



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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for
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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

Jaysen O'Dell

TAP TAP TAP

Her fingernail on his window brought Detective Sergeant Nick Scott back to reality.

“Ah yeah. Hold on.”

He fumbled with the window button locking the already locked doors. The back passenger window went down. Mumbling to himself he just pulled on the door handle. Nothing happened. Doors still locked.

“Good morning Detective Sergeant Scott.” Sarah smiled through the window at him as she backed away.

Finally hitting the right combinations of buttons, Nick was able to open the door. Tripping as he exited his vehicle, he blushed as Sarah reached out to keep him from falling.

“It’s good to see you again Station Marshall Manager. I mean Station Manager Marshall.” The red on his face burned.

“How is Mary? Doing well I hope?”

“Yeah, she sent me with some sandwiches for your crew.” Nick fumbled to get the basket Mary somehow always had ready whenever he went to a crime scene. Nick’s phone would

ring and by the time he was dressed and at the door, Mary would have her sandwiches ready. “For the boys and gals that are there” she would say every time.

“GEORGE! DS Scott is here! Come take these to the boys!”

Even under the bulky fire safety suit, George was an Adonis. The raised face shield framed his ridged brow, square jaw and perfect 5 am stubble beard. He moved effortlessly evidencing the muscles that everyone knew could be counted on to rescue kits in trees or grown men from burning houses. George was a demi-god.

“Aye! Mrs Scott ’s a love. T’anks to yours from ours! T’is an ugly un sir. T’is ugly. Ma’am”. The Scotsman touched the brim of his helmet gently as he smiled his parting word at Sarah. Nick noted the slight color that rose to her cheeks.

“Too bad he can’t wear the kilt in the field” Sarah whispered to herself.

“Ummm... so... is there more to this and just a fire? The call said fatalities...”

“Yeah. The bodies are over there but let me show you this...” Sarah started to head toward the center of the rubble that used to be a holiday cottage. There wasn’t much left of the structure. Nearly every thing had collapsed to the ground. Only a few small sections of wall remained on what would have been the ends of the rectangular building.

“Sarah, why is this area cleared?”

“It’s not. The fire was so hot that everything was consumed. Notice the odd pattern in the burn that looks like dent in the circle? That’s where the bodies were found.”

“That explains the smell. How much of them is left?”

“Not much. We found evidence of a home made accelerant paste behind a floor plate that covered an electrical

outlet. The method to create the paste is readily available on the internet.”

Sarah started to walk back to the bodies she had pointed to earlier. Nick stood looking at the spot on the floor. Why there? Why weren't they in the rooms at the ends of the house?

“We had Vic, from your station, look up the agency and get the registry. There were five people. The four here and one who is on his way to Addenbrookes. Bad smoke inhalation and a burn on his left hand, but nothing else terribly wrong. No major burns anywhere else. Just the one hand. We think that one is Michael Jones.”

As Sarah was speaking Victor Kite had arrived. Victor always seemed a month away from taking his pension. He had been like that the entire 12 years Nick had been assigned to the station. Often the first to buy a round at the pub, he was the last to leave when work needed to be done. His quick wit and crooked smile always set Nick at ease.

“Ya’ know, these kids was all in uni together? This Michael rented from the agency and asked if there was lights that were on all the time outside. It was odd so’s Alice at the agency noted it. Now Alice, she’s the kind that likes a good glass of Jam’son and her and me may have dented a bottle or two in the past? So I knows she can be a bit of the gossip but she tells me this Michael guy seemed off to her then. But he was polite and there were nothing else odd. So she didn’t think nothin’ of lettin’ the place to the lot of them.”

“So why do we ‘think’ it is Michael on route to Addenbrookes?”

“Well sir,” Vic never called him Nick in public, “well, he won’t tell anyone his name. The paries reported that ‘e was agitated and rantin’ about needing the lights to be brighter. They had to strap him down and sedate ‘im. Never once

answered to his name or any questions. Only thing they reported was him sayin' 'it'll kill me'. No idea on that 'un but I'm sure there's a story coming' that none of us wants to be tellin' at the pub."

"So then who are these?"

"Agency says Claire Holloway, John Avery, Dave Wilson and Andy Baker. Like I said, all in uni together. Chums enjoyin' a stay away. Claire and John was the item. No idea on the others but no indication of what used to be called licentious behavior outside the house or in it or between them. Seems a tragedy. Just might be."

Nick was starting to fear the worst. A holiday party turned to tabloid stories about a loonie. Something in the way Vic said "just might be" niggled at the back of Nick's mind.

Nick looked around. George was taking Mary's basket back to the car. Sara had a smudge of soot over her right eyebrow. She had evidently brushed a strand of her bright red hair back to join it's peers. In the dim light that bit of blackness was easily mistaken for a bruise on her smooth, pale forehead. Listening to her giving direction to her men on scene left Nick mesmerized. Graceful. Confident. Beautiful.

"Sir, there's lookin' and then there's lookin' for trouble. She ain't nothing next to your Mary. You let that mess be and figure out how to keep your heads where they belong."

"Vic, you're a good friend."

"No I'm not. If I was, I would beat you with a pipe till you removed your head from your arse. You leave that 'lone. You hear me? My liver doesn't need no more of you making a mess of your marriage. Especially since we both know aint got the balls to do anythin' real. Stop dreamin' and live in the real world with your wife."

Nick felt like his face was on fire. Vic was right. He would

never actually cheat on Mary. Why did he always imagine himself being a “George”? He had everything a man could need or want. Except Sarah. He didn’t have Sarah. He never would.

“You’re right Vic. I know you are. Anyone asks, tell them to leave a message on my desk at the station. I’m going to Addenbrookes to figure this Michael out.”

Nick got into his car and drove away.

“Vic, do you think he will ever notice me?”

“Sarah love, every man notices you. But that man, leave him alone. He doesn’t need you ruining what he’s already got. If you really need to ruin a man, I’m not doin’ a thing until we dent us a bottle of Jam’son.”

Sarah laughed. Vic imagined angels sounded that same. He had no idea how Nick could ever resist her. The smell of burnt plastic and human flesh caused an unexpected retching.

“Bloody hell! Which one of you ejected sperm out of your old man’s bollocks took a shite and set it on fire?”

chapter two

Oleksandr Baranov AKA Garrett

ON A COLD NOVEMBER morning, the silent suburban air was broken by the shrill sound of an ambulance. Tom Peppercod was just leading the herd of his and neighbour's cows to their usual pasture, as he had to stop by the road and let the red-and-blue light flashing van pass. He just shook his head without saying a word. The ambulance should've been heading to the Addenbrookes, and even though the doctors at the emergency department have never refused to help, it was still infamous among the locals. The hospital featured a psychiatric ward, and its patients have always been at the center of most campsite stories in the neighborhood. Tom had already seen a vague line of smoke coming from the opposite direction to the course of the ambulance, and he could imagine what new fables will be concocted at the local inn in the evening.

In the meantime, the ambulance had arrived at the hospital's A&E entrance, and nurses were rushing around. Doctor Hailey, who was still on his 24 hour long double shift, was woken up at his desk and came out while the nurses were rolling the patient out of the van.

“What do we have?”, he asked.

“Male, around 18 years old. Fire victim. Burns, intoxication due to severe smoke inhalation. He’s out for now”.

“Get him to the room 2, I’ll take a look at that hand”.

As they were going through the corridor, the lights dimmed due to some kind of a power surge. Suddenly, the patient sprang in his rollerbed. He grabbed the oxygen mask off and started screaming “THE LIGHT! I CAN’T SEE THE LIGHT”. The surge ended and the lights went back. The patient grabbed the doctor’s coat and pleaded “PLEASE DO NOT LET IT TAKE ME”.

Dr. Hailey shouted back at him “Calm down! The lights are on, anyway. Who are you? What’s your name?”.

“Michael... Michael Jones. It got them. It got them all... It’s out there!”

“What’s out there? Who’s them?”

“My friends...” he fell back down on the bed. “Dead... all of them...”.

“You were in a fire. Talk to me, Michael! Don’t go back to sleep. You have probably suffered some kind of head trauma. Don’t worry, we will put you back on your feet in no time.”

“No, it’s everywhere... It’s coming for me! I can see it there, around the corner!”

“What?! There is nothing there, come on. Quickly, get him in the room”.

“Please don’t turn the lights off! Please!”

“Michael, I assure you, we have the best lit operation room in the whole country”, Dr. Hailey tried to reassure him. But he also said to one of the nurses: “As soon as Dr. Warne gets here, call her up. I guess we have a new patient for her Arkham”. They have called the psychiatric ward Arkham as an in-joke. But only half-joking. And Dr. Lisa Warne was their

local Doctor Strange.

The oxygen mask was put back on and the nurse has sedated Michael. The doctors started working on clearing the lungs from the smoke and treat his burns. After a couple of hours, the patient was stable, his hand wrapped up in a bandage. Dr. Hailey has searched for any sign of head trauma but didn't find any. So, when Dr. Warne came to the A&E, Michael was already up.

She came in to the room which was brightly lit despite that it was close to noon already. Michael has once again related his story about a being trying to trap him and kill him in the dark. Dr. Warne decided that it was a straight up case of nyctophobia, and suggested that Michael staid in the psychiatric ward where she could provide him with a well lit room with no objects that could create shadows. Michael has agreed to her suggestion, as he was sure that was the only way to stay alive.

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, smooths 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

Russella Lucien

"NICK SCOTT, THIS IS the Fire Brigade Incident Commander. You need to come down to the cottage at Cambridgeshire. There has been a suspicious fire." Scott looked at the alarm clock and the red letters read 4:00 am. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and got out of bed. His wife Mary opened her eyes and asked, "Another case?" Mary has become accustomed to the bed shifting and Scott inadvertently waking her up to answer the phone. Scott answered yes and walked towards the bathroom to freshen up.

Scott stood outside of the cottage. The firemen had just turned off their hoses and the cottage appeared as a steaming bundle of wood and building material. The FBIC commander walked up to Scott and said, " We needed to call you since this isn't a simple fire. He motioned towards the four body bags laying on the grass. If Scott was religious, he would have made the sign of the cross. He walked towards the four body bags and opened one to look inside. Most people think when you die in a fire, it results in a crispy burnt body. But most of the time, people die of smoke inhalation. It isn't the flames that

kill you but the smoke. Scott looked inside the bag and saw a sooty female face with her eyes closed. The attendant zipped up the body bag.

The FBIC, a squat, brown-haired man with a handlebar mustache, walked behind Scott and said, "This looked like a regular fire and thought no one was in the cottage but when the guys walked further into the house, they noticed the bodies. One woman, three men. We're trying to identify them but we're still looking into it. The neighbours also thought that there was a fifth person but we can't identify them either." Scott ran his fingers through his short blond hair and walked into the kitchen. The sink and counters looked black and white. Scott smelled petrol from the sink and the ground looked black as well with a faint powder. The frame around the dining room remained solid but the table and chairs looked like stumps and broken pieces of wood. Scott could smell more petrol coming from the corner of the living room. The bones of the red couch had the stuffing and cloth in pieces strewn throughout the room. Scott looked to the right and saw the bedroom doors were slightly closed. Scott asked the FBIC, "Were the bedroom doors closed or open?" The FBIC said, "The doors were slightly closed." Scott opened the doors and saw some smoke marks on the two rooms but the bedrooms looked untouched with the beds unmade. Scott looked into the fuse box room and saw the fuses were blown out but no fire or smoke came from the room. Scott looked at the other two rooms and saw some smoke stains but not as much heavy damage like the rest of the house. Scott asked, "Where were they found?" The FBIC said, "They were found in the conservatory."

Scott and the FBIC walked outside the back of the house and looked out toward the creek. Scott looked out to the

woods and said, "The fifth person could have fled into the woods. Did anyone try to look in the backyard? The FBIC said, " No. We were busy putting out a fire and trying to save lives." Scott shook his head and walked back to the front of the house. He looked out and saw the hot tub and the gas bbq. They appeared untouched and unused. They were potential fire hazards but covered with tarps. Scott looked at the gutted home dripping with water. The FBIC said to Scott, "At first, we thought this was a fire caused by a short fuse. But when we smelled the petrol in different parts of the house, this wasn't an accidental fire. This is why we called you." Scott replied, "Since this is no accident, we need to identify the victims and look for the fifth person. We don't know if they are dead or alive but we haven't found a fifth body."

Scott got back to the police station and started to write down what he did and didn't know about the fire on a whiteboard. Scott liked seeing the ideas on a large white space and could connect the facts. Scott wrote,

"We know there was a fire with four bodies found in the conservatory.

The obvious sources of the fire did not generate enough damage to cause the flames.

Smelled petrol in certain spots in the house.

There is a missing fifth person

Need to ID the dead and the missing person."

Scott tapped the marker on the whiteboard and walked over to his desk to call the medical examiner for any preliminary results from the examination of the four bodies. The medical examiner said that they haven't begun the formal examination but the rough cause of death would be smoke inhalation. Scott decided to contact the owner of the cottage to find out who rented the cottage in the morning.

After making some phone calls, Scott found the owner of the cottage and got the names of the renters: Clair Holloway, John Avery, Dave Wilson, Andy Baker and Michael Jones. He got their pictures from the licencing office and confirmed their id's against the bodies in the morgue. But he noticed that Michael Jones was not in the morgue. He was the missing renter.

Scott never enjoyed notifying the parents of the deaths of their loved ones. The tears and the cries were loud and piercing. After telling the parents of Andy Baker that their son died, Scott got in the car, took a large gasp of air and let it out very slowly. Now, he needed to find Michael Jones. Back at the desk, Scott looked at the picture of Michael Jones. A slight, thin young man with a crooked smile. He had thick, black rimmed glasses and short, wavy brown hair. Scott called the hospitals and other police departments if they have come across a slightly dazed young man. There were no sightings of Michael Brown at the local hospitals. Scott went back to the cottage with the creek and the woods and thought, "The kid could be anywhere. He could have drowned or died in the woods." Scott took out his phone and made a couple of phone calls to get more officers to search the woods and creek for Michael Jones. A couple of hours later, no sight of Michael Jones. Scott went back to the police department.

More information came from the friends and families of the four students killed. John and Claire were a couple and Dave, Andy and Michael were Rugby team members. All of them were university students. Scott saw the pictures of John and Claire sitting together under a tree, with John's long limbs holding Claire's athletic frame. The other pictures showed Dave, Andy and Michael in rugby gear, standing in the playing field with muddy faces and toothy smiles.

While looking at the pictures that the family gave of the four deceased students, Scott got a phone call. "Hello, this is Dr. Lisa Warne from the Psychiatric ward. I heard you were looking for a slightly dazed young man." Scott replied, "Yes, there was a fire at a cottage and there were four fatalities but missing one person. I was just making some phone calls to find him." Dr. Warne said, "This young man seems to fit the description. He seems a little out of it. Please come to the hospital."

Scott walked down the long corridor towards the white-walled hospital room. Dr. Warne greeted Scott and said, "Thank you for coming so soon. We can't seem to get too much information from the young man. We only got the name 'Michael'. We have treated him for a burn on his left hand." Scott followed the doctor in the white room and saw a messy haired young man with bloodshot eyes lying in a hospital bed. He saw the ragged bandage on the left hand. Dr. Warne said, "I will leave you two alone and check back in a couple of minutes." Scott said, "Hi Michael, my name is Detective Sergeant Nick Scott. Tell me how you got that nasty burn on your hand?" Michael looked around the room, swallowed and said, "I was sleeping in the cottage and then I smelled smoke. I jumped out of bed, opened the door and saw flames coming across the hall from the fuse box. I ran away from the fuse box room. I called out to everyone but no one replied and then I ran across the living room. I just saw smoke but no flames. I called out to John and Clare and I didn't hear anything from their room. I saw the smoke getting thicker and then I saw some flames come from the kitchen and getting closer to me. I tried to wave the flames away but then my robe sleeve caught on fire. I tried to take off the robe but my hand caught on fire. I ran outside to the backyard and into the creek since its

shallow. The water put the fire out on my hand. I walked towards the hospital. That's how I got here."

Scott wrote down the details of the events as Michael described it. It seemed plausible but little things didn't make sense. Michael said that the flames were coming from the fuse box but the fuse box looked untouched albeit with a couple of blown fuses. The fire commander said that the bodies were found in one area but Michael said that he called out to them but there was no response. Scott finished writing his notes and said to Michael, "I'm just going to talk to the doctor outside. I'm sure you're exhausted." As he left the room, Scott turned off the lights and Micheal screamed, "Turn the lights back on! Turn the lights back on! They're coming for me!" Scott called out to the doctor, " Hey doc, what's going on?" Dr. Warne and some orderlies ran into the room, pinned his arms to the bed and gave a sedative to Michael. His eyes closed and he slumped into the bed.

Scott asked Dr. Warner in her office, "What just happened?" Dr. Warne said, " He's exhausted but we have not been able to turn the lights in his room. So the lights are always on." Dr. Warne took off her blazer, hung it up and sat behind her desk. I need to do a more thorough examination but I do see some paranoia in Michael's behaviour. Scott said, "Some of the details of the fire don't add up but I need to go back to the office to go through the details."

Scott looked at his notes back at the office and the whiteboard and thought, "Something isn't adding up. Michael's story doesn't match the evidence and his freak out looks a little over the top. He set the fire and caused the deaths of his friends. But I need to find out why."

chapter five

Dawn Oshima

THE START OF A new day. Yet another glorious marvelous magical mystery...

Lisa sighed as strands of hair fell out of the loose bun she had tied a moment ago. Fine, it was going to be one of those days then, she thought as she tied her hair up in her usual ponytail, and washed her hands in the sink.

“What are you trying to prove to yourself, you silly ijit,” she said to the face scowling back at her, and sighed again. New cases always made her a little nervous and this one promised to be one of the more difficult ones to crack. “Sighing like the little girl you’re not isn’t going to solve anything. You know a new hairstyle won’t make things go any smoother just like talking to yourself in a mirror won’t solve any of your problems. Pull yourself together, Warne, and get to work.” She checked to see if her makeup was all right then nodded at her now professional face and left the washroom, picking up the file and her notebook on the way.

Lisa wound her way through the hallways of the hospital, absently waving at the attending nurses before arriving at her

destination. She rapped at the door once before entering the patient's room, and blinked at the bright lights and the morning sunlight streaming through the windows that assaulted her eyes. His file said that he'd been brought in yesterday after a fire destroyed the holiday cottage that he and his friends had rented for the weekend, killing all but the one, but remained vague as to the details except for the fact that he was now suffering from acute nyctophobia which explained all the lights. What had happened at that cottage and why was he here now?

"Who's there? What do you want?" The tinny voice sounded on the verge of hysteria and Lisa paused near the doorway.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Warne and I'm here to have a little chat with you. I think the nurses told you to expect me?"

There was a pause. "Oh. Then that's all right. Only, don't go turning off any of the lights, you hear me?"

"I promise so can we have that chat now?"

"I suppose. Not that it's going to change anything."

Lisa noted the remark as she shut the door behind her and pulled up a chair to sit beside her patient. Michael Jones lay back in his bed, staring at the ceiling looking much younger than the second-year university student that he was. His bandaged left hand lay limp on top of his blanket while his clenched right hand lay by his side but otherwise he seemed calm and cool.

"So, Michael, your file says you are afraid of the dark to the point of perhaps hurting yourself. Could you tell me why?"

"You would be too if you saw the things I saw."

"When?"

"You know, at the fire."

"You mean at the cottage?"

“Go ask the police if you want to know what happened.” Michael rolled over, shutting her out. Lisa sighed to herself and changed her tactics.

“All right, all right. Just tell me what happened Saturday.”

There was a long pause and Lisa thought she had lost the boy when he began to speak.

“It was all Claire’s idea, you know. She and John, that’s her boyfriend, wanted to get away to the countryside after the last exams which were killer but they didn’t have enough money to rent the cottage by themselves so they invited the lot of us, Andy, Dave, and me, along to split the costs.

“We get there Saturday and it’s an absolute stunner. Trees, grass, sun, green mountains, the whole lot. You’d think we never saw real grass in our whole lives, we were running about. We threw all our stuff into the house and went out exploring all around the place and it was a blast. Nothing to think about except drinking and eating and no school at all.” Michael turned over and lay on his back again, eyes shining as he remembered the events of the day. “We had so much fun just larking about then we got to setting up the grill and having a food orgy. And of course the drinks. What a time, what a time we had.”

Michael’s face fell as he continued to talk. “Then it got dark. We decided to go inside as the weather was starting to turn. The wind, the rain the whole lot. But it was sunny all day and now it was raining and it kept raining all that rain. I don’t know what happened next but then the screams started in the next room and at first we thought it was the rain on the roof but no it was someone screaming but it couldn’t be no it wasn’t and then Andy said to get all the candles out and tried to light them but I don’t know we burned our fingers and our toes and I don’t know but I don’t know and...and...”

Michael suddenly screamed at the top of his lungs, jolting Lisa out of her chair. She called the nurses and security in and it took all of them to hold him down and sedate him before he relaxed into sleep.

What the hell had happened at that cottage? Lisa shook her head as she watched her patient sleep.

chapter six

Cassandra Lee

IN THE 33 YEARS of Dr Steven Mallory's career as a forensic pathologist, the four new arrivals at the morgue would turn out to be a bit of a pickle.

The operating tables were arranged in the shape of the letter T, two for the arms and two side-by-side for the post. Steve had just sewn up the third boy, and Vincent Price, the autopsy photographer, added a new sheet of paper, an autopsy form, on Steve's black clipboard. Steve's other assistant, Jessica Price, was summarising the morning's autopsy results on the computer at the foot of the T. The three boys were done; work on the girl had only just begun.

A rasp on the door. The DS. Jessica answered the door and excused herself, brushing a finger against her chest. Steve winced. This was the worst time for a toilet break.

Nick braced himself for an unusually quiet afternoon. In the past, working with this medical examiner required any observer, Nick himself included, to concentrate intensely. He couldn't afford to distract the doc when, for many years, Nick

was the only one in the room who could speak. Nick didn't have the faintest idea how Dr Mallory could have cut the mustard in his field despite his muteness. He had never seen Steve's new assistants; Nick had yet to see any of Steve's past assistants twice.

Steve berated himself inwardly for not working fast enough, as Nick arrived at the time they'd agreed upon. His professionalism dictated that he proceed with the autopsy, live, in Nick's presence. That way, he would respond to the detective's questions visually in real time, rather than interrupt his momentum only to present his findings. Besides, his assistants were his mouthpieces. They were at liberty to show Nick around while he was busy, and, unlike his past assistants, not only were the Price twins medical researchers in their own right, but both were also intimately familiar with British Sign Language owing to their deaf mother. Nick didn't know that Jessica's finger-across-the-chest meant "toilet". It was Steve's forensic dream team's secret code.

The bright light in the examination room bounced an unsightly glare off Steve's bald head. Nick averted his gaze to the bodies.

"Steve, will I be staying all night to see you cut them all up?"

Steve smiled and shook his head. He pointed to the unattended computer on the opposite side of the room. The monitor featured a looping slideshow, showing the results of the three boys: pictures of mangled bodies and bullet points. Nick made out the slide headings "Avery", "Baker" and "Wilson".

Vincent brushed against the body bag on the left arm of the T. The ruffling plastic bothered Nick and his head jerked in that direction. Steve held up an index finger. Nick

understood this to mean that the body at hand was the final or the most important one, and that Steve was about to perform the autopsy.

Steve unzipped the body bag, revealing a blonde young woman with toned muscles and slender limbs. She wore a white terry cloth nightgown with blue highlights. The toe tag identified her as “HOLLOWAY, Claire”. Vincent snapped his camera all over the body: front to back, top to bottom, left to right. He handed Steve the clipboard, on which Steve printed neatly that the nightgown was “damp”. He also checked off items on his clipboard: Caucasian, female, 18-25... On her head was a large, bloodied gash. Head trauma?

While Steve and Vincent collected samples of Claire’s clothing, hair, skin and the like, Jessica returned and beckoned to Nick to join her at the computer. “Sample collection will take quite a while, and it can be boring for a visitor,” she said. “Vince will alert you when they’re done. In the meantime, let’s take a look at Steve’s notes.” She clicked:

EVERY, John

- Died from blood loss
- Wounds indicate cause of death: accident / suicide /

homicide

[Photographs of John’s wounds on head, neck, and chest]

[Photographs of John’s organs; evidence of severe internal bleeding in liver]

BAKER, Andrew

- Repeated head trauma — likely caused his death
- Blunt weapon

[Photographs in various directions of Andy’s head wounds]

[Photographs of Andy's internal organs, all appearing intact]

WILSON, David

- >80% burns (Jessica said "burnt to a crisp" when she first presented this slide to Nick)

- Toxicology report pending; heart attack suspected

[Photographs of Dave in foetal position; face, arms and legs severely charred]

[Photographs of Dave's internal organs: enlarged heart with scarring]

[Figures in 2-by-2 square:

- Top: Lung scans of John, Andy
- Bottom: Lung scan of Dave, a black rectangle labelled "Claire, pending"]

Another click, and the slideshow returned to "AVERY, John". Jessica clicked her way to the lung scans again.

"This," Jessica pointed at the screen. "Each of these three lung scans is somewhat clear. None of the boys died of the fire. And it turns out the same is true of all four of them. Here." She held up an X-ray scan marked "Claire Holloway, chest region". "I fetched it just now, hot off the press."

Nick traced his fingers on the X-ray scan and circled the trachea. "It's a bit blurry around here."

"This is called 'vascular congestion'. Blood vessels clogged up because of water in the lungs." Jessica seemed to know her stuff. Perhaps Steve had found much better assistants this time.

Therefore, Claire died by drowning. Locations of water at the cottage were the creek, the hot tub outdoors or the

bathroom indoors, likely the one behind Claire and John's shared room, so she might have drowned in any of them where the water was deep enough. If the creek, why was she there at night? If the hot tub or bathroom, she would have been running a bath for herself or her boyfriend John.

"John's cause of death spans a broad spectrum," said Nick.

"At this stage, we're not clear which possibility was from the wounds alone."

"But he's certainly not burnt to death."

"That's for sure. The wounds are on parts of the body he could have easily reached with his hands, such as this one across his neck, and the cuts weren't deep, so we didn't rule out suicide."

Jessica proceeded to display Dave's slide.

"The thing is, we're not completely sure how he died. The fire seemed obvious until we take into account his smoke-free lungs. But see," Jessica brought up Dave's lung scan on the looping slideshow, "I found these short horizontal lines on the side of his lungs. They're called Kerley B lines and they're misery. Throw in his enlarged heart, and we deduced that a heart attack might have happened. We need to find out what chemicals are in his body, and which might have led to his demise."

Nick pondered. Dave's body had such bizzare features that it could either be the key to solving this crime, or open a Pandora's box of unanswered questions.

"That brings us to the toxicology report. It should be ready a few days from now, I suppose, Wednesday or Thursday. Expect Thursday."

Nick jotted down "10th November 2011" in his pocketbook. "Jessica, could you show me Andy's slide?"

Jessica obliged.

Nick stared at the photo showing Andy's impacted skull. It was curious that Andy, with his stocky build, sustained such gaping head injuries when he could have fended off his attacker. What could have prevented Dave from fighting back? Could his attention have been elsewhere, or was he sleeping, or did the attacker have accomplices restraining him? He glanced at the remark "heart attack". Yes, a heart attack could be rather disarming, but what if—?

"—Steve wants to show you something," Vincent called.

Nick observed the gash on Claire's head. According to Steve, she too had a broken skull like Andy, but she had shallow fractures rather than Andy's deeper dents.

"Could she have been hit by the same blunt instrument as Andy?"

Steve made signs to Vincent. "Possibly," said Vincent, interpreting for Steve. "That might not have killed her though. Oh—" Vincent turned to Steve. Steve held up his fingers in numbers in what seemed to be instructions.

In his mind, Nick pictured the five young people at the cottage. They were mostly fit and healthy, and could have escaped tragedy if they'd fled or subdued their attackers in time. It was strange that the only victims with visible burns were Dave and Michael, and the rest died of other causes. So... something or someone struck Claire and Andy's heads. Claire was drowned. Andy was battered. John was pierced. Dave was burnt after he died, so the fire seemed to be a cover-up for something else that happened to him. Could Dave also have been attacked like his four friends? Did the fire begin at the gas barbecue site, or inside the cottage because its cupboards contained inflammable materials such as candles and matches? And the fuse box. Short circuits led to fires, too.

Nick's questions outnumbered his answers. Too many leads to follow. As if that weren't enough, despite Nick's atheism, while surfing the web recently, he came across an esoteric website mentioning star gates, portals, CERN, classified military documents, ancient ritual artefacts and all sorts of technopagan drivel. He was not someone who could stomach the existence of otherworldly beings, much less whether they were the perpetrators of this crime — any crime. Who could have been motivated to bludgeon and maim and burn so many youths? But were the culprit human, neither was Nick willing to entertain the idea that Michael was involved or even abetted the attack. Victim-blaming was always a cruel approach to handling mind-shattering crises, and without solid proof, Nick wouldn't venture to implicate Michael.

Nick felt a tap on his shoulder. Steve, Jessica and Vincent were standing behind the three other now-unzipped, naked bodies, their faces pallid. Who could have tapped him?

Steve flashed both palms at Nick: IT'S NOT ME. Jessica's jaw dropped. Vincent hid his face in his hands.

Nick traversed the T shape of all four bodies. Apart from the routine Y-shaped incision done in autopsies on the four chests, a blood-scrawled number sat between the arms of each "Y" as if a knife sliced through them. "1" on Claire, "2" John, "3" Dave and "4" Andy. They weren't Roman numerals or some ancient Mesopotamian script, but the very numerals printed on everyday objects. Nick wondered why the slideshow photos didn't include these creepy etchings.

"We... We didn't see this coming," replied Vincent in a trembling voice.

chapter seven

Shari McGriff

MICHAEL SAT SHIVERING ON the cold, tile floor in the sliver of light coming through the window of his psych room door. Nothing could stop the shaking. Not the blanket. Not the drugs. Nothing. And his arm burned. BURNED. He wiped his forehead with his one good hand and blew out through his mouth—trying to release the pain. He'd never be able to forget. Never. It was too much like ... the last time. Last time.

Suddenly, the room exploded in white florescent light and Dr. Lisa Warne entered the room.

Michael flew to his feet, cursing when the bandage moved slightly on his burnt left hand. "Thank God! Why was the light off? When you left earlier, I asked that the light be left on. I don't even have a torch. I don't have anything to protect myself."

Dr. Warne took in Michael's clammy appearance. "I'm sorry, Michael. I'll let the nurses know." She waved him toward his hospital bed, "Now, why don't you sit down so we can talk."

He licked his lips and stared at her for a moment, before

moving towards the bed.

Lisa opened the door and pulled in a chair and a rolling cart from the hallway. Her ponytail moved like flames on the back of her neck.

“So, tell me, how are you feeling since our session this morning?” she asked as she pulled out a pen from her white coat pocket and sat down.

“My arm is on fi-re...” he said, faltering. Under his breath, “bad choice of words.” He sighed, throwing his head back. “Jesus. How did this happen?”

“How did it happen, Michael?”

He stared past her into the dark recesses of the room. She wouldn’t understand. She wouldn’t believe him. No one ever did. “Did you know that Claire was my tutor? I was failing Shakespeare, and she was helping me.”

“No, I didn’t know that. What were you studying?”

“*Caesar*,” he said shifting in his chair. “She made a beautiful, Portia. We’d act out the plays, you know.”

“What part did you play?”

A great CRACK ripped through them both and they jumped, followed by the ROAR of thunder. The light bulb above them flickered.

Michael shot up off the bed. “Did you see that? There’s something in the shadows.”

“That was the lightning.”

“No, in the dark. I saw something,” he said.

“What did you see?”

He sat silently staring past her. “I’m thirsty. Can I have some water,” he said as he looked at the water pitcher on the cart.

Dr. Warne poured water into a cup and handed it to Michael, and then sat back down.

He gulped the water down.

“Michael, tell me what happened, Saturday.”

“Claire was in charge of the weekend. Guy Fawkes Day was her favorite holiday. She had it all planned. She found the cottage, bought the food, and had the menu planned. She wanted us to be out in nature by ourselves. She knew the owner of the house on the hill, so she wanted to rent their cottage. We—all five of us, Me, Claire, John, Dave, and Avery—got there by taxi Saturday afternoon and unpacked. We were all supposed to make the effigy together, but it was just me and Claire. It was so fun. We started a little early with the mulled wine. Had to make more than one pot,” he said with a wink. “We stuffed the newspaper Guy with straw. John could have joined us, you know, but he wanted to go workout, instead” he said as he rolled his eyes. “I don’t know where the others went off to, but John’s absence, well, that pissed her off.” His eyes bright and damp. “We were all supposed to be together and make it a party. All day. Not just for the bonfire. All day. And now, she’s gone. They’re all gone...except for me,” he said before breaking down into sobs. “It should have been me. Not Claire. Especially not Claire, and...” he trailed off.

Dr. Warne’s watched ticked. Tick. Tick. Tick.

“Michael. What tasks were you in charge of?”

“Huh,” he said wiping his face on his shirt. “Oh. I, uh, brought the gas for the BBQ. And I set up the circle for the bonfire. John was supposed to do that, but he was mad about something and wouldn’t go out and do it. It was really dark by that time though, and I didn’t want to go out, but Claire asked me to. She’d said to me, ‘Love, can you set up the circle and check the wood, for me, please?’ I’d do anything for the ol’ gel, you know. But she knew I was afraid to be in the dark by

myself, so she grabbed two torches from the storage closet and held one up in each hand and grinned at me. How could I resist that smile? So, of course I went into the dark with both torches lit to the max. I could have been hurt out there, but the light protected me.”

“Go on. What happened when you came back in the cottage?”

“I came in from checking the wood, to make sure it wasn’t wetted up, when I heard John and Claire fighting in the kitchen.”

“What were they fighting about?”

“All I heard was Claire say something like ‘everything tastes of liquorice. Especially all the things you’ve waited so long for, like absinthe.’ I saw John point his finger at her chest, when I walked into the kitchen, and he said, ‘cut it out.’ When they saw me in the doorway, they stepped away from each other, and she said to me, ‘Hi love, is the wood okay?’ I stayed quiet and nodded to her. ‘Can you come over here and stir the toffee for me? You’ve made Bonfire Toffee before, right?’ I nodded again. She handed me the thermometer. ‘Make sure you keep stirring and watch the temperature. Here are the molds. And the soup is on low on the left burner. I need time to myself, so I’m going to take a bath.’ Then she stormed over to the storage closet and grabbed a bunch of candles and matches and slammed the closet door shut. She opened another cabinet and pulled out a big mug and poured half the pot of mulled wine into it. John and I stared at her. ‘What?’ she said. ‘That’s all we do, isn’t it? Look at things and try new drinks?’ Then she thundered down the dark hallway towards her bathroom. The blasted light fitting was broken. And then I heard a train whistle shrill in the distance.”

“Then what happened?”

“Can I have some more water, Dr Warne?”

“You can call me, Lisa,” she said, as she got up and went to pour him another cup of water. She handed him the cup.”

Michael gulped the water down again, water trickling down his chin and onto his shirt. He wiped his mouth with his right hand and handed the empty cup back.

“Do you want more?”

He shook his head, no. He shut his eyes and lowered his voice to a whisper and recited:

“Remember, remember!

The fifth of November,

the Gunpowder treason and plot;

I know of no reason

Why the Gunpowder treason

Should ever be forgot!

Guy Fawkes and his companions

Did the scheme contrive,

To blow the King and Parliament

All up alive.”

Michael blinked rapidly and took a sharp intake of breath and then opened his eyes, and then checked all four corners of the room to make sure no one was there.

Dr. Warne watched Michael closely and did not look away, even as her hand scribbled notes on her notepad. “After Claire went to take a bath, what happened?”

“I stayed in the kitchen to stir the toffee, and John went into the Conservatory to work out—again. I heard him counting his push-ups up to 100. I knew he was doing pushups, because I went to see what he was doing. I wanted to ask him about Claire, but the look on his face warned me to stay out of it. After he finished his pushups, I heard him pounding on Claire’s bathroom door. He must have startled

her because I heard a thud, and ‘Shit!’ and then she said, ‘John, go away and leave me alone. I’ll come out when I’m ready. And tell Michael to check the Jacket Potatoes.’ Then John came to tell me what she said, and I told him, ‘I heard her.’ Then I went and checked the potatoes, but the timer still had 20 minutes left, so I closed the oven door. When the egg timer went off, I took the potatoes out.”

“What was John doing during this time?”

“I don’t know. Some kind of calisthenics. When he reached one hundred for yet another exercise, I heard him go pound on Claire’s door, again, but she didn’t answer this time. I didn’t think much about it. I knew she was trying to relax, and by this time I was now checking the toffee molds to see if the candy had hardened yet. I was checking the soup, the wine, and the potatoes, so I was a little busy, trying not to burn the food. John went to exercise again. I started to get a little antsy, because the food was going to be either cold or burnt, if we didn’t start the party and do the bonfire. So, I went to get John and told him I’d go start the bonfire if he’d talk to Claire. He said, ‘do you need three torches this time, nerd?’ I just glared at him, ‘Piss off. Go get your girlfriend. You know, the one that you said you can’t live without and whom you’d do anything for.’ He started to raise a fist at me with that but turned and walked out of the room, instead. ‘By the way,’ I yelled after him, ‘have you seen Dave or Andy?’ He grunted back at me a ‘No.’

Then I went outside and started the bonfire, and when I came back in I heard John demanding that Claire open the door, so I went to go talk to her myself, but no amount of cajoling got her to open the door. Even John knew she’d open the door for me, so when she didn’t that’s when we got worried, and decided to break open the door.”

“We tried everything, but those old doors are solid. Not like the ones today. Finally, between the two of us taking turns ramming our bodies into it, we broke in. And there she was,” Michael said. “Slumped over in the tub with her face in the water. Dead. We didn’t know that at the time. We hoped she wasn’t dead. We both ran to her. John took her out of the tub and held her in his arms. I grabbed towels and threw them over her naked body. At first, we thought she was just asleep. We hoped she was asleep or passed out. We slapped her face gently at first to wake her up but that didn’t work. Then a little harder, but that didn’t work, either. So, then we put her on the floor on her side and hoped the water would flow out of her lungs, but that didn’t happen. So then, John did CPR on her. He’s the Science guy, you know. He should know how to do it better than I do. But he couldn’t get her to wake up, so then I tried. This time we held her up and I tried to do the Heimlich on her to expel the water, but nothing worked. I don’t know how long we did this, but it seemed like several hours...Yet, just moments...We didn’t know what to do. We couldn’t go get help. There was no phone in the cottage, and we didn’t have a car. We’d arrived by taxi and our next one wasn’t supposed to come until Sunday night,” he said as he started to cry again. “It should have been me,” he cried. “It should have been me.”

Dr Warne got up from her chair and prepared another cup of water for Michael. She knelt down in front of Michael and handed him a tissue from her pocket.

He took it and wiped his face. And then he took the cup of water and stared down into the tub of liquid.

“Michael, I think you need to rest now. I know this was very difficult for you to relive, but you did really well. Take a drink of water for me, please.”

He nodded and took a sip.

She took the cup and placed it on the cart.

She pulled the sheet back on the bed for him. "Here Michael, get under the covers. It's time to rest."

He climbed under them and let her pull them up to his shoulders. "You won't turn off the light, will you? I'm not safe in the dark."

"I'll leave the light on and I'll let the Nurses know. You don't need to worry. You are safe here."

She walked towards the door and said, "Get some rest, Michael. I'll check on you again, this evening."

"Brutus," he said.

Dr. Warner turned around. "What?"

"I played Brutus."

"I see," she said, as she walked to the door with her chair and cart and pushed them into the hallway. "I see," she said as she let herself out, and then locked Michael in the room.

chapter eight

Kimberlee Gerstmann

DETECTIVE NICK SCOTT GUIDED the car parallel to the curb, not wanting to pull into the driveway. He turned down the radio and double-checked the numbers on the house, confirming the address with his paperwork: Greg and Jo Jones at 10 Leys Cl. The tires rubbed against the concrete as he came to a stop and he winced, rubbing his thumbs across the steering wheel in an apology to his car. He'd been on the road too long.

Before he got out of his car, a teenage girl erupted from the house, the screen door banging closed behind her. She had a bright pink stocking cap covering a good portion of her long blonde hair and a matching scarf wrapped around her neck. She wasn't wearing a coat, and the chilled November air seemed to catch her off-guard. She rubbed her hands over her arms, hugging herself. After a moment, she grabbed a small cannister from the windowsill and wrestled it open. She reached her hand in and sprinkled a handful of critter food onto a small blue plate at the edge of the patio. She closed up the can and gave a quick look at the nearest tree to see if the

squirrels took notice of her offering. She appeared to cluck her tongue or make an attempt at animal noises to call them. Then she turned on her heel and returned to the house, a quick skip in her step.

Nick glanced down at the paper again, looking for information about the girl: Michael's younger sister, Jessica. He sighed, knowing his visit would change the young girl's life.

He remembered how it felt to have a detective come into your home and uproot it forever.

He was fourteen when it happened to him.

His mother had been silent all morning. It was a Saturday, and she had allowed him to sleep in, which was unusual. He finally climbed out of bed and made his way to the kitchen, where she sat at the table, staring straight ahead at the wall. Her cigarette had burned down to the filter, and she didn't notice the thin column of ash balancing between her fingers until he'd sat down across from her. "Is everything okay, Mom?" Nick asked.

"Of course, Nicky," she refocused her eyes and forced a smile. "Don't be silly." She tried to sound convincing, but he didn't buy it. The skin around her eyes was puffy and her cheeks were red. She'd been crying.

"O---kay. Where's Dad?"

"I think he had an early sales call," she said, setting the remains of the cigarette on her plate. She scooped up the ash from the table with her fingers and sprinkled it on the side of her uneaten egg and toast with one bite out of it.

Nick drummed his fingers on the kitchen tabletop.

"Get yourself some cereal, or some fruit and toast," his mother said. "I need to get going soon. Mrs. Bachman is waiting for me. She needs a perm." She stood and scraped her egg into the trash, setting the plate next to the sink. She tightened the sash on her robe and made her way to the bedroom to dress.

While Nick contemplated breakfast, there was a loud rap on the door. He waited to see if his mom was going to answer, but didn't hear her coming back down the hall. He looked through the peephole in the heavy wooden door and saw a man in a tweed overcoat with a badge on the lapel. He opened the door, half expecting someone to be collecting money for the police foundation, but instead, the detective reached out his hand and introduced himself. Niles Sagel came through the door, lingering near it as Nick yelled for his mom.

She came into the living room in her stocking feet and looked puzzled to see a strange man standing in her entryway.

"Mrs. Scott, I'm DS Niles Sagel. I have a couple of questions for you." He gestured toward the sitting area. "May I?"

Nick watched his mother's hand flutter to her chest before she took two faltering steps, backed toward the sofa and sunk onto it.

"Your husband is Geoff Scott?" Niles Sagel began.

"Yes," Nick's mother whispered, then nodded her head in confirmation.

"Where is Mr. Scott this morning?" Sagel asked.

His mother glanced at Nick and hesitated before answering. "I'm not sure," she admitted. "What is this about?"

Nick felt his stomach turn to stone. She didn't know where his dad was? She lied to him?

"Mrs. Scott, there isn't a delicate way to ask this, but where you two fighting? Having trouble?"

"No!" Nick's mom fumbled with the button on the cuff of her blouse. "Of course not. He often travels for business. He's in sales."

DS Sagel looked from her to Nick. He paused.

"Mrs. Scott, I'm afraid there's been an accident. We believe your husband has been murdered."

The color drained from his mother, and her face seemed to crumple upon itself. She let out an anguished howl, "Noooo, Geoff!!!"

Nick bolted to his mother's side and tried to grab her up in a hug.

She pushed away from him, her small fists pounding on his arms and chest. He could not catch his breath. He felt as if he would suffocate beneath the new reality. His mother rolled into the fetal position on the sofa and sobbed.

The display of emotion didn't seem to have much effect on DS Sagel. He watched them with detachment until Nick turned toward him in anger and shouted,

"What the hell happened?"

He gave Nick a look of compassion then and said simply, "We're still trying to piece that together. I have to ask, do either of you know Ruby Dent?"

Nick's mother continued to wail. Nick felt empty inside, but at the same time, he felt as if he could vomit. He shook his head. "No. No we don't know her. Is that who killed him?"

"We believe so."

That was the beginning of the end of Nick's innocence. He would later discover that his father had been unfaithful to his mother for the last two years of their marriage. His mother did not know for sure, but suspected. Ruby Dent was the last woman his father had been with, and she stabbed him to death in her apartment once he told her he would not leave his wife and son.

Nick stayed in touch with DS Sagel for years. First it was the investigation, then through the trial, Ruby Dent's plea of insanity, her subsequent hospitalization, rapid release, and then her disappearance. She fell off the radar, and no one knew where she'd gone. DS Sagel had been more than a detective assigned to the case. He watched out for what remained of the Scott family. He became a mentor to Nick, and later a friend. He was the reason Nick joined the force.

And now Nick was the one who must go in and deal in bad news.

DS Nick Scott stepped out into the gray afternoon and made his way to the door.

He pressed the button and heard the cheery bell ring deep inside the house. The curtain on the window rustled, and he saw a blonde head poke around. The girl had taken off her hat, but still had the neon pink scarf around her neck. She pulled open the door and gave him a smile that conveyed slight suspicion.

“Hello. Are your parents at home?” Nick asked.

“Of course they are. You don’t think I’d open the door to a stranger if I was alone, do you?” This time, she gave him a cheeky grin. “Mom! Dad! Door!” Jessica yelled over her shoulder.

Jessica showed Nick in and offered him his choice of seat. He waited for the Joneses, noting the absence of photos and limited décor of the room. A greasy smell of sausage and peppers hung in the air, and he wrinkled his nose. Jessica watched him like an animal watching prey. He shifted on his feet and reached out his hand as the girls’ parents walked into the room.

“Mr. and Mrs. Jones, I’m DS Nick Scott. I’m so sorry about your son, Michael. I have a few questions to go over with you though if that is okay.”

Greg Jones motioned for him to take a seat. Nick sat in the chair nearest Mrs. Jones. “Jessica, get the detective some tea, please,” Mr. Jones said.

“Ah, no. I’m fine. I don’t need anything. Thank you for the offer, though,” Nick said.

Jo Jones looked at her daughter.

“Get some tea for your mother then,” Mr. Jones said, his voice gruff. He watched his daughter head toward the kitchen and then rubbed a large hand across his face.

“This has been a nightmare,” he said. “I’m not sure what we can help with. We didn’t know those kids.” His lip curled in

a sneer. “Our boy is in the hospital. And not a regular hospital. They have him in a goddamn looney bin. He sure as hell doesn’t belong there...” he saw the look of consternation on his wife’s face and his voice trailed off.

Jo Jones pulled her sleeves down and rested her elbows on her knees. She gnawed on the right side of her lip while her husband blustered.

“Jo keeps telling me I shouldn’t complain. That we should just be happy he was safe,” Mr. Jones continued, a note of sarcasm hinging around the word ‘safe.’ He seemed to realize how he sounded and changed his tone. “Look, I can’t imagine what those other parents are going through.” He shook his head. “But this isn’t easy on us either. We can’t afford all this hospital stuff. Michael’s hands are burned. We don’t know how bad that is going to be.”

Mrs. Jones finally spoke. “Honey, maybe we should find out what the detective has to say. I’m sure he doesn’t want to hear all about our little troubles.”

Mr. Jones’ jaw tightened, and he stretched his hands across his legs as if he was trying to grab patience that was just out of reach.

Jessica returned with a cup of steaming tea for her mother. She set it on the coffee table and then curled up next to her mom, tucking her thin legs beneath her.

Mrs. Jones gave a weak smile and then patted her daughter’s leg. Jessica slipped a cell phone out of her pocket and started staring at the screen.

Nick flipped open his notepad and focused on the parents. “What can you tell me about Michael’s friends... Claire, John, Andy, and Dave?”

Greg Jones rolled his eyes and pushed a sigh out from between his pursed lips. “I told you, we didn’t know nothing

about those kids. Not a lick. Michael never talked about them that we know of.”

“Is that so, Mrs. Jones?”

“Oh, please call me Jo,” she said, her voice quiet. “Uh. Those kids?” She reached over and grabbed the teacup, bringing it to her lips. As she sipped, she shot a quick glance at her husband, who was staring at her, his jaw clenched. She swallowed her tea.

“I don’t really know anything about them.”

“Michael didn’t talk about them?” Or you didn’t know them?”

“Both?” It came out more like a question than an answer.

Her husband rolled his eyes again.

“Both.” This time, Jo made it sound more definite. “I work in accounting at Banbury Wroxton Hotel House. With the...” she grimaced, “change to Greg’s job, I’ve picked up a few extra shifts working in the restaurant there, too. Odd hours, so I don’t get a lot of time to chat with Michael these days. The accident is the only reason we’re all home together now.”

Greg Jones’ face reddened.

Nick looked at him and waited.

“I was laid off from my job a few months back. You know how it is. Big wigs at the college need to have someone as a scapegoat when they have budget problems.” Greg sighed. “I was the head of maintenance at Wroxton College, but they were having a ‘low enrollment period’ where they couldn’t find enough rich kids to pay their inflated tuition.” The anger in his voice was palpable. “So, so they decided they didn’t need a maintenance supervisor... they think they can get by with just a bunch of aimless grunts.”

Nick nodded vigorously. He felt sorry for the guy having to announce his bad luck with the job. For a tough guy like

Greg Jones, it must be a bitch to admit.

“Anyways, I’m working over at the North Arms Inn, tending bar for a turn until I can find something better. I’ve got a bunch of irons in the fire now. It’s just a matter of time,” Greg finished.

Nick nodded again. “I’m sure you’ll get fixed up soon.”

“Yeah. Well.” Mr. Jones said, looking deflated. “So anyways, that’s why we don’t know any of Michael’s friends now. He’s so busy with his studies, it is hard to find time to chat.”

“So, Michael had a lot of friends before? When he lived at home?”

The parents looked at each other. “He had a few close friends,” his mom answered.

Jessica looked up from her phone and snickered. “He had two friends. Nerds.”

“Jessica, that’s not kind,” Jo said. “Michael was always a quiet boy. He had a couple of close friends. That’s all that he needed. He was never one for big rowdy groups.”

“And how was he adjusting to college life?” Nick asked.

“Like most kids do,” Greg answered.

“Was that your impression as well, Mrs... Jo?”

She looked at her husband before answering. “I think so.”

“And did he have any previous mental health issues?”

Greg Jones growled. “See. Now everyone thinks he’s a mental. He’s not.”

“I’m not implying he’s ‘mental,’ Mr. Jones. I’m just trying to figure out if he had issues prior to this incident, or if this incident may have triggered issues.”

“He doesn’t have any damn issues.”

“Greg,” Mrs. Jones started.

“Jo. Stop.”

She clamped her lips together and then chewed on the right side of her bottom lip again.

“Jo, I need help here. I need to know if there are any issues we should know about. It’s only going to help your son to get these things out in the open now,” Nick tried to play to Jo’s maternal instincts.

Mr. Jones sighed and ran a thick hand through his hair.

“I. I don’t really think Michael had issues. I can’t say what is going on now. We can’t see him. I can only imagine what he must be feeling. Being the only survivor and all. And being hurt and such.” She leaned forward and set her cup back on the saucer, her hands with a faint tremble. “But before, I don’t think he had any more problems than any other teenager has. But at one point, his quietness. His introversion. It concerned me...”

“She was borrowing worries,” Greg Jones stated.

“Maybe I was worrying about nothing, but I took Michael to a therapist for a couple of sessions.”

“I told her it was a bad idea.”

“It didn’t work out,” Jo Jones said meekly. She put her hands beneath her legs to stop fidgeting.

“Why didn’t it work out?” Nick asked.

She looked at her husband. “I think maybe we just didn’t have the right therapist.”

“It wasn’t the right therapist because Dad thought the therapist was hitting on Mom!” Jessica blurted out.

“Jessica!” Mrs. Jones flushed. “That’s not appropriate.”

“Jessica, you’re out of line,” Greg said, gritting his teeth.

Nick looked at Mrs. Jones, questions in his eyes. She would not meet his gaze.

“That wasn’t it at all,” Jo said. “It just wasn’t a good fit. Michael really didn’t need therapy, and Greg said it was just a

fool's errand, so we stopped." She gave her husband a small, tight-lipped smile, as if trying to make amends.

"So, one other question about therapy? Did fear of the dark ever come up?" Nick asked.

"He was not afraid of the dark," Greg Jones snapped. "See what I tell you? Everything blown out of proportion."

Jo took a moment and seemed to choose her words carefully. "He wasn't *afraid* of the dark, but he preferred some light on when he slept. I bought him one of those projectors that displays planets and galaxy lights and stars onto the ceiling. He was really interested in that." She smiled at the memory.

"He never outgrew it," Jessica said. "He took it with him to college. And he was probably going to bring it home with him again."

Nick cocked his head, wondering if he heard her correctly.

"Michael was coming back home?" Nick asked.

Both parents stared at Jessica.

She looked uncomfortable for a moment, but then set her phone down and plowed ahead. "Mom and Dad don't get to talk to him much, but I check in with him to see what's going on." She hesitated for a few seconds, unsure of whether she should continue. She looked back and forth between her parents.

"Okay guys, don't be mad, but Michael told me he was going to come home. He was going to drop out of school."

Jo gasped and looked at her daughter, her husband, and then back at her daughter. "What??"

"He lost his scholarship. He didn't want to tell you. Dad always talked about how Michael should have gone to trade school and forgot about a college degree in English. He always went on and on about how you guys couldn't afford college

and that Michael needed to do it on his own and not be ‘putting on airs’...”

Greg Jones turned red.

“... so he didn’t want to admit that he was failing the quarter. He couldn’t afford to continue without the scholarship. He was really bummed about it. He didn’t know how he was going to tell you. He thought college was going to be his way to get out of this village and reinvent himself.” Jessica sighed and sat back against the sofa cushions.

At the news, Jo Jones cried. Fat tears slid down her pale cheeks, and she pulled a tissue out from her sleeve and wiped her face. “Oh, Michael. My poor boy,” she cried and buried her head in her hands.

Greg Jones was speechless. He sat and looked down at the hands he’d clasped together in his lap. His mouth occasionally opened to speak, but then closed again.

“Sorry,” Jessica said, her voice barely above a whisper.

The three family members sat quietly. The only sounds were the soft sobs from the mother and the loud breathing from the father. Jessica twirled her hair and looked like she knew she was going to be in trouble once the detective left.

Nick felt like he had hit a wall with the family for the time being. He felt like he almost had more questions than answers, but didn’t think he’d get them with all the family members together. He closed his notebook and slipped it back inside his jacket. He looked from one Jones to another.

He wanted to remember this moment. The moment that their lives cracked open. If nothing else, he wanted to honor it for what it was. That was the least he could do.

He stood. “Thank you all for your openness and information. I’ll be in touch if I have any further questions, and you can reach out to me as well.” He handed Mrs. Jones a

business card, knowing that she was the one hiding the most. She'd call at some point. "I can see myself out."

He walked to the door in silence and stepped back out of their world.

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

Alex Brantham

LISA LED NICK THROUGH a maze of anonymous corridors in the hospital's administration block. Although this was an area never visited by patients - or even, if they could possibly help it, medics - the scent of antiseptic permeated even these corners, and the walls were painted the same shade of battered white. Eventually they stopped at a door labelled "Jane Hodges - Hospital Administrator."

Stepping through the door, they might have been teleported into another world. Hodges' office featured fresh new furniture, a surprisingly plush carpet and the massive desk beloved by oligarchs and dictators the world over. Budget constraints didn't seem to apply here. Even the hospital smell was missing, perhaps cleansed by the giant pot plant in the corner.

Once they were seated at the enormous meeting table, Nick didn't waste any time getting down to business.

"You seem to have lost a patient," he said. "Michael Jones. Can you explain to me how this might have happened?"

"Not really, no," said Hodges. "Nor do I feel the need to.

Patients are free to come and go when they like."

"Not this one," said Nick. "He's involved in a very serious incident. Whether he's responsible, a victim or just a witness he's very important to me, not to mention to the families of the four dead people back at that cottage. Wasn't he supposed to be on some sort of hold here?"

Hodges turned to Lisa. "Doctor Warne, would you care to clarify the status of your patient?"

Lisa shuffled forward on her chair. This felt like a meeting with a head teacher. "Of course, he is clearly a patient about whom we are greatly concerned - both for his own safety and possibly others. An order was made when he was admitted."

"Expiring today, I believe," said Hodges, glancing at the file in front of her.

"Well, yes, although I wouldn't like to prejudge the outcome of the assessment we'd have had today. It may well have been extended."

"Nevertheless," said Hodges, "his order was for today and, apparently, he's left today."

Nick drummed his fingers on the desk, as if rehearsing for a grand entrance. "This is ridiculous. Don't you have any control over what happens in this place?"

Now it was Jane Hodges' turn to lean forward. "We're not a prison, Detective Sergeant. We have neither the staff nor the facilities to detain someone forcibly, even if we wanted to, which we don't. To be honest, I am much more concerned today about the dead nurse on my ward. I really don't have time for any more of this nonsense. Isn't finding people supposed to be your area of expertise?"

"It is," he said, "but we do depend on a certain amount of support. What about CCTV? You do have CCTV, I take it?"

"Of course, and you are welcome to spend as long as you

like looking at it. Now, if you'll excuse me, I think we all have work to do."

Back outside in the corridor, Lisa turned to Nick. "Look, Sergeant, we're not going to get any help from her, not least because no amount of paper pushing is going to find Michael."

"Well, we can at least agree on that much, Dr Warne. Can you point me at wherever I'm likely to find the CCTV?"

Lisa nodded at a distant corridor. "The security office is down there, on the right I think. Why don't you go off and play with some toys? In the meantime, I'll go and see if I can find my patient."

Nick didn't even wait to reply, but simply marched off in the indicated direction. Now Lisa had some real work to do - the only problem was that she had almost no idea about where to start.

Michael sat on a bench with his head down, catching his breath. He had to stay out of sight, that much he knew. But doing that while remaining in the light was tough. In front of him, strangers' feet marched past him, heading in directions and for purposes unknown.

His ears were assaulted by the sounds of the space - not just footsteps, but distant clatterings, snatches of voices, the hum of air conditioning. And smells he couldn't even guess at.

The floor was polished and shiny, the walls were white. There was no darkness here, but there was no safety, either.

He risked a small glance upwards to one side. On the ceiling, a dark glass half-globe sat, a red light winking at him. Someone was watching.

He couldn't stay here.

Nick found the right door and marched in, brandishing his warrant card at the startled man reclining in his swivel chair in front of a wall of screens. "DS Scott, Cambridge CID. I'm looking for someone and it's urgent."

The man in the chair turned slowly to face him, nestling a cup between his hands. "Nice to meet you, DS Scott. I'm Bert. Anyone in particular you're looking for, or are you not fussy?"

"No need for the wise cracks, Bert, I'm on police business and I'm sure you wouldn't want to be obstructive."

Bert took a sip from his drink and leaned back. "And I'm sure you wouldn't want me to be breaching any privacy laws, Detective Sergeant. You do have the appropriate court order, I take it?"

"For fuck's sake, Bert, this isn't a laughing matter. Call Jane Hodges - I think you'll find it has her approval, which is all I need."

"No need for profanity, Detective Sergeant. You know we can't be too careful these days. Let me just check."

Bert spun around and made the call, after which he turned back and nodded. At last they were in business and could start looking at images from a camera outside the psych ward.

They ran through the footage. It didn't take long, and at the end of the process Nick had precisely nothing to show for it - no-one looking remotely like his subject during the time in question.

"What other cameras have you got?" asked Nick.

"Sorry, Sergeant, that's your lot for this area. There are supposed to be a couple of others, but they're broken. No budget to replace them. There's this one," said Bert, pulling up a new image. "But, as you can see, some oik has been messing with it, so unless your man got out by walking along the ceiling, it's not going to be much use to you."

"You must have something else. I mean, look at this lot," said Nick, gesturing at the array of images in front of them.

Bert shook his head. "It's a big place. There are too many gaps in the coverage. Your best bet would be to go through the footage at the exit points, because those ones get priority on maintenance. Might take a while, though."

"Well, we'd better get started then."

"Sorry, no, you've had more than enough of my time. I was instructed to let you have access, not to hand over my whole day. I've got other stuff to do."

As Nick started open his mouth to object, Bert raised a hand and continued. "But I'll tell you what. How about I set you up with a terminal of your own and show you which buttons to press? Then you can carry on playing cops and robbers and I can get on with my own job."

It wasn't much of an offer, but Nick sensed it was all he was going to get for now. So he sat down in front of a screen, accepted a couple of minutes of tuition from the master, and settled in for a morning of flickering images and wrist-ache from endless mouse-clicking.

Michael sidled down the quiet corridor, searching for a suitable bolt hole. He looked around him: there was nobody in sight as he eased the door open, letting the light from outside seep into the space. He reached around the corner with his hand and fumbled for the light switch: it took a moment before, finally, he felt the little plastic lever under his fingers and clicked.

Now he could face the room: bright fluorescent lights buzzed gently as they drove away the demons. He slipped inside and closed the door behind him, before sitting on the floor and taking in his surroundings.

On three sides there were industrial racking units, sparsely populated with cardboard boxes with unknown contents. No matter.

It was light and he felt safe, at least for now.

Lisa's intention had been both good and straightforward – find her missing patient. Of course, he could be anywhere by now, but there had to be at least a chance that he was still on the premises and, if he were, it looked like it was her job to find him. The question was, where to look? Where would a man in his situation go?

Nowhere dark, obviously, so that ruled out a lot of murky corners in service buildings and basements. But hospitals generally do tend to be well-lit, 24 hour sorts of places, and that left her with too many possibilities.

She wracked her brains, trying to think of anything that he might have said in their brief conversations that would give a clue. After a few minutes of paralysis, she had to admit defeat: there was no easy answer, she was just going to have to search the hard way.

And so began a trawl of the buildings, starting with the areas around the ward where he'd last been seen. Anytime she passed someone who might conceivably have known him, she stopped to ask. Nothing.

Her circle widened, into the adjacent buildings – departments she'd never ventured into before and never wanted to again. Still nothing.

This was pointless. Time to think again.

Something he'd said. About what made him feel safe. Light, or more to the point an absence of darkness. But there was something else. He'd mentioned an affinity to comforting sounds, like the purring of a cat. The hum of machinery.

Maybe the basement wasn't such an odd place to look after all.

She went back to the psych building and, this time, headed downwards to the hidden floor where patients never went, where the boilers, computers and generators hummed all day and at least some of the areas were lit 24/7.

Straightaway she found herself in the kind of place she was thinking of. A long corridor with just a few doors off it, mostly leading to equipment rooms or store cupboards. He wouldn't hide among the machinery – there would be too high a chance of being found. But some of the store rooms would do nicely.

She stepped quietly along the corridor, looking for anything out of place.

Then she saw it: a beam of light emerging from under the door of a store room which, she knew, really ought to be empty at this time of day. She pressed her ear to the door: could she hear anything? She listened intently, but couldn't make out anything beyond the background hum of all the equipment around her.

Lisa stared at the door. Was it safe to go in? Perhaps she could call the stropky Sergeant for backup. She checked her phone: no signal. She could walk away until she found one, but she had to assume that her approach had been heard and her quarry, if he were inside, would surely escape. No, she was just going to have to face up to this one herself. After all, if her assessment of Michael was correct then she should be okay. Should be.

She tapped on the door and listened intently for a response. None.

Then she leaned on the handle and gently eased the door open. At first she saw nothing except some shelving, but as

the door swung further she saw a figure seated on the floor, staring intently at a mobile phone screen and with headphones in his ears.

He looked up. It wasn't Michael.

"Yousuf?"

"Doctor Warne?" He scrambled to his feet, hastily stuffing the phone into his pocket and dusting down his porter's uniform.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm on my break, honest, I'm not doing anything wrong..."

Lisa shook her head, impatiently. "It's okay, Yousuf, I'm just looking for someone. I think you might know him: Michael Jones, he came onto the psych ward a couple of days ago."

"The man with the burns? Yes, I know him."

"Have you seen him at all today? He's gone missing from the ward and I'm worried about him."

Yousuf furrowed his brows. "This morning?"

Lisa nodded.

"I might have. I was walking past the Outpatients building and I remember seeing someone coming out of the eye unit door. I thought it was odd because there isn't normally anyone there at that time of the morning."

"What time was that?"

"About seven thirty, I think. I was just a couple of minutes late for my shift and I was hurrying, so I could be wrong. But he did look familiar."

It wasn't much, but it was something. Time to find the Sergeant.

Nick's eyes were glazing over. Who knew that there were so many exit points from a hospital? And a steady stream of

people coming and going, all of whom had to be examined closely to see if they looked anything like Michael Jones. Many could be discounted immediately, but six foot caucasian males weren't exactly rare in these parts and all demanded a closer look.

He'd noted in his book half a dozen remote possibilities, but in each case there was something not quite right - he'd bet at least one month's mortgage that none of them was his man.

Then the door swung open and the snotty psychiatrist came in. "Found anything?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Nope. There's nothing near the ward, I've been going round the exit points. How about you?"

"Maybe. Have you checked the Outpatients area?"

Nick riffled through his notes. "Yep. Main exit. A couple of ones I had to look closely at but I'm pretty sure not him."

It was her turn to dissent. "Not the main exit, the side exit for the eye unit. I spoke to a porter who might have seen him there. About 7:30 this morning."

Nick was getting the hang of this system now and it didn't take long to get the right image stream. He wound swiftly forwards to 7:20 and then walked slowly onwards from there. Sure enough, with a time stamp of 7:32, there was a figure of the right size. "Is that him?"

Lisa bent closely to the screen. The face was partly obscured and the image wasn't the clearest. "Could be. Can you zoom in or something?"

"Despite what they show on the movies, we can't see detail that isn't there. If I zoom in we'll just get a mush of blurred pixels." With a few deft clicks of the mouse he demonstrated the proposition.

"What about his hand?" she asked. "The left hand - it was bandaged."

They both stared intently at the screen. The left hand remained steadfastly out of view as the man, head down, strode out of the door and, within a couple of seconds, out of shot.

"Might be him," he said.

"Might not," she said.

Nick's phone buzzed and he fished it out of his pocket to check the screen. "And now I've been summoned back to the station to report progress to the boss."

Lisa smiled. "That won't take long," she said.

Michael stood up and stretched. He was rested now, and it was time to move on. The shopping centre where he'd holed up for the morning was getting busier, and it surely wouldn't be long before some cleaner needed access to the stores he was keeping company.

Time to get out there, in the middle of the day while the light was strong and there were plenty of people to mingle with. Besides, he had somewhere he needed to be.

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

Carlie Brooks

SCOTT'S PHONE BUZZED. WARNE and Michael shifted to look at him expectantly, tension draining from their bodies. He cursed silently and stretched his leg to dig around in his pants pocket for the device. One bloody moment where they had actually been getting some place with the kid, and it was gone. Gone. He pulled out the phone: Martin. His boss.

"Excuse me," he muttered, not meeting their eyes as he swung out of his folding chair with a smooth rubber screech. Warne leaned back in her seat, running her hands over gray trousers before recrossing her legs. She nodded absently and focused her eyes briefly on the linoleum before settling them back on her patient. Michael unfolded himself on the bed, eyes flashing to the corners of the room, hunting shadows, and Scott just caught the whispered words: " . . . seemed midnight at noonday. . . ". Finally, he settled, silent, staring ahead, unblinking.

Scott paused and turned, his hand on the silver door handle, eying the student steadily; "midnight at noonday". He'd have to look that one up. His phone buzzed again. He

opened the door and went into the noticeably dimmer hallway and picked up.

“DS Scott”

“Scott, what the hell is going on out there? I haven’t heard a single bloody thing from you since the kid decided to take a little tour of the medical campus.”

“I —“

“Now I got Jo and Greg here clutching their crosses wondering when they can see their goddamn son, and I’d rather not have to tell them that we lost him to the bloody Gog Magog Golf Club. So what the hell is happening?”

Scott closed his eyes, pinching the wrinkle of flesh between his brows. His bile rose and his breath went out. Bloody Martin.

He opened them, took in a deep gulp of air and focused on the plaster wall across the hall.

“We got him here. He’s fine. Well, relatively speaking. He’s still afraid of the dark; says there’s something in it that will kill him. We’re in the middle of a therapy session right now actually.”

Afraid of the dark was an understatement. Michael couldn’t tolerate the merest hint of a shadow. Christ, they’d even had to put a lamp under the bed or he wouldn’t sleep on it. Lights in the closet, medicine cabinet, constantly on in the bathroom, which meant the bloody ventilation fan had to stay on too. They’d had to move him to a private room; none of the other patients could sleep with that much light 24 hours a day.

Scott heard a sigh through his phone.

“Good. Keep him there. What have you got on the case? What are we looking at here?”

Clotted cream. That was it - the color of the wall. Clotted

cream. He forced his shoulders to relax.

“Fire inspector confirms the presence of accelerant; it’s arson. But the coroner says there’s no smoke in the lungs of the four kids in the cottage, so they were dead before the whole thing went up in flames.”

“Kid seem good for it?”

“As the sole survivor of a quadruple homicide arson who’s already escaped police custody once and is now in a psych ward? Yes, absolutely. We don’t have any direct proof; the bodies were pretty burnt up, and he doesn’t have a trace of accelerant on him, but yeah. Seems he did it.”

Scott scratched at a scuff in the wall and shrugged.

“Not that direct evidence will matter all that much. He’ll have a pretty solid insanity plea with the way he’s going - talking about demons and stuff in the dark coming for him. With fear like that, he probably lit the place up just to not be in the dark.”

Except for the fact that he didn’t have this fear before the fire . . . Scott swallowed his doubt and refocused on the phone. Martin started again.

“Fine. Let the doctors and the barristers clean this up. Close it out and come back to the station. You got a pile of paperwork and unsolved serious crime here, plus a trainee looking to cut their teeth. I’m running out of forensic reports and policy documents for her to review. Your turn to keep her busy.” The voice paused, “One last thing: you think he’s good for visitors? Can I give the ok for the parents to come over?”

Scott sighed loudly and pushed a hand through his cropped blond hair, looking up at the ceiling for answers. Shadowed cream.

“Yeah, I mean, I guess. He’s not violent or anything.” He looked through the rectangular window in the door and into

Michael's wood-paneled room. All he could see was wan wintry light leaking in through the window on the opposite side and Micheal's wavy brown hair. The sky shone white. "As long as Dr. Warne says he's good, and there's an officer outside the room just in case . . ."

"I thought you said he wasn't violent?"

Scott watched the top of Michael's head bob and shake in the milky light.

"He's not. But he's not exactly stable either. The parents - you said they were clutching their crosses. They religious?"

The voice paused, then gave a short snort.

"Judging but the way the mother is rubbing her thumbs over the wood cross around her neck, and the fact that the father hasn't stopped muttering God words into his folded hands, I'd say yes, they are."

Scott nodded vaguely, "Then they might set him off. He's talking about demons in the dark, adding religion to that might make this worse."

Or they might help. After all, they were his parents. Maybe they'd bring some sense or calm or religious logic or something that would help. Scott sighed.

"Let Dr. Warne decide. I'll let her know about them being religious, and if she's good, I'm good. With that added officer at the door. Just in case."

"Just in case. I'll wait to hear from her before sending them over then. Can't wait to get them the hell out of my station." Scott expect the conversation to be over, to hear the chime and tone of a dead line, but the voice stayed, softened.

"And Scott?"

"Thought you already spoke your last bit. What?"

"You've been up all night. I can tell from your voice. Go home to Mary. Take a shower. Take a nap."

“What about the paperwork and the trainee?”

“Changed my mind. Found a new pile of arson cases she can review from the ‘80s. Paperwork will wait.”

Scott smiled absently at this unexpected concern from his boss. Wasn’t usually Martin’s style. He knew he ought to be more surprised, but something about this case bothered him. It didn’t feel like it fully fit even when the facts fit all too well.

He moved closer to the window in the door. Warne was speaking with Michael, leaning over towards him. Scott could see the expanse of her fine grey wool jacket stretched over her back, her brown bob creating a little bump on her back. Michael was seated cross-legged, eyes sparkling at her, smile wide; his right hand fidgeted with the bandages covering his burned left. He seemed . . . engaged. For a brief moment, the pieces of this person, this student, Michael Jones, fell into place, and Scott could see what this kid had been like: passionate, easy, a little bit shy. A little bit into fire?

Scott licked his lips and returned his attention to the phone. He toyed with giving a clever response, but decided not to give it the energy.

“Thanks Martin. I’ll be back at the station later this evening.”

“Don’t waste any more time on this. It’s over. See you tomorrow.”

The phone beeped, the voice gone.

Scott moved to the side a bit and stared through the plexiglass pane. The room was bright, abominably bright, with not a shadow cast for Michael’s demons to hide in.

His demons. That’s what Michael called them anyways. Said there was something there in the dark, black on black, different velvet textures of shapes, pixellated forms that swam to him. Said they were coming for him, to hurt him, maybe

even kill him.

Through the pane, Michael exploded with gesture, his eye brows curving with excitement as he enthusiastically explained something to Dr. Warne. She slowly leaned back in the brown leather chair, letting him take the space.

Scott looked down at the floor. The linoleum had the same flecks of cream in it as the walls. Then he remembered: “seemed midnight at noonday”. He pulled out his phone, rapidly typing the phrase into the browser, already deciding that he’d eat the data fee. He clicked on the first promising link, some poetry page.

Slowly, it loaded.

The trees and bushes round the place

Seemed midnight at noonday.

I could not see a single thing,

Words from my eyes did start —

They spoke as chords do from the string,

And blood burnt round my heart.

Poet John Clare. John & Claire. Scott’s eye shot up to the pane again only to find Michael’s already there to meet his gaze, steady and piercing. Bloody hell. The kid loved them. What had he seen in that dark hallway outside their room? Their bloody bodies tangled together, one mass in the bed, becoming one dead poet in his mind? Their death becoming the demons on the dark?

Scott swallowed and palmed the silver handle. No, he wouldn’t go home. Not yet anyways.

He pushed open the door.

chapter nineteen

Kay Hannah

LISA WAS ALREADY WAITING for him at the swing doors that led to the Psychiatric Unit. Nick felt perspiration on his brow. The hospital was stuffy and hot and he was slightly out of breath. He had taken the wrong exit corridor from the Addenbrookes Concourse and had gone in several incorrect circles before retracing his steps and starting again. Lisa by contrast looked calm and collected in tailored light grey trousers, and a crisp white cotton shirt.

Once again Nick thought how she made an impressive Director of the Liaison Psychiatric Services. Dr Lisa Warne was personable and wore a ready smile which made her immediately likeable. There was no trace of the coldness often associated with Senior hospital executives and Nick knew she still delivered one-to-one treatments with patients as well as discharging her management duties. He noticed a small silver cross on a fine chain around her neck. He hadn't seen it before.

“No white coat today, Doctor?” he asked

She shook her head

“I want to look less doctorish”

Nick repeated her words.

“You want to look less doctorish ? Is that a medical term ?”

“First thing they teach us in psych school” replied Lisa.

Lisa swiped the card hanging from her lanyard and they heard the ward doors click. They pushed through and greeted staff at Reception. “Before we visit the Patient, I want to show you the updated procedures we’ve put in place for him, given the unusual circumstances,” said Lisa.

She showed Nick extra screens behind the desk then introduced him to a man and women in security uniforms.

“We’ve got Michael on Full Watch which means staff working in shifts to watch him around the clock. We’re keeping all video and audio footage for you, as requested, and as you know, there are police stationed around the unit at all times.”

“Having said all that, please remember he is a patient, not a prisoner, and we are treating him medically with drugs and will be putting a programme in place as soon as the Psychiatric and Physical Assessments are complete.

Nick nodded. Lisa had gone through some of this previously but it was good to have all procedures confirmed.

They left the Reception area and made their way down a brightly lit corridor.

Lisa continued. “As I said on the phone, Michael still isn’t sleeping normally and despite the medications, his nyctophobia - night fear - is increasing. He acts more or less normally in the daytime, though he is displaying some unusual food preferences which may or may not mean anything. His psychosis remains intact, he hasn’t changed his story at all from statements made previously. He’s asked us to keep his

lights on all through every night, and has even asked for proof that a backup generator would keep them on in the unlikely event of a power failure. This shows increasing paranoia as well as the psychotic episodes and his extreme phobia of darkness. All this is why he must first be seen and treated as unwell, as a patient, before anyone makes judgements about any alleged wrongdoing”

They paused at Michaels door.

Nick spoke.

“Sorry Lisa, I have to ask this question. Is there any chance at all he is faking anything ? Do you, in your professional opinion, believe he is sincere?”

Lisa replied without hesitation. “He is absolutely sincere and genuine. I am sure of it. Even if it sounds outlandish to us, to Michael, it's his reality. There are patches of memory loss, which is expected with trauma, but Michael never appears to make anything up to cover them, he admits the parts he does not remember.”

“And Michael has freely agreed to try hypno-relaxation today” asked Nick.

Lisa nodded. “He has yes. He says keeping relaxed whilst giving his statement will help him tell us the final part of his story”.

Michael was standing by his bed when Nick and Lisa entered his room. He had his top off, arms out to the side and a nurse was taping a fresh dressing around his chest. Michaels hair was tousled and damp from a shower. Tall and a bit too thin, he had no muscle tone yet and looked little more than a boy.

“How is it healing?” said Lisa

“There’s a way to go yet, but I’ve seen worse,” said the Nurse as she left the room. Her look however, said otherwise.

Lisa knew that the injury was not in fact healing well at all, and even appeared to be spreading despite the antibiotics.

Michael greeted them and winced a little as he buttoned a PJ top and pulled on a new navy bathrobe. The three of them took day chairs by a round coffee table under the window.

Nick pulled out a small recording device and laid it on the table. He looked at Michael who nodded agreement, and a tiny red light appeared on the recorder to show it was working.

Nick spoke some preliminaries into the machine, then handed over to Lisa.

Her voice was clear and directed only to Michael.

“Last time we talked about your journey to the cottage and what you had done earlier that evening with your friends is that right?”

Michael nodded.

“And today you have agreed to tell us the rest of the story up to the point the Fire Service and police found you, is that still ok?”

Michael nodded again. Then said “Yes” aloud for the record.

Lisa continued, “To make it easier on you, I'm going to count you down into a state of deep relaxation. You will still be able to hear my voice and at any time you get too distressed, I will bring you round. Make yourself comfortable in the chair, and when you are ready, close your eyes.”

Lisa counted

“...10..9..8..7..6..5..”

At the count of 5 he was back there. Suddenly he was on the landing of the holiday cottage in the coal black night. Gripping the bannisters, blinking in the relentless dark, so dizzy he could hardly stand, feeling like he might vomit. Worn carpet

prickled his bare soles. What had happened to his slippers? His socks ? His shirt ? He was only wearing jeans. Why was there no light ?

There was a searing, burning pain in his chest, it covered the whole area. Shaking Michael drew one hand from gripping the wooden bannisters and gently touched the area. There was blood, lots of it, sticky and still flowing. There appeared to be something carved or cut into the flesh. A letter. No a number. It felt like an 8 or maybe a 5. Where were his friends. They should be there to help him.

Something itched at his mind. Something to do with his friends and numbers carved into their smooth, youthful flesh. It was on the edge of his consciousness.

Abruptly, a tsumani of warmth blasted up the stairwell from below carrying a stench that could only come from the depths of Hell itself.

And with it came monsters.

Hellish monsters. A susurrations of serpentine slithering. A hideous glow of crimson reptilian slitted eyes, and flashes of green luminous drool dripping from gaping mouths. They poured up the stairs in an oily mass, coiling and uncoiling, hissing, roiling, heaving wet weight.

They were all around him ! Corkscrewing round his legs, his arms, his neck. Foul breath instantly in his mouth, sticky claws digging into his ears and eyes. Michael was so terrified he could not scream. He thrashed at the creatures and stumbled to the stairs, he fell, taking some of the monsters with him.

They crashed at the bottom in a mass of pale human flesh and black demonic scales. Michael himself writhed, rolled and corkscrewed to his feet then he was up and running, blindly holding his hands in front of him. Behind him the creatures

spread dripping jaws to roar in outrage as their prey escaped.

Michael stumbled into the living room and pushed the door closed. It caught on the rough matting and as he shoved, claws inches long, glittering with pus coloured luminescence jabbed through the gap. Michael could see nothing in the relentless dark, not even a glimmer of moonlight from the window where the curtains were drawn back.

The Moon. There was no Moon. The Moon had gone out. There were no stars, no lights in the distance, just unrelenting darkness inside and out.

Thumping shook the door. It sounded like wet anacondas were being thrown at it.

Light, thought Michael. Light will keep them at bay. He felt his way to the fireplace and felt about for matches. He lit one and held it to the screws of old paper in the grate. It caught and the sudden flare was the most beautiful and hopeful thing Michael had ever seen. He grabbed the coal bucket. It was nearly empty. He shook the few pieces on the flaming newspaper. They covered it and damped the flames down to a red glow. The door bowed inwards, cracking. Black slimed coils slipped across the carpet and a reek of rotting flesh came with them. Now Michael could hear laughter cackling around him. The creatures were mocking him. The laughing gurgled as if from under a pool of clotted blood. It filled the room, Michaels head; it was sending him mad.

The fire was barely visible now. Michael stumbled to the dining room and felt in his pockets. His hand closed around something oblong and plastic. A lighter. A lighter ! His heart soared. He held it up and flicked the wheel.

Nothing.

He flicked again and a long flame sprang to life. In its light, Michael saw the remains of their party earlier, the coffee table

littered with red cups, ashtrays filled with roaches, cards against humanity and bottles of vodka, two unopened. He grabbed them and twisting the tops off, he poured the contents over the curtains and touched the lighter to them.

Whomp !

They caught fire in an instant and the room was filled with glorious light.

The creatures retreated immediately, the long tenancies retracting like trains going back into tunnels in a reverse motion film.

Their laughter winked out and the stench of rot lessened.

The heat from the flaming curtains was immense, but Michael decided he would sooner die in the flames than with the monsters. Far sooner physical agony than the metal terror those creatures made every cell of him suffer. He threw vodka on the sofa, spread his arms wide and twirled. As he spun he smashed another bottle and splashed it around him.

Michael ran to the door. The monsters had retreated upstairs. He ran to the dining room and held the tall flame of the lighter against the dusty curtains. Whoosh, whomp,whomp. Up they flared too. Next the hall. Michael set fire to their coats, kitchen towels and tea towels, and now the whole ground floor blazed with heat and light and noise.

It was glorious, exhilarating and suddenly Michael felt the fear of the creatures, the monsters above. Their mocking laughter had turned to roars of outrage and howls of pain. He had won ! He had seen the vilest, most evil of all creatures ever born and had defeated them ! He was invincible. Incredible. Reborn. He was a King.

A woman's voice. Michael could hear a calm woman's voice through the roar of the flames.

“Did you want to die ? ” He tried to think, to answer.

“No, No not die. I wanted...to .. be .. have.. A second chance. To be Strong. Yes, that’s it. I wanted to be Powerful. I wanted to be a King. For a while I was a King.”

“Listen to my voice Michael. It's Dr Warne and I'm bringing you back. I'm counting now. Starting with ...”

“1..Listen .. 2..Focus.. 3.. waking up.. 4.. open your eyes ..
5

Instantly Michael was back in the hospital room. He sucked in lungfuls of clean air, and concentrated on bringing the bright room into focus.

Nick and Lisa stared at Michael. He looked elated and unworldly, there was a glow to his skin and light in his eyes. Cerulean flames danced there. He stared around the room in rapture.

“There is safety in The Light” he said.

Lisa grabbed her cross. She didn't know if she was in the presence of an Angel, or a Demon.

After a moment, Nick spoke.

“I have to ask you a couple of questions for the record Michael, just answer as best you can. Did you think you were alone in the cottage when you set it alight?”

Michael turned his head to look into Nick's eyes. The strange light was fading from them but he was frowning. He shook his head.

“No, I wasn't alone, I told you, the place was full of monsters. I conquered them. I worked out they are mortally afraid of fire and light, so I set fires until they fled.”

“Your friends were still there Michael, in the Cottage. We found all four of them upstairs in the bathroom and bedrooms. Are you quite sure you didn't know that ? Is it possible you saw them, and not demons ? You say yourself

you were all smoking weed.”

Lisa silenced Nick before Michael could answer. “Those questions need to be saved for another time,” she said. “Not now, not even for the record.”

Nick leant forward and switched off the recorder.

“Off the record now Michael. Do you remember where we found you?”

Michael nodded his head. “Yes, outside the house in the garden. I don't remember exactly how I got there. I don't remember leaving the house at all.”

“You were walking around the garden shirtless when we arrived,” said Nick, “You were holding a lighter and a large serrated kitchen knife. The knife was bloodied and forensics have found your blood on it, and some of your fellow party goers. There's at least three positive matches.” You were mumbling about the stars and the moon going out, but when we asked you where your friends were, you started laughing hysterically and said monsters ate them.”

Michael stared at Nick, his expression unfathomable. Suddenly he looked like he might cry. There was no longer any light in his eyes, and his skin looked grey and drawn. Where he had looked boyish an hour ago, he now looked older than his years and worn out.

“I honestly don't know Detective, I just don't know. I just remember being in the fire, feeling elated as the monsters fled, then I was outside in cool air. There were no lights, no stars, no moon, no monsters, no anything actually. I couldn't see trees or the ground. It was nothingness all around me. As if the world had disappeared.

Then I heard a roar like thunder or a dragon overhead. Only it came from all around. I fell to the ground and watched the night sky as the stars pinged back into life one by one, and

then that's when I heard sirens. The world popped back into existence. I saw Fire Engines and spinning lights and then people came and brought me here. That's all I know. That's all I can tell you.”

After they all left, Michael laid on bed. He was truly exhausted but knew he couldn't sleep.

There was a gentle plopping sound and he turned his head on the pillow to see where it came from. The window. Fat raindrops spattered there. The blue sky had been replaced by heavy rain clouds and the light outside was rapidly fading. The dark was on its way.

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.