark side – except that at the same time, the temperature had risen beyond measure. Michael was forced to leave the room.

"Corridor, the dark, the dark again, then the bathroom," he tried to continue, in fact, he seemed like he couldn't stop talking any more. Perhaps the detective was right, Michael might end up laying everything down to them, even his own guilt.

In the corridor, as he was once again in the dark, the arsonist went to the bathroom, directly to his left. He had kept the lighter, but not the bottle. "Dying in the bathtub was my idea, wait there for the end of *my* world. And then not. I got lucky." In the room were two bottles of alcohol, in the medicine cabinet – combined with the shower curtain, that would do the trick. Michael 2 - 0 Darkness.

At this point in the story, Michael was again covered in sweat, nevertheless, he was able to speak clearly. He paused, as if the bathroom also meant something else – indeed, it was at this point that he realised he was completely screwed. "My room was on fire, the bathroom was joining the fireworks, but I couldn't stay there either, and if the flames gained ground, I

still had three quarters of the house to put on fire and totally get rid of the darkness."

He walked out of the room, remembering that the cellar was nearby, quickly opened the door and found the endgame element: a 30-litre fuel drum. Within 20 seconds, Dave and Andy's rooms were doused, then Michael crossed the common areas (kitchen, living room) to disperse the flammable in Claire and John's room, before returning to the common areas to do the same. Finally, he went out onto the terrace, where a few hours earlier, the group of friends had been enjoying some good old times with vegan burgers. He poured what was left of the fuel outside the house, along the wall, until he reached the main door. He knelt down, grabbed the lighter and flicked it. The sparks did the rest.

Doctor Warne and Detective Scott looked into each other's eyes – did they think the same and understand each other, it was not certain. Scott had just obtained the confession of an arsonist – that was good, but he would have preferred the confession of a murderer. Warne, on the other hand, had begun to tremble for her patient – she was thinking of a way to make Michael irresponsible for his actions; she didn't know if nyctophobia would be enough. That said, she was not too worried: nyctophobia, as it was known and accepted in the *milieu*, sometimes causes loss of control of reality, resulting in extreme behaviours to get out of the dark. In this case, it should not be too difficult to prove that, when he went on the rampage, Michael was suffering from a defect of reason and that he did not know that it would result in the destruction of someone else's property. It seemed clear on paper, but then again, one has to stay alert with those legal shenanigans.

Between the two of them, rather in front of them, Michael

was not moving. His story seemed to be over and Warne was about to end the interview, when Scott, once again, took away the opportunity and asked a new question: "Michael, I have the feeling that you haven't told us everything. What happened after you set the house on fire?"

Number 5 looked surprised, his face changed, and again he stood up to answer, unstable and panicking, "BOOM, BANG, BOOM, the darkness, it was still there, I heard it, it was going BOOM, BANG, BOOM behind the house."

chapter twenty

Greg Ray

"WHAT IS GOING TO happen to him?"

"I was going to ask you the same question."

Doctor Warne took another bite of her beet and vegetable salad. She looked at the detective's untouched burger and chips platter.

"You're lucky it's Thursday. Only day of the week you can get fried anything on the hospital menu. Healthy eating and all that."

Detective Scott looked down at his plate. The macabre didn't sit well with his appetite.

The doctor took another forkful of red beets. "I'm curious. What do you think really happened?"

"Whatever you make of Michael's story, one thing is sure. He knows the disposition of each of the victims. I'd say that's pretty damning."

"Michael is a very sick young man, Detective Sergeant. Surely something triggered his psychic break. He may have seen something that night at the cottage."

"What are you saying?"

“In Michael's eyes he has not done anything; he is a victim. You, on the other hand, think Michael is responsible for everything. Perhaps the truth lies somewhere in between. Some initial event, something he may have only witnessed — but felt guilt about — something that was terrible enough to put him into an extreme dissociative state — one where he might not be able to reconcile or even recognize his own subsequent actions.”

“You're talking about the first victim.”

“I'm not sure. Perhaps. We can't really know until Michael gets better. Even then it may be difficult.”

“I suppose it's not going to matter in the end.” Scott frowned, pushed his plate away. “But I'm sorry, it *does* matter. I've got four bodies—”

“Five.”

“Five bodies. And Michael is responsible for some of that anyway. You heard him. He knows how each and every one of those people died. So, whatever you tell me, Doc, somewhere in that boy's head, he knows what he's done. He must. You can't just do something and not know you did it.”

Warne put down her fork and spoke in a measured tone. “It can be very hard to understand how the mind works when it doesn't work in the way we expect. Did you know, Detective, that some people think they are dead? Quite literally. To our ordinary way of thinking that makes no sense and yet this is a known psychological phenomenon. Just one of the many byways the mind can travel on.”

“We're not going to talk about the dark.” Doctor Warne had entered Michael's ward room with evident purpose. There was a new tone, a new firmness in her voice. “Just for now I want us to talk about the light. Okay? Can we take a moment to do

that? My, the lights in this room are very bright, aren't they? I'm just going to adjust this chair, so you can put your head back and relax. Lots of light here.” Warne reclined the chair back and motioned for him to sit there. “I know you're concerned about what is going to happen with the police. Well, I just had lunch with your Detective Scott. I think it's going to be okay. And it looks like you and I may be seeing a lot of each other.”

Michael sat down in the chair and Doctor Warne turned it on its axis to face the center of the room. “So we need to start focusing on getting you better. We have to work on this fear of the dark.”

“I know you don't believe me,” Michael said quietly. “— Can't believe me. But you have to believe me.”

“Michael, I am a psychiatrist. It is not my job to believe or disbelieve. That doesn't matter. What does matter is for you to gain control over your anxiety. I know you're scared and you want to be ready. But fear, extreme fear, is not readiness; it makes us *unready*. And it can make us make the wrong choices when it matters most.”

“So that's the thing, isn't it?” Scott pushed back in his cafeteria chair. “You will have to tell any court that he is messed up in the head and then it won't matter what he did or didn't do. All respect, Doc, but that kind of thing doesn't sit right with me.”

“I can only speak as a psychiatrist, but what would you have us do? Perhaps a man thinks he is slicing a loaf of bread. Do we condemn him if it is instead someone's neck he is cutting? Or maybe a fellow thinks he is with all his might struggling against the dark itself. No, Detective, what I see is a very scared young man. What he needs is help. What he needs is to be healed.”

“Healed. Healed how?”

“I can't discuss Michael's treatment with you, but perhaps I could say something in a general way.” Warne took a thoughtful bite of salad. “Psychologically speaking, Michael's psychosis is held together, not by the traumatic events of the weekend, but by his fear of the dark, so this would be the place to start with him. But these things take time, Detective. It may be years before Michael is truly well again.”

“Years. I was afraid you would say something like that.”

“Let's try a little exercise, Michael. I want you to just focus on what is happening right now — just here, just now in this moment. Breathe out for me. Drop your shoulders. Let your tongue fall from the roof of your mouth. Good. I'm just going to lay my hand on your shoulder, for a moment.” She stood beside his chair and let her hand rest lightly just touching his shoulder. “Here we are and you are safe. There is nothing you need to do right now. You can relax in this moment.”

The effect on Michael was immediate. He was still anxious, still tense, of course, but she watched as a surprising amount of tension dropped from his body.

“You are probably still feeling anxiety. That didn't just go away. But that's okay. It's okay to feel anxious sometimes. Anxiety is a feeling and feelings don't hurt us. And it's good to remind ourselves that just because we feel anxious does not mean something bad is going to happen. And now breath in, deep breath, one two three. Breath out, one two three. Steady breathing helps calm us down. I want you to keep doing that, counting in and counting out your breaths.”

Warne took a few steps as she spoke. “Focus on what is right now. Your breathing. My voice in the room. Maybe you

are hearing the fabric of my clothes when I move. Good. Now, I am going to ask you to move a part of your body. So, close your eyes and turn your ankles three times.”

Michael shook his head. “I can't.”

“It's okay to close your eyes, Michael. Let's think about that together. We all blink. You did it just now. And you close your eyes every time you blink, don't you? And nothing bad happens. You see? And aren't you still here in this bright room even when you close your eyes? Let's just try it for a moment. Close your eyes now and just turn your ankles three times.”

Michael did close his eyes then, but only a moment. He shifted his feet and opened his eyes again immediately.

“That's okay. Lets try another. This time your fingers. And this time I want you to breathe — counting in and counting out. Close your eyes and stretch your fingers three times. Good, that was good. Keep breathing, in out, and just close your eyes once more for me. Good. Let's keep them closed and imagine a bright, morning sunrise. Breathing in, breathing out. Good. We are in a bright room, we are imagining a bright sunrise and we can keep our eyes closed like this and it's okay. And now we can notice that even though your eyelids make it seem dark to you, you are perfectly safe.”

“And in this safe moment, let's ask ourselves, Michael, what is light and dark anyway? When we say a light is bright, it's because our eyes are detecting certain wavelengths of light in the room — all the light in the visible spectrum. But there are waves of all frequencies around us all the time, if our eyes could but see them. For a different creature, even a dark room is filled with light. So, when you think about it — when you really think about it, Michael — *we are never really in the dark.*”

“What will you do now, Detective?” Doctor Warne rose from

the table and Scott stood up with her.

“He could certainly be run up on an arson charge — we have that at least — but with your diagnosis, Doc, it won't stick.” Scott exhaled heavily. “But then, besides the obvious circumstantial evidence in the morgue, all we have is Michael's testimony about what happened that night at the cottage. And we can't take that at face value now can we? We'd have to say the dark did it.”

“A difficult warrant to serve, I imagine.”

“It's tough to say it, but for now it looks like Michael is out of the hands of criminal justice. He's a problem for the mental health system now. Frankly, that doesn't sit right with me, letting things go like that. Wrong's been done and I think I've got my guy, but then I don't got him. You've got him. And you're saying years. Meanwhile, I've got victims' families wanting to know what happened, wanting justice to be done.”

“We do what we can, Detective.”

“I can't say as I understand it all, Doctor, but I do know it. I do. I just wish you could do it a mite faster. Leaving things hanging like this — Doesn't feel like justice is all.”

Michael's eyes were closed and he would keep them closed now. His body was more relaxed. Warne could see his weariness lulling him to it. She continued to talk and to guide him — letting him listen to her voice as she moved about the room. Things were going well. Perhaps this could all be made easier than she had thought.

“I wonder, Michael, have you ever heard of the *Stampfl technique*. Well, I don't suppose. But perhaps you took a psychology course in college. It's a kind of cognitive-behavioral method — *in vivo statim therapy* is the technical name. I think we might want to try something like that. We

don't have to let our fear control us.”

Warne came to a stop. She pulled the shade down on the observation window in the ward door. “You've been letting your fear drive you, exhaust you. So, I would like to try this technique with you. I think it might really help in this situation.” — that new, firm tone in her voice — “I know it will.” Warne looked down at the light switch panel. She lifted her right hand a moment and let it rest lightly just touching her shoulder. “It's something we call *exposure therapy*.” Her hand pushed all three switches down. Darkness leapt from the walls and threw everything into pitch blackness.